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Remembering ‘The Dark’: Fifty years on from the ‘McGahern affair’

Eamon Maher

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It is difficult to believe that 50 years have passed since 260 advance copies of John McGahern’s second novel, *The Dark*, were seized by Irish Customs and Excise officers. The [Censorship of Publications Board](#) would deem that the novel posed a risk to public morality because of its “indecent or obscene” content.

So began the infamous “McGahern Affair”, which would have far-reaching consequences for Irish public life and the book’s author.

McGahern’s first novel, *The Barracks*, had been awarded the Macauley Fellowship in 1964 with an accompanying cheque for £1,000, which enabled the writer to avail of a year’s sabbatical from his position as a primary school teacher in Clontarf. Little did he think then that he would never resume his teaching career.

Apparently, the then archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, who, in McGahern’s words “had an obsession with dirty books”, intervened with the INTO to ensure that they did not support the writer’s appeal against his dismissal.

On his return to [Ireland](#) in late summer 1965, McGahern unexpectedly found himself in the eye of a storm. Senator [Owen Sheehy Skeffington](#) questioned how a work with such literary merit as *The Dark* was banned in the first place.

He claimed the book was sensitive, well-written and somewhat poignant; that it dealt with aspects of Irish life which officialdom preferred to pretend did not exist: “Masturbation, homosexual tendencies, the sexual frustrations of many Irish men and women including some priests, are dealt with in a courageous and frank manner, but with a sobriety and seriousness of concern which are undeniable.”

Probing

The Dark is far from pornographic in its probing of the problems its main protagonist, Mahoney, has with masturbation and related issues. But the fact that McGahern was a primary school teacher, a profession that came under the direct jurisdiction of the [Catholic Church](#), did not help his cause.

[Samuel Beckett](#) offered to support any protest McGahern might want to mount against the ban, but the latter declined, preferring to maintain a dignified silence during the controversy. Throughout the early part of *The Dark* young Mahoney’s self-abuse is described in detail.

Worse than that is the unwanted sexual attentions of his father, with whom he is forced to share a bed. The rhythmic massaging of his stomach and genitalia by Mahoney Senior is referred to as “the dirty rags of intimacy”.

Such acts went largely undetected and unpunished, mainly as a result of the dominant position of the father in Irish society, as can be gauged from the fact that the adolescent never mentions them in Confession or in any other forum.

Plagued by doubts about his suitability for the priesthood, Mahoney decides to spend some time with his cousin Fr Gerald.

The visit does not quite work out according to plan when the priest enters Mahoney's room in the middle of the night, gets into bed alongside him and proceeds to question him in an intrusive manner about his sexual desires: "[Y]ou stiffened when his arm went around your shoulder, was this to be another of the midnight horrors with your father."

Mirroring the nights

The way that his scene mirrors the nights when Mahoney has to endure his father's abuse, and because in this instance the perpetrator is a priest, inevitably guaranteed the fate of McGahern's novel with the censorship board.

Although nothing untoward happens, one is left with the distinct impression that the priest may have been grooming the child.

Fifty years on, in the wake of the clerical abuse scandals and revelations of the horrific treatment meted out to largely innocent children and young adults in church-run institutions such as industrial schools and Magdalene laundries, often with the knowledge and complicity of lay people, the courage of McGahern in dealing with such issues was truly remarkable.

Michael McLaverty captured the essence of the novel in a letter he wrote to the under-siege writer around the time of its publication: "The book rings with truth at every turn and it must have been a heartbreaking and exhausting book to write."

The Dark shines a light into an unsavoury Ireland that many would have preferred to keep hidden at all costs. Half a century later, it has lost none of its emotional charge or its power to shock. It is a classic example of the raw, realistic writing for which McGahern is rightly renowned.

[Eamon Maher](#) is the author of two monographs on McGahern and is director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in IT Tallaght.