



I. EARLY LIFE, THE 1914–18 WAR AND FIRST PUBLICATIONS

Perhaps more than we would wish, our parentage determines what we are. Ernest John Smeed Moeran – known to family and friends as Jack – came of an Irish father and a Norfolk mother. The two strands of his heritage would dictate the course of both his life and his work.

Esther, his mother, had been born in Norfolk in 1866, and would survive as an octogenarian to grieve her son's death. His father, the Rev. J.W.W. Moeran, had been born in Dublin but was taken to England as a baby, never to return to Ireland. His paternal grandfather, the Rev. T.W. Moeran, was an Anglican priest, and for a while vicar of St Matthews, Toxteth Park, Liverpool. His son (Moeran's father) followed him into the priesthood. His student days at Cambridge were followed by curacies in Yorkshire and Upper Norwood in South London. In 1893 he was appointed vicar of Spring Grove, Isleworth, Middlesex, where on 31 December 1894 his son, the future composer, was born. An elder brother, Graham, followed his father and grandfather into the priesthood, but Ernest John, despite a number of respectable contributions to the music of the church, was no believer.

The place of birth – Heston – is of little significance, for the family were to move shortly to Bacton in Norfolk where the Reverend J.W.W. Moeran had been appointed to the living. A very remote region of the Fen Country, isolated, empty and desolate, it is a region of 'Lonely Waters', reeds and scrubland. The place cast its spell on the impressionable boy, who retained all his life a love of the fens, their people and their music.

In 1904, Moeran was sent to Suffield Park Preparatory School in Cromer as a boarder. Here he had lessons in violin – the first steps towards the superb violin writing in the Violin Concerto. The only musical nourishments in the Moeran home had been *Hymns Ancient and Modern* and the *Cathedral Psalter* –

but these had been sufficient for the boy haltingly to teach himself to read music and make a beginning at the piano.

At this stage, there seemed to be little evidence of a budding composer; indeed, it was hoped the boy would become an engineer. Certainly, a love of things mechanical – motorcycles and fast cars – was a feature of his later years.

At the age of fourteen, he was sent to Uppingham School. In this he was undoubtedly fortunate, since Uppingham in those days was musically forward-looking. His teacher then was Robert Sterndale Bennett (grandson of Sir William Sterndale Bennett, the composer and friend of Mendelssohn), who commented: 'I doubt if any boy has grasped with more discernment and avidity or made better use of the opportunity which school music has to offer'.¹ He developed into a fine pianist and a useful violinist, taking part in the accompaniment of choral works, and in his last year forming a string quartet. His first efforts at composition date from his time at Uppingham. They included three string quartets and a sonata for cello and piano which took nearly an hour to perform.² According to his widow,³ all were destroyed, for his self-criticism was strict. Professor Aloys Fleischmann suggests⁴ that Moeran's interest in folk music went back to his days at Uppingham and that his collecting may have begun there.

He always retained an affection for his old school and had a deep admiration for Sterndale Bennett, who was himself a fine pianist. As late as 1944, Moeran could suggest his old teacher as a solo pianist for a performance of the exacting Third Rhapsody.⁵

In 1913 he enrolled as a student at the Royal College of Music. It was not an auspicious time to be starting a course, but there were to be musical experiences which would profoundly

¹ 'Obituary for Ernest John Moeran', *Uppingham School Magazine*, No. 631, March 1951.

² *ibid.*

³ Peers Coetmore, quoted in Stephen Wild, *E.J. Moeran: An Assessment*, unpublished M.A. thesis presented to the University of Western Australia, 1966.

⁴ 'The Music of E.J. Moeran', *Envoy*, Vol. 4, No. 16, p.61.

⁵ In a letter to Douglas Gibson dated 1 January 1944. Gibson was the proprietor of J. and W. Chester, the publishers of the Third Rhapsody. Hunter Skinner was a boy at Uppingham at that time and remembers playing the orchestral part on a second piano while Sterndale Bennett played the solo part.

affect the course of his work. For the first time he heard the music of Elgar, and at a Balfour Gardiner concert he first met the work of Delius – not a mature, characteristic work, but the somewhat unrepresentative Piano Concerto. Nevertheless, the drug entered his system.

The college course came to an abrupt end. Moeran never returned in the Autumn of 1914, but instead enlisted on 30 September – into the Sixth (cyclist) Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment as a motor-cycle despatch rider. Within two months, he was promoted to Lance Corporal, and in June of the following year he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant. Posted to the Western Front, he was attached to the West Yorkshire Regiment in 1917.

On 3 May of that year, at Bullecourt in France, he was severely wounded in the head, with shell particles too near the brain to be removed. Two months later, he was promoted to Lieutenant. With the ending of the War, he attended the School of Aeronautics (Royal Air Force) for two months but was finally released from military service in January 1919. After many Medical Boards he was awarded a disability pension assessed (according to Michael Bowles⁶) at 80–90 per cent. These are the bald facts. The physical injury was appalling enough; one cannot begin to imagine the mental scars.

The treatment for his injury involved the fitting of a plate into the skull and it is probable that this injury permanently affected his physical health and may ultimately have contributed to his death. For the rest of his life Moeran appeared to be accident-prone: his correspondence frequently refers to injury of some degree or other from falling over or colliding with things. Furthermore, his drunkenness – whether real or apparent – became a source of some embarrassment to his wife, his friends and his fellow artists. Modern medical authorities would recognise both these behavioural traits as characteristic of head injury, the treatment of which in 1917 was, to say the least, rudimentary. One authority offers the following comment:⁷

⁶ In a letter to the author dated 26 January 1981.

⁷ Dr E.H. Williams, in a letter to the author.

All patients who have had head wounds – especially those who have plates in the skull – are warned of the dangers of drinking alcohol. Even a small amount of alcohol may affect a patient out of all proportion to the amount consumed.

People who have plates in the skull may be subject to severe headaches and irrational behaviour, irritability, violence and lack of co-ordination (giddiness or falling about) which might be mistaken for a drunken state.

A head injury may possibly lead a man to drink (perhaps to deal with pain) who had previously been teetotal or at the least a modest drinker. Before and during the First World War, there were many doctors who did not appreciate (because they had no experience of shrapnel wounds) the far-reaching effects of this type of wound.

After his discharge, Moeran for the first time encountered Ireland and Irish society. Michael Bowles writes:

While he was convalescent after the hospital, he was seconded for nominal duty to . . . I think . . . the Bedfordshire Regiment stationed at Boyle, Co. Roscommon. Boyle was a garrison town, the barracks being some sort of headquarters or depot . . . The social and political division in garrison areas like Boyle were not, of course, as bitter as they are now in the North of Ireland, but they were nonetheless clear-cut. Jack with very light duties and, above all, competent skill in music, was very much in demand in Boyle society.⁸

The experience of the War, however, indelibly marked the outlook of artists who took part in it. In the 'twenties the memory of that experience would be reflected in their work. Moeran was no exception, and in addition he felt bitterly the loss of those who fell in the fighting. One telling piece of evidence of Moeran's strength of feeling concerning the waste of artists in wartime surfaced much later in a controversy in the musical press about the absence of Benjamin Britten in America at the outset of the 1939–45 War. Moeran wrote to *The Musical Times*:

Provided that he keeps valid his artistic integrity, I consider that he is doing his duty by remaining where he is . . .

The death of Butterworth in 1915 was a tragedy, the nature of

⁸ In a letter to the author dated 26 January 1981.

which no country with any pretensions to the preservation of culture and a respect for art can afford a recurrence.⁹

An interesting example, this, of Moeran's own civilised integrity – he didn't like much of Britten's music.

The earliest manuscripts of Moeran's work are preserved in the archive of the Victorian College of Arts, Melbourne, Australia. They include two pieces for piano (*Dance and Fields at Harvest*) dating from 1913, the year of his enrolment at the Royal College of Music, and a set of four songs from *A Shropshire Lad* (Housman) of mid-Summer, 1916. According to Rhoderick McNeill,¹⁰ the Housman songs are 'entirely separate' from the *Ludlow Town* set of 1920, discussed in Chapter II. McNeill points out, however, that the melody of the fourth song of the 1916 set was to appear, with modifications, in the 1925 Housman setting, *Far in a Western Brookland*.

Three Pieces for Piano

One of the most characteristic moods in Moeran's music – a certain introspective, bleak quality – may be traced back to the trauma of those years in the 1914–18 War. But there is no evidence of this in the *Three Pieces for Piano* he wrote in 1919. These pieces – 'The Lake Island', 'Autumn Woods' and 'At the Horse Fair' – were his first publications (Schott, 1921). 'The Lake Island' is a piece of gentle impressionism immaculately laid out for the piano but heavily influenced by John Ireland, although (surprisingly) not specifically by that composer's *Island Spell* published a few years before. The pentatonic (black-note) ostinato saves the piece from the more extravagant Ireland-isms, and also disciplines the structure. It has a rapt serenity and stillness, and it is easy to see why, of all his early piano works, Moeran retained an affection for this one. 'Autumn Woods' is less satisfactory; Bax had written *November Woods* (for orchestra) in 1917 – a masterpiece of evocative and

⁹ In a letter, published in the issue of October 1941. The editor, Harvey Grace, had attacked Britten's being domiciled in the USA during the War. Moeran and Gerald Cockshott came to Britten's defence. The mention of Butterworth here is significant, in that some Butterworth influence on Moeran can be detected. The point is discussed in Chapter II in connection with the First Rhapsody for orchestra.

¹⁰ In a letter to the author dated 17 September 1983.