TOM MOORE'S DIARY
THOMAS MOORE
AGED 58

After the portrait by D. Maclise, R.A.
TOM MOORE'S DIARY

A SELECTION EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY

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INTRODUCTION

I

A DIARY may give us a picture of a man or a picture of an age. The writer may turn his gaze inward, hardly troubling to record outward events, and describe his hot fits of passion and his cold fits of repentance, his bursts of pride, his frequent lapses into gloom and despair, in short, he may paint for us his heart and secret mind. If he does this, it does not matter who he was and when or where he lived; he has given us a document of great human interest. On the other hand, the diarist may be worlds away from such introspection and self-analysis, never looking within himself but looking outward at his times, describing, as truthfully as he can, his friends and acquaintances, his and their activities, the gossip and the anecdotes that reach his ears, and so forth, and so creating for us, stroke by stroke, a faithful portrait of his age. Such records are contributions to history, social, literary, political, and if they are at once lively and truthful, they are something more, they are good literature, to be enjoyed for their own sake. The really great diarists, like Pepys, contrive to give us both a picture of themselves and a picture of their age; their journals are equally attractive under either of the above heads; but such records are very rare. All the rest can be classified under one of our two divisions, although there is no line of demarcation and the divisions overlap. The Journal of Thomas
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Moore, which he began in 1818 and kept, more or less faithfully, until his powers failed him in 1847, belongs to the second class of diaries; it is the picture of an age. Except in a few passages, when a domestic crisis stirs the depths, Moore does not examine himself, does not show us his heart and mind, but is content to tell us what he did, where he went, and what he heard. He is not writing, as so many diarists are, for his own secret satisfaction, but is deliberately composing a day-to-day autobiography, catching his history as it flies. When he appoints Lord John Russell his literary executor in his will, he mentions his Journal, which, with letters and other matter, will form the basis of "some kind of publication, whether in the shape of memoirs or otherwise, which may afford the means of making some provision for my wife and family." He has an audience in view, and selects his materials accordingly. Thus, long stretches of time, in which he is busy writing in his cottage, are passed over quickly; he tells us very little concerning his actual work, its initial conception, the details of its progress, and so forth. On the other hand, he does not omit a single figure of any importance he met during the period (striving always to remember exactly what they said, though, curiously enough, rarely describing them—throughout he starves our visual sense), and always skims the cream of the talk at the great houses he visited. But he is not what we might call a professional diarist, like Crabb Robinson, his contemporary. The latter, we feel, made his life serve his diary, and spent half his days tracking down great literary figures, notebook in hand.
For this reason he is of far greater service to the critic and biographer than Moore is. For facts and first-hand information concerning the figures of the Romantic Period, Crabb Robinson has no equal. But Moore, though he selected his material with one eye on his audience, did not make his life serve his diary but simply made his diary mirror his life. He is not so useful as Crabb Robinson but he is vastly more entertaining. Moreover, he pictures a whole period, in almost all its aspects, whereas Crabb Robinson portrays us simply a group of literary men. Moore’s chief faults are, first, that he is apt to concentrate his and our attention upon the wrong people, in short, that many of his swans are now geese and little geese at that; and, secondly, that he is far too prolix, burying his good things under loads of chit-chat. For this reason, there is probably no diary that gains more from a fairly drastic but judicious process of cutting and selecting than this of Moore’s. There are some diaries that it would be monstrous to cut and compress; even if they are prolix, such prolixity is part of their character and through it they achieve their end. Thus, there is no sense in cutting Pepys, for either you want the whole Pepys to browse in or you do not want it at all; a potted Pepys is little or no use. But Moore’s diary, I repeat, gains from being compressed. Moore was himself something of a politician, and was the friend of most of the great Whig politicians of his day, so that it naturally follows that his Journal gives us an enormous amount of political discussion and gossip, crumbs that Moore picked up at the tables of Bowood and Holland House. Now the period under
review is already well covered by political diarists and Moore has little or nothing of value to add to their large store, so that all this political matter of his can be cut out without any loss. A great deal of the anecdote, the sweepings of table-talk, can also be omitted without any injustice to either writer or reader. What is left then shines more brightly, and is more readily appreciated by the reader who wishes to enjoy rather than to explore and dig. The following selection, which amounts to not more than about a fifth part of the complete Journals that Moore left behind, is simply the cream of the diary. No single interest, except the political, represented in the original diary has been overlooked. We have here a complete picture of the life Moore lived and the kind of world he lived in, and the value of the picture to us, it is clear, depends upon the character and interest of that life and that world. These deserve a word to themselves.

II

In 1818, the year in which the diary begins, Thomas Moore was an extremely successful man of letters, indeed, after Scott and Byron, the most successful man of letters of his time. The year before, *Lalla Rookh* had been published and had proved an immense success. His songs, of which he had already published several volumes, were known everywhere. In addition, he had made a great deal of money and a considerable reputation by a succession of political squibs and satires, and such volumes as *The Fudge Family in Paris*. He had recently removed to Slopperton Cottage, Wiltshire, chiefly to be
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near Bowood, Lord Lansdowne's country house, where, as will be seen from the diary, he was a very frequent and very welcome guest. Indeed, he was a favourite everywhere. He was a troubadour to the Whig society of the Regency. (Although the dates of this Journal carry us beyond the Regency, Moore and his friends were not only in but of the Regency, its typical figures, and wherever they were, no matter what the year should be, there was still the Regency.) The men liked his wit and humour and fund of good spirits over a bottle. The women liked his trim, little figure, bright eyes and fluttering tenor voice. He was, by nature, a gregarious, convivial soul, a born diner-out in the great age of dining-out. He was an Englishman's idea of what an Irishman should be. That he was flattered by the attentions of the great there can be no denying, nor can it be denied that he might have been a greater figure in literature (that is, in what we call literature, for he was great enough in his own day) if he had thought less about Holland House and more about Parnassus, if his way of life had not driven him to think only of immediate triumphs, if he had not written with one eye fixed upon Lady Holland, Lord Lansdowne and the rest. "Mr Moore converts the wild harp of Erin into a musical snuff-box," growls Hazlitt, who had a knack of penetrating mere literary fashions. We are not concerned here with Moore's literary reputation, but something must be said about his reputation as a man. If his own time was, on the whole, too kind to him, both as a poet and a man, posterity has certainly been unkind. His mode of life may have been, and probably was, a
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mistake, but once we accept it, we must admit that, within its bounds, he showed a manly independence that makes him something very different from the tuneful lap-dog of common report. Indeed, if we compare his conduct with that of most of the other poets of his time, poets who, unlike Tom Moore, were always talking morality, he cuts no mean figure. He neither accepted a pension for his change of opinion, nor lived on other people's allowances, nor let strangers keep his wife and family. His wealthy friends frequently pressed him to accept their help, but he always refused. When the deputy registrar he had left at Bermuda suddenly embezzled £6000, for which Moore was responsible, Moore had to leave England and make his home in Paris (hence the frequent entries dated from there during the years 1820–2) to escape a debtor’s prison; but despite all offers of help from friends, he preferred to make an arrangement with his publishers to pay off the debt. Nor must the superficial appearance of ease and gaiety in his memoirs or in any accounts of him, in which this aspect of his life is always stressed, blind us to the fact that his life had its share, and perhaps more than its share, of anxiety, hard work, and domestic tragedy. He passes very lightly, as I have said, over the periods when he was slaving away at his biographies, political satires and the like, for weeks on end at his cottage. He was fortunate in having the best wife (“Bessy”) that a man could possibly have, and though he was frequently forgetful and sometimes selfish (like most husbands with good wives), he was on the whole a very affectionate and devoted husband and father.
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There is nothing better in the whole diary than the occasional glimpses we get of his domestic life, and now and then he writes of his wife in words that move us more than whole volumes of his love poetry. So too he was a fond father, and his last years, before his final collapse, were spent battling against debts that had been incurred on behalf of his children, not one of whom lived to benefit by his care. It is one of the ironical strokes common in this world that this couple, so devoted, so happy in their parenthood, should outlive all their children. Tom Moore had his day, and rattled it with the best of them, with his hair “curling in long tendrils” and his eyes sparkling “like champagne bubbles,” with every poem a triumph, with tears and laughter and applause always at his command, the idol of a whole populace, the darling of a notable society; but, in spite of appearances, he was something more than a bright little singing-bird in a gold cage, fed on rose petals and for ever smoothed down by white hands; he had his life to live in this world and brought to the task and the adventure a stout heart and a manly spirit, and so was only defeated in the end by an old age that was assaulted by disaster after disaster.

III

Times change and with them opinion, and now we would rather have had Mary Lamb as our hostess than Lady Holland, would rather have had Charles Lamb’s invitation to play whist and smoke a pipe than have had a score of dinners at Holland House. Nevertheless, we need not be blind to the fact that Holland House was
the centre of an extremely brilliant society, a society that may have been slow to recognise great genius (and what society is not?) but that was saturated with wit and learning and literature, and made table-talk into an art. This was the society in which Tom Moore was at home, and his Journal is probably the best record of it we now possess. Nor was it the only society in which he found himself. In truth, he went everywhere. He will be found at Holland House at night, with the Whig statesmen, wits and men of letters, and will be breakfasting the following morning with Mary Shelley. He listens to Byron in Italy, Scott at Abbotsford, Wordsworth in London, Lafayette in Paris, and himself in Kilkenny. A lost age springs to life again in these pages. Byron, Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, Rogers, Campbell, and a host of others, pass and repass. The publishers and editors come and go, making their suggestions and naming their figures. Sidney Smith, Luttrell, Jekyll, and the wits, crowd the dining tables again, turning their epigrams. “Gentleman Jackson,” the boxer, calls to ask where the line “Men are but children of a larger growth” comes from, as there is a bet depending upon it. Young Macaulay, springing from nowhere, suddenly bursts upon the diners. We hear a discussion on the subject of “Boz, the new comic writer.” We see Moore and Luttrell so overcome with laughter at Sydney Smith that when they arrive at Cockspur Street, all three are “obliged to separate, and reel each his own way with the fit.” And best of all, we are given a glimpse, now and then, of Tom with his Bessy, of whom Maurice Hewlett (who put this diary
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to good uses) has written so exquisitely. “Through all the sparkle and flash,” Hewlett writes, “under all the talk, through all the tinklings of pianos and guitars which declare Tom's whereabouts, if you listen you can hear the quiet burden of her heart-beats.” What could be better, more revealing, than that early entry which describes how Moore read *The Vicar of Wakefield* to Bessy, who was recovering from a confinement, in the evening, and how there had come a young Irishman to the door who had said that his wife was delivered of twins on the road and was lying, without any comforts, at a neighbouring cottage, and how Bessy gave him a large jug of caudle, some clothes, tea, sugar, and money, and how they discovered, next day, that “twas all a cheat” and, with a sigh, began their reading of *The Vicar of Wakefield* again. The whole episode might have come out of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. There may be readers who do not wish to learn that on April 1st, 1819, Tom Moore “made Bessy turn her cap awry in honour of the day,” or that at eight o'clock of the 13th of May following, she and Tom sauntered up and down Burlington Arcade, then went and bought some prawns and supped “most snugly together”; but if there are such readers, we can only pity them and point out that there are great names and matters of more apparent moment elsewhere in the Journal. And if Moore’s worth as a man and a husband should still be doubted, there is a little entry towards the end of the diary that of itself should clear all doubts. Moore simply tells us how, once again, he has played his old trick upon Bessy, for he has got a friend to send her a five-pound
note as if it was his own gift and not Moore’s for her supplies for the local poor. “It makes her happy without the drawback of knowing it comes from my small means, and, in the way she manages it, does a world of good.” It is doubtful if any diary can show us anything more moving than Moore’s description of the death of his little daughter, Anastasia, when the last thing that Bessy did before the coffin was closed “was to pull some snowdrops herself and place them within it.” Poor Bessy, most unfortunate of mothers, there were yet other tragedies before her. Both her sons died when they had only just arrived at manhood, and one of them, Tom, their darling, after costing his father a small fortune and his mother a great many tears, died in disgrace, with the Foreign Legion. She was all mother, this Bessy, and yet she was driven to cry: “Why do people sigh for children? They know not what sorrow will come with them.” Moore’s last years were saddened by these repeated losses. His sister died, then his remaining son, and he writes: “The last of our five children is now gone, and we are left desolate and alone. Not a single relative have I now left in the world!” This selection ends before the final period, when, broken by these domestic tragedies, harassed by the task, for which he was not fitted, of compiling his History of Ireland, his powers gradually failed and the scattered entries in the Journal show more and more traces of a fading memory and a weakening hold upon life. These last entries make mournful reading and we can well spare them, now that Time has huddled away him and his friends and his enemies and all their days. It is
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better to watch the age being revived at its brightest, see Rogers sitting down to breakfast with his poets and politicians, or the footmen throwing open the doors while the beauty and wit and learning of England pass into Holland House.

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NOTE. The text of this selection is that of the 1860 edition of The Memoirs, Journal and Correspondence of Thomas Moore, edited by Lord John Russell. The spelling throughout is Moore's own. As frequent notes would be unwelcome in an edition of this kind, I have put in as few as possible, and these for the most part only refer to persons who were Moore's closest friends and who constantly make their appearance in his Journal. As most of these persons are well-known figures, the majority of readers will probably not require even such notes as there are, but they may help a few readers to understand and enjoy the text. It will be noticed that I have omitted to include Moore's account of one of the most famous incidents in his life, namely, the negotiations connected with Byron's "Memoirs" and their final destruction. The facts are simple and are to be found in all Byron literature. On the other hand, the negotiations were long and intricate, and Moore's account of them is very long and involved and very dull. This being so, and space being valuable, I have omitted the whole transaction and take this opportunity of apologising to those few readers who would rather not be without it.