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A Deep Well of Want: Visualising the World of John McGahern

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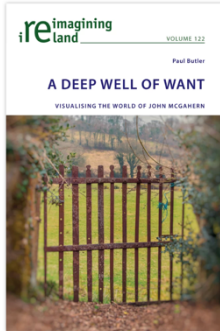
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BOOK REVIEW

A Deep Well of Want: Visualising the World of John McGahern, by Paul Butler, Oxford and New York: Peter Lang Reimagining Ireland, 2023, 230pp., ISBN 978-1-8007-9810-6.



John McGahern talked of his own writing as being act of looking for and writing an image. His closely crafted scenes and characters, often of a slowly unfurling rural life, are like photographs in textual form. In his new book, *A Deep Well of Want*, photographer Paul Butler visualises the intersection of two life-stories: that of his own and that of McGahern as part of a photographic journey through his adopted homeland of Leitrim, where he has now lived for over twenty years.

The book is a dual photo-memoir, a brave and honest telling of Butler's often troubled childhood and his difficult and ultimately broken relationship with his parents. Similarly, McGahern and his siblings famously suffered at the hands and the words of their brutish and bullying father, Frank McGahern Snr, a Sergeant in the newly formed Gardaí. The gentle schoolteacher, Susan McGahern, John's mother, died of cancer when the boy was just aged 10, a blow he never fully reconciled with, emotionally or psychologically. If our home lives shape so much of our childhood selves, Butler's "visual statements," reflecting Leitrim in a McGahern-tinted lens, show just how homeplaces, from the cottage to the country field, influence how we react with and remember our local environments.

Early in its introduction, Butler recounts being asked a question when previously a batch of his photographs were entered in a competition. "Do you want your images to make a statement," Butler was asked, "or do you want your images to tell a story?" In a thoughtful response Butler outlines that he likes to make visual statements, a form of story-telling through image that resonates as a dialogue with McGahern's writing and textual imagery of rural Ireland and of his hinterland of Leitrim.

The book is arranged along three main thematic sections, each with a title that outlines the treatise of Butler's writing and curating of images within each section. The titles and themes include "Landscape," "A Sense of Place," and "Ritual." Each are keenly linked to the themes of McGahern's writings and are reflected back through Butler's cataloguing of these base elements in his own work.

Butler draws on photographic theory and what it means to make meaning out of an image of a place? How can we take meaning from representation? Butler describes the scenes of childhood and daily chores of the young McGahern during cold Leitrim winters as being "a rough canvas." As a photographer Butler captures an essence of McGahern's environments and distils it through the lens for the viewer to experience. In a photograph taken from the 'Landscape' section of the book depicts a winding narrow road on Sliabh Bawn, Co. Roscommon, with moss lining its centre, Butler explains that the image "helps relive a memory of freedom and a light summer breeze that Elizabeth Reegan must have felt as she freewheeled down the hill in *The Barracks*" (58).

From "A Sense of Place" we accompany Butler along wanderings through inside crumbling cottage interiors, overgrown gardens, neglected house exteriors, as well as ordinary domestic items, all signifiers of past lives and ghostly memories still residing, creating their own residual, if all fading, sense of place in the present. Butler reminds us that "capturing a sense of place is a difficult and essential part of McGahern's literary undertaking" (88). A photograph of a farmhouse in Oghil, Drumlish, Co. Longford is additionally poignant when reading Butler's caption that the house is now demolished. Images in this section preserve views of historic shopfronts in Strokestown, Co. Roscommon to a rusting luxury old Citroen DS car, visible only by its distinctive roof peeking out above the high grasses and trees that surround it. Familiar interior objects, from butcher's calendars to dish scrubbers, rudimentary objects of the "past everyday" are what we would expect to find in the country homes of the Morans of *Amongst Women* or of James and Mary in *That They Face The Rising Sun*. With childhood such a prominent and recurring theme in McGahern's fiction and non-fiction, as well as in Butler's own writing, a photograph of a moss-covered garden swing is especially arresting: "The house has been idle for a very long time. It's a majestic residence with floor to ceiling windows and secret garden. For every time I gaze upon it, I can hear childhood sounds and voices ... the little swing is now still, though memories remain rooted within the moss-covered seat" (101).

Throughout the section on "A Sense of Place," windows are a recurring motif. Characters often look outward into the world in McGahern's books and stories, beginning their day or ending their evening with the opening or

drawing of curtains. The seasons dictate so much of the natural rhythm of rural life, with light being the circulatory force of the hum and throb of work and routine from summer to winter. Butler's photographs of "The Net Curtains, Gortletteragh, Co. Leitrim" (119) and "The Lonely Chair," Mucknagh, Co. Leitrim (137) capture a sense of the gentle growth of the natural world, undisturbed by the presence of human living. The still net curtain and the sole wooden chair next to the window, now draped in hanging strands of ivy capture the stasis of rural life, silenced by depopulation.

In contrast, the image "The March of Modernity. Scramoge, County Roscommon" (111) uses the window of the derelict cottage as a means to draw the perspective of the scene outwards from the interior towards the new housing estate, sites which now populate (and often dominate) our small rural towns and villages. The unrelenting "march of (apparent) modernity" of the Celtic Tiger period, driving by its reckless excesses saw the rise of derelict housing of a different kind. Not houses left empty by the passing of rural lives or of an older generation, but rather unfinished houses, left empty by finance and money which never existed in the first place. The "ghost estates" also typify what Butler felt in this image, what he described as "a coldness and lack of feeling within this place, and not just in a physical sense. The house itself exuded an air of sadness" (111).

In the section titled "Ritual" Butler notes that "religious themes flow through McGahern's work, from his description of the Rosary in *The Barracks* to the significant details surrounding the rituals of death in his short story "A Country Funeral." The smells, colours, and rituals are plainly visible on the pages of his work and in the visual vignettes that he supplies" (141). The photographs taken by Butler in this section capture a stillness, one which surrounds the passing of the power of faith and of religious ritual within the Irish Catholic home and parish. The remnants of ritual, from the stone Marian Year Cross at Sliabh Bawn, Co. Roscommon to a statue of Mary in the Dining Room, Aughancliffe, Co. Longford, are bare and vague remainders of the practice of faith now absent in much of everyday life. The poignant scenes present a contemplative emptiness. Sites and objects associated with ritual, such as rosary beads and holy pictures within the home, to exterior sites of graveyards, churches and roadside religious billboards are devoid of their divinity and healing power through their neglect. The photo of a wall with peeling and crumbling paint and plaster still adorned with a framed photo of Pope John Paul II next to a long-dried out holy water font, hint of an Ireland that is now far removed from the theocratic state that embraced the papal visit of 1979. As Butler comments, "the scene acts as a visual analogy of the damage that the [Catholic] Church has inflicted on the people of Ireland."

The book overall is love song to Leitrim and the places connected to McGahern and of his writing. Leitrim is a place that though struggles in parts to sustain the flora and fauna that inhabits its inch-thick soil (the opening lines of McGahern's memoir read "The soil in Leitrim is poor") but yet which grips the hearts and minds of those who fall for its charms: "Leitrim and the north-west are very distinctive. Hidden, forgotten and full of ancient mystery. I love where I live and over time and through what I record I have come to a realization of why John McGahern wrote so fondly of this place." Paul Butler's photographs record and archive the passing life and landscape, the ritual and time of a place that lies largely outside the passing consciousness of the rest of the country.

Special mention must go to Peter Lang Press and to the Re:Imagining Ireland series for supporting the high quality printing and reproduction of so many colour images in the book. Butler's photographs, of which there are over 120 in the book, carry a deep aura of the sacred and the mystical as they capture moments of stillness illuminated in exquisite light. The rolling pastoral landscapes of Leitrim or the decaying domestic scenes of long vacated country cottages are all way-markers through time of a neglected and almost forgotten place. A rich light holds the essence of each photograph, from tree-lined country laneways, frayed net curtains on ivy-covered windows, to morning fog stubbornly rising over Lough Rinn.

In the informative captions that accompany each image, Butler explains in detail the technicalities of configuration of aperture setting and exposure lengths used to capture each scene – the care and craft of the photographer's work is akin to McGahern labouring over a draft manuscript, editing lines and sentences until it became a complete picture in words.

Butler's photography and McGahern's writing of place complement each other intimately throughout. I am reminded of those who have written of the Irish landscape in terms of its time, meaning, and of its own private language – the embodied language of place and people and how it speaks to each new generation who make it their home. Manchán Magan, Tim Robinson, and Dervla Murphy are but some of those who bring the image and reflection of their place in time to the reader in such vivid words. Here, Butler adds a photographer's perspective, of images so deeply layered, so nuanced in their telling of visual stories that they flow off the page as much as any written description.

During Covid-19-enforced lockdowns, Leitrim's sparsely populated countryside fell even quieter. "It felt like the world was empty," Butler adds. Living in Farnocht in the south of the county, his images of ruined interiors, the subtle ordinariness of everyday objects, tell of an all but vanished way of

life that still feels impossibly recent, one where life was very much dictated by the rhythms of seasons and nature. As McGahern tended his small Leitrim farm it wasn't as a form of mindfulness to escape the busy life he could have embedded himself in, of writerly circles and busy academic campuses. Instead, its plainness and simplicity was a sanctity and wellspring for the creativity in his work. It was out of nature and his local environment that the literary world was furrowed and reaped.

McGahern's uncanny natural eye guided his writing so much that he could write about a vase of flowers in a window, and while the noise of a saw mill laboured on the distant Lakeland horizon, the dying flowers behind the lace curtain seemed somehow unnatural, as their beauty ebbed and faded, a sign of the sad fate that would befall Elizabeth Reegan in *The Barracks*. In this beautiful and poignantly pitched photo-memoir, Butler has created a lasting record and an important social study of the land which McGahern gave voice to.

Writing about the nineteenth-century photographs of Leitrim taken by Leland Duncan, McGahern wrote of the historic images that "they speak to us out of a world that has disappeared; but such is the magic and mystery of art that they do so with a richness and depth that life rarely gives. Time has become a reflection." In a digitally saturated world, where relentless imagery scrolls through our thumbs daily, the pace and peace of Butler's photographs offers a new reflection into McGahern Country and into McGahern's world and invite us to stop, to breathe, and to look.

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