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## An Irishman's Diary on John McGahern and 1916 : What was it all for?

Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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# An Irishman's Diary on John McGahern and 1916

'What was it all for?'

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Eamon Maher

In an article in *The Irish Times* published to mark the 75th anniversary of the 1916 Rising – “From a Glorious Dream to Wink and Nod” (April 3rd, 1991) – John McGahern expressed anger at the way this seminal event is often hijacked by those wishing to rewrite history.

The most common reaction to the Rising in the Ireland he grew up in was one of puzzlement. “What was it all for?” was a question repeated by many, a sentiment that is echoed by the disillusioned veteran of the War of Independence Michael Moran in McGahern's masterpiece *Amongst Women*. “What did we get for it?” Moran asks, referring to the fruits of their struggle.

“A country, if you'd believe them. Some of our own johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen. What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod.”

Certainly the fallout from the failed rebellion was quite considerable on many levels. It resulted in a brutal guerrilla war that ended in stalemate and a treaty that led to partition and civil war.

## Emigration

The protectionist policies introduced by various governments in the early years of the Free State caused hardship at home, with emigration to England being the only recourse for thousands of Irish men and women in need of employment.

McGahern recalls how a Clare labourer on a London building site, on reading that prayers were being offered for an end to the torrential rain that was falling in Ireland, exclaimed: “May it never stop. May it rise higher than it did for fukken Noah. May they have to climb trees.”

The deep anger felt by many Irish emigrants in England towards their homeland is a recurring theme in McGahern's novels and short stories. These were mainly people from poor rural and urban backgrounds who were deprived of a viable future in

post-independence Ireland. They could well be excused for thinking, like Moran, that the whole thing was a cod.

There were others, of course, who flourished under the new dispensation. They were the professional classes (such as doctors, clerics, bankers, lawyers and, to a lesser extent, teachers and gardaí) that were closely allied to the State and the Catholic Church.

According to McGahern, "They grew rich in sanctimoniousness as well as in power and money." The close alliance between church and State meant that in order to get on in Ireland, one had steer clear of controversy, from whence the oft-repeated refrain: "Whatever you say, say nothing."

De Valera was revered in a way that was not in keeping with his rather limited role in the Rising. Yes, he did fight in Boland's Mills and escaped execution by dint of his American birth but subsequently, in McGahern's assessment, "he looked more like a lay cardinal than a revolutionary". Under de Valera's leadership, the Free State would become a theocracy, which was totally at variance with the spirit of the 1916 Proclamation.

McGahern believed that the fact that the Rising took place at Easter placed it in direct competition with the church's greatest festival, thereby depriving it of the type of popular support it might have otherwise enjoyed. After all, "the risen people were nothing before the risen Christ".

That said, some of the leaders, most notably Pearse, were very keen to align themselves with the Catholic Church and regularly emphasised the purifying effects of a blood sacrifice.

McGahern was struck by the fact that many of the signatories to the Proclamation were writers and intellectuals: "A more unlikely crowd to spark a nation to freedom would be hard to imagine".

Even if the leaders had decided to wait, it is likely that North and South would have separated in any case, mainly as a result of their need to "out-bigot" one another.

There was little doubt in McGahern's mind that the ideals of the 1916 leaders and many of their combatants were subverted in the so-called "Republic" that subsequently emerged.

McGahern believed that the best way of honouring 1916 would be to restore the rights and freedoms contained in the

Proclamation that were completely whittled away, mainly in an attempt to appease the concerns of the Catholic Church.

The recent decline in the church's influence has not led to any significant social improvements: there is still a huge amount of work to do in areas such as homelessness, unemployment, racial and sexual discrimination and, of course, venality among our elected representatives, before we can come close to matching the ideals of 1916.

A good start would be to ensure that the "nod and wink" brigade are banished forever, but that does not show any signs of happening in the near future.

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