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# JOHN McGAHERN AND THE COMMEMORATION OF TRADITIONAL RURAL IRELAND

## Eamon Maher

For all that he is adept at capturing in his prose the landscape and inhabitants of the Irish north-west midlands in which he was reared, John McGahern was never primarily concerned with being a social commentator. He grew up in the 1930s and 40s, decades when the fledgling Irish Free State, later to become a Republic, was attempting to come to terms with its newly found freedom from British rule as well as the aftermath of a bloody Civil War. Emigration reached epidemic proportions during these years and McGahern saw many of the young men who attended his primary school having to leave Ireland to make a living in Britain or the USA. Terence Brown makes the point that '[...] the Irish Free State in those decades was a largely homogenous, conservative, rural society, in which critics of the dominant ideological consensus could make little headway'<sup>1</sup>. Not a huge amount had changed when McGahern began publishing novels at the beginning of the 1960s, as we shall see.

McGahern's novels do not attempt to hide the unsavoury side of life in rural Ireland during this period. They often point out excessive clerical interference in the lives of people, sexual abuse perpetrated on children by parents, mainly fathers, poverty, an absence of any real healthy social interaction, disappointment with the fruits of the fight for freedom, emigration and the resulting rural depopulation. So why do I talk of commemoration in relation to such a portrayal? It is clear from his last novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, that McGahern saw traditional rural Ireland as being on its last legs. Declan Kiberd makes the following point in relation to McGahern's aesthetic:

*Where art comes in is this: I suppose most artists have a sort of theory of the Swan Song – that, just before any truly complex culture goes under, it often achieves a grace of lyric utterance which in some ways encapsulates all its values, all its aspirations*

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*and, of course, its achievements before it finally agrees to lie down and die*<sup>2</sup>.

John McGahern, aware that his Ireland is in terminal decline, sets about capturing its sights, sounds and smells, its characters and way of life, all that is central to the development of community, in a style that is simple yet graceful, transparent and dense. Such a literary vocation is in no way unique to McGahern. His self-professed admiration for Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* is attributable, in my view, to the similarity of both writers' wish to commemorate a disappearing culture. For Ó Criomhthain, it was the Blasket Islands whereas for McGahern it was the traditional rural Ireland, which he mined in virtually every one of his novels. McGahern admired the bare style and lack of emotion that characterises Ó Criomhthain's account and it can be said that his own prose bears the stamp of what Joyce memorably referred to as a 'scrupulous meanness'. In his review of *An tOileánach*, he provides us with a keen insight into what gives his fictional work the same type of universal resonance which he praises in Ó Criomhthain:

*So persistent is the form of seeing and thinking it seems always to find its right expression, for poetry seeps through the book as a whole, like water or the sea air round the place itself. Unwittingly, through this island frame, we have been introduced into a complete representation of existence*<sup>3</sup>.

If one were to replace the island frame with the setting of the north-west midlands of Ireland, one would have a good summary of McGahern's own literary achievement.

It is noticeable that it is only since the publication of *Amongst Women* in 1990 that McGahern attained a canonical status in his country of birth – he has been admired in France since the publication of his first novel, *The Barracks*, in 1963. As the inroads of modernity start to bite into the Irish psyche, there is a tendency to look back with nostalgia at the rural landscape and civilisation that McGahern sketches with such precision. His present popularity clearly owes something to the public's appreciation that his novels offer us a lens through which we can see the past. The hidden Ireland that he exposed as early as 1965 (the year *The Dark* was

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published and banned) has now been shown to be accurate and people are less unwilling to accept some unpalatable facts about what exactly characterised Irish society in the decades after Independence. But for McGahern, the desire was not to effect social change: rather, he merely wanted to 'get his words right' and, in so doing, he hopes to capture what is essentially not just an Irish, but a universal, truth. His strong 'sense of place' is something to which Seamus Heaney is also attuned:

*Irrespective of your creed or politics, irrespective of what culture or subculture may have coloured our individual sensibilities, our imaginations assent to the stimulus of the names, our sense of place is enhanced, our sense of ourselves as inhabitants not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented*<sup>4</sup>.

Aughawillan, Cootehall, Ardcarne and Oakport, these place names have a sort of incantatory quality in the writings of McGahern. Sometimes, as his characters head back by train to Dublin, they make a mental note of the towns they pass through as if in an effort to gauge the distance they are travelling from their roots. The naming of the various trees and wildlife of Leitrim in the recently published *Memoir* has a similar purpose.

A brief analysis of three novels by McGahern, the first two, *The Barracks* (1963) and *The Dark* (1965), and his most recent one, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), shows the way in which they celebrate a rural Ireland that is on its last legs. For the first novel, McGahern deliberately used the physical setting of the barracks his family inhabited with their father, a Garda sergeant, in Cootehall. One part of the town faced a river and above it there was a big lake – McGahern described all this in an interview he did with Nicole Ollier in 1995. He also revisited the house in a recent RTÉ documentary, which is very strong on providing images of the writer in his natural environment. The setting of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, with the lake at its centre, is similarly an undisguised reproduction of McGahern's final abode in Leitrim. He reckoned his first novel was the most autobiographical book he ever wrote. However, rather than producing a type of *Bildungsroman*, with its classic coming of age of the main protagonist, the point of view is that of a terminally ill middle-aged woman, Elizabeth Reagan. The most impressive aspect of the novel is how the young writer manages to describe the inner turmoil of a woman

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who has to face up to the reality of her impending death from cancer. In the opening pages, she thinks back to how she met the widower Reagan, whom she would end up marrying, during a trip home on convalescence from a London hospital. She was worn out from the strain of nursing through the Blitz and found the quiet calm of the Irish countryside comforting. Nothing much had changed since her departure a few years previously:

*The eternal medals and rosary beads were waiting on the spikes of the gate for whoever had lost them; the evergreens did not even sway in their sleep in the churchyard, where bees droned between the graves from dandelion to white clover; and the laurelled path between the brown flagstones looked so worn smooth that she felt she was walking on them again with her bare feet of school confession evenings through the summer holidays<sup>5</sup>.*

In this passage are captured country customs, landscape, wild life and foliage. Throughout the novel, as her death edges ever and ever closer, Elizabeth reaches a deeper appreciation of nature and the joy that the most ordinary scenes and events can bring. She doesn't have time for daydreaming – she is kept busy in the house, cleaning, sewing and cooking for her husband and the four children he had by his first wife – but she nonetheless notes the routine of life outside the barracks:

*The village was waking. The green mail car came: then the newsboy from the Dublin train, the cylinders of paper piled high on his carrier bicycle. A tractor with ploughs on its trailer went past at speed, and some carts. There was blasting in the council quarries: four muffled explosions sounded and the thud-thud of brown rocks falling. The screaming rise-and-fall of the saws came without ceasing from the woods across the lake. (B, 47-8)*

In addition to this, she can also hear Guard Casey rummaging downstairs in the dayroom while she grimaces with the pain caused by the hard cysts within her breast that she fears must be cancerous. While the familiar sounds and actions of other people continue in their carefree manner, she is left to deal with her dilemma alone. The hard frost of March does not prevent the daffodils from making an appearance. Spring, with its signs of

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life and growth, are in stark contrast to the confirmation of her cancer. The night before she departs for the hospital, the wives of the other policemen arrive, as is the custom: "They came before Elizabeth had her packing finished, the intolerable vacuum of their own lives filled with speculation about the drama they already saw circling about this new wound." (B, 106) The women are seen to resemble vultures in this description. As Reegan accompanies his wife on the train to Dublin, he remarks on how many people are leaving the countryside to take the night-boat to Holyhead, the path to emigration. In an unconscious prophecy, she replies: "There'll be soon nobody left in the country." (B, 112) This is noteworthy in light of what was previously stated in relation to McGahern's commemoration of what he sees as a dying culture. The sense of loss is more palpable to Elizabeth whose illness gives her a heightened sense of the importance of this development. Nevertheless, she manages to get some comfort from the images that pass before her eyes:

*Trees, fields, houses, telegraph-poles jerking on wires, thorn hedges, cattle, sheep, men, women, horses and sows with their litters started to move across the calm grass; a piece of platform was held still for three minutes at every wayside station and for ten minutes at Mullingar.* (B, 112)

Elizabeth wants to soak in the different signs of quotidian existence, to make them live in her mind. She uses her memory as a coping mechanism: "She was not really going in a common taxi to a common death. She had a rich life and she could remember." (B, 115) An important part of her mental landscape are the religious rituals that mark the different seasons: "[...] the church services, always beautiful, especially in Holy Week; witnessed so often in the same unchanging pattern that they didn't come in broken recollections but flowed before the mind with the calm and grace and reassurance of all ritual". (B, 123) Her appreciation of nature and the passing seasons is mirrored by her love of the Rosary and the church services which were like the language of her youth. They have a permanence that is lacking in human life, a power to lift her above the perfidious earth. This is what explains her 'epiphany' as she looks out on the countryside one morning and really 'sees' its beauty for the first time: "It was so beautiful that, 'Jesus Christ', softly was all she was able to articulate." (B, 170) Inexpressible awe at the splendour of the ordinary, so

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precious now that she knows that she will not be able to behold it for much longer, is what Elizabeth feels at this moment. Moran in *Amongst Women* has the same insight before his death as he walks through the fields with which he has struggled on a daily basis without ever really 'seeing' them. Then comes the poignant realisation: "To die was never to look on all this again. It would live in others' eyes but not in his. He had never really realized when in the midst of confident life what an amazing glory he was part of" <sup>6</sup>.

Reading McGahern's fiction at the beginning of the third millennium recreates images and experiences of a rural culture that is waning fast. You do not have to be Irish to be able to feel the anguish of an Elizabeth Reegan or a Moran. As she lies upstairs in her death bed, her husband asleep on a mattress on the floor beside her, Elizabeth, alone and in pain, is somehow comforted by the stirring to life of the village:

*[.] and the first cart would rock on the road, faint and far away but growing nearer, rocking past the end of the avenue with a noise of harness and the crunch of small stones under the iron tyres and fading as it went across the bridge and round to the woods or quarry. More carts on the road, rocking now together, men shouting to the horses or each other. A tractor, smooth and humming after the slow harsh motion of the carts; other carts and tractors and a solitary car or van with men travelling to work. (B, 201)*

She is minutely recording this activity, so important because it is a reminder that she is still alive. She envies those who are up and about, who are healthy enough to live the ordinary lives that seem a burden when one is not sick: 'Outside the morning was clean and cold, men after hot breakfasts were on their way to work. The noises of the morning rose within her to a call of wild excitement. Never had she felt it so when she was rising to let up the blinds in the kitchen and rake out the coals to get their breakfasts, the drag and burden of their daily lives together was how she'd mostly felt then, and now it was a wild call to life; life and life at any cost.' (B, 201-202)

Elizabeth Reegan was, in McGahern's opinion, "as much a way of seeing things as a character in her own right" <sup>7</sup>. This notion of the



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character as 'seer' becomes an increasingly important aspect of McGahern's work as it evolves. In *The Dark*, the focus changes from that of a terminally ill woman to trace the coming of age of an insecure adolescent, who is the victim of sexual abuse perpetrated by his widowed father. As its title might suggest, *The Dark* is not inclined to evoke in a lyrical manner the beauty of the material world. It is more interesting as social commentary than for any nostalgic descriptions of nature contained in its pages. However, this is not to say that the land doesn't play a significant role in the lives of Mahoney Senior and his offspring. There is a wonderful description of a fishing trip on the river in the early pages of the book when Mahoney tries to ingratiate himself with his children after one of his more violent tantrums. While the children remain uneasy that the pleasant atmosphere is not going to last long, it seems as though Mahoney is somehow calmed by the rocking of the boat:

*And the boat was sliding in its own ripple in the narrow reaches of the river, in the calm under the leaning trees of Oakport, wood strawberries in the moss under the heaviest beeches, cattle in the fields the side facing the wood. He rowed that way under the trees to Knockvicar, where he bought lemonade in the post office, and they ate the sandwiches on the river bank*<sup>8</sup>.

Mahoney has few opportunities to escape from the harsh tyranny of his struggle to make a living off the land. His son resolves that he will never be tied to it in the same manner. Education and a university scholarship will offer him a means of escape. But, stunted by the sexual abuse, and lacking the conviction needed to benefit from the liberty afforded by a university education, young Mahoney opts at the end of the novel for the safe option of a job in the Electricity Supply Board. The summer after his Leaving Certificate, he had known the satisfaction that can come from working on a farm. The reader gets the sense that perhaps this way of life could have been fulfilling for him: 'There was the delight of power and ease in every muscle now, he'd grown fit and hard, he'd worked in the unawareness of a man's day.' (D, 148)

But then again life in Galway could also have been the gateway to a better life, one of intellectual stimulation and perhaps even sexual fulfilment. However, young Mahoney wasn't ready to embrace the

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opportunities that were presented to him. It is doubtful whether he will find much happiness in Dublin either. Like many of McGahern's characters, it is conceivable that Mahoney could complete the circle and return to the place of his birth, a place that is an inextricable part of his psyche. While he sleeps the night before the first exam of his Leaving Certificate, his thoughts inevitably revert to visions of his childhood:

*In a dream the boat went by the known landmarks. The Gut at the mouth between a red navigation pan and a black, the Golden Bush good for perch, Toughran's Island, Knockvicar Island and the creamery through the trees, the three arches of Knockvicar Bridge with the scum from the creamery sewer along the sally bushes, names bedded ever in my life, as eternal. (D, 139)*

Note how once more the place names have a resonance that reminds one of Yeats. They are 'eternal', concrete reminders of what gives meaning to young Mahoney's life. In a period of turmoil, they provide a soothing presence because of their permanence. In *Memoir*, McGahern refers to the lanes of Leitrim, with the hedges that run alongside them, and how they have the power to transport him back to the time when he used to accompany his mother to school:

*I must have been extraordinarily happy walking that lane to school. There are many such lanes around where I live, and in certain rare moments over the years, while walking in these lanes, I have come into an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace, in which I feel that I can live forever. I suspect it is no more than the actual lane and the lost lane becoming one for a moment in an intensity of feeling, but without the usual attendants of pain and loss. These moments disappear as suddenly and as inexplicably as they come, and long before they can be recognized and placed<sup>9</sup>.*

McGahern has often said that his decision to come back to live in Leitrim was determined by a suitable house becoming available at the right time, but one suspects that his motivation was deeper. Seeing him in the RTÉ interview walking the land with his dog, retracing the steps he and his mother made on their way to school, observing the landscape from the window of his house overlooking the lake, one has the impression that the

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man and his environment are in harmony. This is particularly so as the writer is getting older and it is becoming more difficult to draw clear lines between the past and the present. In the following lines, taken once more from *Memoir*, he provides quite a good summary of *The Dark*: 'We come from darkness into light and grow in the light until at death we return to the original darkness. Those early years of the light are also a partial darkness because we have no power or understanding and are helpless in the face of the world'<sup>10</sup>. Unlike Elizabeth, Mahoney is too young to appreciate fully the natural environment. He is more concerned with escaping from the repressive and abusive shadow cast by his father. And yet he does have the odd inkling as to what the countryside means to him:

*The fragrance of new hay drenched the evening once the dew started and they were building high the cocks. Joy of a clean field at nightfall as they roofed the last cocks with green grass and tied them down against the wind. (D, 147-8)*

*That They May Face the Rising Sun*, with its obvious autobiographical overtones, provides a more mature appraisal of the role of landscape in people's lives. There is very little by way of plot or character development in this novel. In fact, it is not really a novel at all in the conventional sense, more a lyrical evocation of a particular place where a community of middle-aged to older people attempt to come to grips with what is happening around them. There is an awareness that they, like the inhabitants of Ó Criomhthain's Blasket Islands, are the last of their ilk. As Patrick Ryan, the rough-tongued but perceptive local handyman says: "After us there'll be nothing but the water hen and the swan"<sup>11</sup>. There is, in fact, the tone of the Swan Song about this comment. While the houses may have televisions, toilets and washing machines, the lives of the people have changed very little for generations. They are still engaged in farming: trips to the mart to sell their livestock, saving the hay, visiting the neighbours in the time-honoured Irish tradition of the *cuairdíocht*, going to Mass "to see all the other hypocrites", (RS, 2) as Jamesie says to the agnostic Rutledges, all these rituals form part of the fabric of the community.

The main difference between this book and McGahern's best novels, *The Barracks* and *Amongst Women*, is the absence of a strong central character. Whereas we identify closely with Elizabeth Reagan and

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Moran's suffering, the central consciousness of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, Rutledge, remains aloof and we are thus deprived of any real access to the inner workings of his brain. He is simply the conduit through which the novel is narrated, 'a way of seeing', like Elizabeth, with the difference that the reader can never 'commune' to the same extent with what he is describing. When he travels home with his wife, Kate, to look at properties in the area around the lake, Rutledge has an interesting conversation with the local auctioneer, pub-owner, undertaker and IRA activist, Jimmy Joe McKiernan, who asks him why he and his wife want to come back to live in Ireland. He replies that England "is not my country and I never feel it's quite real or that my life there is real." (RS, 19) The same cannot be said for Ireland, which is, according to him, "Far too real." It is appropriate to speak of 'dislocation' in relation to Rutledge's time in England. It is as if the landscape beside the lake has some mystical hold on him. This fascination is clear from the following lines:

*The night and the lake had not the bright metallic beauty of the night Johnny had died: the shapes of the great trees were softer and brooded even deeper in their mysteries. The water was silent, except for the chattering of the wildfowl, the night air sweet with the scents of the ripening meadows, thyme and clover and meadowsweet, wild woodbine high in the whitethorns mixed with the scent of wild mint crawling along the gravel on the edge of the water. (RS, 296)*

There is a wistfulness about these lines that comes from the detail with which the countryside is delineated. The plants are all named as if, by naming them, it is hoped to preserve them in people's minds forever. It is obvious that McGahern knows the scene he is depicting intimately, just as he knows the people who inhabit it. There are several references to birds, the foliage around the lake, animals of all sorts. The characters are comfortable with their environment and seem helpless when they are forced to leave it for any length of time. This is why Jamesie and Mary are so relieved to be back in their own house after spending Christmas with their son and his family in Dublin. We are told they 'looked exhausted' (RS, 208) on their return and Jamesie explains: "It doesn't take long to see everything you want to see in a city. There are too many people. After a while, they all start to go by in a blur." (RS, 209) The pace of life at home, surrounded by familiar objects and people, suits the ageing couple a lot better.

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While John McGahern's novels are nearly all set in a traditional Irish rural landscape, his purpose is not to romanticise or idealise that setting. Indeed, in many of the novels the bleak facts of rural disintegration are as evident as in Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (1942). McGahern was not like some anthropologist who presumed to speak and sermonise about features of rural Ireland that were in decay – nevertheless, this all still comes across seamlessly in an understated and beautifully crafted prose. It is in this way that he succeeds in conveying a strong sense of place and of a culture that transcends time. Everything for him is dependent on style – he has no wish to engage in journalism:

*If a writer only sets out to reflect a particular society he will only be of interest to a historian or a sociologist. What is permanent is the spirit or personality in language, the style, and that's what lasts. A book that was written two hundred years ago can be as alive today as it was when it was first published, and last month's novel can be as dead in a year as a laboratory mouse*<sup>12</sup>.

This preoccupation with an objective style links McGahern to the French writer Flaubert as well as to the aforementioned Ó Criomhthain. He commemorates in a manner that gives flesh to what he holds most dear; he brings his readers into an intimate relationship with a people and a way of life that are unique because of their fragility.

At the end of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, we feel sad to be leaving behind a community with whom we have shared some time. We miss the amusing talk of Jamesie and the antics of John Quinn. 'The Shah' and his strange ways, Johnnie's prowess at darts and his peaceful death as he returns to his brother's house during one of his trips home from England, the Ruttledges' quiet lives that are divided between chat and some farming, all these elements combine to give us a sense of what it must be like to live in such a place. McGahern was keenly aware of the fact that he was living in a traditional rural Ireland that will soon be no more. So his decision to write a memoir was both a logical and a welcome move. His mother is constantly at his side as he assembles the images that constitute the essence of what makes him the writer he became:

*The happiness of that walk and night under the pale moon was so intense that it brought on a light-headedness. It was as if the whole night, the dark trees, the moon in the small lake, moonlight making pale the gravel of the road we walked, my mother restored to me and giving me her free hand which I swung heedlessly, were all filled with healing and the certainty that we'd never die*<sup>13</sup>.

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**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: Fontana, 1985), p.182.
- <sup>2</sup> "John McGahern: Writer, Stylist, Seeker of a Lost World." Tapescript of an interview between Eamon Maher and Declan Kiberd, in *Doctrine & Life*, Vol. 52, No 2, February 2002, pp.82-97, p.86.
- <sup>3</sup> John McGahern, "An tOileánach/ The Islandman", in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 13, June 1987, pp.7-15, p.14.
- <sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, "The Sense of Place", in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-78* (London/Boston: Faber&Faber, 1980), p.132.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Barracks* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p.14. All subsequent references will be to this edition, with the page number in brackets.
- <sup>6</sup> *Amongst Women* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p.179.
- <sup>7</sup> Eileen Kennedy, "Q & A with John McGahern", in *The Irish Literary Supplement*, Spring 1984, p.40.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Dark* (London: Faber&Faber, 1965), p.13. All subsequent references will be to this edition, with the page number in brackets.
- <sup>9</sup> *Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p.4.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36.
- <sup>11</sup> *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), p.45. All subsequent references will be to this edition, with the page number in brackets.
- <sup>12</sup> "An Interview with John McGahern", in Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003), p.145.
- <sup>13</sup> *Memoir*, p.64.