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Introduction

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Time and Space: A Taste of John McGahern's Leitrim
Introduction
Emily Smith

“Space and time are the enclosures of every novel and of life itself.”

These are the words used by the Leitrim author John McGahern to describe his literary objective in a documentary made shortly before his death in 2006.¹ His novels have an eternal quality, the passing of time being linked to the changing seasons of the Leitrim / Roscommon landscape, itself a central character in his oeuvre. McGahern is a specialist in localised universality. In his rural family dramas with their individual peculiarities he manages to chronicle the familiar human conditions of love, loss, frustration, and isolation. Perhaps it is these uniquely intimate yet widely identifiable portraits which make him such a beloved voice both in his native Leitrim and well beyond. With this in mind, it was oddly poetic that on 10th May 2018 a group of postgraduate researchers from the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies decided to celebrate the author by bringing together scholars and creative voices from across the country to his beloved Ballinamore, Co. Leitrim.

The NCFIS is a research group that has prided itself since its inception in 2003 on taking an open-minded, ambitious, interdisciplinary approach to examining a diverse array of social and cultural questions linking Ireland and France. It was therefore no surprise that a priority for the organising committee was to find as many unique and engaging ways as possible to explore John McGahern's writing.

What is gathered here is but a sample of the unique perspectives offered on McGahern's work across the two-day festival hosted in Ballinamore Public Library and kindly supported by Leitrim Arts Council. Members of the public, scholars and creatives alike were treated to papers and talks from a range of disciplines, as well as a presentation of Leitrim photography by Paul Butler, a dramatic reading of McGahern's 'A Slip Up' directed by Dr. Máire Doyle, and a bus tour taking in some of the recurring sites mentioned in the author's work, including the Glenview Museum which houses some of the author's own childhood objects.

This edition of the *JOFIS* opens with a sample and examination of some of the photography Paul Butler presented during the celebrations in Leitrim in the hope that it might allow readers to begin to appreciate both the beauty and the significance of the author's homeland in framing discussions of his work. We then dive further into McGahern's local landscape with an examination of his representations of the Irish pub by Aoife Carrigy. Using McGahern's non-fiction writings, notably his article 'County Leitrim: The Sky Above Us' which lays out his beliefs on the both distinct and familiar nature of his home county, and 'Blakes of the Hollow', a beautiful description of a traditional pub he frequented in Enniskillen, the article applies the author's intimate portraits of his surroundings and the people who inhabit them to his short stories in order to show how our sense of place and time are so often inextricably linked. Taking McGahern's own notion of 'pub time', the article demonstrates through discussions of manners, tradition, habit and identity, how the pub can at once be at the heart of a community and a distinct world of its own making.

The latter two articles of the journal take a tour through critical theory. In his article 'Waiting' for the 'Arrival' of the 'Text': Poetics in John McGahern's *The Dark*, Martin Keaveney paints McGahern as a descendant of Samuel Beckett in regards to how his use of waiting and non-action in *The Dark* can be seen to be inherited from the play *Waiting for Godot*. Using Tzevetan Todorov's *The Poetics of Prose*, the article methodically shows how moments of anticipation, boredom, and general 'plotlessness' come to develop McGahern's prose from stories of where 'nothing' happens to

1 *John McGahern: A Private World* (Harvest Films: Hummingbird Productions, 2005).

a text playing at non-play.

The journal concludes with an article by Emily Smith, '“It's not a mansion this house, but it's our own”': Memory, Childhood and Domestic Space in John McGahern's *Memoir*'. In this article Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, primarily his theory of the oneiric house, are applied to McGahern's accounts of growing up in Leitrim in order to demonstrate the ways in which the simultaneous absence and presence of interior descriptions reflects the disorientating nature of childhood bereavement, and the restorative nature of the imagination.

This edition of the *JOFIS* is but a taste of the vibrant, innovative work currently being done in the field of McGahern studies, and we hope that this collection of Early Career voices serves as a further jumping-off point for much more lively and inspired discussion.