

ERNEST JOHN MOERAN

A PERSONAL ASSESSMENT

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Ernest John Moeran, often known as Jack, is sadly best remembered for his death on 1 December 1950. Some have stated that he was drunk and fell from the pier into the river Kenmare during a storm; others said that he had a cerebral haemorrhage or a heart attack and was dead before he fell into the water while many say he just fell and drowned.

Moeran was born on 31 December 1894 to Joseph William Wright Moeran who was the second son of the Rev Thomas Warner Moeran of Cork and Frances Byrne of Dublin. Joseph William Wright was born in 1857 and was ordained and a curate at Pocklington near York. In 1885, he became curate at St Pauls, Upper Norwood in south east London. He fell in love with the nineteen year old Ada Esther Whall whom he married on 10 April 1888.

EJ studied the violin and the piano while a child and was taught by his governess. He then went to school at Suffield Park Preparatory School in Cromer and was a boarder during the week. His family were living in Becton, North Norfolk at the time. From 1908 to 1913, he was at Uppingham School and taught music by Robert Sterndale Bennett the grandson of Sir William. Thereafter he went to the Royal College of Music benefiting from the teaching of Stanford.

Moeran was a despatch rider in World War 1 but suffered a bad head injury in 1917 and did not return to the front. He was granted a pension. He returned to Uppingham to teach but that did not suit him and so he went back to RCM in 1920 and took lessons from John Ireland.

The 1920s saw the composing of his String Quartet in A minor, the Rhapsody no 1 for orchestra, the String Trio, the Sonata for violin and piano and some songs. While in Norfolk, he had collected local folk songs and this influence may be detected in these early works. He had collected many of these in local pubs. There are his Six Suffolk Folk Songs and with his connection with Southern Ireland there are His Six Songs from County Kerry.

In the mid 1920s, Moeran began a close and ill-advised friendship with Peter Warlock whose real name was Philip Arnold Heseltine. With the artist Hal Collins, they rented a house in Eynsford in Kent.

Warlock was a bad influence known for his wild behaviour, anarchy and drunkenness which resulted in visitors of similar characteristics as well as many visits from the local police. Moeran became just as bad. Warlock was influenced by the weird Cyril Scott who advocated spiritualism, the occult and the dismissal of moral standards. Moeran adopted these dangerous practices and alcoholism took over his life. By 1930, he was alcoholic.

A radio 3 documentary stated that Warlock imbibed the nonsense that the spirits of other dimensions could contact you better if you were nude and therefore nudity was essential in certain aspects of the occult. Moeran involvement with motors bike during the war and it is reported that Warlock rode a motor bike nude driving down Crickley Hill in the Cotswolds inviting the spirits to contact him. This nonsense ruined Warlock and damaged Moeran.

Warlock was usually depressed and insecure. His head was always full of occult teachings and he had no respect for decency or morality. He was atheistic being a left winger, and had many disastrous relationships. He threatened to kill himself by gas poisoning and this is how he died in 1930 and a verdict of suicide was given.

All of this occult teaching and life style of anarchy made Moeran ill and, as funds had run out, he had left the house before Warlock's death and reassessed his life and musical style moving away from the styles of Delius and Ireland. The result was the sonata for two violins and the String Trio and the choral work Songs of Springtime. These were works of his physical and mental illnesses.

Of course, people are entitled to their own beliefs and life style but some beliefs can be dangerous and I understand spiritualist so-called 'churches' and other such establishments now have to declare that their practices are experimental and cannot be guaranteed to be true. A notice on the board of the local spiritual church in my town states this.

Moeran's severe depression may have caused him to consider his Irish roots, his father having been born in Dublin. E J became very fond of the small town of Kenmare which inspired some of his works.

A close friend, who is an excellent horn player, and, by qualifications, is a psychiatrist tells me of the very many mental patients suffering as a result of their connections with spiritualism, witchcraft and the occult more so than any other ism or group of people.

As a school teacher, I was made aware of two girls, both fourteen years of age, whose respective parents were into witchcraft forced their daughters to dance naked around a fire with many other people of various ages also involve in this activity. As I often hiked for charities during the nights, they were frightened that I might see them. But the spirits can make contact if you are nude!

E J had been commissioned to write his Symphony in G minor, dedicated to Harty, which was almost complete in the 1920s and then put to one side and not finished until 1937. This makes the works somewhat uneven but it has much to commend it and it proved to be a success. The Violin Concerto, written for Arthur Catterall, took five years and was completed in 1942 and is a glorious work, lyrical, beautiful and inspired by Ireland. He loved landscapes and the countryside wherever he went. His concerto is vastly superior to the Elgar concerto.

Some have said that Moeran belonged to the English Pastoral School. What is not in dispute is his love for the madrigal.

War loomed again. Moeran worked on a Symphony no 2. He married the cellist Peers Coetmore and wrote a Cello Concerto and a Cello Sonata both fine works.

The Cello Concerto is a great work and stands with other fine British cello concertos such as those by Walton, Finzi and Bliss. I have broadcast recordings of Elgar given in Russia and Japan which was booed and yet the Moeran was very warmly received in these countries.

Moeran also wrote his Sinfonietta, dedicated to Bliss, the Rhapsody for piano and orchestra, the Fantasy for oboe and string trio and the Serenade in G.

The marriage between Jack and Peers was not a success and his drinking continued unabated. His increasing bad health caused him to consider he was going insane and might be certified.

If only he had not got involved with Warlock and, in turn, Warlock not become involved with spiritualism, the occult, witchcraft and Cyril Scott. This instability and mental illness was at odds with his staple and secure upbringing.

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Since writing this, Martin Yates has taken Moeran's sketches for the Symphony no 2 and 'completed' the work.