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CATHOLICISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF JOHN McGAHERN

Interview between Eamon Maher and John McGahern¹

EM: John McGahern, it is a great privilege to welcome you here today. I won't embarrass you by enumerating your many achievements as a writer, the prizes awarded you, the reputation you enjoy at home and abroad. Rather, I'd

"I remember reading in Proust's letters where they were trying to throw the *curé* off the school committee and Proust says that he should remain if for nothing but the spire of his church which lifts men's eyes from the avaricious earth"

like to focus our discussion on the theme of Catholicism and National Identity in your works, a theme which is, in my view, central to everything you write. We might start by discussing the environment in which you were brought up. Was yours a typically Irish Catholic upbringing?

JMG: Yes. I mean it was the only upbringing I knew and in that sense you can't consider it typical. The Church

dominated everything.

EM: Your parents would have been religious?

JMG: I think my mother was very spiritual. My father was very outwardly religious.

EM: Rituals like you describe in many of your novels were commonplace?

JMG: The rosary was said every evening. I always liked that sentence about the medieval Churches, that they were the Bibles of the poor. The Church was my first book and I would think it is still my most important book. At that time, there were very few books in the house. The only pictures we could see were religious pictures, the Stations of the Cross. The only music we would hear was religious hymns; and it's (*the Church*) all I came to know of ceremony, even of luxury - the tulips that used to come in the flat boxes when I was an altar boy, the candles, the incense.

EM: These memories stay with you.

JMG: Yes, but also one of the problems for a novelist in Ireland is the fact that there are no formal manners. I mean some people have beautiful manners

but there's no kind of agreed form of manners. For a novelist there has almost to be an agreed notion of society. In that sense, I often think that you could never find Jane Austen writing poems or short stories. And it's through the Church that I first came to know all I'd know of manners, of ceremony, of sacrament, of grace.

EM: Some people might be surprised that you paint such a positive picture of your relations with the Church.

JMG: I would think it is neither positive or negative – it's just a fact. I remember when *The Dark* was banned I went on *The Late Late Show* from, of all places, The King's Hall in Belfast. I was expected to attack the Catholic Church and I said that I could no more attack the Catholic Church than I could my own life. I remember there was a Unionist in the audience and he got up and said: "There's a man whose book has been banned by the southern Government, has been sacked out of his school by the Archbishop of Dublin and he comes down here to Belfast and gets up on his hind legs and praises the Catholic Church." He says: "Could Moscow do a better job of brainwashing than that?!"

"I see sexuality as just a part of life. Either all of life is sacred or none of it is sacred. I'm inclined to think that all of life is sacred and that sexuality is a very important part of that sacredness"

EM: Speaking about Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, you were in Scoil Eoin Bhaiste in Clontarf at the time. He actually intervened with the parish priest, the Manager of the School, didn't he?

JMG: Actually, the Manager was a charming man. He was a Fr Carton and I don't think he had any interest in Catholicism or spirituality. He came from the rich family that supplied all the potatoes to the Dublin market and he loved whiskey and food. He complained to me constantly about "them bowsies of doctors." I was, I suppose, spiritual at the time and I equated spirituality with a priest. I was a bit shocked when he said to me one day in the school yard: "If you listen to those bowsies of doctors, life wouldn't be worth living!" I thought that a priest was supposed to have a more elevated view of life.

EM: I just wonder, John, if the religious instruction you received as a child had a detrimental impact on your spirituality?

JMG: No, I mean I have nothing but gratitude to the Church. I would think that if there was one thing injurious about the Church, it would be its attitude to sexuality. I see sexuality as just a part of life. Either all of life is sacred or

none of it is sacred. I'm inclined to think that all of life is sacred and that sexuality is a very important part of that sacredness. And I think that it made a difficult enough relationship - which is between people, between men and women - even more difficult by imparting an unhealthy attitude to sexuality. By making sexuality abnormal and by giving it more importance in a way than it has - by exaggerating it.

EM: It was always the way in this country that religion and sexuality were entwined and that practising Catholics were expected to obey the rules handed down from on high.

JMG: Yes. When I was in my 20s it did occur to me that there was something perverted about an attitude that thought that killing somebody was a minor offence compared to kissing somebody.

EM: And then of course the Papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, came along and it caused a lot of pain for many sincere couples who were trying to avoid having children.

JMG: In a way, I had left Catholicism at that time, but the debt remained. And of course it was a very simple form of Catholicism and to a certain extent I always thought that as well as being my most important book the Church was also my first fiction. I think fiction is a very serious thing, that while it is fiction, it is also a revelation of truth, or facts. We absolutely believed in Heaven and Hell, Purgatory, and even Limbo. I mean, they were actually closer to us than Australia or Canada, that they were real places.

EM: A physical state?

JMG: I remember writing once that there was an orchard beside the barracks, Lenehans' orchard, and somehow in my imaginings of Heaven, Lenehans' orchard was some place around the entrance.

EM: It may have had something to do with the garden of Eden.

JMG: I don't know, maybe it had.

EM: Elisabeth Reegan, the main character in your first novel, *The Barracks*, suffers much and yet is receptive to the beauty of nature and the cycle of life. Her exclamation before her death of "Jesus Christ!" as she looks out one morning at the spectacular countryside seems to me to be something of an epiphany. What is the role and meaning of revelation in your novels?

JMG: I don't think that the writer can say that. That belongs to the reader. I mean all the writer tries to do is get his words right and in order to do that you have to think clearly and feel deeply. I like a thing that Chekhov said: "When a writer takes a pen into his hand he accuses himself of unanswerable egotism and all he can do with decency after that is to bow!" I also think that the only difference between the writer and the reader is that each of us has a private world which others cannot see and that it's with that private world that we all read. It's a spiritual, private world. And the only difference between the writer and the reader is that he (the writer) has the knack or talent to be able to dramatise that private world and turn it into words. But it's the same private world that each of us possesses. Joyce once described the piano as a coffin of music and I see the book as a coffin of words. That book, in fact, doesn't live again until it finds a reader and you get as many versions of the book as the number of readers it finds.

"When we're young we read for the story, the excitement of the story - there comes a time when you realise all stories are more or less the same story. I think it's linked to the realisation that we're not going to live forever and that the way of saying and the language become more important than the story"

EM: Speaking as a reader, I find that passage particularly moving where Elisabeth Reegan looks out on that splendid scene which up till then she had never fully taken in. Now, when she is about to die, the beauty strikes her with poignant force.

JMG: That's a dramatic problem. 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. I think there's a great difference in consciousness in that same way in that when we're young we read books for the story, for the excitement of the story - and there comes a time when you realise that all stories are more or less the same story. I think it's linked to the realisation that we're not going to live forever and that the way of saying and the language become more important than the story.

EM: In an interview you did once with Julia Carlson, you remarked how amazing it was that a Catholic country like Ireland should have produced so many writers who were lapsed Catholics. But is this fact all that surprising? Maybe the writers would have been more Catholic if the country had been less so.

JMG: That was a very hurried interview and it was never revised or corrected. I mean I think that's a fact and I think that we had a very peculiar type of Catholic Church here in that it was a fortress Church. Very much like an army, it demanded unquestioned allegiance. I remember reading in Proust's letters where they were trying to throw the *curé* off the school committee and Proust says that he should remain if for nothing but the spire of his church which lifts men's eyes from the avaricious earth. Elsewhere in that same letter he describes the 18th-century Church in France as "the refuge of ignoramuses". I would think that the Church, the personnel of the Church I grew up in - which I separate from the Sacraments, the prayer, the liturgy - I would suspect might even have been a refuge of ignoramuses also. Proust said also that he saw with Tolstoi that one could never think looking back at the 18th-century Church that one would see the revival of spirituality that was seen in the 19th century. Proust stated as well that Baudelaire was intimately connected with the Church, if only through sacrilege.

EM: Yes, that's an interesting comment with regard to Baudelaire, who was a real *poète maudit* and yet was also very spiritual.

JMG: But you can't commit sacrilege if you believe in spirituality.

EM: In the same interview with Julia Carlson you pointed out that Irish identity was very confining. To be Irish was to be against sexuality, against the English. How do you think our national identity has evolved since the 1960s?

JMG: I think I was remarking on something that I would see as childish. Trying to define yourself as being against something is poor, I think. The way I see it is that all the ol' guff about being Irish is a kind of nonsense. I mean, I couldn't be anything else no matter what I tried to be. I couldn't be Chinese or Japanese.

EM: Strangely enough, it's becoming "sexy" almost to be Irish, which certainly wasn't the case a few decades ago.

JMG: Well, that's just another version of the same thing. What's interesting is to be human, to be decent or to be moral or whatever. Everything that we inherit, the rain, the skies, the speech, and anybody who works in the English language in Ireland knows that there's the dead ghost of Gaelic in the language we use and listen to and that those things will reflect our Irish identity. And I actually see it as being very childish for anyone to have to beat their breast and say "I'm Irish!" I mean, isn't it obvious?

EM: You present a very different picture of Ireland from some of your contemporaries like Brian Moore, John Broderick (who was a cousin of yours, I believe), Edna O'Brien and Frank McCourt. What is your opinion of their depiction of Irish mores?

JMG: ² Well, I can't speak for them. I would think that I write out of my own private or spiritual world. I would see my business as to get my words right and I think that if you get your words right you will reflect everything that the particular form you're writing in is capable of reflecting. And, in fact, I think that if you actually set out to give a picture of Ireland that it would be unlikely to be interesting, that it would be closer to propaganda or journalism. Because, when an author starts a book, he has no idea where it's going. It's a voyage or a work of discovery. And I have a suspicion that if the tension wasn't there for the writer that it wouldn't be there either for the reader. Art is a mysterious thing, the fingerprints of the writer are all over it and you can't fake anything from the reader. If the tension's not there, the reader will sense that it's actually not dramatised, not thought out, not felt. There's a very interesting analogy that Auden made where he said that while the scientist knows his work, the work doesn't know him. Whereas the work always knows the writer.

"The only role a writer has is to get his words right and to do that, as Flaubert said, you have to feel deeply and think clearly...If the writer gets his words right, he'll make that local scene universal"

EM: But even as a reader – you would read fiction – there must be Irish writers whom you admire.

JMG: Oh yes, many. When I was young both Beckett and Kavanagh were writing and publishing and they were for me the most exciting writers at the time. They weren't the most fashionable - O'Faoláin and O'Connor were the most fashionable. And I would think that Kate O'Brien is a most important writer and she was considered nobody then. I like strange people: I like Ernie O'Malley, I like Tomás O Crotháin's *The Islandman*. I like Michael Mac Lavery, some of Corkery's short stories. I mean the obvious ones are Joyce and Yeats.

EM: Joyce and Yeats almost cast a shadow over Irish writers who came after them. You inherit a certain literary tradition – before you become a writer, you're a reader – which has to influence you.

JMG: Yeah, sure. But I don't consider them shadows. In fact, I would think that they're an enormous source of sustenance and pride. In a sense Yeats was

a terribly important figure because he made it difficult for the mediocre to get a footing. Not only was he a brilliant poet but he almost single handedly established a tradition that wasn't there before. In fact, he paved the way for Joyce and Synge and you could say even Beckett. I see some of Beckett's works as full of Yeats. I think the play *Purgatory* is very close to *Waiting for Godot*. I edited for a French publisher John Butler Yeats' letters and there's a charming letter where John is very upset that Willie has rejected his play for the Abbey because he said it had no system. John Butler Yeats was drawing a portrait of Synge at the time and he was complaining to the latter about Willie's rejection of his play. Synge said: "You should go back and ask him if his plays have a system!"

EM: You often portray characters who are veterans of the War of Independence. Men like Reegan (*The Barracks*) and Moran (*Amongst Women*) are disenchanted with the Irish Free State, the fruit of their struggles. In Moran's words, it has resulted merely in "some of our johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen." Is he echoing your own view of the situation here?

JMG: No, not really my view, but my father fought in the war of Independence and one of my uncles. He (the uncle) was expelled out of the I.R.A.. He won a King's scholarship, he was a very intelligent man, a pedant. He got expelled out of the I.R.A. for insisting that they all learn Irish after the war was over. He joined the Blueshirts then. To a certain extent, Moran is an imaginary figure but he is also based on a number of people. That was, in a way, a prevalence - in that the dream didn't become the reality. A lot of it was confused with their youth which would end anyhow. It was also the most exciting and dramatic time of their lives. I think they had a kind of dream - you see it in O'Malley's *Another Man's Wound* too - that they were bound together by something bigger than themselves. And then normal life restored itself and the Church and the medical profession got power. And, if anything, the country got poorer.

EM: Yes, as often happens after a conflict like that, it was a minority that benefited.

JMG: And it was a very unattractive minority, I think, that did well out of the State, in that they were the shopkeepers, the medical profession, the Church. People were looked down on that had to go to England to earn a living as if they had committed sin in some way, as if it was any virtue to have the luck to remain on in Ireland.

EM: In the modern context, we have a “new” type of State with the Celtic Tiger which is also benefiting a minority.

JMG: Ah, I think a lot more people are better off now. I think it’s a wonderful thing and that they don’t have to go unless they want to go abroad.

EM: Because emigration, as far as you’d be concerned, was a major problem. And then you had to emigrate yourself.

JMG: I thought that romantic notion of the writer having to go abroad was foolishness, even when I was young. It looked like a nonsense to me that someone like Larkin or Evelyn Waugh – I think Larkin is a great poet – or Thomas Hardy would have to go abroad to be an English writer. I remember saying once that I thought a person could write badly in Ireland as well as anywhere else – you didn’t have to go abroad to write badly!

“When I was in my 20s it did occur to me that there was something perverted about an attitude that thought that killing somebody was a minor offence compared to kissing somebody”

EM: I suppose again, because Joyce did it, it became fashionable.

JMG: It’s a sign of inferiority complex. It is our country now and we don’t have to apologise to anybody. In fact, I remember when *The Dark* was banned I was friendly with the very distinguished editor of *The Listener*, Joe Ackerly, and he said that it was marvellous about the scandal surrounding the book, that it would boost sales. I actually didn’t think that at all: I was quite ashamed. You know, it was our own country and we were making bloody fools out of ourselves. When I was young in Dublin we thought the Censorship Board was a joke and that most of the books banned were like most of the books published: they weren’t worth reading anyway, and those that were could be easily found and quickly passed around. There’s no fruit that tastes so good as the forbidden fruit. And then I was actually a bit ashamed to be mixed up in it and I would refuse to make any protest about it. In fact, it’s well known that the people in Paris wanted to make a protest and that Beckett was approached. He said that first of all he would have to read the book and then to ask McGahern if he wanted a protest. And only for Beckett I would never have been asked that. When they asked me, I said that I didn’t want a protest, that I was enormously grateful to them and to thank them and Mr. Beckett, but that I thought that by protesting one gave it too much importance.

EM: You were amazingly low-key. I mean you were a *cause célèbre* at the time and you did nothing to highlight the wrong that was done you.

JMG: Ah, I don't think it was a virtue: it was pride more than anything. I wouldn't like to claim too much credit for it.

"Each of us has a private world which others cannot see... it's with that private world that we all read... the only difference between the writer and the reader is that he (the writer) has the talent to dramatise that private world and turn it into words"

EM: Does the writer of fiction have a role to play in forging a national consciousness in your opinion?

JMG: Not deliberately. The only role a writer has is to get his words right and to do that, as Flaubert said, you have to feel deeply and think clearly...

EM: And write coldly.

JMG: in order to find the right words. But think clearly means coldly. I think that if you do that, you will reflect everything that is worth reflecting. Whereas when you set out to reflect something you end up reflecting nothing. There's a very interesting thing that Scott Fitzgerald said: "If you start with a person, you end up with a type, but if you start with a type, you wind up with nothing." You set out to discover something in your writing and it is through the attempt to discover that you reflect. If you have your mind made up about something, you'll reflect nothing.

EM: So really you are a word craftsman and what emerges is up to the reader to interpret, enjoy or not enjoy.

JMG: I think that if it is good work – and that's for the reader to decide – it actually does become the history of our consciousness.

EM: Anthony Cronin has suggested that you, in common with Edna O'Brien, persist in misrepresenting Ireland – which Cronin sees as urban, open and secular – by portraying characters who are dominated by rural values, taboos and religious repressions. What is your reaction to this critique?

JMG: Well he's (Cronin) a reader and he's attacked my work from the beginning, as he has every right to – in fact, I'd defend his right to do that – but I would see in that the vulgarity of making subject matter more important than the writing. In fact, a writer doesn't really have much choice over his subject matter in that the subject matter claims him/her and that all that matters is what he does with the subject matter. The quality of the language,

the quality of seeing and thinking are the important things, not whether it's rural Ireland, whether it's in Foxrock or in bohemian Dublin. I think that all good writing is local, and by local I don't differentiate between Ballyfermot and north Roscommon. If the writer gets his words right, he'll make that local scene universal. The great Portuguese writer, Miguel Torja, said the local is the universal, but without words.

EM: In his *Irish Journal*, Heinrich Böll wrote that for someone who is Irish and a writer, there is probably much to provoke him in this country. Has this been your experience?

JMG: I would think that to be a writer anywhere is always a difficult thing because you have the same problem of finding the right words. I read Böll's book and liked it, but I thought it was a love affair with Ireland, and it was a fantasy world. It was very charming because of that, but it was a dream world – and every world is to a certain extent a dream world.

EM: The strange thing about Böll, as I see it, is that when he's actually writing about Germany he's extremely cutting and his observation is very acute. Whereas he seems to have glossed over completely the more unsavoury aspects of Ireland, the poverty, emigration – he has this notion of emigration as being almost a romantic thing for the Irish.

JMG: Well, of course, he knows more about Germany, almost certainly. That's why family rows are the worst, because everyone knows too much about one another and can inflict wounds that an outsider wouldn't be able to inflict.

EM: Do you think that the Peace Process will succeed?

JMG: I've been asked that many times and I think that Northern Ireland is fashionable because of the violence. When I was growing up, there were two sectarian states, one here and one in the North. Despite public claims and utterances, they were very happy with one another, that one could point the other out in self-justification. I know people from both sides of the divide in the North and I don't actually understand the Northern situation because I think that it's an emotional situation. It's sectarian and you need to be brought up in it to understand it. It just seems strange and foreign to me. It doesn't engage me personally. I don't think it's right that people should be killing one another. From my point of view, life is more sacred than any idea.

EM: You speak about two sectarian states. You'd say that the Irish Republic was in its own way sectarian?

JMG: When I was growing up it was completely Catholic, sectarian. It was almost like a theocracy.

EM: You were accused once of portraying Protestants in a sympathetic manner.

"It was a very unattractive minority, I think, that did well out of the [new Irish] State, in that they were the shopkeepers, the medical profession, the Church. People were looked down on that had to go to England to earn a living as if they had committed sin in some way, as if it was any virtue to have the luck to remain in Ireland"

JMG: Yes, that's right. I grew up very close to the Rockingham Estate and there were many Protestants there. They dwindled: I think that the marriage laws had a big impact on them. They were a very attractive people to me. Everybody had good manners, they were better off and, of course, some of them did convert to Catholicism in order to get married. I write about that in "The Conversion of William Kirkwood"³. I remember saying on French television once about the

North of Ireland that it was a very mysterious place to me, that it seemed to me that the Catholics hated the British and they looked down on the people in the South as degenerate and the Protestants hated the people in the South and they looked somehow on the British as degenerate. They conducted their warfare in Washington, London and Dublin and the one place where they wouldn't talk to one another was in the North of Ireland. I didn't think that anything would happen in the North of Ireland until they were actually kept up there and talked to one another, which seems to be what is happening now, whether it will endure or not. I live beside the border and I have a cousin who was a diocesan examiner and he tells me that to examine religious doctrine in the schools when you go 6-7 miles across the border, Catholicism is 40-50 years back in the North of Ireland. He was talking about 15 years ago.

EM: I'd say the situation isn't dramatically different today.

JMG: When you grow up in the South, your experience is a different experience. There's a very nice statement of David Hume's: "I never discuss religion", he says, "Because its basis is faith, not reason". I would apply the same thing to the North of Ireland.

EM: A final question to you, John. We've just come to the end of the first year of the new millennium. What sort of Irish identity do you see emerging in the coming decades?

JMG: I don't know. It'd be a wise man that would try to predict that. It doesn't really interest me because I believe that the real adventure is a spiritual adventure and that that's a human adventure. One's Irish experience is given and it's what one does with it that counts. That's just the accidental place (Ireland) that life happens and it's the only place and it's the place we love and it's passing. We will have an identity, but I think we wouldn't have it long if we started worrying about it.

EM: John McGahern, thank you very much for your time and patience.

¹ Tapescript of interview between Eamon Maher and John McGahern, Institute of Technology, Tallaght, 8 December 2000.

² In some written notes that the author submitted to me, he supplied the following answer to a similar question that is worth reproducing here: *I read a few of Moore's novels. The craft and care are obvious, and have to be respected, but I never found in Moore what I look for in writing. Angela's Ashes interested me much more. I found it a very strange book, a mixture of farce and clearly honed American evocative writing and literary pretention. The pretention was its weakest part. A work it reminded me of was Synge's Playboy of the Western World, also a farce. It was farce as a great kick at misery and passive suffering. If it's not a farce then the concluding chapter is in serious bad taste and the whole book a sort of porridge.*

³ This short story is in *The Collected Stories*, London: Faber & Faber, 1992, pp.331-350.