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Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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The Religious Landscape of Walter Macken's Fictional Universe

Eamon Maher

The writer lectures in the Department of Humanities, Institute of Technology, Tallaght, Dublin. He is Director of The National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies.

Walter Macken (1915-1967) was part of a generation of Irish people who were imbued with a strong faith and a commitment to the Catholic values that they learnt at home and in school. As a young boy, he toyed with the idea of becoming a priest, a calling that was abandoned as soon as he became aware of the attractions of the fairer sex. A passage from the unpublished autobiographical novel, *Cockle and Mustard*, reproduced in the biography written by Macken's son, Ultan, conveys the anxiety experienced by a young boy at the thought of receiving his First Communion:

The boy knows that he is going to receive God, which is an overwhelming thought; it makes you feel awed really. How is it to happen? He has to take the wafer on his tongue and on no account must he bite it. It mustn't even touch his teeth while it dissolves and he then must swallow it. He will have God inside him and he will be near the angels.¹

1. Cited by Ultan

Macken, *Walter*

Macken: Dreams on Paper (Dublin: Mercier Press, 2009), p.51

Unlike Frank McCourt, who has a highly amusing account of his preparation for First communion in *Angela's Ashes*, Walter Macken's commitment to Catholicism did not wane with the passing years. His biography underlines the importance of Mass and the sacraments to him and his wife Peggy (née Kenny), who were regularly seen in church and whose attachment to religion was unmistakable. Writing about the tragic death of the eldest child of Peggy's niece, Macken observed: 'We watched her die for 3 hours. She was only 14, but the behaviour of Peggy's sister and her husband in their terrible trial was a wonderful pointer for the strength imparted by our faith.'² He felt that the grieving couple were granted the 'grace of fortitude' to sustain them in their unbearable loss and his admiration for their stoicism is unmistakable. His faith was of immense importance to Walter Macken and it is thus not too surprising that Wally Junior should have become an Opus Dei priest, which was a source of immense pride to his father: 'It is a wonderful thing to have a son a priest. I don't think there is any human honour that is comparable to it.'³

2. Ibid., p.323

3. Ibid., p.401

I have had a life-long interest in Walter Macken's fiction, which I read for the first time as a teenager attending boarding school in Roscrea in the 1970s. At the time Macken was considered 'safer' than a writer like McGahern, with whom he nonetheless shared the distinction of being banned by the Censorship of Publications board. This was the case with his first novel, *Quench the Moon*, probably as a result of

Loveless marriages are a feature of Macken's fiction...

4. Walter Macken, *Quench the Moon* (London: Pan books, 1974), p.92

5. *Ibid.*, p.45

describing the pregnancy outside of marriage of Kathleen O'Flaherty, the hero Stephen O'Riordan's sweetheart. Macken must have been deeply upset by the injustice of the banning, but it did not diminish his commitment to pursuing a literary career, which he sometimes combined with working as an actor and producer at *An Taidhbhearc* Theatre in Galway. Through a discussion of this first novel and two others, I hope to give readers a flavour of Macken's portrayal of religion in his fiction.

Quench the Moon, first published in 1948, is set in Connemara, like most of Macken's novels, and it describes the ups and downs in the O'Riordan family – father, mother and one son, Stephen – who live a far from idyllic life, in spite of enjoying relative material comfort. The problem is poor communication between the couple, Martin and Martha, and between Martin and his son. The *pater familias* seems to carry a dark secret which fuels his violent character, inducing broodiness and long silences. He and Stephen spark off each other regularly and the enmity between them deepens when Martha dies of a cancer that first appears in an area where she received a blow from her husband. Martin's brother, Fr O'Riordan, who first arranged a position for Martha in Connemara, muses after her death on the harm caused by this action: 'I have often been in me bed at night, lying awake and thinking that I did her a great disservice by outing her out in this wilderness, like planting an orchid in the middle of the Sahara.'⁴ Loveless marriages are a feature of Macken's fiction and many of his characters find themselves constrained by the bonds of matrimony to stay with people for whom they feel no affection. Those who fall in love are generally prevented from living together by a combination of religious and social constrictions.

Connemara, an area that is much loved for its rugged landscape and spectacular scenery, is presented in quite a negative fashion by Macken. Its inhabitants seem moulded by their environment and often end up unfeeling and embittered. Stephen's friend and arch-poacher Michilin makes the following observation:

That's one of the troubles about Connemara, too. It must be the strong air of it or something. It weeds you out. If you can stand up to it you're all right, but sometimes it mows men down like oats in front of a scythe.⁵

Religion fails to instil any gentleness in the people. Personal enmities find an outlet in malicious gossip and violent exchanges, one of which leads to the death of the Kathleen's brother Malachai, who is killed by Stephen when it is revealed that he was responsible for the death of his sister as a punishment for her bringing shame on the family.

Stephen is disgusted at the clergy's propensity for berating unmarried girls who become pregnant, especially when many of them end up married to the father of their child. He also sees first hand in Galway the discriminatory division between rich and poor:

The farther back the seats went, the poorer became the dress of the people, hats and summer dresses giving place to shabby coats and rough scarves pulled over the hair. At the very end were women completely covered in their black shawls, who were praying devoutly, and sighing at intervals.⁶

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 223-24

It would appear that religion is just a veneer, a mask that people wear when it suits their purposes. There is no real engagement with their faith by people who seem intent at all costs to settle scores, acquire land and generally behave in a manner that has little or nothing in common with the message of the Gospel. In *The Bogman* (1952), the reaction of the local community to Cahal Kinsella when he returns to the farm of his grandfather Barney after years spent in an Industrial School is typical of the way in which Macken's characters are bereft of empathy when it comes to protecting their own interests. Cahal is incarcerated at the age of six in because of his unmarried mother's pregnancy by a traveller, Danny, a scandal that could never be revealed to the neighbours. Cahal remains deeply marked by his experience:

He knew it was partly the school was to blame, where you had been taught by instinct to look after yourself and if you saw another person crying to feel nothing but gratitude that it wasn't yourself; the fear at the back of your mind that tomorrow would be your turn to cry.⁷

7. Walter Macken,

The Bogman (Oxford: Brandon/isis, 2004)

p.70

Ireland has become aware in recent years of the trauma those who were sent to Industrial Schools and the Magdalene Laundries had to endure, most often for the perceived 'sins' of their parents. What Cahal describes above conforms to the testimony of a number of those who spent time in these institutions and were marked for life by the experiences endured within their walls. Cahal's grandfather eventually forces him into marriage with a woman who is much older than he and for whom he feels nothing but disgust. The tragedy for the young man is that he is in love with Máire Brodel, a love that is viewed as illicit according to the mores of the time. Shortly after his wedding, Cahal knows that he is condemned to a life of misery:

How could he have known what it was to be violated, to be feeling the way he felt now, that everything in the world that might have been sacred was torn up by the roots and left to wither in the light of knowledge.⁸

8. *Ibid.*, p.151

His skill as a balladeer does nothing to endear him to some of the neighbours whom he satirises and belittles in song. After a time, they turn against him and resolve to chase him out of the area. His refusal to conform to local customs and traditions results in his ostracisation. He marvels at how people justify their treatment of him:

What better way to do it than to say that God had smitten the unjust? They could be pious about that. They could go into churches and thank God for his munificent mercy that he had reached out from heaven and punished the sinners in their midst.⁹

9. Ibid., pp.339-40

It is true that not everybody in the community buys into this approach. Máire Brodel and her father support Cahal, as does the elderly Tom Creel who decides to oppose the boycott by offering him help with the harvest. He explains his decision thus: 'Who is God? Isn't everyone in the village this mornin' God Almighty? What about if Cahal Kinsella is a bit odd? That's not for people like us to judge. That's something he'll have to answer to God about. What's it got to do with ye?' The parish priest is also sympathetic to Cahal's plight, but tells him that the bond of marriage cannot be broken - 'you can't break your own chains' - which is scarcely reassuring advice. In the end, Macken's hero comes to see that his detractors are not completely responsible for their actions:

He loved all of them. He didn't want to hurt them. He never had really. It was the terrible way they had all been brought up, the niggling puritanical soul-destroying education that had been handed out to them like meal fed to chickens.¹⁰

10. Ibid., p.329

Brown Lord of the Mountain (1967) presents a more positive image of Connemara than the two other novels just discussed. In it, Donn Donnshleibhe, whose parents force him to marry Meela, pregnant with their daughter, leaves home and abandons his bride on the day of their wedding only to return many years later at the precise moment when his father, with whom he had a problematic relationship, is on his deathbed. He is amazed at the lack of change:

Outside, the whole world was feverishly renewing itself, tearing down, building up. He had never noticed coming in the bus that many thatched cottages had disappeared, and that tiled cottages had taken their place, with electricity poles crossing the fields with ignorant arrogance. Oh, but not here, not in the Mountain. There was absolutely no change, no change.¹¹

11. Walter Maken, *Brown Lord of the Mountain* (London: Pan Books, 1970), p.22

He tries to explain to Meela what prompted his sudden departure, saying that he couldn't tolerate the 'false moral gun' his parents help up to his head.¹² But he has a lot of ground to make up with his wife

12. Ibid., p.29

and their daughter Nan, who has the mind of a child and the body of a woman. His father's funeral reveals a different side to the people than what he was accustomed to: 'There were people today making you feel that you belonged. You understand? Like you said: Well now if I die there will be somebody to go to my funeral.'¹³ Meela interrupts him, saying that they like funerals and that their presence does not automatically spell love for the deceased.

13. *Ibid.*, p.41

Over time, Donn re-establishes himself among the people. His exchanges with Fr Murphy reveal a deep distrust of the clergy, and at the same time a sneaking regard for this priest who is a force for good in the community. Donn confronts him with the following scenario: 'I met you since I was a child and your failure is my disbelief, from the penny catechism up. Who was there to say to me: Look, we are all Catholics but none of us are Christians.'¹⁴ He goes on to describe his boredom during Mass every Sunday morning, where the only distraction was the sight of girls in their pretty dresses. Gradually the priest and agnostic come closer until the night Nan is cruelly raped by a local yob called Dino. Donn wants revenge at all costs. When Meela tells him to lean on love, not hatred, he explains that, unlike her, he cannot follow the Christian message of resignation: 'For what? Until it eats into your guts. I'm not offering anything up. I know what I want, and I'm going to get it, otherwise I can't live.'¹⁵

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Knowing that Dino will not be able to bear the thought of leaving his beloved tractor behind him, Donn waits until the night he will come back, when he will inflict a fitting punishment. But some of the local men, learning of Dino's plans to return one evening, flock to Donn's house to prevent him from committing a crime that will do more harm than good. Eventually he sees how different they are from a monster like Dino: 'Complicated human machinery, none of them the same, but he saw, and knew that what they had done had been for him, not against him.'¹⁶ The former seminarian, Seán McNulty, desperately in love with Nan, had witnessed Dino's misdemeanour and had remained silent. When he explains to Donn what happened, he is initially treated with disdain but eventually accepted as the person best equipped to look after Nan. Fr Murphy had tried to explain to Donn how Nan would recover from her ordeal:

16. *Ibid.*, p.244

There is an unseen purity as well as the visible sort. That's what I mean about Nan. She is no less a virgin now than she was before. Her soul is as pure as ever it was. [...] She is not the one I am worried about. It's you I am afraid for.¹⁷

17. *Ibid.*, pp.189-90

There is definitely a softening in Macken's presentation of both religion and Connemara in this novel. After having a few drinks with the men

after Dino's perilous escape in the tractor, Donn decides to embark on his travels once more but is inveigled by the priest to say goodbye to Meela, who moved out after failing to convince Donn of the futility of exacting revenge at all costs. He discovers that she is pregnant with their second child and shares the positive discovery he has made as a result of what has happened: 'For every Dino', he said, 'there are a hundred or more decent people.'¹⁸

18. *Ibid.*, p.254

Walter Macken was someone who knew the good and bad that is in every human being, but it is my impression that he too saw more to admire than to despise. He is a writer who clearly deserves more critical attention of than he has received to date. My hope is that this short piece might prompt the readers of *Spirituality* to seek out his books and (re)discover for themselves his many talents.

The Glory Be is no simple naming of the persons of the Trinity.

(Continued from page 110)

prayed for there is the Son in person. The forgiveness of sins that is prayed for is the work of the Holy Spirit. And the third petition is for the final recovery of all things from the power of evil, worked by the Son and the Spirit, and restored to the Father in heaven from whom all things come forth. The Glory Be is no simple naming of the persons of the Trinity. Said in the light of the Our Father and the Hail Mary it is the whole mystery of God and God's creation that was there from the beginning in the Fatherhood of God, that became the now of created time in the sending of the Son and the Spirit, and will be forever in the fulfilment of heaven to the Glory of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.