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## Reflections on the Literary Legacy of John McGahern (1934-2006)

Eamon Maher

*Technological University Dublin*, [eamon.maher@tudublin.ie](mailto:eamon.maher@tudublin.ie)

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## Reflections on the Literary Legacy of John McGahern (1934-2006)

It is hard to believe that John McGahern has been dead 13 years. Along with Seamus Heaney and Brian Friel, his work enriched the lives of many people, exerting as it did, in spite of the rawness of the issues broached, a soothing effect on his vast audience. Although the majority of his writing was situated in the northwest midlands of Ireland – the area of Leitrim-Roscommon – it has reached a global audience. This is because the existential dramas which he sketched with such wonderful poise are ones with which everyone can identify. Sons in conflict with autocratic fathers; wives forced to cater for the needs of their husbands and children while sacrificing their own hopes and desires; the traumatic uprooting associated with emigration; the back-breaking toil of trying to make a living off the land; the rituals surrounding death; all these are captured in a way that gives McGahern fans the impression that they are actually living out these experiences as much as reading about them. When he describes the sour smell of a sweaty headband from the threadbare hat of an elderly farmer, or long days spent saving the hay, or evokes the image of sedge in bogland bathed in moonlight, or recalls walking through the lanes of Leitrim hand in hand with his beloved mother, he unlocks emotions and memories that are deeply buried in people's psyche.

McGahern did not just tell the story of a country trying to find its feet after the trauma of a bloody struggle for independence followed by an equally vicious civil war, of the emergence of an authoritarian Catholic Church intent on replacing British sovereignty with Roman rule. He does touch on such issues, of course, but his primary concern was with individuals struggling to make sense of their lives in a world that seems intent on breaking them.

Elizabeth Reegan in McGahern's first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), a middle-aged woman married to a widowed Garda sergeant with a young family, discovers early in the narrative that she has breast cancer and knows she will be forced to struggle alone through the treatment and ultimately succumb to its ravages. Lying in her bed one morning shortly before her death, she is touched in a hitherto unknown part of her being by the sounds of the external world: "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 now it was a call to life, life and life at any cost".

This wistful evocation is mirrored in McGahern's masterpiece, *Amongst Women*, published some twenty-seven years later, when the elderly Moran walks through the luxurious meadow at the back of his house like a man who is "seeing" its beauty for the first time: "He had never realized when he was in the midst of confident life what an amazing glory he was part of". There is a universal truth to be found in pithy insights such as these. Many of the revelatory moments in the work are inspired by the landscape of his native county Leitrim, a landscape that McGahern has immortalised in his fiction and prose writing.

For example, the last lines of the posthumously published short story, *Creatures of the Earth*, convey McGahern's exemplary recreation of place. Maggie, now in the twilight years of a life that has known much pain and turmoil, is seated in a friend's car looking out on the countryside as he opens the gate leading down to her residence, and observes: "Wildfowl scattered from the reeds along the shore out towards the centre of the lake as soon as the car door opened. They squawked and shrieked for a while before turning into a dark silent huddle. Close by, a white moon rested on the water. There was no wind. The stars in their places were clear and fixed. Who would want change since change will come without warning? Who this night would not want to live?"

It is impossible not to feel Maggie's emotion as she contemplates the beauty of this scene and realises that at moments like these, life is precious. McGahern's great understanding of human nature, his special feel for place, make him the canonical writer that he is acknowledged to be.

Assessing a writer's literary legacy, more than a decade after his death, allows for the type of distance that is not always possible when she or he is still alive. Denis Sampson was the first to make a case for McGahern's inclusion in the canon with his ground-breaking monograph, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (1993). Since then, there have been several other books and special journal issues devoted to the different aspects of an oeuvre that is generally accepted now as being of exceptional depth and quality. One of the last times I met with McGahern was in his home in Stoneybatter. We touched on many subjects, but one of his comments has always stuck in my mind: "I think that when a writer finishes a book, he has dealt in images and rhythms, and out of the material the book is shaped finally – the last thing a writer does is shape it – and once he does that, it will not live again until it finds a reader. It will have as many lives as it has readers".

There is simplicity and wisdom in these words, an awareness that when a writer puts a book out into the world, it no longer belongs to him, but to the readers. That same day, McGahern had had cancer treatment in hospital and reassured me that he, was "a good statistic". Despite his pallor and obvious fragility, I believed him, because the thought of him dying was too unpalatable to contemplate. He gave me two bottles of wine for my wife as I was leaving and wished me well in my work. That was him in a nutshell: generous with his time, courteous in his demeanour, a man of impeccable "good manners", a virtue he valued highly in others.

He wore his fame easily, at times even appearing somewhat bemused that the author of the notorious second novel, *The Dark*, that was banned in 1965 and cost McGahern his job as a primary school teacher, could have been transformed into the revered and much-loved figure who, in the last two decades of his life, was feted as one of Ireland's foremost prose writers of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

In what many consider to be his literary credo, 'The Image', McGahern noted: "Art is an attempt to create a world in which we can live: if not long or forever, still a world of the imagination over which we can reign, and by reign I mean to reflect purely on our situation through this created world of ours, this Medusa's mirror, allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable". The plain, unfussy explanation of his aesthetic quest should not blind us to the ambitious nature of such an undertaking. Because the lives that McGahern chronicled were nuanced and complicated, heroic and tawdry – lives, in short, that had not found widespread expression in Irish fiction until he brought them to life in his own inimitable fashion. Art, for him, was about confronting all that life throws at us – its troughs and peaks, sometimes "the totally intolerable" – in a language that resembled the sound of a real hammer on a real anvil, a language that rang true. When it achieved this essential quality, that is when McGahern felt that he was creating something approaching a worthwhile "world of the imagination", a sanctuary of truth. That is no mean legacy for any writer.

Eamon Maher is co-editor, with Derek Hand, of *Essays on John McGahern: Assessing a Literary Legacy*, which has recently been published by Cork University Press.