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EAMON MAHER

The Rituals of Food and Drink in the Work of John McGahern¹

John McGahern (1934–2006) was a writer with a keen sense of place. His novels and short stories are mainly set in the northwest midland counties of Leitrim and Roscommon and they bring to life a vast array of characters and situations that provide invaluable insights in relation to what it was like to live in traditional rural Ireland during the middle and later decades of the last century. Religion, the land, complex familial relations, emigration, the dancehall phenomenon, sexual abuse in the home, all these issues are courageously broached and realistically presented. McGahern's stark portrayals also attracted the unwanted attentions of the Censorship Board, which saw fit to ban his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965, for containing material that was deemed injurious to public morality. The banning led to McGahern's dismissal from his position as a national school teacher in *Scoil Eoin Baiste* in Clontarf and to his temporary exile to England.

Given his insightful observation of Irish customs and practices, it is not surprising that food and drink feature to a significant degree in McGahern's work. The rituals associated with eating and drinking are memorably evoked in both his fiction and prose essays. This chapter will explore the role these rituals play in the work of someone who was described by no less an authority than Declan Kiberd as 'Ireland's foremost prose writer in English now in Ireland' (Kiberd 2002, p. 86). People's eating and drinking practices tell us much about their cultural *habitus*, religious beliefs and social standing; it is thus logical that they should attract the interest

1 The author would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Dr Maire Doyle in pointing out many of the gastronomic examples in McGahern's work that are cited here.

of a writer such as McGahern, rightfully renowned for his accurate evocation of the cultural environment that moulded him and which he mined so exhaustively in his writing.

This chapter will not, of course, be claiming that McGahern was in any way unique in focusing to such a large extent on what his characters eat and drink. Literary texts abound with descriptions of meals, of aromatic odours emanating from kitchens, of the links between food and memory – one has only to think of Proust's '*petite madeleine*', so memorably evoked in *A la recherche du temps perdu* –, or of the notorious food orgies witnessed in Rome during decadent times. Closer to home, we have the example of the splendid meal organised by the Morkan sisters in Joyce's short story, 'The Dead', which is described thus:

A fat brown goose lay at one end of the table, and at the other end, on a bed of creased paper strewn with sprigs of parsley, lay a great ham, stripped of its outer skin and peppered over with crust crumbs, a neat paper frill round its shin, and beside this was a round of spiced beef. Between these rival ends ran parallel lines of side-dishes: two little minsters of jelly, red and yellow; a shallow dish of blocks of blancmange and red jam, a large green leaf-shaped dish with a stalk-shaped handle, on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds, a companion dish on which lay a solid rectangle of Smyrna figs, a dish of custard topped with ground nutmeg, a small bowl full of chocolates and sweets wrapped in gold and silver papers and a glass vase in which stood some tall celery stalks.

(Joyce 1996, p. 224)

The account goes on for a few more lines, but what is quoted underlines sufficiently the value attached to food by the foremost writer of the twentieth century. Such a vast array of victuals, the way in which they are presented and prepared, these tell us a lot about the social class to which the hostesses and their guests belong. This is a display of refinement and good taste: what else could account for the careful layout of the table, the at times exotic collection of meat, fruit and vegetables? Joyce probably understood better than most the truth of the adage: 'We are what we eat.' The Morkan sisters evidently belong to the Dublin middle class and they are at pains to ensure that their guests retain a positive memory of the food and drink they are served, the music and songs that they hear, the decor that they see.

The middle classes of Dublin at the turn of the twentieth century might appear to be at a remove from the preoccupations of John McGahern, a writer who was more concerned with those working the land and running small businesses in the West of Ireland. Nevertheless, the attention to detail, as we shall see, is very similar in both writers when it comes to recounting what people's gastronomic habits reveal about their personalities and levels of sophistication. This may well explain why so many memorable scenes in McGahern's novels and short stories revolve around the rituals that punctuate life in traditional rural Ireland: trips to pubs, attending wakes and weddings, special celebratory meals, religious ceremonies, and so on. The author's own predilections probably had a role to play in this. One of his prose essays from the *Love of the World* collection captures the enjoyment derived by himself and his wife from trips made to Blake's pub in Enniskillen during the postal strike in southern Ireland in the 1970s. There is a genuine appreciation of the strengths of this establishment contained in the following lines: 'The pint of Guinness you get in Blake's is as good as you can get anywhere. Michael draws a perfect shamrock in the cream of the stout with a flourish so neat and quick it cannot be followed. They have delicious sandwiches neatly cut into squares with generous measures of tea in old aluminium teapots' (McGahern 2009, p. 44). McGahern liked the ambience of Blake's, the tact and efficiency of the bar staff, the quality of their goods. One encounters many similar instances in his novels and short stories where characters enjoy a pint of Guinness in the local pub, or savour the fresh ham sandwiches served to them while working in the bog or saving the hay, or when the death of a friend or neighbour causes them to visit the deceased's house to partake of the copious amounts of food and drink provided by the family. In order to assess the pervasiveness of gastronomy in McGahern's writing, what follows is a brief survey of some of the most common tropes associated with this theme in his fiction.

McGahern's second novel, *The Dark*, charts the painful coming of age of Mahoney, the adolescent son of an abusive widower farmer in the West of Ireland. Mahoney's main objective, once he has decided that he is not really suited to the life of a priest that his dead mother had wanted for him, is to win a scholarship to university. When his Leaving Certificate results

finally arrive during the summer and he discovers that his ambition has been realised, his father suggests that they celebrate in style, which for Mahoney Senior means a meal in The Royal Hotel. Much to the son's embarrassment, the father feels the need for everyone in the dining room of the hotel to be made aware of the success that has been achieved: "Pick what you want. It's your day. It's not every day people get a University Scholarship", he said loudly enough for the room to hear' (*D*, p. 157). On discovering that the duck is dearer than the chicken, they order that and then have to negotiate what cutlery to use for the various courses. In the end, Mahoney is relieved to escape from the hotel and regain the anonymity of the outside world. His father pays the bill and is disgusted by the price: 'A disgrace, no wonder they're rotten rich. You pay for the silver and the "Sir", and the view of the river as if you never saw a river before. Think of all the loaves of bread you could buy for the price of them two meals' (*D*, p. 158).

For a man who lives a simple life and counts the pennies, such extravagance is unthinkable in the normal course of events. His dismissal of the service and the plush surrounds (he doesn't need to visit the hotel to see the river) reveals how he associates such luxury with the wealthy or the foolhardy. In a sense, this episode prepares us for young Mahoney's decision to leave University College Galway after a few weeks in order to take up a position in the Electricity Supply Board. Damaged by the claustrophobic and violent atmosphere in which he was brought up, he is unable to cope with change and freedom. His masturbatory fantasies of having passionate and sadistic sex with compliant women fail to materialise at university when he cannot even summon up the courage to attend the first student dance. The sophisticated world of education and opportunity are abandoned for the safe option of a dreary office job. One wonders if he ever managed to avail of the restaurants and dance halls of Dublin when he began working there – the novel does not cover his life after university – but it seems unlikely that he would do, given his background and personality.

With *The Leavetaking*, a strongly autobiographical novel mainly concerned with a young teacher's account of the death of his mother and his subsequent dismissal from his teaching position when it is discovered that he got married in a registry office in London to Isobel, an American

divorcee. The novel also supplies abundant examples of the joys associated with gourmet food and fine wines. While in London, shortly after entering into a relationship with Isobel, they are invited to dinner in the house of the latter's stepmother. On arrival, Isobel hands over the bunch of irises and they are invited in:

We entered an enormous room which was both a kitchen and dining-room, a high table in its centre, a big stove at the far end, with sinks and cupboards and a battery of copper pots and pans hanging from the walls. The floor was of light polished wood. A young girl was bent over lettuce leaves at one of the sinks.

(*L*, p. 121)

There can be no doubting that the proprietor of this house is wealthy: everything from the dimensions of the rooms to the furniture and kitchen utensils suggests a lifestyle of ease and comfort. Coming as he does from a small village in the West of Ireland, this is a big step-up for the main protagonist: he is now engaging with the inhabitants of a Big House, an experience never enjoyed in Ireland. There is a maid preparing salad at the sink and later a governess enters with two young girls in nightdresses, the daughters of the hostess, to say goodnight to the guests. Then comes the food:

The meal was elaborate and rich, beginning with a plain vegetable soup. Sole cooked in white wine with mussels and prawns and oysters, and some shallots and mushrooms, followed and a bottle of chilled muscadet opened. I thought that was the meal but veal was to come accompanied with a green salad. A bottle of red Bordeaux was poured out. There were a number of cheeses. A bowl of fruit was passed around.

(*L*, p. 122)

We are in a completely different culinary world from the duck ordered by the Mahoneys in *The Royal Hotel*. Sole and exotic shellfish, served with white wine, followed by veal, salad and Bordeaux, cheese and fruit for dessert, this is seriously high-class fare, especially for the period during which the novel is set, the 1950s or 1960s, when such culinary refinement would have been rare indeed. The antics of Isobel's abusive father, Evatt, during the meal are also significant. He has a gluttonous approach to his food: 'He seemed to look forward inordinately to each new dish, but once

it came he wolfed it down, starting then to grow fidgety and despondent until the next course drew near' (*L*, p. 122). He resembles a drug addict awaiting the next fix. An annoying tendency he displays is to sample food from other people's plates, which is revealing of a predatory or parasitic nature. When he does this to Isobel, she reacts angrily and his wife tells him to desist: "I like to pick", he smiled a disarming smile as if he'd made an unwelcome sexual pass at an attractive woman' (*L*, p. 123). The sexual innuendo is clear. Later in the novel, Evatt and the main protagonist go for a meal on their own. Having finished his main course, he starts picking at his companion's left-overs: 'he ordered several small dishes and a large steamed fish' (*L*, p. 132). Patrick, on the other hand, settles for just one course. A man of means, Evatt pines after the finer things in life and he feels entitled to taste everything that might tickle his demanding palate. When they are leaving their flat in London, Isobel and Patrick bring with them three cases of Bordeaux, six bottles of gin, ten bottles of very old Armagnac and a whole case of Glenlivet whisky, all of which belonged to her father. In *The Leavetaking*, therefore, much of which is set in Dublin and London, we have a real change in terms of the type of eating and drinking engaged in by the characters.

The Pornographer, much of which is again set in Dublin and London, could be described as a novel of appetites. The nameless protagonist makes a living from writing pornography and he carries out some of his fieldwork on women he encounters in the bars and dancehalls of Dublin. Aroused on one occasion after describing the sexual antics of his fictional characters, he looks forward to a night on the town: 'I am impatient for the jostle of the bar, the cigarette smoke, the shouted orders, the long, first dark cool swallow of stout, the cream against the lips, and afterwards the brushing of the drumbeat as I climbed the stained carpeted stairs to the dancehall' (*P*, p. 24).

Guinness could do worse than to employ these words in one of their advertising campaigns – it is a sensual and alluring evocation of their product. The drink is a prelude to the next stage, the dancehall, where young people rummage around for sexual gratification. He happens on an attractive bank official, Josephine, who is compared to 'a wonderful healthy animal' (*P*, p. 34). They return to his digs, where they 'feed' on each other's

bodies. The pornographer is someone who callously uses women for sex without commitment. Josephine, who is in her thirties, seeks something more and conspires to get pregnant in the hope that her lover will marry her. However, that is not his plan at all and they end up estranged from one another. Not before they share some nice food and drink, though. On one occasion Josephine comes to his digs to cook him a meal: 'She unpacked the parcels from the basket: two steaks, a head of lettuce, mushrooms, three different types of cheese, four apples' (*P*, p. 78). The salad and cheese show a subtle continental influence, but it is the wine that is most revealing of more urbane habits. The pornographer has a lamp made from a Chianti bottle and the preference for red wine shows a developed palate – white wine would have been more popular in the initial stages of wine consumption in Ireland. When they go on a boat trip on the Shannon, the meal is washed down with two bottles of red wine: 'I was ravenous even before the meat started grilling, and as soon as I'd eaten, with the early morning on the river, all the raw air of the day, and the red wine, I began to yawn' (*P*, p. 90). His fatigue does not prevent the couple from making love, the sexual desire mirroring the gastronomic appetite once more.

Two trips to London, to visit the now pregnant Josephine, who decides to give birth and hold on to her baby, involve visits to restaurants. The first time he goes over, they end up in an Italian restaurant in Old Compton Street: 'It had glass-top tables, and a black and white blowup of the Bay of Naples along the whole length of one wall. It is plush and exudes a certain refinement: 'The waiter brought the minestrone and a carafe of red wine. I finished a glass of red wine while she ate the minestrone. I wasn't hungry enough to begin with anything. I blamed it on the travelling. I asked the waiter to suggest something light, and he advised lamb cooked with rosemary' (*P*, p. 181).

The pornographer deliberately drinks too much, conscious of the ordeal that awaits him and determined to resist Josephine's attempts to get him to be a father to their child. On another occasion, the couple go to a French restaurant in Soho run by a fat Breton. She explains apologetically that it is a bit pricey, but that the food is delicious:

It could have been a hairdresser's window, except for the lobster pot and a piece of torn netting with rectangular cork floats and lead sinks ... The man [the proprietor] was very fat, in a chef's hat and apron, arms bared, and he was sweating profusely. I was still not hungry and ordered a steak tartare as an excuse to drink.

(*P*, p. 194)

The attention to detail is apparent – the decor reflecting the Breton origins of the proprietor, with the lobster pot and fishing nets showing a definite maritime influence. Once more the pornographer ends up inebriated and feasts on Josephine's body after the meal. *The Pornographer*, therefore, shows an increased tendency among McGahern's characters to eat in expensive restaurants and drink good wine. This is a reflection of the impact of increased prosperity and access to foreign travel among many Irish people during the 1960s and 1970s. The London and Parisian eating houses were no longer the sole preserve of the privileged classes, as more and more Irish travellers got to sample Italian and French cuisine both at home and abroad, but particularly abroad. Once sampled, they would not lightly relinquish such pleasurable gastronomic experiences. The winds of change were blowing through Irish society during the 1960s and 1970s and this is reflected in the middle phase of McGahern's oeuvre in particular.

Amongst Women brings us back to a farm, Great Meadow, in the West of Ireland. There is scant reference to fancy restaurants in this novel, which depicts an unchanging patriarchal world where simple food is *de rigueur*. Moran, a widower left with the care of five young children, one of whom, Luke, escapes from his clutches when he goes to work in London, often eats alone sitting opposite a mirror in the living room. This highlights his aloofness and revered role in the family. On Monaghan Day, the name given to a fair that took place in a nearby town during the month of February, McQuaid, Moran's second-in-command in a flying column during the War of Independence, came to visit Great Meadow. He would eat a hearty meal, drink whiskey, spend the night and depart next morning. For the daughters, the day was quite an ordeal. The lamb chops had to be bought at Kavanagh's – apparently he was the one butcher whose meat was up to scratch – and everything had to be laid out perfectly: 'They draped the starched white tablecloth over the big deal table. The room was wonderfully

warm, the hotplate of the stove glowing a faint orange. They began to set the table, growing relaxed and easy, enjoying the formality of the room ...' (*AW*, p. 9).

The sense of occasion is palpable, as the house is made ready for a special guest. McQuaid drives a Mercedes and has clearly become successful as a cattle dealer. Moran, his superior officer during the war, still seeks to exercise control over his subordinate. However, this proves more difficult over time as McQuaid reveals himself less willing to yield to his host's authority on every subject. On his last trip to the house, he flirts with the girls, praises their good looks and cooking prowess and then settles in to a hearty meal:

The girls had the freshly cut bread, butter and milk on the table. The lamb chops sizzled as they were dropped into the big pan. The sausages, black pudding, bacon, halves of tomatoes were added soon after to the sides of the pan. The eggs were fried in a smaller pan. Mona scalded the large teapot and set it to brew.

(*AW*, p. 12)

This is not the type of meal enjoyed by the Moran family on a regular basis: no expense is spared in ensuring that McQuaid is properly looked after. The painstaking way in which the meal is presented is striking: all the ingredients are named individually and the cooking methods described. One can almost smell and taste the food. McQuaid clears his plate and thanks the girls. He and Moran then start recounting episodes from their war experiences. Although appreciative of the hospitality shown to him, on this particular evening he baulks against the systematic authority of his former comrade in arms: 'Tonight a growing irritation at Moran's compulsion to dominate, to have everything on his own terms or not at all, had hardened into a sudden decision to overturn the years and quit the house at once' (*AW*, p. 21).

Aware that this brusque departure signals the end of a life-long friendship, Moran is nevertheless unwilling or unable to say the words that might heal the rift. Before he gets into his Mercedes, McQuaid utters under his breath in a voice loud enough to be heard: 'Some people just cannot bear to come in second' (*AW*, p. 22), a pointed reference to the changed social status of the two men. The way in which McQuaid breaks the etiquette of

hospitality is revealing of his rather uncouth manners – he treats his wife in a very dismissive manner and is ruthless in his quest to become rich. It is very unlikely that he, or Moran for that matter, would ever be found in a French or Italian restaurant. They are the products of a time when plain food was appreciated, usually supplied in plentiful quantities, but always with an eye to the possibility of falling on hard times – the spectre of the famine would still have loomed large in the minds of many inhabitants of the West of Ireland. But occasions like Christmas had to be marked appropriately. Hence the following account of the Christmas dinner in Great Meadow:

The room was already full of delicious smells. Two tables were put together out from the window and covered with a white cloth. The places were set. The huge browned turkey was placed in the centre of the table. The golden stuffing was spooned from its breast, white dry breadcrumbs spiced with onion and parsley and pepper. There were small roast potatoes and peas and afterwards the moist brandy-soaked plum pudding. Brown lemonade was squirted into the glasses from siphons with silver tops.
(*AW*, p. 99)

Just as with his descriptions of certain religious rituals, there is something almost sacred about the time-honoured conventions that are observed in relation to this important family event. Things have been done in a certain way for many years and these traditions must be preserved. One has the impression that while outside of Great Meadow many customs and practices are changing, here at least there is consistency, as though the house were in some way a bastion of immutability. Hence there is the white cloth, the special places at the table, the browned turkey with stuffing in its breast, the roast potatoes and plum pudding – one might add the Brussels sprouts and carrots, the trifle and cream and the other ingredients of your typical Irish Christmas dinner. McGahern's objective was to capture the atmosphere, smells and colour of a meal that reunites the Moran family (with the exception of Luke) and highlights for them the unique pull of home.

In the concluding part of this chapter, I will deal with McGahern's last novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* and his classic short story, 'The Country Funeral', in order to illustrate the writer's painstaking charting

of his characters' interaction with things gastronomic. 'The Country Funeral' describes the impact a trip to attend the last rites of their uncle Peter, a bachelor farmer, exerts on the brothers Fonsie, Philly and John Ryan. As children, their mother's precarious financial circumstances meant that the boys had to travel to Peter's farm during the summer holidays. The invalided Fonsie had particularly bad memories of these stays: 'The man [Peter] wasn't civilised. I always felt if he got a chance he'd have put me in a bag with a stone and thrown me in a big hole' (*CS*, pp. 381–382). Philly, who works on the oil rigs and squanders the good money he earns on trips home buying drinks in a Dublin pub, has a different perception of their uncle. What's more, during the few days he spends at the funeral, he comes to appreciate the tact and neighbourliness of the community where Peter lived. For example, on their arrival at Peter's house, the brothers notice that preparations have already begun for the wake: 'In the kitchen Fonsie and Philly drank whiskey. Mrs Cullen said it was no trouble at all to make John a cup of tea and there were platefuls of cut sandwiches on the table' (*CS*, p. 383). The Cullens had taken it on themselves to buy food and drink for the wake. Bill Cullen showed the brothers 'a bill for whiskey, beer, stout, bread, ham, tomatoes, cheese, sherry, tea, milk, sugar' (*CS*, p. 384). Nevertheless, they still need to travel to Henry's, the pub/grocery in the local town, to get more provisions for the expected guests. Luke Henry, the proprietor, insists that they have a drink and discuss the passing of their uncle. He refuses the money they offer for the bottles of gin, whiskey, stout, beer, sherry and the food they get from him, saying that they can settle up after the funeral. Anything that is not consumed, he will take back.

The wake and funeral revolve around food and drink. It is noticeable that the mourners do not eat or drink to excess. It would appear that the food and drink are just an expression of welcome and gratitude on the part of the family for the solidarity shown by those friends and neighbours who come to pay their respects. Everything follows time-honoured traditions, expressions of sorrow being followed by anecdotes about the dead man's life, the qualities he encapsulated. Then there is the usual flurry of activity in the kitchen: 'Maggie Cullen made sandwiches with the ham and turkey and tomatoes and sliced loaves. Her daughter-in-law cut the sandwiches

into small squares and passed them around on a large oval plate with blue flowers around the rim.' Those drinking beer often make use of the empty bottle as an ashtray: 'Some who smoked had a curious, studious habit of dropping their cigarette butts carefully down the narrow necks of the bottles ... By morning, butts could be seen floating in the bottoms of bottles like trapped wasps' (*CS*, p. 391). This is a studied portrayal of some typical rituals associated with the wake in Ireland where talk was interspersed with food and drink and where cigarettes were extinguished in empty beer bottles as described above. The reason why McGahern devoted so much time to immortalising such rituals was possibly because he realised how, in an age of globalisation, they were in danger of extinction. How long will the 'healthy' breakfast enjoyed by Philly on the morning of the funeral endure in the Ireland of the twenty-first century, I wonder: 'After managing to get through most of a big fry – sausages, black pudding, bacon, scrambled eggs and three pots of black coffee – he was beginning to feel much better when Fonsie and John came in for their breakfast' (*CS*, p. 397).

Throughout 'The Country Funeral' we encounter many such references to excessive eating and drinking. Once more, in keeping with tradition, the Ryans stop in various pubs on their journey back to Dublin after the funeral, something that would in all likelihood no longer happen with the stricter drink driving laws in Ireland. By the time they end up in Mulligan's of Poolbeg Street, one of Dublin's best-known hostelrys, they are all inebriated and Philly has decided he will buy his uncle's farm from his mother and settle down there after he has finished working on the oil rigs. The time spent at Peter's funeral has convinced him that this would be a good place to live: neighbours look after each other, there is a timeless pattern to life there and he feels as though it is where his roots lie.

Published in 2002, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* contains elements of the pastoral, in that McGahern celebrates the disappearing culture of an aging local community living around a lake, a setting that has obvious resemblances to the writer's final residence in Foxfield Co. Leitrim. Jim and Kate Ruttledge, a childless middle-aged couple, come back from London to live in this secluded spot. They dabble in a bit of farming and their house becomes something of a magnet for the likes of their loveable neighbour, Jamesie, Ruttledge's uncle known as 'The Shah' and Bill Evans, a 'farm boy'

who was committed to care at an early age and ended up working as a virtual slave on different farms around the country. On one occasion, the family for whom he worked locked him out of the house when they went away for a few days and he was forced to ask the Ruttledges for some food. When Jim explains rather apologetically that there is nothing, not even bread, in the house, Bill asks if there are any 'spuds'. We read: 'His eyes glittered on the pot as he waited, willing them to boil. Fourteen potatoes were put into the pot. He ate all of them, even the skins, with salt and butter, and emptied the large jug of milk' (*RS*, p. 10). It is interesting that the more urbane Jim Ruttledge would not have considered potatoes a proper meal, given the fact that they were the staple diet in Ireland for such a long time and are still extremely popular. Bill has no doubts about their nutritional value and is solely concerned with sating his hunger. Life in a religious-run institution, where food was scarce and unprovoked beatings commonplace, had taught him to appreciate the simple things in life.

When the Shah arrived to the Ruttledges' house for his dinner every Sunday, different proprieties were observed. Like Bill Evans, the Shah enjoys his food to the full: 'He ate in silence from a large white plate: sausage, rasher, grilled halves of tomato, mushrooms, onion, black pudding, a thin slice of liver, a grilled lamb chop. From another plate he drew and buttered slices of freshly baked soda bread'. And that wasn't the end of it: 'With an audible sign of satisfaction he reached for the slice of apple tart, the crust sprinkled with fine sugar. He poured cream from a small white jug. He drank from the mug of steaming tea' (*RS*, p. 87). There is a consistency between this meal and the one offered to McQuaid in *Amongst Women*. It conforms to what would generally have been referred to as a 'mixed grill' when I was growing up, a very popular choice in hotels and restaurants around the country. Ruttledge's uncle is most satisfied with his repast and thanks Kate for preparing it. It is likely that there is not much variety in what he wants and gets for his Sunday meal in the house beside the lake. Compare this to what happens when a friend of the Ruttledges comes to visit from London. In this instance, there is a dinner of steak, salad and wine:

The steaks were cooked over a fire of dried oak on an iron grill the Shah had made for the fireplace in the small front room. As they cooked, grease dripped from the raised grill and flared in the red embers. Robert Booth sat in silence with a whiskey, watching the fire and the lights from the fire play on the white walls. At the table he came to life.

(*RS*, p. 158)

Booth is a successful businessman and is keen to get Kate to come back to work with him in London. Originally from Northern Ireland, he settled in England and eventually assumed the accent and mannerisms of an English squire. During his stay with the Ruttledges, he sleeps long into the morning, reads the newspapers and springs into life when drinks are served and food is on the way.

Food for him has an aesthetic dimension and is not simply a means of satisfying a physical need. His hosts make a special effort to ensure that the meals served during his stay are varied and refined in order to meet his expectations. After he has left, they decide not to return to London, even though what he proposed was tempting. The couple have settled into the slow rhythm of life beside the lake and feel close to the inhabitants. They enjoy the feeling at the end of a hard day's work on the land as they settle into a meal with Jamesie and his wife:

Inside the house a reading lamp with a green shade was lit on the big table. On the red-and-white squares of the tablecloth stood a blue bowl filled with salad and large white plates of tongue and ham, a cheeseboard with different cheeses, including the Galtee Jamesie liked wrapped in its silver paper, a cut loaf, white wine, a bottle of Powers, lemonade. There was a jug of iced water in which slices of lemon floated.

(*RS*, pp. 113–114)

Jamesie is impressed, calling it a 'pure feast', and it is clear that all enjoy each other's company and sharing in the achievement of saving the hay through food and drink. Similarly, after a successful day at the local mart, there is another example of a celebratory meal: 'Mary made a hot whiskey for herself. Then she removed a damp cloth from a platter and a border of white and blue flowers on which small squares of ham and chicken sandwiches were sprinkled with sprigs of parsley' (*RS*, pp. 231–232). Whiskey and ham sandwiches seem to be constants at these gatherings, indicating

that both these products appeal to the people involved. Simple, wholesome fare is what most people living in this rural setting appear to enjoy. At the wedding breakfast of the notorious womaniser John Quinn, the menu is more upmarket:

The mushroom soup was home-made. Roast chicken was served with large bowls of floury potatoes and carrots and mashed turnips. There was plenty of crisp breadcrumb stuffing and a jug of brown gravy. Instead of the usual sherry trifle, a large slice of apple tart was served with fresh cream.

(*RS*, p. 168)

Just as Guinness could profitably employ the sensual evocation of its product in *The Pornographer*, Bord Bia might equally use this description to extol the virtues of Irish food for an international audience. This is as close as one can get to ethnic Irish cooking and it whets the appetite for the cuisine that one finds on these shores.

There is no doubt that McGahern's appreciation of gastronomy informed his evocation of the rites associated with food and drink in his fictional and prose writings. The eating and drinking habits of his characters are revealing of their life experience and social standing and in addition they tell us much about how gastronomy evolved in Ireland over a period of time. In this, as in many other ways, John McGahern can be seen to be the bard of a particular period of Irish history, which saw great upheaval and change on a number of fronts. To read his fiction is to be given a gateway to understanding how exactly people behaved and what they ate and drank in the latter decades of the twentieth century. That is no mean achievement in itself.

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