

Jeffery W. Vail, ed., *The Unpublished Letters of Thomas Moore*. 2 Volumes: Volume I, Letters 1797–1827, Volume II, Letters 1827–1847. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013. £195. Pp. 864. ISBN 9781848930742.

The Dublin-born author Thomas Moore (1779-1852), poet of the celebrated *Irish Melodies* (1808-34) and *Lalla Rookh* (1817), renowned Regency satirist for the Whig opposition, biographer of R.B. Sheridan, Lord Byron, and the Irish rebel aristocrat Lord Edward Fitzgerald, was a prolific writer of letters. Jeffery W. Vail's splendid two-volume collection is the third edition of the letters to appear since Moore's death in 1852. True to form, given Moore's illustrious personal network, his first editor was no less a figure than the Whig leader Lord John Russell, the author's close friend since 1819, and twice British Prime Minister (1846-52 and 1865-6). Upon Moore's death, and immediately following his initial term of office as Premier, the indefatigable Russell loyally saw to press eight volumes of the *Memoirs, Journal and Correspondence of Thomas Moore* (1853-6), containing 447 of his deceased friend's letters. The shortcomings of Russell's arduous labour have been well documented: he was a personal friend, not a professional editor, and he was a busy politician. And Russell deleted, for reasons of propriety, passages from Moore's manuscript correspondence he thought might cause offence or embarrassment if published. Neither did Russell see fit to include the lion's share of the near thousand letters Moore wrote to James Power, publisher of the *Irish Melodies*. Russell incorporated only fifty of that number: a more complete selection of the letters to Power appeared from an American press as *Notes from the Letters of Thomas Moore to his Music Publisher, James Power* (New York: Redfield, 1854), but this collection is problematic. As Vail points out, it is very difficult to determine the order of its contents and the dates provided are unreliable. For this reason even Wilfred S. Dowden, doyen of modern Moore scholarship and editor of *The Letters of Thomas Moore*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964) chose not to include any of the contents of *Notes from the Letters of Thomas Moore to his Music Publisher, James Power*. Vail is the first scholarly editor to rise to the challenge of disentangling, re-ordering and accurately dating the material contained in *Notes*, which extends over the period 1803-1836. The inclusion of 484 items from that volume is a major strength of Vail's edition, as the letters not only provide details of Moore's business dealings with his publisher but also touch on more personal matters, giving the modern reader an insight into the daily concerns of a nineteenth-century author's professional and domestic life.

Given that of the 1,435 items included in Vail's edition some 806 constitute previously unpublished material, his title *The Unpublished Letters of Thomas Moore* is scarcely accurate. Yet to say so is not to detract from the value of the edition: Vail's recovery and correction of items of correspondence that although previously published have been poorly or inaccurately edited is a service alone. Moreover, in the inclusion of Moore's letters to Power especially, Vail provides a wealth of period detail for scholars of nineteenth-century literature, music, and book history. With any scholarly edition the reliability of text is of primary importance – and Vail is scrupulous in answering the scholar's need for a precise transcription and for a clear editorial policy. Particular attention is paid to correcting false or misleading dates in letters or excerpts of letters, especially those items reprinted from Dowden. In spite of their excellence Dowden's two-volume edition of Moore's *Letters and The Journal of Thomas Moore*, re-edited from Russell in six volumes (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1983-91), contains some dating errors. Vail sets the record straight.

Perhaps paradoxically, given that his first and most notable triumphs as a satirist, 'Parody of a Celebrated Letter' (1812) and *The Fudge Family in Paris* (1818), are epistolary

in form, Moore's characteristic use of the letter is as a mode of communication rather than as a means of artistic expression. There is little sign in Vail's edition of Moore philosophizing on the redemptive role of the creative imagination, for example, or waxing poetical about the aesthetic power of nature, *à la* Keats or Shelley. A signal exception are the letters he wrote to his mother from North America in 1804 descriptive of Niagara Falls and the natural beauty of the Canadian wilderness, though Dowden earlier creamed these off, so to speak, and they are absent from Vail's edition. By contrast, the letters in Vail are concerned mainly with quotidian affairs – matters of business and domestic issues – but the ordinariness of this content is frequently leavened by Moore's congenital wit that can make even the most business-like of his letters a delight to read. As a satirist and poet with a penchant for wordplay Moore revels in language and he is never slow to exploit the potential for a pun or a joke. Witness his letter of 16 March 1813 to James Power announcing that Mrs Moore has just given birth to their second daughter, Anastasia, and that he is pained by toothache: 'I am still plagued with my teeth, and believe I must have myself delivered next of a pair of rotten twins with which my poor face has been in labour this fortnight past' (Vol. 1, 49). (Teeth are a recurrent concern in the volumes: elsewhere we encounter the gruesome observation that Bessy 'is at this moment applying leeches to her gums'.) (Vol. 1, 191).

Accurate editorial scholarship apart, I think it is fair to suggest that the scope of Vail's edition does not extend to the minutiae of contextual annotation that is sometimes needed. Editorial notes on the many detailed references to Moore's health, personal hygiene, travel, clothes and food, which offer fascinating, if occasionally repellent, glimpses into his domestic life, might have aided the reader of Vail's volumes. A letter dated 13 May 1831 has Moore reporting his forgetfulness of his personal effects – 'I wish, if you happen to be passing [. . .], you would say that I left a flesh-brush & a tongue-scraper behind me which they will take good care of' (Vol. 2, 170). A tongue-scraper is self evident in meaning and we can probably surmise the uses of a flesh-brush although I've no idea what Moore's would have looked like. Were flesh-brushes luxury items or were they in common use? Were they part of a nineteenth-century gentleman's daily ablutions or did they substitute for soap and water? On 1 December 1837, Moore notes that his wife, Bessy, 'has been even worse in health than usual, lately – but a course of Blue Pill is making her daily better' (Vol. 2, 288). Blue Pill? This apparently efficacious remedy might also deserve a note.

Moore's fondness for the *fruits de mer* is evident from this edition's numerous letters of thanks to Power for sending gifts of fresh fish, of lobster, prawns, salmon and mackerel, and, on at least one occasion, oysters, to the Moore household in Wiltshire. 'Many thanks for the nice oysters', writes Moore prosaically to Power, on 8 September 1832 (Vol. 2, 220). In livelier vein is the ditty, again addressed to Power, dated 15 or 24 November 1826:

Many thanks for the *fish*

And your birth-day *wish!* (Vol. 1, 368)

Volume II of the *Letters* opens in April 1827 with another acknowledgement of Power's piscine largesse: '1000 thanks for the mackerel and for your good joke with them' (Vol. 2, 1). Power appears to have acted *inter alia* as Moore's London fishmonger, so often did he send gifts Wiltshire way. It would be interesting to learn about the logistics of transporting fish and oysters from London to rural Wiltshire, a journey of near one hundred miles, in order that they would arrive fresh for the table. Vail does not enlighten us: perhaps the information is not recorded in history's pageant. But this is to carp, if one will excuse the pun. Vail has provided an extremely valuable resource that will stand on the library shelves, with Dowden, as a keystone of Moore scholarship for decades to come.

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