



1894-1950

An article by Barry Marsh

E.J. Moeran in Norfolk

A report in the Eastern Counties Newspapers for September 1924 reads:

On the programmes of recent concerts in London, a comparatively unfamiliar name has appeared...to awaken a good deal of curiosity. To the young composer E.J. Moeran has fallen the honour of writing a new work for the Norwich Centenary Festival. We have it on Mr. Moeran's own authority that [Rhapsody No.2](#) owes its basis to the Norfolk countryside and people.

'Jack' Moeran grew up in the sheltered atmosphere of a vicarage, his Irish father Joseph having entered the priesthood like his father before him. Up until this time the family had been constantly on the move, but now settled in Norfolk, a natural choice as Jack's mother Esther was a native of King's Lynn, and his grandfather was already installed as Vicar of Bacton.

Joseph was appointed priest in charge to the joint parishes of 'Salhouse with Wroxham' in 1905.

Sunday morning hymns in church provided Jack with his earliest musical experience. Dressed in his smart muslin frock the boy would listen attentively, returning home to (in his own words) 'invent great chords' on the piano. At the age of eight he became a pupil at Suffield Park Prep. School in Cromer, and in September 1908 was sent away to Uppingham public school. Here he quickly learnt the violin, joined the orchestra and formed his own string quartet. The school concert programme for July 1912 records

the first performance of a Sonata for Cello and Piano by the Lorne House pupil Master E. Moeran.

Jack learnt to compose simply by practising it; this accounts for his later mastery of the orchestra.

Folk song collectors had been active in Norfolk since the turn of the century - [Vaughan Williams](#) in particular had written three rhapsodies based on tunes from the county. By the time Moeran became aware of the tradition of "Saturday night frolics" at the local pub, the custom was already dying out, yet he still succeeded in rescuing some 150 songs from oblivion, moreover preserving something of the original freshness that was becoming obscured by academic piano accompaniments. There is a fine set of [Six Folksongs from Norfolk](#) in particular. As [Philip Heseltine](#) [AKA Peter Warlock] observed in 1923:

His familiarity with the neighbourhood gave him facilities which are often denied to the stranger....he collects these songs from no antiquarian or

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historical motives, but because he loves them and the people who sing them. (1)

And as an old man from Sutton remarked after a sing-song to which Moeran had brought a visitor from London: "We were a bit nervous of him; with you, it's different, of course - you're one of us."



Cliff House, Bacton, in Norfolk, (built by Moeran's father) c.1930

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Unless he was actually living in the place and amongst the people from which the music originated, Jack Moeran could not find the inspiration to compose. His was a dual ancestry, and even though he was later to produce his greatest work in the mountain country of Southern Ireland, there are still constant reminders of the East Anglian county with its wide horizons, tall church towers and windswept dunes.

'[Stalham River](#)'(1921) and '[Lonely Waters](#)'(1931) both speak of their composer's desire to be 'at one' with nature amidst the Norfolk landscape. The rugged splendour of the western Irish coast might finish the [Symphony in G minor](#) of 1937, but the North Sea gales sweeping in over Bacton certainly colour its opening, first conceived there in 1924. Even as late as 1946 the small village of Rockland St.Mary on the edge of the Norfolk Broads would see the birth of the [Fantasy Oboe Quartet](#).

In the last few months of his life Moeran was struggling to complete his Second Symphony, but at the same time his mind was also contemplating "a piece for strings(a la Barber)"(2) or "a work of a lighter nature"(3) for Norwich. One enthusiastic letter makes mention of a "mad wild Scherzo for orchestra. *Denny Island* is its title", another that the piano piece '[The White Mountain](#)' is to form the basis of an extended "Symphonic Scena".

What would the future have held? It is impossible to speculate. On December 1st 1950 the lonely waters of the Kenmare River claimed the life of one who was described by the 'Musical Times' as having had

a great gift for friendship - his music will always be a mine of interest for seekers after truth and beauty.

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1 - *Introductions XX111 : E.J.Moeran : Music Bulletin* 1924

2 - *EJM letter to Peers Coetmore, May 30th 1947*

3 - *EJM letter to Peers Coetmore, July 26th 1949*

