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Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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Author(s): Eamon Maher

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"Belfast: The far from Sublime City in Brian Moore's early novels"

"BELFAST: THE FAR FROM SUBLIME CITY IN BRIAN MOORE'S EARLY NOVELS."

Eamon Maher

The city has been a source of inspiration for many writers. Joyce's depictions of Dublin have prompted much cultural tourism in our capital as the annual Bloomsday celebrations will attest to. New York, Paris, London, Madrid have all been described both positively and negatively in numerous works of fiction. Belfast has inevitably had her bards, few probably better known than the novelist Brian Moore (1921-1999), who wrote several novels set in places as far afield as Canada, the US, France, South America and North Africa. It seems to me, however, that most of Moore's best fiction was set in Belfast. His views on the city have been well-documented in his radio and television interviews, where he comments on its repressive, sectarian nature, its resistance to change, its immutability. He was born and reared in Clifton Street, directly opposite the Orange Hall, and he thus had an excellent view of the statue of King Billy on his white horse, a symbol of the origins of the religious conflict that has long bedeviled the history of this island. Moore, the nephew of Eoin McNeill, one of the founders of the Gaelic League and the man who signed the countermanding order for the 1916 Rebellion, was part of an extremely Catholic nationalistic family. By his own admission, however, he 'lacked the religious sense', and thus always felt uncomfortable in a city where people take their religious allegiance so seriously. He hated the education he received at St. Malachy's, the diocesan school where you were caned for the slightest misdemeanour, and he soon discovered that he had no interest in becoming a doctor, like his father and brothers before him. He ached to escape from Belfast and the Second World War provided him with the opportunity. He joined the British Ministry of War Transport and his work brought him to North Africa, France and Italy. When he subsequently joined the United Nations, he was sent to Poland where his infatuation with an older lady prompted him to head to Canada. He worked for a few years with the *Montreal Gazette*. Then, after the break-up of his first marriage, Moore settled in California with his second wife, Jean, and he spent the rest of his life there.

I mention these few biographical facts to illustrate how Moore visited and lived in many places around the world. He was exposed to several cultures and experiences after he left Belfast aged 21. So he could not be described as parochial in any sense of the term. He returned regularly to Belfast to see his mother but each time he visited his first thoughts were how quickly he could leave again without insulting his family. Belfast, a city he loathed, was nevertheless the place where he decided to situate his early fiction. I will attempt to illustrate how the city's landscape and architecture, its sights,

sounds and smells were imbedded in the author's consciousness. Moore liked to quote the French writer and Nobel Prize winner, François Mauriac, who said that for the novelist the door closes at twenty, by which he meant that the events of the first twenty years of life form the basis of our future concerns and preoccupations. Belfast was where Moore's artistic temperament was moulded even though, in order to nurture his vocation, he was impelled to leave the city. In a passage from 'The Expatriate Writer' Moore describes a departure from Belfast. Having boarded the ferry, which marks the embarking on a new existence, the young emigrant strikes up a conversation with a man who asks him what are his reasons for leaving Ireland:

"...he walked in a dull city where men made money the way charwomen wash floors, dully, alone, at a slow methodical pace."

I'm leaving home because I don't want to be a doctor like my father and brothers. Because I want to be a writer. I want to write... Perhaps that's the way a lot of people become writers. They don't like the role they're playing and writing seems a better one.¹

In real life, Moore did not realise at the time what the future held in store for him. He had no inkling that he would end up as a writer. What he did know was that he was suffocating in Belfast and that he wanted to contribute to the war effort on the Allies' side. There was a sense in which the artistic temperament was suspect in the city he was leaving. Were he to have stayed, he would have run the risk of slipping into the same Catholic ghetto that ensnares some of his characters. Belfast may be the inspiration of most of Moore's best writing but he could never have written about it so forcibly, sometimes so cruelly, had he not left it. There can be no doubt that the door closed for him, as for Mauriac, at twenty.

The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne (1955) is a remarkable first novel. Moore admitted how conscious he was of Joyce when he began to write this book:

I wanted to write about my own loss of faith, but did not wish to risk adverse comparisons with him (Joyce) by describing the loss of faith in a young Irishman... I decided to write not about an intellectual's loss of faith but of the loss of faith in someone devout, the sort of woman my mother would have known, a 'sodality lady'²

The choice of heroine was inspirational. Judith is the victim of a domineering aunt who demands that she sacrifice her future to care for her when the old lady becomes an invalid. After the aunt's death, Judith has lost whatever youthfulness and charm she once possessed and, in addition, is in a precarious financial position. The opening pages of the novel see Judith moving into new digs. She is a woman imbued with much of the snobbery of her class and,

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although she doesn't possess much in terms of material possessions, she is acutely aware of being somehow superior to her landlady and the other tenants of the lodging house:

The street outside was a university bywater, once a good residential area, which had lately been reduced to the level of taking in paying guests. Miss Hearne stared at the houses opposite and thought of her aunt's day when there were only private families in this street, at least one maid to every house, and dinner was at night, not at noon. All gone now and all those people dead and all the houses partitioned off into flats³.

The setting clearly doesn't appeal to Judith. In her mind, it's just another example of how the city is falling into social and moral decay. She is aware of the fact that she doesn't really belong in Belfast, or anywhere else for that matter. She is part of a world and class that have all but disappeared. This is why her prize possessions are her aunt's picture and the oleograph of the Sacred Heart, which she carefully hangs up each time she moves digs. These are the reminders of what she holds most dear: her family and her religion. But neither gives her much comfort. She is desperate to experience companionship, love, adventure and is excited by her first encounter with the brother of her landlady, Mr. Madden, recently returned from the United States. She says to him: "I'm sure you find Belfast dull, after New York. My goodness, after all that excitement. It's so up-to-date and everything, New York, I mean." (p.28).

Madden does indeed find Belfast dull. When walking through the damp streets of the Ulster capital, he remembers how the Big Apple hums with the business of making millions. He thinks of the shows on Broadway, the wisecracks you hear on the streets and finds the contrast with his present surrounds unbearable:

While he walked in a dull city where men made money the way charwomen wash floors, dully, alone, at a slow methodical pace. In Belfast Lough the shipyards were filled with the clang and hammer of construction, but no sound was heard in the streets. At the docks ships unloaded and loaded cargoes, but they were small ships, hidden from sight behind small sheds. In Smithfield market, vendors lounged at their stalls and buyers picked aimlessly at faded merchandise. In the city's shops housewives counted pennies against purchase. In the city's banks, no great IBM machines clattered. Instead, clerkly men wrote small sums in long black ledgers. (p.46)

Small-minded acquisitive inhabitants, buildings and ships that appear minuscule compared to what one finds in New York, the returned emigrant cannot avoid noticing the clear differences between the two cities. The reader is left to ponder who exactly is describing the scene above. Madden is incapable of this type of insight and so the voice must be that of the author. The housewives counting “pennies against purchase” remind one of the Dublin merchant class described by Yeats, adding the “ha’pence to the pence” in their “greasy tills”. The noise emanating from the shipyards contrasts starkly with the silence of the streets. There is an eerie atmosphere in the northern capital. When Moore evokes Belfast, it is nearly always in these negative terms. The cold, black buildings, the sober architecture, the quiet orderliness of the scenes he sketches portray something of the enclosed, puritanical nature of the inhabitants:

“The Protestant dearth of gaiety, the Protestant surfeit of order, the dour Ulster burghers walking proudly among these monuments to their mediocrity”.

The newsvendors calling out the great events of the world in flat, uninterested Ulster voices; the drab façades of the buildings grouped around the Square, proclaiming the virtues of trade, hard dealing and Presbyterian righteousness. The order, the neatness, the floodlit cenotaph, a white respectable phallus planted in sinking Irish bog. The Protestant dearth of gaiety, the Protestant surfeit of order, the dour Ulster burghers walking proudly among these monuments to their mediocrity (p.103).

Belfast residents are the products of their physical environment: harsh, uncompromising, fond of their shillings. The Catholics feel as though they are trapped in a sectarian society where they always come out second best. They are very much the outsiders in this Protestant-dominated city. But their marginalisation does not lead them to closer union with their fellow Catholics. The misunderstanding and incomprehension of one’s neighbour is not merely sectarian in nature. Catholics are as suspicious and insensitive towards one another as they are to their Protestant neighbours. Madden, with whom Judith falls in love, is a sexual deviant who remorselessly rapes the young maid in his sister’s house. He is attracted to Judith because he believes her to have money and he quickly drops her when he discovers that she is more impoverished than himself. Bernard Rice, the son of the landlady, asks Judith: “Why are you alone tonight, if it isn’t for your silly religious scruples?” and adds: “Your God is only a picture on the wall. He doesn’t give a damn about you.” (p.183) There is no escape for Judith in a city as cold and uncompromising as its buildings. Fr. Quigley, to whom she turns for help, is impatient lest he be late for his golf appointment and tells her that her problems are not that serious. The O’Neill family, on whom Judith inflicts a

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visit every Sunday, has no affection for her and endures her presence out of a sense of religious duty. Bereft of love, condemned to a life of solitude, Judith, in desperation, turns to the bottle, in the hope of finding "the key to contentment". She drinks to flee from oppressive reality, in order to view her trials more philosophically. On the verge of a nervous breakdown, she asks for God's help:

What is to become of me, O Lord, alone in this city, with only drink, hateful drink, that dulls me, lonely drink that leaves me more lonely, more despised? Why this cross? Give me another, great pain, great illness, anything, but let there be someone, someone to share it. Why do you torture me, alone and silent behind Your little door? Why?
(pp.239-40)

No response comes from the tabernacle. No one replies to her cry for help. When she loses her faith, Judith's world comes crashing down around her. The Protestant taxi driver who chauffeurs her around the city, is surprised when she asks him to stop at a church: "These bloody Papishes, you never knew what they were up to. 'It's a long time on the meter', he warned". (p.238) Fr. Quigley is embarrassed that a Protestant should witness the strange antics of one of his parishioners but is as bemused at Judith's behaviour as is the driver. The novel is atmospheric and the image of the city as a claustrophobic force is smothering.

Laura Pelaschiar, in an insightful examination of how the role of Belfast has evolved in Northern Irish Fiction, notes that the capital city was portrayed by writers like Moore as home to alienation, confusion and violence. In the writings of the new generation of novelists that came on the scene in the nineteen eighties and nineties, however, a much more positive image of the city emerged, particularly among Protestant writers like Glenn Patterson (*Fat Lad*, London: Minerva, 1992). Pelaschiar describes *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* as 'the first proper, modern description of Belfast' and adds: "Like Dublin for Joyce, Belfast is for Moore the centre of paralysis, a sad, bleak, boring, passionless, unattractive place where narrow-mindedness and mediocrity thrive undisturbed."⁴

The portrayal doesn't improve in subsequent novels either. Moore's second novel, *The Feast of the Lupercal* (1958), conveys an equally black picture of Belfast and its inhabitants. This time the focus is an English teacher in the Catholic Belfast school, Ardath, a thinly disguised representation of St. Malachy's. Devine is another solitary figure living in a hostile world. Hidden from view one day in the toilets, he hears one of his colleagues refer to him as being 'an old maid'. Hurt at having himself described in this uncomplimentary light, he begins to see that the picture painted is not altogether false. Thirty-seven years of age, a bachelor, his only obvious attributes are his capacity to anticipate examination questions for his students

and to organise the local drama group. He decides to attempt to be more daring, especially when it comes to his relations with the fairer sex. When his colleague, Tim Heron, invites him to his house to mark the occasion of his daughter's engagement, Devine encounters Heron's niece, Una. On discovering that she is a Protestant from Dublin, Devine's reaction betrays the stereotypical reaction of his caste:

*Protestants were the hostile Establishment, leaders with Scots and English surnames, hard, blunt businessmen who asked what school you went to and, on hearing your answer, refused the job... To them, Catholics were a hated minority, a minority who threatened their rule*⁵.

"Like Dublin for Joyce, Belfast is for Moore the centre of paralysis, a sad, bleak, boring, passionless, unattractive place where narrow-mindedness and mediocrity thrive undisturbed". (L. Pelaschiar).

We are back to the bigotry already displayed in the description of Protestants in *Judith Hearne*. What is most important to Devine in this instance, given his desire to broaden his sexual horizons, is his belief that Protestant girls were *fast*.⁶ As if to reinforce this theory, Devine discovers that Una has been forced to leave Dublin because she was having an affair with a married man. Like the tragic hero about whom he must have spoken many times in his Shakespearean classes, Devine cannot help falling in love with this woman from whom he is separated by religion and culture. Sure enough, obstacles to his love pile up before him. His position as a teacher in the diocesan school would normally preclude him from even contemplating a relationship with a Protestant. But, irrational with passion, he allows the relationship to develop until finally he is presented with the situation towards which he has been manoeuvring.

After attending a dance in the city, Una suggests that she accompany him to his digs. After some awkward kissing and fumbling on the floor of his living room, Una proposes that they might be more comfortable in the bedroom. Shocked by the prospect of actually having sexual intercourse, and also probably unconsciously aware of his Catholic upbringing, Devine is unable to go through with it. Una, hurt by the shock and fear on his face when he saw her naked body, misinterprets his reaction and sees it as a demeaning rejection. Upset and confused, in addition to having drunk too much, she falls asleep in the flat. Devine does not dare to wake her and she is caught entering her uncle's house the following morning. The worst is suspected and Tim Heron canes his colleague in full view of the priests looking out over the school grounds. Both are summoned to the President's office to explain themselves. Dr. Keogh, one of the few positive portrayals of a priest in Moore's fiction, accepts Devine's explanation of what happened and allows him to remain in his job. What emerges from the whole episode is a rather

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sordid depiction of what Catholicism can do to people in a city like Belfast. When contemplating his travails, Devine notes:

If I had been a Protestant, this would never have happened, he thought. I would have had my fill of girls by now. I would never had had to go to confession (p.212).

Belfast may be the inspiration of most of Moore's best writing, but had he not left he could never have written about it so forcibly. He might have slipped into the same Catholic ghetto that ensnares some of his characters.

Earlier in the novel, Moore paints a telling picture of the neighbourhood where Tim Heron lived which is revealing of how events will unfold in the later part of the novel:

It was a street of small, red brick houses, their bay windows thrust out to repel the stranger; a street whose backyard laundry offered an intimate census of the inhabitants. Children, now in bed, had fought all day long up and down its pavements, laying waste the tiny front gardens with the litter of their presence; chalked walls, overturned tricycles, sagging, abandoned prams. It was quiet now: the yells, the shouted refusals, the adult bicker done. Here, people went to bed early, rose early, and had a tiring day (p.20).

This is the Catholic Belfast in which Devine has been reared and which has made him into the feeble, indecisive adult who does not know what he wants and who is always afraid of offending people. Others use him shamelessly to direct plays for which he gets scant acknowledgement and no remuneration. His fate is sealed from birth. He is at one and the same time the 'stranger' whom the city repels and a person who is sensitive to its heart beat. Had he followed the pattern of going to bed early, rising early and having a tiring day he would not have suffered all the discomfort that comes his way.

The Emperor of Ice-Cream (1965) presents us with another misfit, this time in the form of Gavin Burke, who is as close to an autobiographical depiction as you'll come across in Moore's novels. Gavin is not academic like his older brother, Owen, and doesn't secure sufficiently good results in his A-Levels to advance to Queen's University. He realizes that he doesn't really want to conform to his family's hopes for his future. He thus joins the ARP (Air Raid Precautions Unit), as Moore himself did, much to the disgust of his father, who is a virulent opponent of Churchill and King George. Redundant for months on end as a result of the Germans' indifference to Belfast, Gavin is subjected to the ridicule of his family and friends. He is indeed part of a motley group of men and women who don't fit into the normal social categories, but he sees this as an appropriate place to find himself: "The world of misfits, the ARP world, was a world one could enter only if one belonged there."⁷ But events unfold in a most unexpected way at times and

the German war-planes do eventually make it to Belfast to release their bombs on an unsuspecting and disbelieving population. Moore describes the night very vividly, as one might expect, given his personal experience of that horrific event. From being a lascivious coward, concerned mainly with how he could break down the stubborn piety of his girlfriend, Sally, Gavin attains almost heroic proportions. Instead of fear, his feeling is one of elation: "Tonight, history had conferred the drama of war on this dull, dead town in which he was born." (*The Emperor*, p.202)

*There is the dour
Sabbatarianism of
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own community.*

Gavin's father, like Moore's own, is eventually shown the true side of war, where neither side has the moral high ground and where atrocities abound. Many Belfast Catholics, formerly sympathetic to Hitler, changed sides completely after the Belfast Blitz. There was a strange unity of purpose among the population in the immediate aftermath of this event of April 1941 in which almost 900 people were killed. Moore himself became determined to contribute to the War effort of the Allies side, as already mentioned. Unlike Judith Hearne and Devine, Gavin Burke attains some heroic stature and self-confidence with regard to his future path. He does not join in the prayers that are being said around him by people all too ready to become pious when their lives are in danger. Instead, he stands apart and determines to follow an independent path:

There and then, in the drone of the priest's 'but deliver us from evil', he vowed to deliver himself from the sham of church attendance, of pretending belief for his parents' sake, of the pretences and compromises which had helped keep him becalmed in indecision between adolescence and adult life. Tonight, he felt, at last that he had grown up, escaped... (p.226).

This is the first time that a Moore character who is born and bred in Belfast manages to shed the shackles of religious oppression. Normally Belfast envelops its inhabitants with its negativity and religious prejudice. The presentation of the city varies from novel to novel. In *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* there are more descriptions of the physical environment: the city thus becomes a character in its own right. *The Feast of the Lupercal* deals more with general societal issues whereas *The Lonely Passion* concentrates largely on the dilemma of the main character. Devine, in spite of his many weaknesses, nevertheless has financial independence and professional qualifications. He commands a certain respect and control in the classroom as well as in the drama group. That said, both he and Judith are the victims of their class and environment. They are controlled by their Catholic beliefs and the closed society in which they live. They have the worst of both worlds: the paranoia of the minority within their own community and the dour

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Sabbatarianism of the majority imposed from the outside. *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* is a type of *bildungsroman* where the main protagonist advances down the path of self-knowledge towards independence and maturity. History conspires to give Gavin Burke's life some meaning and justification. All in all, however, a dismal atmosphere permeates the early Belfast novels. Living in a type of Catholic ghetto ensures that there is no escape for Judith or Devine, and very little liberation for Gavin Burke. They are trapped in a city where you are classified in terms of your religious beliefs. Mixing with the perceived enemy, Protestants, as Devine discovers to his cost, will bring, not happiness and liberation, but confusion and shame. Burke is amazed to discover that there are people living in Belfast who are not plagued by all the religious baggage to which he is subjected:

To think that people who wrote poetry, burned joss sticks, and built puppet theatres were living here in Belfast, not a mile away from his own home. They were Protestants, naturally. Why was it that no Catholic could grow up in an interesting atmosphere? (The Emperor, pp.98-99)

It is not strange that Moore should have adopted a negative idea of Belfast as he found living there to be oppressive and limiting in terms of personal freedom. If you were Catholic, you were expected to be nationalistic and to live according to a specific set of moral values. The following quote shows him to be a part of a long line of Irish writers who chose exile as the only effective manner of realising their literary ambitions:

For those writers born and brought up within its shores, Ireland is a harsh literary jailer. It is a terrain whose power to capture and dominate the imagination makes its writers forever prisoner – forcing them, no matter how far they wander in search of escape, to return again and again in their work to the small island which remains their true world⁸.

There are all sorts of imprisonment. For Moore, the departure from Belfast was merely geographical in nature. In his mind, the emotional grammar of the city was firmly etched and can be seen clearly in the novels we have discussed. Maybe the formative years are the period when life is lived so that the human mind may be formed and crystallised into a receptacle for future experiences to be blended and assessed. Or is this just true of the artistic mentality? Those who read Moore's early fiction are given a taste of Belfast as only someone who lived in it for many years can provide. In fact, the three novels dealt with in this short article demonstrate many of the tensions and the prejudices that still characterise the lives of many in the Ulster capital at the beginning of the third millennium.

Eamon Maher lectures in Humanities at the Institute of Technology Tallaght

Notes

- ¹ 'The Expatriate Writer', in *The Antagonish Review*, 17, Spring 1974, pp.28-29.
- ² Quoted by Denis Sampson, *Brian Moore: the Chameleon Novelist*, Dublin: Marino, 1998, p.86. This study by Sampson is a great help in understanding Moore the man and the writer.
- ³ *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, London: Flamingo, 1994, pp.7-8. All my references are to this edition.
- ⁴ Laura Pelaschiar, "Transforming Belfast: The Evolving Role of the City in Northern Irish Fiction", in *The Irish University Review*, Vol.30, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2000.
- ⁵ *The Feast of the Lupercal*, London: Granada Publishing, 1983, p.35.
- ⁶ This view of Protestant women was not just prevalent in Belfast but was a widely held view among Catholic men all over the island of Ireland. It probably still exists today.
- ⁷ *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*, Flamingo, 1994, p.123.
- ⁸ Quoted by Denis Sampson, *Brian Moore: the Chameleon Novelist*, op. cit., p.249.