University of Calgary Press
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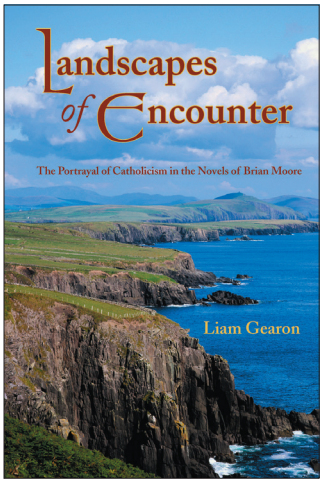

LANDSCAPES OF ENCOUNTER: THE PORTRAYAL OF CATHOLICISM IN THE NOVELS OF BRIAN MOORE
by Liam Gearon
ISBN 978-1-55238-663-7

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Landscapes of Encounter

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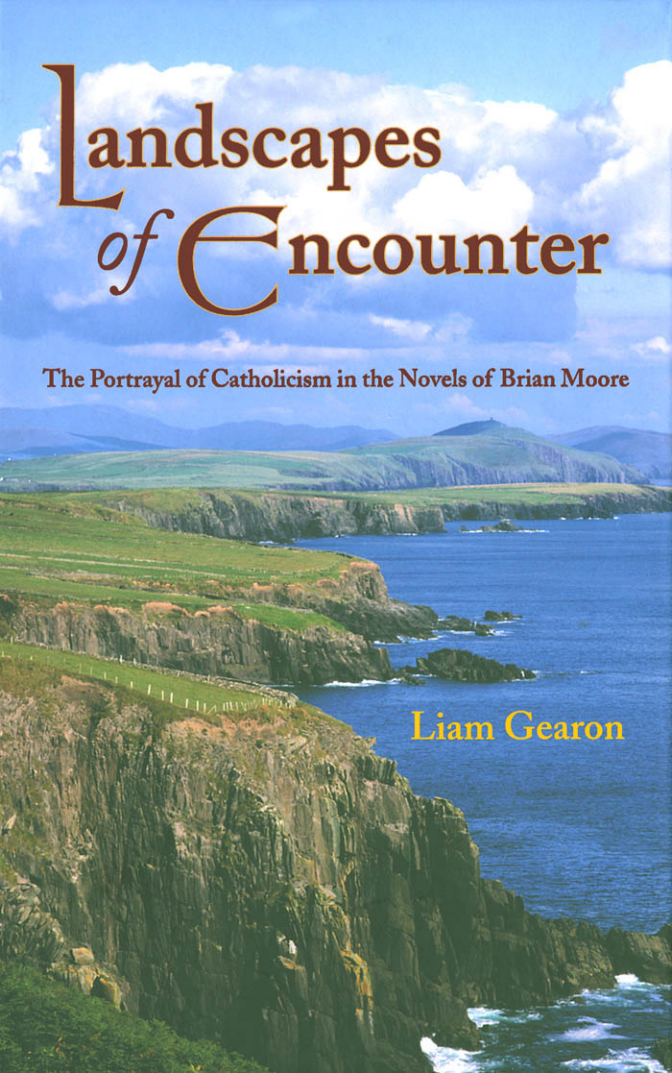

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University of Calgary Press
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, Alberta
Canada T2N 1N4
www.uofcpress.com

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data
Gearon, Liam
Landscapes of encounter

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-55238-048-3
Also issued in electronic formats: ISBN 978-1-55238-663-7, ISBN 978-1-55238-380-3
1. Moore, Brian, 1921-1999—Criticism and interpretation.
2. Catholic Church—In literature. I. Title.
PS8526.O62Z66 2002 C813'.54 C2002-910893-4
PR9199.3.M617Z66 2002

Canada

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDIP) for our publishing activities.

Canada Council for the Arts | Conseil des Arts du Canada

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Printed and bound in Canada by AGMV Marquis
♾ This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Cover design by Kristina Schuring
Interior design by Jeremy Drought, Last Impression Publishing Service, Calgary, Alberta

Contents

- Acknowledgments vii
- Preface ix

Part I
Introduction

1 Landscapes of Encounter:
The Portrayal of Catholicism in the Novels of Brian Moore 3

Part II
The Fictional Portrayal of Pre-Vatican II Catholicism

2 The Early Irish Novels 23
3 The Early North American Novels 55

Part III
Fictional Portrayals of Vatican II Catholicism and Beyond

4 Catholicism Reappraised: Ireland Revisited 93
5 North America Revisited:
Post-Vatican II and Postcolonial Perspectives 133
6 Moore's Portrayal of the Church in the Modern World:
Theological Universality and Cultural Particularity 159

Part IV
Conclusion

7 Moore's Portrayal of Catholicism: A Conclusion 203

- Endnotes 207
- Bibliography 265
- Index 285

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Acknowledgments

I have many people to thank for guidance and support in the completion of this work. Above all, Dr Suman Gupta, formerly Department of English, University of Surrey Roehampton (now of the Open University), has been an outstanding critic, as well as a good friend. Dr Kevin McCarron provided additional insights as my work progressed, especially in the context of numerous conference presentations at which he was kind enough to attend and make constructive comment. I would like to thank Professor Ann Thompson, former Head of English at University of Surrey Roehampton, for initial discussions on my research topic and ongoing support as one time Director of Studies, until her appointment to another Chair of English at King's College, University of London. Thanks too to Professor Janet Beer, Head of English, Manchester Metropolitan University — her help with Moore's Canadian connections proved invaluable. In Canada, Apollonia Steele, Head of Special Collections, MacKimmie Library, University of Calgary, was most helpful during two Canadian research visits to the Brian Moore Archive in March/April, 1999 and February 2000.

In regard to funding, I am indebted to the International and Research Office, University of Surrey Roehampton, for financial support for my conference visit to Galway in June 1999. I am grateful to Christine Hopkins and Professor Ron Best, Faculty of Education, for matched funding for both Canadian and Irish visits. Thanks to Professor Graham Welch, London Institute of Education, for ongoing support and encouragement of my interdisciplinary endeavours. Special thanks to Dr Bernadette Porter, Rector and Chief Executive, University of Surrey Roehampton, for the unstinting support of this and other research work, including financial support for my first Canadian research visit. In the final stages of production, I express many thanks to the generous support of Dr Myszka Guzkowska, Principal of Digby Stuart College and Pro-Rector of University of Surrey Roehampton, together with that of Dr Chris Lloyd, Head of School of Education Studies, University of Surrey Roehampton.

Gratitude extends also to my publishers at Cassell/Continuum — especially Ruth McCurry and Diana Smallshaw — for my edited volume

English Literature, Theology and the Curriculum (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), as part of the *Theology in Dialogue* series. In addition to the many funding bodies behind the international *Engaging the Curriculum* project from which *English Literature, Theology and the Curriculum* arose, I am grateful to the series editor, Professor Ian Markham, now Dean, Heartland Seminary, Conneticut, for his consistent support. More indirectly, thanks to all the many contributors to the latter volume who have helped to set Moore's fiction in wider literary and religious context; special thanks being owed to keynote contributors, including: Professor David Jasper, Dean of Divinity, University of Glasgow, Professor Stephen Prickett, Regius Professor of English Language and Literature, University of Glasgow; Professor Graham Ward, Professor of Applied Theology, University of Manchester; and Professor Terence Wright, Professor of English Literature, University of Newcastle.

I am grateful to many conference organisers, journal and book editors for allowing me space to present and publish papers, particularly Professor Stanley Porter, University of Surrey Roehampton, and Professor Tadgh Foley, Department of English, National University of Ireland, Galway. The interdisciplinary and contextual range of these events is evidence of the interpretative breadth possible for Moore's work — from conferences on Death (University College Chichester, 1997), Religion and Sexuality (Roehampton institute London, 1998), Jewish-Christian Relations (Roehampton Institute London, 1999), Faith in the Millennium (Roehampton Institute London, 1999) to the Third Galway Conference on Colonialism (National University of Ireland, Galway, 1999) and Canadian Nation Building, the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Conference of the British Association of Canadian Studies (University of Edinburgh, 2000).

In the preparation of the volume many thanks are due to the director of the University of Calgary Press, Walter Hildebrandt, to the copy editor Lee Sheddon, and the production editor, John King, not fogetting the typesetter, Jeremy Drought, and the cover designer, Kristina Schuring.

Finally, and with all due respect, thanks are offered to Jean, the widow of the late Brian Moore (1921–1999), especially for her permission to access certain material in the University of Calgary archive in March/April 1999 and February 2000.

Preface

The Novels of Brian Moore: Critical Contours

THE first encounter I had with the writing of the late Brian Moore (1921–1999) was through the novella *Catholics*. The story is of an isolated and ancient monastic community living on an island off the West coast of Ireland. Set in a post-Vatican IV future, *Catholics* relates how the community struggles to come to terms with changes in a new theological world order. I read the book in 1978 (perhaps six years after the original date of its publication) as a young, idealistic person growing up with an Irish Catholic background in the west of England. For its ability to encapsulate existential crisis within a world of political and religious change within a hundred or so pages of poetic prose, to this day I maintain that *Catholics is* one of Moore's finest works, and certainly amongst the most critically significant of all his books. Yet this work and many of Moore's fictions have never really achieved either the lasting popular or enduring critical acclaim that one might expect for a writer whose work — from *Judith Hearne* (1955) until *The Magician's Wife* (1997) — spanned five decades.

There might be many reasons for this relative neglect. Perhaps chief amongst them is the fact that Moore has never achieved any permanent primacy within any national literary canon. Another reason might be that Moore's work often consciously straddles that curiously ill-defined border between popular and literary fiction. Another reason for critical neglect is the predominant and arguably unfashionable theme which permeates Moore's fiction: that of religion, specifically Roman Catholicism.

This book is an ambitious attempt to redress some of these perceived literary injustices. Contextualizing Moore as a writer of international importance, a recognition he never really received in his lifetime, this book provides a treatment of Moore as a complex writer whose ambivalent portrayal of Catholicism represents a distinctive literary convergence of the ideological and the theological.

Such an approach is predated by a number of countervailing critical currents. Relative neglect aside, a diverse commentary accompanies Moore's

prodigious output.[1] Still, as Sullivan comments, it is "very difficult to find a formula that would serve as a universal interpretive key to Moore's protean fictive production."[2] Sampson's characterisation of Moore as "the chameleon novelist" seemingly supports such an assertion.[3]

For many critics, the national and literary identity of the writer as exile both adds to such potential interpretative difficulties and provides for a hermeneutical resolution. Born and brought up in Belfast, Brian Moore was a natural migrant. After journalistic wanderings in the post-World War II ruins of Eastern Europe, he emigrated to Canada in 1948. Moore retained Canadian citizenship until his death in January 1999 but as early as the late 1950s he had moved from Montreal to New York, and from the east to the west coast of the United States by the mid-1960s. He and his second wife, Jean, subsequently wintered in Malibu, California, and after 1967 summered in Nova Scotia where, in 1995, the Moores had the building of a second home completed.[4] (Moore's final resting place, though, was on native Irish soil.) Based on Moore's Canadian citizenship (and comparisons with Malcolm Lowry's literary residence in Canada), Dahlie acknowledges the writer's Irish background but sees Moore as a Canadian writer. Indeed, in both Dahlie's early and later studies, Moore's migrations are a key source for interpretation of the writer's fiction, especially as Moore's novels highlight conflict and encounter between the Old World of Europe and the New World of North America.[5] While the themes of the writer as exile and the importance of place within Moore's fiction maintain a central focus for Dahlie, Moore's status as a Canadian writer has been confirmed fairly persistently.[6]

A distinctive but not dissimilar biocritical approach is evident in Flood's *Brian Moore.* Her monograph thus links biographical history and literary creation under the following headings: "The Novelist in Disguise," "The Guilt of the Novelist," "The Power of the Novelist" and "The Novelist as Revolutionary and Conservative."[7] A psychoanalytic method identifies typically Freudian themes in the writer's life and fiction. In. "The Power of the Novelist," for instance, an interview of Moore by Dahlie is cited to support her biocritical and psychoanalytic hermeneutic:

> Moore remarks on a change in himself and in his circumstances which occurred between the writing of *An Answer from Limbo* and *The Emperor of*

> *Ice-Cream:* "I am much happier now than I was when I was thirty-five or forty. *Emperor* was written at a crucial time in my life—it was the first book after I changed."

Flood proceeds in typical psychoanalytic vein:

> The change which Moore acknowledges in his life is clearly reflected in his fiction, not only in *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* but also in the two novels which followed it [*I Am Mary Dunne* and *Fergus*]. *The Emperor of Ice-Cream* shows significant changes in the recurring pattern of Moore's fiction. Once again he gives us the conflict between the fantasizer-son and the rigid authoritarian father, but this time the conflict lacks the deep, driven pain characteristic of its earlier appearances, and the issue of the conflict at last is the reconciliation of father and son, the father's acceptance of the son's triumph. (64)

Flood thereby sees the author's fictions as providing some form of literary-therapeutic resolution or catharsis.

In contrast to Dahlie, who places Moore in Canadian context, Moore for Flood is canonically an Irish writer.[8] The Bucknell University Press Irish Writers Series, of which Flood's study is one volume, thus identifies Moore's place within the critical canon of Irish writers which also includes (in the series) Friel, Heaney, O'Casey, Synge and Yeats. It is a literary determination accepted by many other critics, including Bolger, Deane, Jeffares, Murray and Rafroldi.[9] Some, such as Cronin, Foster and Longley,[10] describe Moore more narrowly as a Belfast author and a minority, by contrast, notably Kiberd,[11] emphasize Moore's Irish roots at the same time as his cross-cultural affiliations. It is this latter international dimension that in my view probably best suits Moore when his work is taken as a whole.

O'Donoghue's *Brian Moore: A Critical Study* also places the novelist within the tradition of Irish writing.[12] She works under a number of headings which themselves highlight the range of Moore's fiction, the apparent difficulty of thematic characterization and the problem of canonical labelling.[13] O'Donoghue's is a study which combines biocritical considerations with one of the first significant stylistic analyses of Moore's narrative technique.[14]

Sullivan's *A Matter of Faith* acknowledges debts to Flood, Foster, Dahlie and O'Donoghue. Critical of Flood's reduction of Moore's fiction "to a disguised psychobiography," Sullivan reserves most praise for O'Donoghue:

> Despite the healthy growth in recognition that Moore has always deserved, very few commentators have engaged with the nuances of Moore's stylistic and narratological choices: the craft of his fiction. It is much to O'Donoghue's credit that she deals with this aspect of Moore's fiction in the most intelligent and. comprehensive way to date. (xiv)

Sullivan credits O'Donoghue too with seeing "Moore's ambiguous relationship to faith and belief" as a "kind of structuring premise." Noting that Moore's "hostility to religion and Catholicism in particular has gradually disappeared," that "he now sees spiritual faith, not just as another kind of belief but as the highest kind there is," Sullivan comments:

> Moore has, of course, never been hostile to belief; indeed his whole *oeuvre* is a testament to his fascination with the mystery of belief, the enigma of faith, both of which are necessarily premised on absence. (xiii–xiv)

While emphasising the difficulty of finding that "formula that would serve as a universal interpretive key to Moore's protean fictive production," Sullivan ventures to state one hermeneutical possibility as "the over determined loneliness (if not alienation) ... at the centre of Moore's oeuvre" (xiii).[15]

Open in stating that his study presents "no master-narrative of interpretive strategy," Sullivan's final chapter reveals his methodological bias, providing an extensive analysis of *The Great Victorian Collection* as Moore's "Masterplot."[16] The story told is that of Anthony Maloney, a University of McGill professor, and the re-creation of a collection of Victorian artefacts in the car park of his motel:

> There is in this fable ... a gesture towards Moore's own Collection of fictive creations ... It is not so much that Moore has dreamed the same dream over and over again—indeed he is in many ways the most protean of contemporary novelists — but that the "dream," the fictive creation, must always be taken as "real."(117)

Sullivan nevertheless attempts to counterbalance (rather than overturn) a prevailing analysis of Moore's fiction as classical realism, something also undertaken earlier by Cronin, states Sullivan:

> In many of the general criticisms that we have of Brian Moore's fiction, a common observation is that his method is ultraconventional and that he belongs to the tradition handed down by the Victorians. It has been suggested that his work needs little or no exegesis and that this has been a reason for the relative paucity of critical attention.
>
> Although it is true that Moore's fiction, overall, displays a "simple excellence"[18] this apparent simplicity is not achieved through the reworking of uniform stylistic and narrative techniques. There is, in his total output, a considerable degree of experimentation within the terms of his adamantly defended realist stance, and Moore has successfully blended modern innovations in narrative with that of more traditional representation. (109)

Drawing on the Platonic distinction between diagesis (the authorial voice) and mimesis (the direct, dramatic representation of a character's speech), Sullivan concludes that in "modern terms, the diagesis belongs to those sections of a novel concerned with recounting an event and mimesis with the enactment of such an event." Further, he suggests that it would not be "too much of an exaggeration to say that the entire modernist impulse in narrative experiment was one that sought to efface or displace the diagesis, in effect, to dramatize the novel" (118):

> There are various ways to achieve this displacement, including the invention of surrogate narrators (James and Conrad), stream of consciousness (Joyce and Woolf) and what Lodge (after Bakhtin) calls "the focalization of the narrative through character." This latter is a kind of ventriloquial effect in which narrative is "spoken" through a character's personality, a technique that Joyce exploited and one that Moore uses to great effect, especially in the first five novels. (119)

Moore's frequently used narrative technique, then, of writing in a classic realist, third-person style while using stream of consciousness to provide the impression of a first-person narrator, "a fusion of the classical realist

text's dramatic scene and authorial commentary," is described by Sullivan as "diagesis with mimetic effect":

> Many of Moore's characters (it could be argued all of them) have to learn the hard lesson of distinguishing between dream and reality (Anthony Maloney is of course no exception here), and this ventriloquial technique helps to demonstrate that lesson without authorial comment. (119–120)

Sullivan's conclusion is that Moore's literary experimentation—the "masterplot that informs his fictive enterprise" — is a "cautious inventiveness," demonstrating skills of technique which have been overlooked by critics. (124)

Still, as influences on Moore's literary technique as well as his preference for particular fictional forms have been variously identified with classic realism,[19] modernism[20] and postmodernism,[21] there is clearly no final interpretative resolution here. Moore himself has acknowledged a similar diversity of influences, from Joyce[22] to Borges.[23] Controversially too the author has been in characteristic denial of some less than canonical forms in pseudonymous (and now out of print) "pulp" works dating from the early 1950s which financed his early literary novels. The fictional influences, European and American "Greats," are thus apparent in inter-textual literary references within Moore's own novels, especially when characterising fictional novelists such as Brendan Tierney and Fergus Fadden. Moore is equally disparaging, especially in his early Irish novels, of popular literary and dramatic forms. Given Moore's own "pulp" works, this is somewhat ironic.[24]

Sampson's *Brian Moore: The Chameleon Novelist* is a major full-length study of Moore's life and work. Sampson accessed the Brian Moore Special Collection at the University of Calgary and interviewed the author as well as friends, relatives and acquaintances of Moore (333–336). Unfortunately—and typical of bio-critical approaches to Moore's work from Dahlie and Flood onwards—Sampson succumbs to the pitfall of reading the writer into the novels.[25] Sampson's thesis is that Moore never writes the same novel twice—hence, the "chameleon novelist" designation. *The Magician's Wife* is hailed as final confirmation of this view—one work cited as justification for an idea which supposedly relates to all Moore's novels:

> Most of all, the novelist wishes to remain chameleon-like — hidden from himself and others. This writing life must remain fluid and open to improvisation. And so *The Magician's Wife*, like all the other novels, surprises with its inventiveness. Moore deliberately resists a determined blueprint in the discovery of his way into each new novel. Even the mastery of technique is itself a danger that must be resisted if each novel is to be a new probing of the meaning of his experience. (293)

Remaining with Moore's final novel, Sampson is determined to uncover the pyschobiography of the writer within *The Magician's Wife*. Sampson's summary of the narrative is preparatory ground for this:

> This novel of two journeys undertaken by the magician Henri Lambert and his wife Emmeline in 1856, the first to the French court as the guests of the Emperor, and the second later in the year to Algiers and out into the Sahara desert, is once more a novel of displacement, role-playing, and the craving for belief. Emmeline is the centre of consciousness in the narrative, which carries her into a moral and emotional limbo between two worlds; Henri is a supremely successful performer, a conjuror who uses scientific principles to beguile native audiences, yet as a husband, he is absent — egocentric, obsessive and sexually impotent. (294–295)

Yet Sampson sets aside the latter's "outer coverings of political parable, this time focused on colonialism, and of an historical period set in Moore's favourite period, the mid-nineteenth century" and claims the following with some assurance:

> *Brian Moore is, of course, both Emmeline and Henri.* The exiled and lonely consciousness of Emmeline is due not only to the geographical displacement or to the different racial and religious identity that she discovers among the Muslims in Algeria, but to her alienation from the deliberate and over-civilized social forms of French culture. The conventions, fashions, and roles that are required of those who aspire to a higher social status impose an inauthentic identity, one Henri finds easy to embrace for his personal identity has been subsumed into the public role of the magician.... *His desire to obliterate the feelings of vulnerability which*

> *arise from chance events, such as illness and death, has made him a monomaniac who has lost all roots in the "commonplace" facts of life.* [295, my emphasis]

Little seems to be added by way of biographical insight,[26] and Sampson withdraws into biocritical speculation for a substantial part of his work, as evidenced by the following:

> Since the mid-1960s, Moore has chosen isolation over social involvement. Jean accepted that isolation with him and became his constant companion. His first marriage had been an urban affair, energized by involvement in a lively social and professional scene; Brian and Jean have opted to withdraw almost entirely from that kind of busy social and literary milieu. *Not only does Moore disappear into his identity as a novelist in the second half of my biography of him, Jean disappears also.* (165, my emphasis)

Sampson again openly acknowledges his own restricted use of biographical sources (333–336). While noting Moore's general assistance in relation to information access, Sampson acknowledges that in other cases "he withheld permission, and as a result, the treatment of certain issues is, to a degree, less vivid or textured than I originally intended" (333).

In looking for that hermeneutical key, it is possible to argue that critics and biographers alike have missed the obvious. In the manner in which they engage religion and politics, ideology and theology, Moore's novels are literary reflections on a Catholic world undergoing radical transformation. In a diverse range of global contexts — eastern Europe, the Caribbean, North Africa, as well as his native Ireland and adopted North America (Canada and the United States) — Moore's novels record the transformation of the grandnarrative of Catholic tradition in conflict and in dialogue with the "other." These are Moore's fictional landscapes of encounter.

Reservations about Moore's critical inheritance aside, this volume, intentionally provocative, is a respectful acknowledgement of previous commentators. If, by the same token, this book encourages further reading, debate and scholarship, it would be a welcome achievement. Above all, this study is a tribute to Brian Moore the writer, an author most fully revealed within his stories.