

**“Possibly the Greatest Prose Book in the English Tongue”**  
**George Moore’s *The Brook Kerith***

Paper by Dennis Kennedy to the Belfast Literary Society,  
(Monday October 3, 2011.)

In September 1948 I was among the first wave of the lower orders to invade the hitherto select world of Northern Ireland’s grammar schools via the new Qualifying Examination. Wallace High School in Lisburn was not among the elite or exclusive, but nonetheless suffered severe culture shock as it tried to absorb so many newcomers from the ranks of the working and lower middle classes.



One teacher in particular, a recent recruit from a Belfast school, felt it his duty to challenge both the Protestant fundamentalist ethos in which his new charges had been framed, and the provincialism of a place like Lisburn as viewed from the lofty intellectual heights of Belfast. He was Mr Hendron, a remarkable and unorthodox teacher of English.

It was from his lips that I first heard the name of George Moore. Not that Moore was on the curriculum, then or since. As part of his crusade to confront our obscurantist mindset, Mr Hendron had made it clear to us that he was an atheist, and he never missed an opportunity to seek to lighten our darkness, or darken our enlightenment. I cannot remember the context, probably Milton, but the matter of Christ’s death and resurrection arose during a lesson and Mr Hendron said there was more than one side to that story, suggesting we might want to read *The Brook Kerith* by one George Moore, in which Jesus managed to survive the crucifixion.

That was a shocking assertion, and the name of the book and the author lodged itself in my mind. Years later I came across Moore’s *Confessions of a Young Man*, bought it, and tried to read it. It was, to me, unreadable. A decade after that I was at dinner in New York with a diplomat from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, a Mayo man. He had a wall of books, and as I browsed I saw not one George Moore, but a whole shelf of them. I told him my story of Mr Hendron, and he told me all about George Moore. The connection was mainly, I think, Mayo, for my friend had grown up close to what remained of Moore’s ancestral home, Moore Hall.

Back home in Dublin a month later, I received a parcel from him. It was an early edition of *The Brook Kerith*. That was more than thirty years ago, and at the last count I have 30 books by George Moore on my own bookshelves, plus eight or nine more about him.

I am not an expert on Moore, and this paper is not intended as an academic treatise, but as a tribute to the one writer who has given me more hours of enjoyment and stimulation over the years than any other, and to that most remarkable of novels, *The Brook Kerith*

George Augustus Moore was born at Moore Hall in Mayo in 1852, the eldest son of George Henry Moore, a large landowner, an MP at Westminster and an early leading light in the Home Rule movement. The Moores, originally English settlers in Cromwellian times, had by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century become Catholic, and one of them, John Moore, had

sided with the United Irishmen in 1798 and had found himself, for a very brief few days, the first and only President of the Republic of Connaught.

George Moore was sent to England to be educated at a Catholic boarding school, from which he was either expelled or removed by his father at the school's request. He rejected his father's attempt to guide him into a military career, instead enrolling as an art student at the Kensington Museum. His father died in 1870, when George, the heir, was 18. When he came of age in 1873, and was guaranteed an income from the estate, he decamped to Paris to study art. In seven years in Paris he came to know artists and writers, including Manet, Monet and Zola. Realising he was not a painter, he turned to literature. In 1878 he published his first volume, *Flowers of Passion*, a collection of poetry.

Brought back to Ireland in 1880 by estate business, he left again in 1881 for London, determined now to make a career for himself as a writer. He succeeded, not just as a writer but as pioneer of the new social realism, of the naturalistic approach to the novel as it was called, particularly in his early harrowing novel, *A Mummer's Wife*, published in 1885. He also gained public prominence as a crusader against the stranglehold the private lending libraries exercised over writers and publishers of fiction. In 1894 he had his greatest popular success with *Esther Waters*.

In 1901 he took the big decision to return to Dublin . partly, he suggested, as a protest against the Boer War of which he disapproved, partly because he was beginning to feel neglected by the British public, and partly because his close friend and distant cousin by marriage, Edward Martyn, and W B Yeats, whom he had come to know in London, had stimulated his interest in the Gaelic revival and literary renaissance in Dublin. In Dublin he was energetically involved in the creation of the Irish Literary Theatre, though his ability to fall out with anyone and everyone, and the boredom of listening to interminable speeches in Irish, particularly by Douglas Hyde, soon dampened his ardour.

His writing continued; he collaborated with Martyn and Yeats on two plays for the Irish Literary Theatre, and within four years of returning to Dublin he had produced two of his best works . *The Untilled Field* and *The Lake* - and all the time was gathering the material that would fill the three volumes of *Hail and Farewell* with delicious scandal. In 1911 he left Dublin for London, never to return as a resident.

By the time he died in London in January 1933, Moore had published some sixty books . poetry, plays, autobiography, short stories, art criticism and novels . and was acknowledged as one of the great figures of English literature of the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first quarter of the twentieth . frequently dubbed the English Zola and also the Irish Turgenev

One writer, Humbert Wolfe, deemed *The Brook Kerith* the greatest single literary achievement of our time and, in the words of this talk's title, as possibly the greatest prose book in the English tongue Wolfe qualified that claim to the extent of inserting except the Bible By the Bible he obviously meant the Bible in English, and in the English of the King James Authorised Version of 1611. Moore, in his many references to the Bible, and in his analysis, and great praise of its quality of writing is also invariably referring to the King James Version . to Moore and his contemporaries, the book they called the Bible was The King James English translation.

*The Brook Kerith; A Syrian Story* appeared in August 1916, at the lowest point of the Great War. It was published in London, and Edinburgh as well as New York, but not by Heinemann, Moore's usual publisher, which had indicated that it did not wish to handle a book by Moore on such a topic. Within a month it had gone into its fourth printing, sold 5,000 copies, and survived an action for blasphemous libel. It appeared

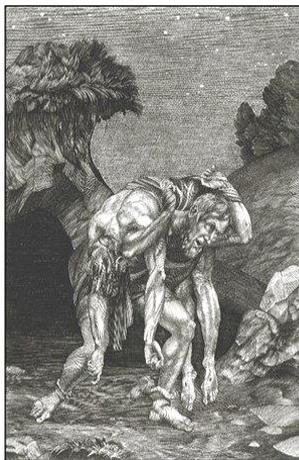
again in a revised version in 1927 as part of the Heinemann Uniform Edition of Moore's works, and in a limited edition illustrated by Stephen Gooden in 1929.

At almost 500 pages, more than 170,000 words, it was, and is a formidable work, made more so by Moore's use of inordinately long paragraphs . often extending to three or more pages . and by his omission entirely of quotation marks to indicate direct speech. It is in many ways a tribute to the King James Bible, written almost entirely in that style, using the 17<sup>th</sup> century ~~thou~~ and ~~thee~~ and ~~ye~~ with no attempt at dialect or vocabulary to define the characters. It is Moore's version of the gospel story, hung on a framework of three individuals - Joseph of Arimathea, Saul of Tarsus (St Paul) and Jesus.

Written when Moore was in his sixties, the book was seen by many as a major departure. It followed the three volumes of *Hail and Farewell* which had enthralled Dublin with their gossip, wit and bruising opinions, but were in part at least, autobiographical trivia, and *Kerith* could not have been more different.

But it was more a departure in style than in subject matter, for several of his earlier writings had shown his interest in religious topics. His second published work . his first attempt at serious literature, according to one critic<sup>iii</sup> - was *Martin Luther: a Tragedy in Five Acts* (London 1879). Moore was 27. The hero of one of his early novels, *Mike Fletcher* (1889) had talked about writing a trilogy of plays on the life of Jesus. In 1887 Moore had written a review of Wagner's posthumously published opera *Jesus of Nazareth*.<sup>iv</sup> In *Esther Waters*, evangelical Protestantism had been introduced as the religion of Mrs Barfield, Esther's benefactress. In both *Evelyn Innes* (1898) and *Sister Teresa* (1901) religious belief was a central theme.

At a personal level, matters religious had long been in Moore's mind. His removal from the Jesuit St Mary's School at Oscott at the age of 16 he variously attributes to idleness and bad behaviour, but also to his refusal to confess. He later described Oscott as a detestable place mentally and physically, telling his brother Maurice that while he, Maurice, had suffered only physical cold, hunger and canings, she had suffered in his mind. ~~I could not breathe in Catholicism~~<sup>v</sup> As a young man he greatly admired Shelley, was attracted by his atheism, and was led by him to read Kant, Spinoza, Darwin and others.<sup>vi</sup>



*Joseph removes Jesus' body*  
Engraving by Stephen Gooden  
from 1929 limited edition.

Living in England in the 1880s - dear sweet Protestant England as he termed it in *Confessions of a Young Man*<sup>vii</sup> . he told his mother in a letter of December 1887, that he was very happy with his life in rural Sussex, and very fond of his English friends. He wrote that he had entirely adopted their life . having said, in fact ~~that thy people shall be my people, thy god shall be my God~~

~~I~~ put on a high hat, take an umbrella and march to church every Sunday. I do not believe, but I love Protestantism. If it is not the faith of my brain, it is the faith of my heart.<sup>viii</sup>

He had long been disenchanted with his family's Catholicism and rather publicly converted to Protestantism in 1903, or at least to his own sort of Protestantism.

In December 1910 Moore took furious exception to a phrase in an *Irish Times* obituary of his brother Augustus which described the Moores as ~~an old Roman Catholic family long settled in the West of Ireland~~ He wrote to the editor stating that the family was Protestant, and had been so until his great grandfather had moved to Spain where he had set up a successful trading business, which would not have been possible had he not embraced Catholicism.

His interest in the Bible, by his own account, dated back to 1898, when one Mary Hunter gave him a Bible as a Christmas present. Mary Hunter was a prominent lady in London society, sister of Ethel Smyth, the composer and suffragist. *Kerith* is dedicated to Mary, and the dedication states that that Bible had been Moore's constant companion and chief literary interest since 1898. Moore's interest in the Bible may have gone back twenty years before that. In the late 1870s he was writing to his mother from Paris about his play *Luther* and telling her to read now nothing but Balzac, Hugo, Shakespeare and the Bible.<sup>x</sup>

This prolonged immersion in the Bible produced first fruits in a play *The Apostle*, first published as a scenario in the *English Review* in June 1910, and then as a book in 1911, which was also dedicated to Mary Hunter. It is a very short drama, and not a very good one. One critic deemed it: "the most audacious if not the most blasphemous revision of the gospels ever attempted in print".<sup>x</sup>

It foreshadows the plot of *The Brook Kerith*, but from our perspective the foreword to the published text, entitled "A prefatory letter on reading the Bible for the first time" is perhaps as interesting as the play. It is in the form of a letter Moore had written to his friend Max Meyerfeld, who had declined to provide an introduction to his translation of *The Apostle* into German, and it tells us much about Moore's disillusionment with, and vigorous hostility towards, Catholicism, as well as a fairly detailed literary critique of the Bible.

In the letter Moore responds to Meyerfeld's question as to why he had rushed into print in June 1910 with what he himself called "working notes" and indicates that he had been thinking for some time of writing a book on the idea that Christ had not died on the cross. "a very old legend, he notes, and that he had long been talking about a story based on Paul meeting Christ twenty-five years after the Crucifixion. He had even received proposals for collaboration on such a project from talented and honourable men and it was his fear that the idea would drift so completely into common consciousness that someone else would write the story in such a way that would cause me much unhappiness."

By the middle of 1910 the English speaking world was already preparing for a most significant event. 1911 would mark the three-hundredth anniversary of the appearance of the King James Bible. The celebrations began in January 1911 in both London and Washington. I have not found any reference by Moore to these events, but I would think it very likely that they prompted him to embark on his long-held intention. To write his own version of the Bible story. It was perhaps Moore's own tribute to the King James Bible.

After *The Apostle*, Moore, though completing *Hail and Farewell*, and producing a stage version of *Esther Waters*, was increasingly focused on what was to be *The Brook Kerith*. In January 1914 he embarked on a trip which took him via Marseilles, Port Said and Joppa, to Palestine where he trekked on mule-back from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, and to the Sea of Galilee, identifying the landscapes which he was to portray in such detail in *Kerith*. Fifteen months after he returned from Palestine, the book was complete, to be published at the end of August 1916.<sup>xi</sup>

Joseph of Aramathea is the dominant figure for the first two thirds of the book, and the story is told from his perspective as the son of a rich salted-fish merchant in Galilee much more interested in learning Hebrew and Greek and reading the scriptures than in taking over the family business.

The character of Joseph is finely drawn, and his deep interest in philosophy and religion allows Moore to bring in, painlessly for the reader, much theological discussion. Up to this point *The Brook Kerith* is a biography of Joseph. This begins to change when Joseph goes in search of "one John preaching in the country about the Jordan; the

Baptist, they call him where he soon hears about Jesus the Essene, the young prophet who has been preaching to great crowds. In search of Jesus, Joseph visits a community of the Essenes, a small Jewish sect, at a cenoby near Jericho, where Jesus has been a shepherd, and where he eventually meets him.

Moore uses the Bible accounts of Jesus's life and eventual crucifixion as the framework for his own story. The Jesus he portrays is an extremely serious, passionate, young man; his band of followers, Joseph finds, is almost all fishermen employed by his own father. This prompts a discussion on whether a rich young man like Joseph could join himself to a group of uneducated fishermen.

The story becomes increasingly familiar to any student of the Bible. The crucifixion is not recounted in detail, as Joseph arrives in Jerusalem on that day when Jesus is already on the cross and presumed dead. With Pilate's permission, and with the help of the centurion at Golgotha, Joseph takes the body on an oxcart to the new tomb where Martha and Mary join him and place a sheet over the body. Left alone Joseph re-enters the tomb and notices that the sheet has fallen away, and a tress of hair has dropped across the cheek.

Moore describes Joseph's reaction:-

*'He must have moved, or angels must have moved him, and uncertain whether Jesus was alive or dead, Joseph remembered Lazarus, and stood watching, cold and frightened, waiting for some movement.*

*'He is not dead, he is not dead, he cried, and his joy died, for on the instant Jesus passed again into the darkness of a swoon'*

Joseph moves the body, at night, back to his own house outside Jerusalem, where, with the help of one trusted servant he hides Jesus and nurses him in secret. After a week Jesus recovers sufficiently to talk to Joseph, but shows no memory of his near death on the cross, or of his life before it. As he recovers slowly from his ordeal, there is a hue and cry over the disappearance of the body from the tomb, and Joseph, as the tomb's owner, is suspected of having stolen the body to perpetuate the claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. It becomes increasingly dangerous to let Jesus remain at his house, as his discovery would mean his certain death, and possibly Joseph's too.

After various unimplemented plans to move Jesus out of Palestine and out of harm's way, Joseph persuades him to return to the Essenes. They find that the cenoby near Jericho has split, and a small faction of a dozen or so has moved some miles further to a cave beyond the brook Kerith. There Jesus joins them and resumes his work as a shepherd.

Joseph of Aramathea drops out of the story. We learn that he has been murdered by zealots in Jerusalem. The rest of the story takes place in and around the rocky ground above the brook Kerith. In his grief over the death of Joseph, Jesus feels in his heart *something more than mortal grief*. This grieving is over his former life, his temerity in proclaiming himself the Messiah, for which he believed he would be held accursed for all eternity.

The post-resurrection Jesus portrayed by Moore is a much more gentle, simple soul than the fiery preacher presented to us in the months before Calvary. Moore encapsulates the difference in two passages. The first, taken almost straight from the Bible, records Jesus' anger when Joseph leaves him on the eve of his trial in Jerusalem to visit his sick father. When he returns Jesus bluntly tells him there is no place among his followers for those who could not free themselves from such ghosts as father, mother and children and wife.

A few weeks later, after the crucifixion when Jesus is recovering at Joseph's house, Joseph arranges to take him to safety, out of Palestine to Egypt. But the night before they are due to go, he has a dream in which his father seems to be warning him

not to leave Judea. When told the dream Jesus immediately agrees that they must heed the warning, declaring to Joseph *'...a son must always be obedient to his father, and love him before other men.'*

The final phase of the story takes place twenty years later, at the cenoby of the Essenes where Jesus is still working as a shepherd. Late one night a stranger arrives at the cenoby seeking shelter. He has a bald egg-shaped skull which seems ridiculously small, and a thick black beard spread over his face like a broom, and nearly to the eyes; thick black eyebrows shaded the eyes so piercing and brilliant that the Essenes were aware that a man of great energy had come among them.

This is Saul of Tarsus, St Paul, making his way to the port of Caesarea, *en route* to Rome for his trial; he has lost his way, and also his companion Timothy. He tells the Essenes all about himself . of his great mission to preach the doctrine of Christ, of the resurrection of Jesus, and of his own life-changing vision on the road to Damascus. This lengthy exposition takes place while Jesus is out with his flock. At the end of it one of the brothers asks Paul who was this Jesus Christ when he lived on earth, and Paul tells him he was from Nazareth, was baptized by John in the Jordan, preached in Galilee, was crucified by Pilate, and rose from the dead .

The puzzled monk tells him that they have a brother Jesus who was born in Nazareth, baptized by John and suffered under Pilate. Many men suffered under Pilate, replies Paul, then asks which of them is Jesus. Not here, he is out with his flock, he is told.

Jesus returns from the hills and meets Paul, who is anxious to know more details of his life. Jesus then gives an account, for the first time to the Essenes, of the two years of his life preceding and following the crucifixion.

*'...my passion was so great in those days that I did not see that my teaching was not less than blasphemy against God...I fear to speak of the things that I said at that time...My teaching grew more and more violent...I was so exalted by the many miracles which I had performed by the power of God or the power of a demon, I know not which, that I encouraged my disciples to speak of me as the son of David, though I knew myself to be the son of Joseph the carpenter.'*

Paul can stand no more and rushes out crying *'A madman, A madman or possessed by some evil spirit.'* The Essenes then recount to Jesus all that Paul had told them, and Jesus is *overtaken with a great pity for Paul'* and resolves to go immediately to Jerusalem and confess that he is Jesus and that he did not die on the cross. He leaves the cenoby and shortly after comes across a man lying in a faint near a rock . it is Paul, who in his rush from the cenoby has taken no water and has collapsed from thirst. Jesus gives him to drink, and offers to help him find Timothy. They share a cave for the night and as they proceed on their journey Paul tells Jesus what he had told the Essenes, of his persecution of the Christians and of his conversion on the road to Damascus, when Jesus Christ had spoken to him out of the cloud, suggesting that Jesus' version of events as told at the cenoby was *by order of the Jews* who were trying to ensnare him.

Jesus replied that the Jesus who spoke to Paul out of the cloud had never lived in the flesh . he was *a Lord Jesus Christ of thine own imagining.* This provoked a great rage in Paul, who turned on him, threatening him with his staff and trying to chase him away. But the two still continued together, though apart at first, and then in conversation with Paul humouring Jesus, convinced that he was a madman, and Jesus not seeking to persuade Paul that there had been no miraculous resurrection, for fear his mind would snap and Paul would be left wandering demented through the hills.

After more dialogue Jesus' final words to Paul are *'Thou canst not understand me and be thyself; but, Paul, I can comprehend thou for once I was thou,'* and he walks

off across the hills. Paul goes on in search of Timothy, sure that Jesus would not go back to Jerusalem to deny the resurrection, but would join a band of monks from India whom they had met on their journey. Paul finds Timothy and they travel to Rome. There Paul is put under a sort of house arrest pending his trial, but continues to preach, as the penultimate paragraph in the book puts it

*“He expounded and testified the Kingdom of God, persuading them on all matters concerning Jesus, his birth, his death and his resurrection, enjoining them to look into the Scriptures and to accept the testification of five hundred, many of whom were still alive, while some were sleeping. He spoke from morning to evening.+*

The last single-line paragraph of the book says simply *“The rest of his story is unknown”*.

The ending, it seems, had caused Moore some trouble. The 1911 version of *The Apostle*, has a very different conclusion. Paul and Jesus, instead of going their separate ways, have an argument which culminates in Paul accusing Jesus of blasphemy and striking him with his staff *in the name of the Jesus sitting at the right hand of the father*. Jesus falls to the ground, and Paul realises that he is dead, and declares:

*‘It is well that he died, though the blow was not of my motion, but came from God...’*

This ending was just too neat, and Moore abandoned it in *The Brook Kerith*. But in 1923, in a revised version of *The Apostle* the ending is again changed. There is no final walk and conversation between Paul and Jesus. After Paul’s exit from the cenoby in anger, Jesus reaffirms his determination to go to Jerusalem:

*‘It cannot be that I should stand aloof and let the world take comfort in a lie...’*

There then follows a new Act, set in Caesarea where Paul has arrived to take ship and is talking to Timothy and other Christians there. It ends with Timothy and Paul parting at the quayside, Timothy’s parting words being *Go Paul, and fetch the world to Christ*.

A revised edition of *Kerith* appeared in 1927, and while there are many amendments in detail, the ending is essentially the same as in the original 1916 version. In 1930, in another reworking of the *Apostle*, published as *The Passing of the Essenes*, the story has yet a different ending.<sup>xii</sup> The chapter in Caesarea, which had been inserted in the 1923 revision of the *Apostle*, is dropped, and the final walk and conversation between Paul and Jesus is also omitted. The cenoby is split with the majority of the Essenes going off with Paul, leaving Jesus with a few elderly brothers who are determined to go to Jerusalem and make it known that Jesus of Nazareth is still alive, thus making a laughing stock of Paul’s doctrine.

But Jesus surprises them by saying he is not of their mind, that he *‘...stumbled once in the belief that we who did not make the world can remake it, but I have learnt since that the world is ever in the hands of God. He is moulding it always, without our help and warily.’*

Jesus then picks up a basket of food the brothers have forgotten to take to a hermit, saying *±* will take it to him. Mayhap they will learn in time that it is better to love the good than hate the wicked.q

When it appeared in August 1916 *The Brook Kerith* generated much publicity, helped by the almost immediate prosecution for blasphemy. The blasphemy charge was soon despatched. It was taken by, of all people, Lord Alfred Douglas, he of Oscar Wilde fame, but now converted to Catholicism. His application for a summons against Moore and his publishers *±for that they did compose, print and publish, or caused to be composed, printed or published a blasphemous libel of and concerning the Holy Scriptures and the Christian religion in a book called The Brook Kerith*q was curtly dismissed by the magistrate at Bow Street. He ruled that, despite the applicant’s

argument that the book perverted the Gospel narrative and held up the Christian religion to contempt and ridicule by suggesting that our Lord Jesus Christ was an ignorant, deceitful, violent tempered person, and a vainglorious imposter, the book did not come within the decided cases with reference to blasphemy. He had nothing to say with regard to the merits of the book, which was based on the assumption (which the author had a perfect right to make) that Christ was merely a man and not a divine person. That was not blasphemy.

As *The Academy*, a London monthly, commented, the result was that Mr Moore and his publisher received a valuable advertisement *gratis*. *The Academy* said the magistrate's decision was probably right from a legal point of view, adding that '*The public doubtlessly is buying the book and being inexpressibly bored by it. Out of duty to our readers we review it at length in another column, and we are free to confess that we have never had a more distasteful job.*'

*The Academy's* review was headed 'Moore's The Pity' and was as much an attack on Moore himself and his pretensions as it was a critique of the book. As a piece of fiction, it conceded the book might pass, but as gospel or doctrine '*...it is quite the most disgraceful and malicious thing that mortal man has hitherto had the impertinence to offer us.*'

*The Daily Express* called it 'contradictory, stilted, peppered with anachronisms, irritatingly mannered and blatantly vulgar.' *The Westminster Gazette* gave it a very adverse review, but published sixteen letters on it in subsequent issues. All this boosted public interest and sales just as much as did the numerous positive reviews, which ranged upwards from *The Times* - 'difficult success'- and *Life* which ranked it 'easily the most challenging piece of literature published in the present century' to *Vanity Fair* which adjudged Moore 'the best living English novelist', and *Dial* which placed Moore 'in the company of Rembrandt'. *The New Republic* saw in it 'George Moore at his best'.

*The English Review* called it 'an astonishing tour de force, incontestably a great book, a modern classic.' Like other reviewers, including some who raged at its plot, *The English Review* praised the writing. 'a gem of exquisite English, of a quite haunting charm, of an abiding beauty. It is Moore's chef d'oeuvre, the effort of a true artist.'

R Ellis Porter in *The Bookman* thought Moore's intellectual and spiritual struggles as portrayed in the book were full of rare beauty, and though his overall view of the book was that it was 'barren, cold, accurate and, alas, so lamentably long', it was a masterpiece.

*The Spectator*, reviewing a later edition, said *The Brook Kerith* was GM's most perfect achievement and "the most perfect of imaginative prose writings since *Marius the Epicurean*." <sup>xiii</sup> (Moore would have appreciated that tribute, as he frequently cited Walter Pater, the author of *Marius the Epicurean*, as one of the great masters of the English language.)

In a letter to Frank Harris in 1918, responding to criticism of *The Brook Kerith*, Moore defended both its content and style. While making no pretensions to scholarship, he insisted that he had read and assimilated the story of the origins of Christianity with the good result that no one had been able to pick a hole in his erudition. The 'melodic line' of the narrative, he wrote, had never been excelled. <sup>xiv</sup>

The book's reception in Ireland was in stark contrast to the furore in London. As far as I can see *The Irish Times* carried no review, and no comment on it, though it did report the blasphemy court case. I have not been able to find a single review in an Irish newspaper or journal. *The Irish Book Lover*, which often carried snippets of information about George Moore and his writing, made no mention of it, not even in its list of titles published. It did find space, in February 1917, to review Susan Mitchell's biography of Moore

The late summer of 1916 was a fraught time in Ireland, and the destruction associated with the Easter Rising had disrupted printing and publishing, and one or two monthlies had been forced to go bi-monthly. But they still came out, and they all, as far as I can discover, ignored *The Brook Kerith*. In a lengthy obituary of Moore in January 1933 *The Irish Times* devoted one paragraph to it describing it as 'a long book published in 1916', adding that 'but for men's preoccupation with the events of the Great War the publication of this work would undoubtedly have caused great stir. The book is cherished by admirers, and copies are precious.'<sup>xv</sup>

(That 1933 obituary included the information that one of Moore's books, *A Story Teller's Holiday*, was banned last Friday (the day before Moore's death) by the Free State Censorship Board. q. an insertion that would have delighted Moore.)

In an essay published in 1922 Moore refers to the fright the book caused among critics when it first came out, and how again and again the book was returned (by critics) to the editors who had sent it out.<sup>xvi</sup> It may be that Irish critics asked to review it took even greater fright than their English colleagues.

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Moore is both a great story-teller and a wonderful writer of English prose. Here the story is epic, and the style both beautiful and dignified, with Biblical echoes. The characters are wonderfully and sympathetically drawn. It is no anti-Christian tract, even though it does deny the core doctrine of Jesus's resurrection. It has indeed a melodic line and like a Wagner opera is not to be rushed. rather the reader finds himself immersed in it, and stimulated rather than provoked by it.

A Norman Jeffares, in his 1965 book *George Moore*, gave this assessment of *The Brook Kerith*

*"The Biblical imagery and rhythms add to the epic quality of the story: it is simple and the narrative unfolds effectively, action, description, thought and speech blending in a pattern which provides variation and tension as well as information and reflection. It is easy to read, and reads aloud superbly; it is spacious dignified and captivating, an example of the supreme flexibility of the art of a story-teller whose essential seriousness of artistic purpose is enlivened by the subtle humour and by inconsequential trivia which give to the novel its feeling of concrete detail."*<sup>xvii</sup>

That is a literary judgement, and Moore certainly saw himself as primarily a story-teller. But *The Brook Kerith* is not just Moore's re-telling of the gospel story for modern, non-believing readers as a literary experiment. there is in it, I think, much spiritual, theological content reflecting Moore's own relationship to religious belief. Here we have a problem, for Moore was a supreme egotist, a man with armour-plated vanity, a self-publicist *par excellence* whose every major move in life was taken with its impact on his standing with the public. whether celebrity or notoriety. a primary consideration.

Thus, having decided to leave London in 1901 and return to Ireland, attracted by the literary revival and encouraged by Yeats and others, he presented it as a protest against the Boer War, thereby gaining the attention of a public which had lost interest in him. That does not mean that he was not genuinely outraged by the war against the Boers, but it was almost certainly not the reason he returned to Ireland.

When he publicly announced his conversion to Protestantism. ie to leave the Church of Rome, as he called it - in a letter to the *Irish Times* in September 1903,<sup>xviii</sup> the one reason he was prepared to give was that the Catholic Archbishop had attended the levee given at Dublin Castle by King Edward on his visit to Dublin, and that the Hierarchy received the King at Maynooth, in spite of the opinion of Irish nationalists. All this, he suggested, because the Archbishop wanted to get a Cardinal's hat and Maynooth

wanted a Catholic university. And he grandly declared that no choice was left to him if he wished to remain an Irishman, but to say goodbye to Rome. (Moore's close friend Edward Martyn was a leading voice in opposition to the Royal visit.)

In fairness to Moore he had already stated in the letter *that the reasons which decide a man to leave the church he was born in are many and complex, and I do not propose to open my soul to the public as if it were a public building.*'

But the Royal visit was not Moore's real reason for the letter. He had been energetically refusing to be a Catholic since his early teens, and had been outspoken, even outrageous, in his criticisms of both Catholicism and Catholics.

As he tells the story in *Salve* his wish had long been to dissociate himself from a church which he deemed 'shameful'.<sup>xix</sup> Now, in 1903, he became conscious of a desire to join a Church in sympathy with his religious aspirations to some extent.

Whether this desire arose from his immersion in Mary Hunter's Bible, which he had received in 1898, one cannot say. Certainly *Evelyn Innes* (1898) and *Sister Teresa*, (1903), both with religious belief as a central theme, suggest such matters were much in his mind. Or it may be that he realised that, in Ireland at least, the only way to stop being a Catholic was to become a Protestant. And, being George Moore, he no doubt relished the stir that a public declaration by him of his conversion would cause in Dublin.

So he wrote a letter to the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Peacock, telling him that for the past three years, since he had come to live in Dublin, his thoughts had been directed towards religion and he had come to see that Christianity in its purest form was to be found in the Anglican rather than the Church of Rome. And he concluded:

*'I am anxious to become a member of your Church, and shall be glad to hear from your Grace regarding the steps I am to take.'*<sup>xx</sup>

Some time passed with no reply from the Archbishop, time Moore spent rehearsing the many lofty spiritual debates he anticipated having with the prelate. Then a letter came from the Archbishop saying he was on holidays with his family at the seaside, and would not be back for some weeks, so he was passing Moore's letter on to his parish priest, who would no doubt call upon him.

By parish priest he meant the rector of the Church of Ireland parish, who, it turned out, was a Rev Gilbert Mahaffey, whose rectory was in Ely Place, a few doors away from Moore's home. This was not what Moore had expected, but he met Mahaffey and discussed spiritual matters with him, recounted with some wit in *Salve*. These meetings culminated in a very private and decidedly low-key reception into the Church of Ireland . the two men kneeling and Moore reciting the Lord's Prayer after the rector.

A week later Moore had a rude reminder that whatever had happened in the seclusion of the rectory, he was still a Catholic in the mind of the Dublin public. A review of his latest book, *The Untilled Field*, was published, including the phrase 'Moore, himself a Catholic'. This was too much . Moore had to declare his Protestantism, and he hit upon the idea of linking his conversion/defection to the royal visit, and his shock at the lack of patriotism displayed by the Catholic hierarchy, and explaining this in a letter to *The Irish Times*.

Was this all cynical play-acting and self-promotion? Possibly, but Moore swallowed his pride and discussed his innermost feelings with the Rector. His chief concern . which worried the rector a great deal . was whether it was essential to believe in the divinity of Christ and his physical resurrection. Was it not enough to revere Jesus as *the noblest human being who ever lived*' and to respect his teachings?

In the conversations between Jesus and the Essenes, and Paul in the final stages of *The Brook Kerith* there is more than an echo of the exchanges in the rectory in

Ely Place. Again, this time inevitably, the key issues are the divinity of Christ and the resurrection. Jesus does not doubt that Paul had a life-changing experience on the Damascus road, that he had a vision of the Christ, but continues to argue that he, Jesus of Nazareth, was not divine, and did not die on the cross. Paul still thinks Jesus is mad, and departs, driven by his faith in his own experience, to spread Christianity to the world.

Jesus had clearly taught that salvation was no longer for Jews alone, to be found only in observance of the laws of Jehovah, but in a new personal experience. Why that experience had to be depend on belief in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth and his physical resurrection was what bothered Moore in his talks with the Rev Mahaffey; in *The Brook Kerith* he offers an alternative account of the origins of Christianity and its spread worldwide which circumnavigates his own personal difficulties, and those of many others.

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Moore's stature and popularity declined after his death in January 1933 . indeed it had already begun to fade. *The Brook Kerith* was his last great work, though he continued to write, and rewrite, to the very last. By the post-war era he had almost disappeared, and even the film of *Esther Waters*, made in 1948, with Kathleen Ryan, Dirk Bogart, Cyril Cusack and Fay Compton, failed to re-ignite interest in Moore as a writer, and for many years *Esther Waters* was his only title in print.

More recently there has been renewed academic interest . including an excellent biography by Adrian Frazier, published in 2000 . and there have been reprints of many of his works. A feature film based on his short story, *Albert Nobbs*, is to be released shortly.

But he is still rarely included in the canon of great Irish writers, and when he is mentioned it is briefly with a reference to *Esther Waters* and his social realism, but almost never to his masterpiece, *The Brook Kerith*.



GM with W.B.Yeats in Max Beerbohm cartoon

He himself contributed to this lack of canonisation in Ireland. He was, after all an absentee landlord at the time of the Land War, he wrote savage things about Ireland, both peasants and landlords, in *Parnell and his Island*, in *A Drama in Muslin*, in *Hail and Farewell* and elsewhere. He was highly critical of Catholicism and its suffocating affect on culture; he converted rather publicly from Catholicism to his own form of Protestantism.

He over-indulged in autobiographical ramblings, almost a dozen books if you count *Hail and Farewell* as three, most of which repay exploration, but possibly for a limited readership. And he did make enemies; Guido Bruno, commenting on Moore's correspondence with Frank Harris writes that the letters 'prove George Moore a self-centred conceited egoist, vain ignorant and totally unappreciative of other men's genius.'<sup>xxi</sup>

That last rebuke was in response to Moore writing to Harris that Oscar Wilde was not a great writer – 'third or fourth class and therefore not worth worrying about. I do not think anybody would have troubled about him if the Marquis of Queensbury had

not sent him a post card.' Moore had his problems with W B Yeats, who wrote that

Moore had neither charm nor rhythm, quoting another anonymous critic that Moore's sentences were *like ribbons of tooth paste squeezed out of a tube*. George Bernard Shaw, Moore wrote, *'...cannot pursue a line of thought for more than a few lines and then has to contrive his escape in a joke – his jokes are vulgar claptrap, the jokes of the clowns in the pantomime.'*<sup>xii</sup> Shaw had written that he had read thirty pages of *The Brook Kerith* and then given up.

Moore's very large output included great books, some pioneering in the choice of topics and in their treatment. He has given me half a life time of pleasure. My own favourites would be, *The Brook Kerith* of course, then *The Lake, Muslin, Esther Waters, A Mummer's Wife* and the *Untilled Field*. When you have finished those, I would suggest *Parnell and his Island*, for its blistering assault on just about every Irish sensitivity - originally written as a series of articles for *Le Figaro* in 1886 - and *A Story Teller's Holiday* (1918) for Moore at his sauciest and funniest. And, of course, *Hail and Farewell*.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> See obit (London) *Times*, Jan 23, 1933.

<sup>ii</sup> Wolfe, Humbert. *George Moore*. London 1931. p 90. Wolfe was an Italian-born English poet, and biographer of Moore.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Stephen Becker 'Private Moore, Public Moore' in *George Moore in Perspective*, ed Janet Eagleson Dunleavy. Malton Press, Naas. 198s. p 70.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Musician* May 12, 1897.

<sup>v</sup> *Salve*, vol II of *Hail and Farewell* by George Moore, p 228. (1947 edition.)

<sup>vi</sup> *Confessions of a Young Man*, by George Moore, p23.(Digit Books edition, 1961)

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid* p110.

<sup>viii</sup> Letter of 22.12.1887, see Hone, Joseph, *Life of George Moore*, London, 1936. p 137.

<sup>ix</sup> Quoted in Hone, p76.

<sup>x</sup> *CURRENT LITERATURE* II (Oct 1911), 423-24

<sup>xi</sup> 'Apologia pro Scriptis Meis' in *Fortnightly Review* DCLXX, New Series, 1922.

<sup>xii</sup> *The Passing of the Essenes* was staged at the Arts Theatre in London in 1930.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Spectator*, CXXXI (4 Aug 1923), 160

<sup>xiv</sup> *Moore versus Harris*, by Guido Bruner. Printed privately, Chicago, 1925. p 16.

<sup>xv</sup> *Irish Times*, January 23, 1933. p4.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Apologia pro Scriptis Meis*, *The Fortnightly Review*, DCLXX. ,Oct 2, 1922.

<sup>xvii</sup> *George Moore*, by A Norman Jeffares, , London 1965.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Irish Times*, September 24, 1903. p 5.

<sup>xix</sup> *Salve*, op cit, ch XX..

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid* p 264.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Moore versus Harris*, op cit. p 9.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid* pps 10,11 and 16.

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