



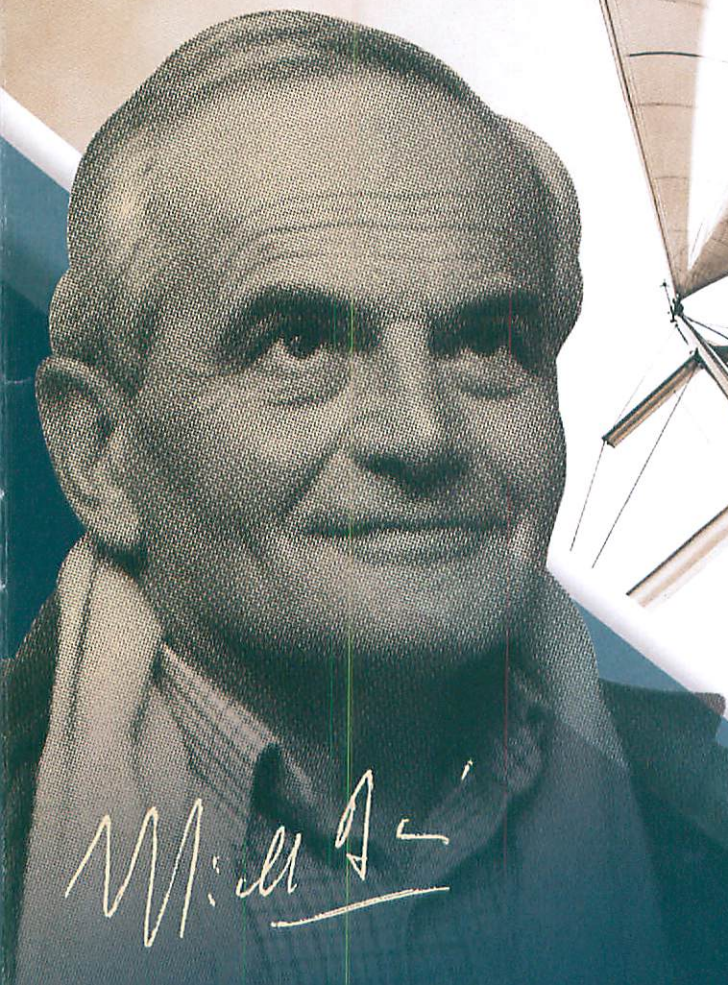
Michel Déon: un grand périple a great voyage

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Michel Déon: un grand périple

a great voyage



Michel Déon

MICHEL DÉON

Biographical note, based mainly on Alice Déon,
'Vie et œuvre' in Michel Déon, *Œuvres* (Gallimard, 2006)

MICHEL DÉON was born Édouard Michel in Paris in 1919. He attended school there and in Monaco, where the family had gone to live in 1927. His father died in 1933 and he and his mother subsequently moved to Nice for a time (1935-1937). In 1937 he began studying law in Paris, without great enthusiasm, and additionally worked for *L'Action française*, following in the footsteps of Thierry Maulnier, Kléber Haedens, Lucien Rebatet, Robert Brasillach and Claude Roy. Shortly after the start of World War 2 he was mobilized (February 1940) and, after a brief period of training in the Auvergne, was sent to join the infantry in the Ardennes.

In 1942, having been demobilized following the German invasion south of the line of demarcation, he remained in the former *zone libre*, in Lyon. There he worked for *L'Action française* as a copy editor, and published a number of articles. Returning to Paris in 1944, after the Liberation, he continued working as a journalist, initially for *Radio 44*. That year he also published his first novel, *Adieux à Sheila*, under the name of Michel Déon.

From 1946 on, he began to travel widely, spending time in Switzerland, then Italy (1947). On returning to Paris he became acquainted with Antoine Blondin, André Fraigneau, Jacques Laurent... The year 1948 saw the completion of another novel, *Je ne veux jamais l'oublier*. Then, in 1950, he travelled in the United States, with a grant from the Institute of International Education, meeting, among others, William Faulkner, Billy Wilder, Hitchcock, Mae West... Early in 1951, a further grant from the Rockefeller Foundation enabled him to visit French Canada, and study the lifestyle and language of the Acadians.

Following his return to Paris, Michel Déon pursued his career in journalism, while beginning to publish novels on a regular basis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Sincere thanks are due to the following for their ideas and material: Alice Déon, Mel Durkan, Catherine Gagneux, Pierre Joannon and Frédéric Vitoux.
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In 1956, he became a literary advisor for the publisher Plon but left in 1958 to spend almost a year in Portugal, then in the Ticino (Switzerland). In 1961, he returned to Paris for two years, working with the publisher La Table Ronde and writing on theatre for *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, taking over that role from Gabriel Marcel. He and Chantal Renaudeau d'Arc married in 1963, then moved to the island of Spetsai in Greece where they remained for five years. This was followed by a long stay in Portugal, and then, in 1969 the family began to spend longer periods in Ireland. In the following years they divided their time between Ireland, Greece and Paris. 1970 saw the publication of *Les Poneys sauvages*, which was followed in 1973 by *Un taxi mauve*.

In 1974, the Déons acquired the Old Rectory in Tynagh, County Galway. The following year *Le Jeune Homme vert* was published, and two years later, *Les Vingt Ans du jeune homme vert*. In 1978, Michel Déon was elected to the Académie française, to Jean Rostand's *fauteuil*. In 1982 the Déons sold their house on Spetsai and settled in Tynagh with their children Alice and Alex.

In the following years, Michel Déon continued to publish novels, plays, essays and other works, engaged in collaborative publications, and contributed prefaces to numerous others. He later returned to some of his earlier books, to revise them and publish new editions.

He regularly travelled to France, where he contributed to the work of the Académie française, while still enjoying the countryside around Tynagh, and walking a great deal...



MICHEL DÉON RECOGNITION

MICHEL DÉON is the author of more than 50 full-length works of fiction and non-fiction, ranging from the Swiftian satire of *Mégalonose* (1967) to novels, essays, plays, books for children and travel accounts. He remains best known for his novels, many of which have appeared in multiple editions and languages. Together they provide exceptional insights into the ideas and experiences of French men and women from the 1940s to the early 2000s, seen from the perspective of a member of the so-called 'lost generation', who reached adulthood on the cusp of World War 2, but who never ceased to engage with a changing world.

From the 1950s on, his writing won numerous prizes. Early awards include the Prix de la Ville de Nice for *Je ne veux jamais l'oublier* (1951), the Prix des Sept for *Le Dieu pâle* (1954) and the Prix Kauffmann for *Le Balcon de Spetsai* (1961). His 1970 novel *Les Poneys sauvages*, which continues to draw critical acclaim, was awarded the prestigious Prix Interallié, and, in 1973, *Un taxi mauve* (later filmed in Ireland) won the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie française. The Grand prix de littérature pour albums d'enfants was awarded to *Thomas et l'infini* (1976) and the Glenfiddich Award went to the two volumes of *Le Jeune Homme vert* and *Les Vingt Ans du jeune homme vert* in 1977. The following year he was elected to the Académie française. Later awards were the Prix des Maisons de la Presse for *Je vous écris d'Italie* (1984) and the Grand Prix Jean Giono for *La Cour des grands* (1996); in 2008 his writing as a whole was honoured by the award of the Prix Auduberti.

Respected for his independence of mind, characterized as a 'rebel' and a 'contrarian' in the best sense, Michel Déon's enduring literary legacy is notable for several key works which interrogate his period, and human behaviour, with lucidity. Neither apolitical nor *engagé*, of *Les Poneys sauvages*, which was seen as politically controversial, he said in his *Journal*:

'Ce n'est pas de la politique, ce sont des événements politiques.'

'It's not political, it's about political events.'

Throughout his writing career he remained true to his personal vision, warning the reader that:

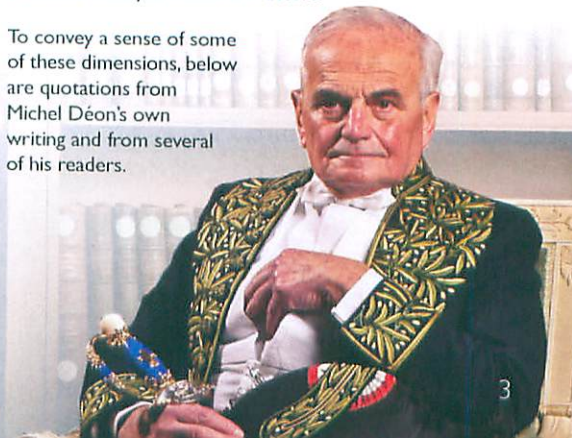
'Dans mon œuvre, il ne faut espérer trouver qu'un même éclairage: celui d'un écrivain qui aime les mots plus que les idées, la beauté des êtres plus que la beauté des choses, le cœur plus que l'esprit.'

'In my work, you must not hope to find anything other than a single angle of approach: that of a writer who loves words more than ideas, the beauty of beings rather than the beauty of things, heart rather than intellect.'

Mes arches de Noé

The best way to approach Michel Déon's work is, of course, to read it, in all its diversity, both what Lakis Progudis has called his 'œuvre de création' – upwards of twenty novels, plays and collections of short stories – and his 'œuvre de dialogue avec le monde', which includes his commentaries on art, his journalistic writing, and his travel writing, especially his *Pages grecques*, *Pages françaises* and *Pages irlandaises*. He has been the subject of monographs, theses and innumerable articles. As an introduction to Michel Déon, the articles and interviews in the *Cahier Déon* published by l'Herne (2009) offer a comprehensive view of the traits of his writing and his thinking, and of his standing in the world of literature, seen by several generations of writers, artists, journalists and actors.

To convey a sense of some of these dimensions, below are quotations from Michel Déon's own writing and from several of his readers.



TRAVEL: A DIALOGUE WITH THE WORLD

THROUGHOUT decades spent abroad, most notably in Ireland, Michel Déon remained loyally and imperturbably French. However, he was also 'a great European', through his familiarity with other countries, through his command of languages (as seen in his translations from English and Spanish), and, above all, his lifelong concern with the destiny of European civilisation. His early travels were partly motivated by disenchantment with post-war France, a fact which has been well documented, but his desire to explore was more than circumstantial and went well beyond surface contact.

'On ne lit qu'un livre. Le mien s'appelle Robinson Crusoe [...] Dans Robinson, j'ai pris le goût des îles et ce goût m'a poursuivi la vie entière.'

'We each have just one book that we read. Mine was called Robinson Crusoe. [...] Through Robinson, I developed a fascination with islands, and it has pursued me throughout my life.'

Mes arches de Noé

'Dès la Libération, après ces années de confinement dans les frontières françaises, j'ai eu envie d'espace, de voyage... Mais je ne suis pas un nomade, j'aime me fixer.'

'After the Liberation, following years of confinement within the frontiers of France, I felt the need of space, of travel... But I am not a nomad, I like to attach myself to a place.'

in Josyane Savigneau,
'Michel Déon, le goût des îles'

'... je ne voyage pas au sens étroit du terme. Je séjourne. Je m'installe, je mange, je bois à la mode du pays, j'écoute de la musique, je lis des auteurs étrangers.'

'... I don't travel in the strict sense of the term. I stay somewhere. I settle in, I eat, I drink what the people around me do, I read foreign writers.'

in M.-H. Ferrandini and A. Lanavère,
'Entretien avec Michel Déon'

IRELAND: A 'COUNTRY OF THE MIND' FOR A 'RONDE D'INSOUMIS'



Michel Déon and the East Galway Hunt, with Chantal Déon in foreground (on white horse).

Photo: Oliver Walsh, Flowerhill Equestrian Centre

HE HAS SAID he was drawn to Ireland 'on a whim', and it was also, no doubt, partly due to his love of islands, partly to his awareness of a small element of Irishness in his ancestry, on the grounds of which his mother had introduced him to Wilde, Shaw, O'Casey and Synge in his childhood. As a non-conformist, he saw Ireland as a congenial and 'eccentric' place, literally and literarily. He wrote:

'La littérature du vingtième siècle aura eu l'Irlande pour noyau dur: Wilde, Yeats, Synge, O'Flaherty, Beckett... Parcourir le Musée des écrivains irlandais, Parnell Square à Dublin, c'est entrer un moment dans une ronde d'insoumis.'

Frédéric Vitoux has pointed out that for Déon travel did not mean a loss of focus, or dispersion:

'Déon nous a fait aimer la Grèce, l'Irlande, il est inutile d'insister. Mais il ne s'est pas dispersé pour autant. Au centre de tous ses livres s'impose une forme de fidélité à ce qu'il est, à ce qu'il aime, aux valeurs qu'il défend. Déon a-t-il jamais cessé de parler de lui-même, d'un livre à l'autre, avec masque ou sans masque, de son goût des femmes, de l'amitié, de la nature, des blessures de la vieillesse, du respect de la parole donnée?'

Déon, l'écrivain exilé par excellence, loin de son pays et de son temps? L'écrivain, plutôt, qui n'a cessé de s'explorer lui-même, sans complaisance, sans relâche, avec cette sincérité sans laquelle une œuvre ne saurait prétendre à l'universalité.'

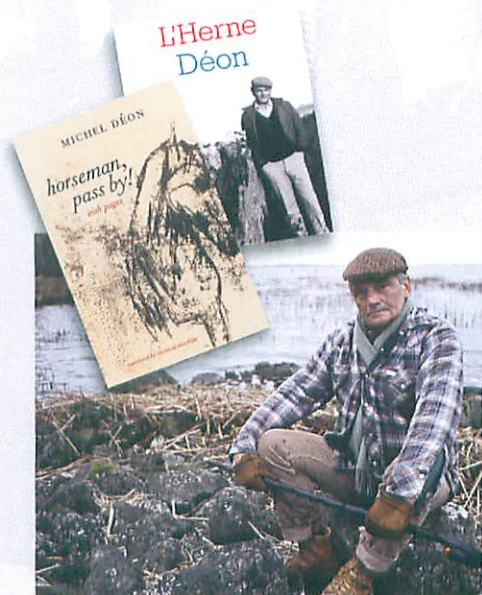


Photo: Ulf Andersen (Aurimages)

'In France, the films made of his works, the television programmes on his Irish hermitage and the numerous articles and interviews in which he continually praised the charm of his adoptive country, have done more than anything else to make Ireland better known and to strengthen links of every kind between our two countries.'

Pierre Joannon, 'Michel Déon, Award winner of the Ireland Fund of France'

Two of Michel Déon's most important novels – *Les Poneys sauvages* and *Un taxi mauve* – are wholly or partially set in Ireland. *Les Poneys sauvages*, which ranges over three decades (1937-1969) and several countries, was filmed as a mini-series in 1983. However, it is the film of *Un taxi mauve*, directed by Yves Boisset, which has been most influential. Starring Charlotte Rampling, Fred Astaire, Philippe Noiret, Peter Ustinov, with Irish actors in character

roles, among them David Kelly and Niall Buggy, the film rapidly became a key point of reference for the French vision of Ireland, like *Man of Aran* or *The Quiet Man*.

Cavalier, passe ton chemin! (2005) was seen by Michel Déon as a way of thanking Ireland and its people for providing 'a precious haven' where he and his family could 'find peace and independence of spirit, all the while remaining French and from France! In the preface he wrote in September 2016 for Cliona Ní Ríordáin's translation (*Horseman, pass by!*), he said with characteristic modesty:

'Of course, my lines on Ireland do not aspire to equal those written by great travel writers. They do, however, record the grateful thanks of a French writer who has learned to love Ireland and appreciates its openmindedness, independence of spirit, its courage, its hopes and its humanity.'

FRIENDSHIP & SUPPORT



Michel with Philippe Noiret and Fred Astaire, during the filming of *Un taxi mauve*.

Photo: © Alain Dejean (Agence Sygma)

AS A DEDICATED READER from childhood, who suggested that rather than 'ateliers d'écriture' what the world needed was 'ateliers de lecture', Michel Déon had affinities with many past authors – Stendhal must rank first in that list. But he also enjoyed friendships with contemporaries such as Roger Nimier, Jacques Laurent, Antoine Blondin, the other 'Hussards' (a label to which he was quite resistant), or André Fraigneau, Félicien Marceau, Jean d'Ormesson... and the many younger writers whom he encouraged.

He was close to several legendary figures, including Coco Chanel, Salvador Dalí and Jean Cocteau. In Ireland he formed a friendship with John McGahern, among other writers.

His friendship and practical support were not subject to sectarian restrictions: they extended to writers like Bertrand Poirot-Delpech or Jean Rolin, whose political views lay far from his own.

Similarly, as a writer and reader, he saw it as an important part of his role to encourage students by making literature accessible to them. Over many years, through his association with the discipline of French as Adjunct Professor in the National University of Ireland, Galway, he showed generous support for students there, and shared his vast collection of books with the University Library in a great gesture of philanthropy and friendship.

'... s'il fallait te résumer en trois mots, je dirais: le charme, l'amitié, les livres.'

Jean d'Ormesson, 'Hommage à M. Michel Déon', 18 January 2017

'L'œuvre romanesque de Michel Déon peut être considérée comme une incessante exploration de l'amitié sous ses deux aspects, l'aspect humain et l'aspect cosmique.'

Lakis Proguidis, 'L'Arche des romanciers'

'... je connais peu d'hommes ... qui se seront dépensés autant que vous pour donner leur chance aux jeunes écrivains, voire aux moins jeunes.'

Pierre Joannon, 'Attribution du Prix Audiberti à Michel Déon'



Michel with French students at an exhibition of his books, during his time as Adjunct Professor in NUI Galway, 1999.

Photo: Aengus McMahon



Michel signs the *Visitors'* book in NUI Galway in 2015 with Dr James Browne, NUI Galway President, and Jean-Pierre Thébaud, French Ambassador to Ireland.

Photo: Aengus McMahon

A LIFE IN BOOKS

MICHEL DÉON was interested in many activities, but he was above all a lifelong bibliophile, often photographed against a backdrop of books, in his study in Tynagh, or a library or bookshop. In *La Chambre de ton père* he tells us that his love of reading began with the adventure novels of Verne, Dumas, Jack London, Mayne Reid, Rudyard Kipling, and Daniel Defoe, and developed into a desire to write. He also developed an interest in fine bindings and in book production: some 40 works, illustrated by Julius Baltazar, Willy Mucha and Jean Cortot, among others, show how he valued books as objects of art as well as one of our best paths to understanding.

Jean d'Ormesson, recalling Michel Déon's contribution to the Académie française, stressed the status he had in the eyes of his fellow académiciens as a connoisseur of literature:

'Tu aimais les livres. Et pas seulement les tiens – mais ceux des autres. À l'époque où des jeunes gens abandonnaient le grand écran pour le petit et le petit pour la tablette, et où les chefs d'État communiquent par tweets, tu faisais un usage des livres surprenant: tu les lisais. Ta voix comptait, quai Conti: nous t'écoutions.'

**'Hommage à M. Michel Déon',
18 January 2017**



A LIFE IN BOOKS

MICHEL DÉON viewed the novel as the most demanding form of writing, and pondered deeply on how it and the author's life are related.

'Il y a des histoires que l'on écrit pour soi-même, et d'autres contre soi-même.'

'There are stories one writes for oneself, and others that one writes against oneself.'

Journal 1947-1983, 12 July 1969

'Chassant ou simplement marchant, j'ai commencé là et achevé un roman tout imprégné des paysages d'herbe brune, d'étangs noirs, de tourbières et de rocailles.'

'I hunted or simply walked through the countryside, and there I started and finished a novel that bore the imprint of the brown grasses, black loughs, bogs and rocky outcrops'

Cavalier, passe ton chemin!

'Y a-t-il une heure de la vie d'un écrivain où, après avoir masqué ou travesti ce qui lui était le plus cher, ce qui était la première essence de son œuvre, y a-t-il une heure où s'impose l'irrésistible besoin d'en parler enfin à livre ouvert?'

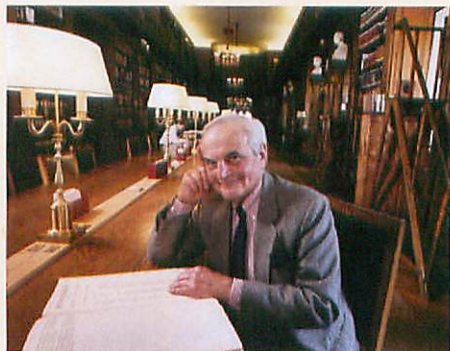
'Does there come a time in a writer's life when, after masking and transforming all that he holds most dear and that inspires his work, the desire to write about it openly at last becomes irresistible?'

Cavalier, passe ton chemin!

'Les romans n'imitent pas la vie, mais ils la condensent ou la caricaturent pour que ses traits soient plus apparents. C'est là que le romancier peut montrer le bout de son nez. Le reste du temps il est un témoin fidèle ou infidèle, peu importe, mais impassible. En fait un équilibre entre le "behaviourisme" et le subjectivisme, un délicat, dangereux équilibre à maintenir. C'est "après" qu'il faut y réfléchir quand le récit est là, étalé sur la table, mais "pendant", il faut oublier toutes ces ruses.'

'Novels do not imitate life but they condense it or caricature it so that its outlines appear more clearly. That is where the novelist can reveal himself a little. The rest of the time he is a witness, whether faithful or not, it doesn't matter, but impassive. In fact, a balance between "behaviourism" and subjectivism, a delicate, dangerous balance to maintain. It is only "after" that you can reflect on it, when the story is there, spread out on the table, but "during", you must forget all those tricks.'

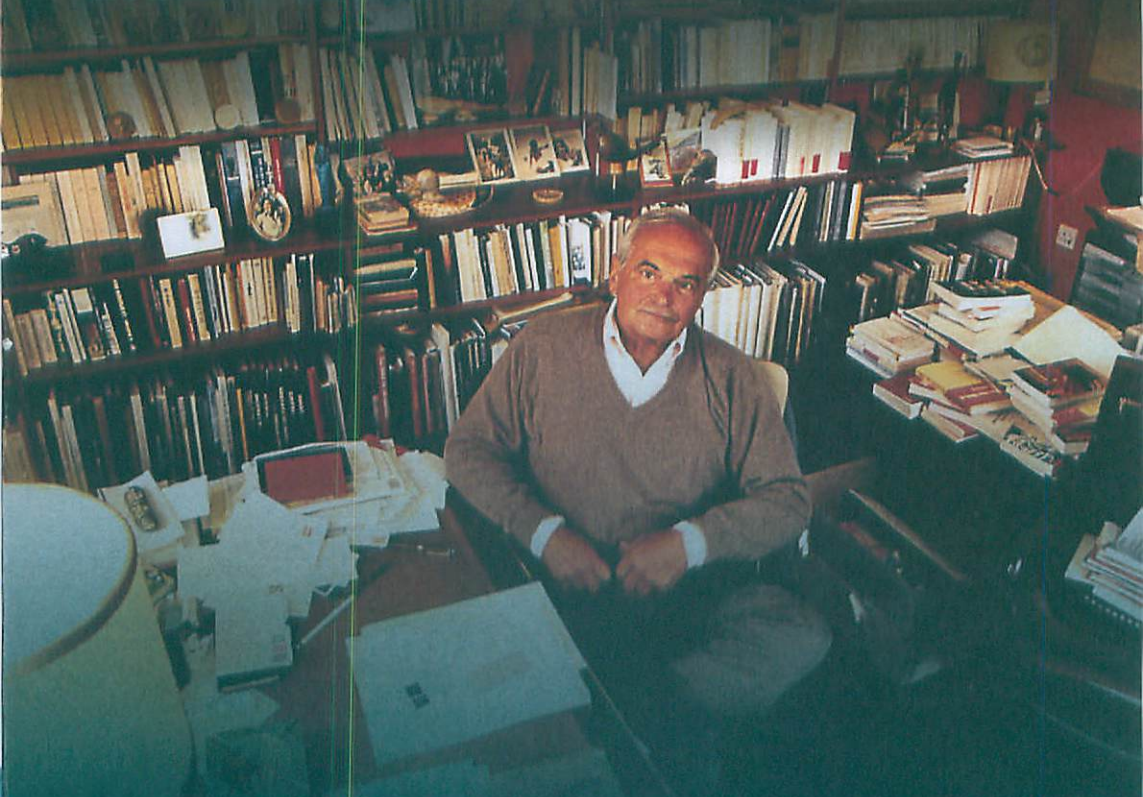
Journal 1947-1983, 12 July 1969



Michel in the Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France

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Michel at work in the study, Tynagh
Photo: © James Adanson (Prestige)

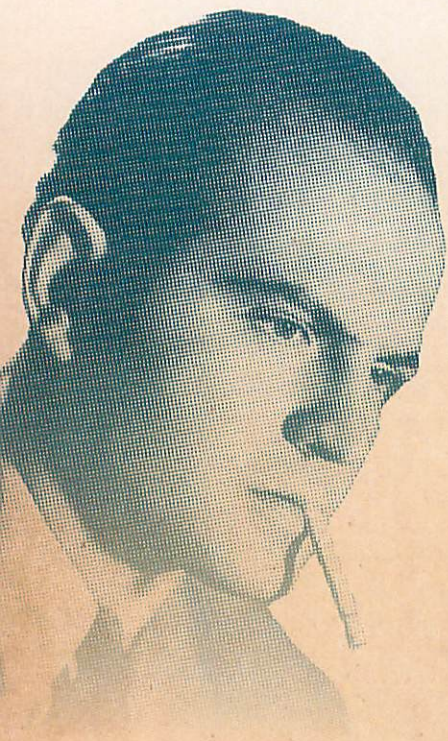


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| 1944 <i>Adieux à Sheila</i> (Robert Laffont) | 1964 <i>Louis XIV par lui-même</i> (Gallimard) |
| 1946 <i>Amours perdues</i> (Bordas) | 1965 <i>Le Rendez-vous de Patmos</i> (Gallimard) |
| 1950 <i>Je ne veux jamais l'oublier</i> (Plon)
Prix de la Ville de Nice | 1967 <i>Un parfum de jasmin</i> (Gallimard) |
| 1952 <i>La Corrida</i> (Plon) | 1967 <i>Mégalonose</i> (La Table ronde) |
| 1954 <i>Le Dieu pâle</i> (Plon). Prix des Sept | 1970 <i>Les Poneys sauvages</i> (Gallimard). Prix Interallié |
| 1955 <i>Tout l'amour du monde I</i> (Plon) | 1973 <i>Un taxi mauve</i> (Gallimard). Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie française |
| 1955 <i>Plaisirs</i> (Éditions de Paris), as M. Férou | 1975 <i>Le Jeune Homme vert</i> (Gallimard); filmed for television (1979); English trans. <i>The Foundling Boy</i> (2013) |
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| 1956 <i>Les Trompeuses Espérances</i> (Plon) | |
| 1958 <i>Les Gens de la nuit</i> (La Table ronde) | |
| 1960 <i>La Carotte et le bâton</i> (La Table ronde) | |
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- 1992 *Le Prix de l'amour* (Gallimard)
- 1992 *Ariane ou l'oubli*, play (Gallimard)
- 1993 *Pages grecques* (*Le Balcon de Spetsai, Le Rendez-vous de Patmos, Spetsai revisitée*) (Gallimard)
- 1993 *Parlons-en...* (with Alice Déon) (Gallimard)
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- 1995 *Une longue amitié, lettres d'André Fraigneau et Michel Déon*, edited by Alice Déon (*La Table ronde*)
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- 1998 *Madame Rose* (Albin Michel)
- 1999 *Pages françaises* (*Mes arches de Noé, Bagages pour Vancouver, Post-scriptum*) (Gallimard)
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- 2002 *Une affiche bleue et blanche* (Gallimard)
- 2002 *Mentir est tout un art* (Le Rocher)
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- 2011 *De Marceau à Déon, de Michel à Félicien: lettres 1955-2005*, edited and annotated by Alice Déon
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- 2013 *À la légère* (Finitude)

Also: Approximately 40 illustrated works; 12 travel albums; translations from English of works by Joseph Gollomb, James Lord, Saul Bellow, Joyce Petersen and Julian Evans, and from the Spanish of Salvador Dalí and Alarcón; numerous prefaces, discourses and collaborative publications; as well as radio and film contributions. The most complete bibliography up to 2006 is that provided by Alice Déon in the *Œuvres* (Gallimard, 2006).



'Michel Déon, a French writer whose novels offered a witty, panoramic view of French society.'
New York Times

'Our lives would be all the richer if we read a Michel Déon novel—a modern classic.'
William Boyd

'Quiet, wryly funny prose ... a delight.'
Independent on Sunday

'Les livres de Déon furent notre cour de récréation. Nous y avons appris à jouer, à vivre, à aimer.'
Eric Neuhoff, Michel Déon

'I loved this book for the way, in its particularities and casual narration, it admitted me to a world I know nothing about, and the many ways it made me care. It is not just a glimpse into the past, but a study of the heart of a man and his times.'

Paul Theroux, about
The Great and the Good
(trans. of *La Cour des grands*)

'Il distribuait à la folie, des biens qui ne laissent pas de trace: la générosité, la bonté, le courage, la gaieté, l'intelligence de la vie.'

'He freely distributed gifts which leave no trace: generosity, kindness, courage, gaiety, a deep understanding of life.'

Un taxi mauve



NUI Galway
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Cúirt
PROGRAMMA NAIDHEACH DE LEASACHAIDHE
FÉILÉ CHOMHARNAIDHEALTEOLAÍOCH

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