

2019

Seeing Leitrim

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Recommended Citation

Butler, Paul (2019) "Seeing Leitrim," *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/jofis/vol5/iss1/3>

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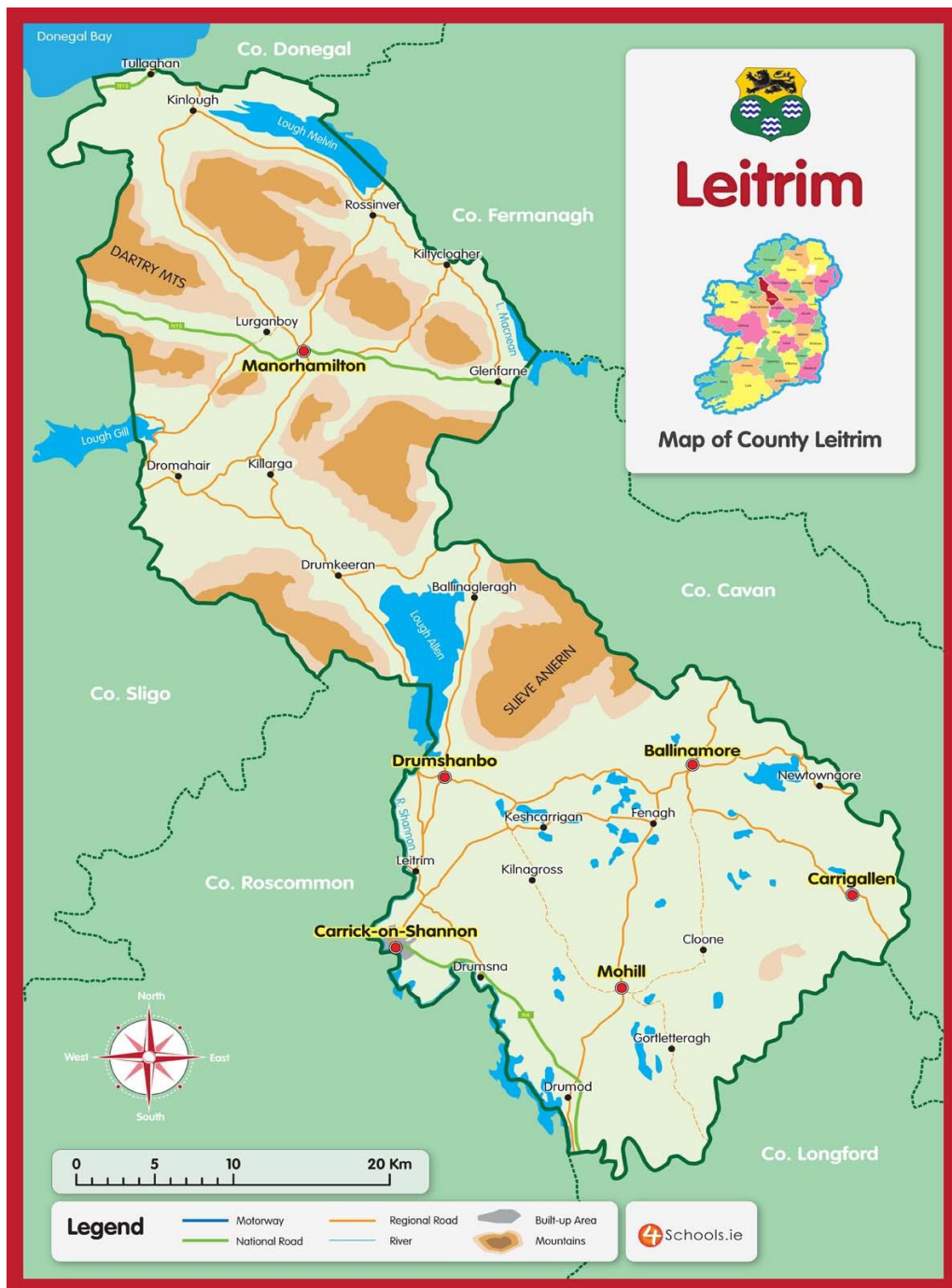
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Leitrim is a beautiful forgotten county, clipped at the tail of the county by the N4 as it enters Roosky at the county boundary with Longford and departs towards Roscommon at Carrick-on-Shannon. The small fields are less intensively worked and are enclosed within hedgerows rich in wildflower and fauna, it is a landscape relatively unspoilt.



¹ <https://4schools.ie/content/leitrim-county-map>

The *Ireland Reaching Out* website has the following observation with regard to Co. Leitrim:

Leitrim and Cavan were one state back in the 1100s and 1583 the county borders were drawn. In the 15th century iron ore was the main industry in the county and that tradition had continued up until the 18th century.²

Carrick-on-Shannon is the chief town of the county. During the Great famine the population decreased from 155,000 to 112,000. It is still the least densely populated county of Ireland. In addition to Carrick, there are many picturesque towns that are evoked regularly by McGahern, places like Ballinamore, Fenagh, Dowra, Mohill, Drumshanbo, Carrigallen, which return like refrains throughout the work. These are places the writer celebrated and immortalised in his work.

There are also several beautiful lakes, of which the best known are Lough Gill, Lough Allen, Lough Garadice, Lough Glenade, Lough Rynn, Lough MacNea and Lough Melvin the western shores of which are in County Leitrim. The county in the medieval period was thickly forested and five great forests endured into the 17th century. The soil of Co. Leitrim is particularly water-retentive and, along with its many lakes, provides the basis for the standard joke that land in the county is sold by the gallon rather than by the acre.

County Leitrim takes its name from the village of the same name situated close to the River Shannon. The Irish form of Leitrim - 'Liath Druim' - means the grey ridge. It is also known as 'The Wild Rose County'.³



Scene: 28:03

‘Now there was a lot of life here but that it was local life. And that often the quality and spirit of the people varied enormously even over the course of a few miles.

One of the pleasant things about here is that they take you for what you are, you know, rather than who you think you are. And sometimes they'd ask me is there much money in this writing business John?

² *Ireland: County Leitrim*. Available at: <http://www.irelandxo.com/ireland/leitrim/introduction> [Accessed 3 January 2019]

³ *Ireland: County Leitrim*: Available <http://www.irelandxo.com/ireland/leitrim/local-resource/history-leitrim> [Accessed 3 January 2019]

And when I assured them that there wasn't they seemed quite satisfied and to accept it like most trades.'⁴

This is how McGahern himself described the pace of life in his native county. It is clear that the peacefulness and tranquillity of the landscape appealed to him and that he viewed the inhabitants as being his people. He felt comfortable in this environment: it allowed him to write and to do a bit of farming on the side. When he returned to live in Foxfield, in a house overlooking the lake, he had the distinct impression of coming home.

My experience is quite a different one. I am a native Dubliner who moved to Farnaght in South Leitrim in 2001 with my wife Rita and son Luke and whilst McGahern's work transports us back to a disappearing way of life, I have observed that the land and how it is worked very much dictates the nature of the people in this part of the country. In a sense the seasons define the people and it is to his beloved county that John McGahern returned as he mentions in the wonderful documentary to which I already alluded, *A Private World*. The documentary shows the writer in his home and on his land. It shows him interacting with the locals at marts and in the town of Mohill. He is indistinguishable from the other natives, a Leitrim man among other Leitrim men and women. He observed in the documentary:

'We've {his wife Madeline and himself} both lived here now for over thirty years so practically half our lives have been lived here. And the first eighteen years of my life was lived here because I lived all around here and I went to school not far from here until I was nine.'*(A Private World)*

⁴ Cited in *John McGahern: A Private World* (Hummingbird Productions, Harvest Films/Bord Scannán na hÉireann, 2005).



Curraghroe, Co Roscommon. (33mm RAW Format image: Paul Butler 2016)

I have also begun to look on Leitrim as my home. I love it when, during late spring and early summer, the hedgerows come alive and wildflower takes hold. Great big skies roll by and a large palette of greens dominates the landscape. Autumn brings golden yellow and rusty reds that filter through the dull grey light. The landscape of Leitrim flows from the pages of McGahern and I found it quite natural to visualise the scenes so close to the writer's heart. The landscape of Leitrim never fails to impress and, as McGahern himself observed:

‘In a novel or a short story you are always faced with material that is time and space and landscape. The problem for the writer is to actually dramatise that inert mass so that it comes to life and conforms to an idea or a vision.’ (*A Private World*)



Cattle in May, Farnaught, Co Leitrim. (RAW Format f4.4 / 63mm - 35mm equivalent)
image: Paul Butler 2011

The opening lines of *Memoir* underline the unique nature of the Leitrim landscape:

The fields between the lakes are small, separated by thick hedges of whitethorn, ash, blackthorn, alder, sally, rowan, wild cherry, green oak, sycamore, and the lanes that link them under the Iron Mountains are narrow, often with high banks. The hedges are

the glory of these small fields, especially when the hawthorn foams into streams of blossom each May and June.⁵

It is McGahern's description of how fields and laneways burst into life during the spring and summer months that beautifully sum up the magic of this hidden landscape. Due to less intensive agriculture, the fields are quite small and are bounded by a wonderful array of hedgerows. The seasons matter here; in fact, they determine everything and I find myself noting what jobs the farmers are doing in the area at a particular time. I have always felt that as the N4 merely skirts the lower part of the county, the people and environment have mostly been left to their own devices.

In his monograph on McGahern's work, Eamon Maher observes:

When we read his books and short stories, we are transported back in time to a rural Ireland that is very close to extinction, an Ireland where people worked the land in a way that moulded their character.⁶

Leitrim and the North West are very distinctive. Hidden, forgotten and full of ancient mystery, I love where I live and where I record imagery and come to a realisation of why John McGahern wrote so fondly of this place.

A Sense of place

Capturing a sense of place is a difficult, and essential part, of McGahern's literary undertaking. *Terrain.org* provides the following insightful definition of a 'sense of place':

Either the intrinsic character of a place, or the meaning people give to it, but, more often, a mixture of both. Some places are distinctive through their physical appearance, like Newgrange; others are distinctive, but have value attached to them, like the Cliffs of Moher.

Less striking places have meaning and value attached to them because they are "home," and it is argued that attachment to a place increases with the distinctiveness of that place.⁷

McGahern appreciated the importance of place better than most and his work, by concentrating on the small details of the everyday as lived out in the local, managed to create a universal experience that resonates with readers across the globe.

⁵ John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p.1. Further in-text references will be to this edition, with page numbers provided.

⁶ Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002), p.2.

⁷ <http://www.terrain.org/ecomedia/q1/definitions.htm>



‘..the best of life is life lived quietly, where nothing happens but our calm journey through the day, where change is imperceptible and the precious life is everything.’ [*Memoir*, p.80]

Lough Rynn Access Road Farnaught, Co
Leitrim.
(RAW f5.7 / 225mm - 35mm equiv) image:
Paul Butler 2012

My initial impression of Leitrim, before we relocated there, was of an empty place, damp and full of trees. No doubt this was related to the advertisements that appeared regularly back in the eighties informing people of acres for sale, or tree planting. However, my ignorance was totally unfounded. That said, the land is poor and marshy, but it nevertheless displays a stunning beauty in all seasons. The French academic and McGahern expert Anne Goarzin provides the following assessment of my work:

Paul Butler’s photographs do more than adhere to a registered literary trademark and they open up a window into the real ‘McGahern Country’ of the imagination, which is first and foremost located in the texts of his novels, short stories and essays as well as in the readers’ minds.⁸

The photograph below is perhaps a good example of my approach, where I offer my ‘image’, my ‘vision’ of what it is exactly that the writer is seeking to achieve. There are hundreds of quotes from his work that could be used in conjunction with the image, whether it be the nostalgic realisation of the beauty that surrounds her by Elizabeth Reegan in *The Barracks*, the sadness of Moran in *Amongst Women* when he ‘sees’ the meadow behind his house for the first time when he is on the threshold of death, or the numerous reflections on the landscape in McGahern’s final novel, *That They May Face The Rising Sun*. With McGahern, beauty nearly always has a bitter-sweet dimension, as though one needs to be shocked into an appreciation of the wonderful array of spectacles present in the ordinary, everyday scenes that go largely unnoticed.

⁸ Anne Goarzin, ‘“The Sky Above Us”: John McGahern, ‘The Image’ and Paul Butler’s Photographs of County Leitrim’, in Derek Hand and Eamon Maher (eds), *Essays on John McGahern: Assessing a Literary Legacy* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019), pp.123-134.



October Sunrise, Lough Rynn, Co Leitrim. (RAW Format f3.7 / 33mm - 35mm equivalent) image: Paul Butler 2012

October to May are my favourite months with light and colour ranging from suppressed to riotous. Spring gives you the big sky months, monstrous cloud formations rolling across the land. Captured on a wide angle lens and printed in black and white, they evoke a deep and touching experience.

While the heavy grey days of November with head-height sagging grey cloud can make you feel quite melancholic, but the effect of this neutral light on the falling leaves and leaf litter carpeting everywhere is an annual treasure.



Big Spring Sky , Farnaught, Co Leitrim. (RAW Format f3.7 / 33mm - 35mm equivalent)
image: Paul Butler 2011

McGahern captured this aspect of life very well in an interview with Eamon Maher:

‘When you’re in danger of losing a thing it becomes precious and when it’s around us, it’s in tedious abundance and we take it for granted as if we’re going to live forever, which we’re not.’⁹

As our life started to gather momentum in Leitrim, photographic opportunities spread out before me. In early spring with the Sitka spruce plantations carpeted in a morning mist, their inner darkness permeated by shafts of light revealing old native wood hidden from view. I slung the camera over my shoulder and pushed through the low lying branches to try and break out onto the lake shore and watch large bruised bulging cloud roll across the lake.

It is a certain heavy stillness that greets you when you scramble through state forestry, nothing stirs within, and the light is reduced to a faint glow. The deep pile of dead pine needles is soft underfoot. Because of the density of tree planting it is not inviting for wildlife or plant life, and the silence is deafening. The reward only arrives when you break through to

⁹ ‘Catholicism and National Identity in the Works of John McGahern’. Interview between Eamon Maher and John McGahern, in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly*, Vol. 90, no. 357 (Spring 2001), pp.72-83, (p.75).

the old native woodlands still hugging the breezy shoreline of Lough Rynn, their vibrant moss clad trunks and still leafed beech trees, an Aladdin's Cave of colour. The state forestry Company, Coillte cleared the local forests a few years back and already the new planting is starting to rise and outmanoeuvre the local fauna. At the moment of writing, the area is bathed with extra light and should remain so for the foreseeable future.



Winter Fog in the Wood, Farnaught, Co Leitrim. (RAW Format f4.3 / 57mm - 35mm equivalent) image: Paul Butler 2010

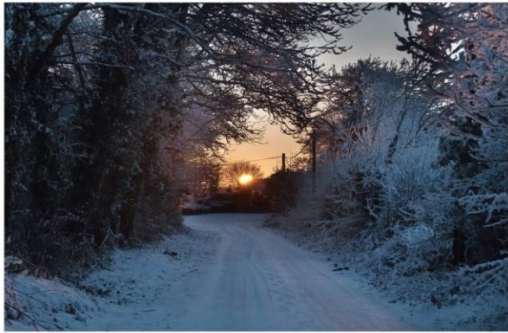
Reading through McGahern's short stories, one encounters descriptions like the following:

There was no longer the dripping on the dead leaves, the wood clamped in the silence of white frost except for the racket some bird made in the undergrowth.¹⁰

When localised fog sits close to the ground it creates the most atmospheric scene: everything slows, delicate moisture coats the grass and hedgerow and when that fog is accompanied by a freeze, the senses heighten to the sound of a crunch underfoot, or the squawk of a jay as it bolts from the trees flying low over the high field beside the access road close to my home. Once more, we come across this wonderful evocation of place:

¹⁰ John McGahern, 'Christmas', in *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Short Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p.19.

The weak winter sun had thawed the fields soft enough to course the hare on, and though it still hung blood-orange above the hawthorns on the hill the rims of the hoof tracks were already hardening fast against their tread.¹¹



Christmas, Farnaught, Co Leitrim. (RAW Format f4.3 / 57mm - 35mm equivalent)
image: Paul Butler 2010



Morning Fog, Tooman, Co Leitrim. (RAW Format f4.3 / 54mm - 35mm equivalent)
image: Paul Butler 2011

¹¹ 'All Sorts of Impossible Things', in *Selected Stories*, p.90.



High Meadow, Farnaught, Co Leitrim. (RAW Format f4.1 / 51mm - 35mm equivalent)
image: Paul Butler 2011

Then in *Amongst Women*, there is this moving evocation of how Moran's children feel liberated when they escape from the oppressive atmosphere created by their father: 'To leave the ever-present tension of Great Meadow was like shedding stiff, formal clothes or kicking off pinching shoes.'¹²

¹² John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p.33.



Sunset cloud over Lough Rynn, Co Leitrim. (RAW Format f4.1 / 52 mm - 35mm equivalent)
image: Paul Butler 2013

I am regularly asked why I moved to Leitrim. It does involve a long journey to my place of work in Dublin, but the rewards are plain to see, literally. The photos that accompany this piece bear witness to the majesty of what surrounds me when I return from work in the evening. Each day is different: the sky is never the same; the water on the lakes sparkles in new ways; the birds form shapes in the sky that frame it and them, so that I feel rejuvenated, reborn, capable of rebirth. I know that this is my place, a place I share with the other inhabitants of Leitrim, with the writer and all his readers who commune with the pictures and scenes he evokes.

Biography:

Paul Butler is a photographer based in County Leitrim whose main interest is in documenting the many abandoned dwellings, iconography and landscape within this part of Ireland. He is currently working on a research project visualising the work of the celebrated writer John McGahern.

To view images related to this project: www.paulbutler.me

Email: images@paulbutler.me