

2019

John McGahern, the Conscience of Ireland

Eamon Maher

TU Dublin - Tallaght Campus, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ittbus>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Maher, E. (2019) John McGahern, the Conscience of Ireland, *Spirituality*, vol. 25 September-October 2019, no. 146, pp.310 -317.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Business and Humanities (Former ITT) at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie.

John McGahern, the Conscience of Ireland

Eamon Maher

Eamon Maher is Director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in IT Tallaght.

His latest book, *Recalling the Celtic Tiger*, co-edited with Brian Lucey and Eugene O'Brien, will be published by Peter Lang in the autumn.

John McGahern has been referred to variously as the chronicler of a disappearing traditional rural Ireland, as a critic of narrow, repressive thinking, particularly in the religious and social spheres, as a writer with a keen appreciation of the landscape, customs and practices of his native Leitrim/Roscommon. Undoubtedly, he was all these things, but he was above all else an artist who saw his role as simply 'get his words right.' In an interview I conducted with the author in 2000, he made the following observation: '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.' What he is emphasising here is that a writer should not set out deliberately to paint a particular image of a society or culture, that such a role applies more to journalists and sociologists than to creative writers. Had he adopted such an approach, McGahern's work would have justifiably been criticised for being moralistic, or motivated by a desire merely to give vent to personal opinions rather than to create art. I think it is fair to say that McGahern is one of the least didactic writers you will find, which does not mean, however, that his work is devoid of criticism of a number of the unsavoury aspects of the hidden Ireland that are memorably captured in both his fiction and prose writing.

When it was published in 2005, a year before McGahern's premature death from cancer, *Memoir* revealed that the writer had borrowed a lot from his personal history in terms of the characters he created and the settings in which he placed them. The beautiful evocations of the landscape of Leitrim/Roscommon give a nostalgic, pastoral feel to *Memoir* and one is conscious that it was written by a man who knew his days were numbered and who wanted to celebrate life in all its wonder. On page 2, for example, he describes the area in Leitrim where he returned to live with his wife Madeline after the controversy surrounding the banning of *The Dark* had died down in the late 1960s:

A maze of lanes link the houses that are scattered sparsely about these fields, and the lanes wander into one another like streams until they meet some main road. These narrow lanes are still in

McGahern is one of the least didactic writers you will find...

use. In places, the hedges that grow on the high banks along the lanes are so wild that the trees join and tangle above them to form a roof, and in the full leaf of summer it is like walking through a green tunnel pierced by vivid pinpoints of light.

McGahern has immortalised the lanes of Leitrim, which were the trigger that sparked moments of involuntary memory which transported him back to the time when as a young boy he walked hand in hand with his beloved mother through these same lanes. He experienced 'an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace' at such moments, a feeling that he could live forever. It is no surprise that McGahern associated such happiness with his mother, who died when he was young, but whose kindness and gentleness he never forgot and which he always associated with the emotional landscape of his youth. His father, on the other hand, is portrayed as authoritarian, self-centred, vain and violent, a lot like the patriarchal Catholic Church at that time in Ireland:

Authority's writ ran from God the Father down and could not be questioned. Violence reigned as often as not in the homes as well. One of the compounds at its base was sexual sickness and frustration, as sex was seen, officially, as unclean and sinful, allowable only when it, too, was licensed. (*Memoir*, 18)

In considering McGahern as a social critic, this article will illustrate the extent to which in two key texts, *The Dark* (1965) and *The Pornographer* (1979), certain aspects of the evolution of Irish society are depicted in a manner that does not fall into the trap of becoming 'mere journalism', to use McGahern's own words. The tension between sex and religion, so well captured in the lines from *Memoir* I have just quoted, will be foregrounded as a key component of McGahern's social criticism.

The Dark brought McGahern to public attention in a way he would not have wished for when it was banned by the Censorship Board in 1965 and led to its author losing his position as a school teacher in Belgrove National School, Clontarf. McGahern became a *cause célèbre* around this time, with Samuel Beckett being enlisted as a potential supporter should McGahern have wanted the banning to be appealed, which in the end he decided not to do. Of particular interest to us for this article is the way McGahern in his second novel delicately unveils certain unsavoury aspects of the Ireland of the 1940s and 50s in which

He experienced 'an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace' at such moments, a feeling that he could live forever.

The tension between sex and religion,... will be foregrounded as a key component of McGahern's social criticism.

he grew up. An adolescent's problems with masturbation lead him to believe that he will never be able to fulfil the promise he made his dying mother that he would one day become a priest and say Mass for the repose of her soul. The opening scene describes a simulated beating which involves young Mahoney being punished for having uttered an obscenity. He is ordered to strip by his father and to bend over while Mahoney Senior brings the strap down on the leather of the chair in a type of simulated beating. The sexual overtones are clear. The father is excited by the power he exercises over the son: 'He didn't lift a hand, as if the stripping compelled by his will alone gave him pleasure.' He shouts instructions in an imperious manner: 'Move and I'll cut that arse off you. I'm only giving you a taste of what you're going to get.' When it's all over and the boy has urinated in terror all over the floor, the leather strap resembles a limp penis: 'his face still red and heated, the leather hanging dead in his hand' (*The Dark*, 10).

Such explicit writing would not have been commonplace in 1960s Ireland and it was a very brave move on McGahern's part to delve into the whole area of depraved sexuality in the way that he did. It is interesting that in his correspondence with Michael McLaverty, a writer for whom he had tremendous respect, McGahern described the pain that he incurred as a result of the banning of *The Dark*. He knew McLaverty to be a devout Catholic and so must have been greatly relieved when he received the following validation of the novel: 'The book rings with truth at every turn and it must have been a heart-breaking and exhausting book to write.' Nevertheless, McLaverty went on to note how he 'recoiled' from a few pages that were devoted to what he describes as 'a priest's thoughts' and says he 'wished they hadn't been there.'

Looking back on the 1960s from the very different perspective of third millennium Ireland, which has become a largely neo-liberal, secular society, the daring demonstrated by McGahern in confronting issues like domestic abuse, both physical and sexual, masturbation and, most daring of all, implied clerical sex abuse, is quite breath-taking. After all, this was the Ireland of de Valera and John Charles McQuaid, a country where Church and State worked hand in glove to beat down any perceived challenge to

... it was a very brave move on McGahern's part to delve into the whole area of depraved sexuality in the way that he did.

Ireland's status as a moral, Catholic country. A few years previously, Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* suffered the same ignominy as *The Dark*, finding itself banned for the danger it posed to public morality. Change might have been afoot in Ireland, but any concessions to a liberalisation of the censorship laws would come slowly, and at a price for the writers who found themselves outside the fold. It is my view that the portrayal of Mahoney's cousin, Fr Gerald, is the most discomfiting aspect of the novel for readers. During a visit to Fr Gerald's house in the summer preceding his Leaving Certificate, the priest arrives unannounced in the boy's room in the middle of the night on the pretext of discussing his vocation. He then gets into bed alongside his cousin and proceeds to question him about his problems with masturbation. The situation reminds Mahoney of similar situations at home: 'Was this to be another of the dreaded nights with your father?' (*Dark* 70), he wonders. Although nothing untoward happens on this occasion, it is hard not to feel that the priest is grooming the child and that there is at the very least a chance of subsequent abuse. The discomfort of Mahoney is not without cause, as he has already been the victim of similar behaviour at the hands of his father. In the aftermath of McGahern's death in 2006, Fintan O'Toole wrote the following comments about the issues raised by *The Dark*:

By accurately describing the human interiors of Ireland, McGahern helped to alter Ireland's sense of reality. The starkest example of this is the issue of child sex abuse. When it hit the headlines in the 1990s, it was spoken of as a stunning and awful revelation, a secret that hardly anyone knew. Yet it is there in black and white in *The Dark*, thirty years before.

The massaging of his son's tummy by Mahoney Senior, slowly moving down to the genitalia, on the pretext that it was good for wind, the shame felt by the boy after those nights when his father 'wanted love', all this is summed up in the highly descriptive phrase, 'the dirty rags of intimacy.' How many other children had to endure similar treatment in families all across Ireland in those years when a blanket of silence was quickly thrown over such behaviour? By bringing it to the surface in the way that he did, McGahern incurred the wrath of the powerful Catholic Church and the huge number of adherents it ruled over at that time.

... Fr Gerald, is the most discomfiting aspect of the novel for readers.

The only success that young Mahoney enjoys is when he gets his sister Joan away from the lascivious attentions of Mr Ryan, a wealthy parishioner of Fr Gerald's. The latter, on hearing why the girl is returning home with Mahoney, is primarily concerned with whether the Ryans have been confronted about what has happened. On discovering that they haven't, his response is: 'For that relief much thanks. (*Dark*, 99)' Avoidance of scandal, maintaining appearances, this is what counts to the priest, not the lewd behaviour that Joan had been subjected to by her boss. Taking into consideration all these factors, it really should not have come as a surprise that *The Dark* was censored. Writing in the *John McGahern Yearbook*, fellow writer Eugene McCabe notes the prophetic nature of McGahern's writing, the way in which he revealed the beatings, psychological abuse and buggery that happened in homes and various institutions the length and breadth of Ireland for many decades. He concludes:

... Eugene McCabe notes the prophetic nature of McGahern's writing...

In fact, I think McGahern held back in the bed scenes with young Mahoney and his father, and his cousin the priest. These were scenes of sexual abuse he couldn't bring himself to write in graphic detail, though God knows a blind man could read between the lines.

Fifteen years separate the publication of *The Dark* from the appearance of McGahern's fourth novel, *The Pornographer*, in 1979, but it is my contention that the two have more in common that might appear at first glance. The existential hero or anti-hero of the later novel ekes a living from writing pornography, a profession that seems to pay reasonably well. Describing himself as 'dead of heart' after the failure of a long-standing relationship, the pornographer, who is never given a name, moves around the Dublin bars and dance halls in search of sex without commitment. On one of his sorties, he happens upon a thirty-eight year old bank official, Josephine, whom he describes as 'a wonderfully healthy animal.' They have sex at the end of this first encounter and then embark on a relationship, which is one of convenience for him and of primal importance to her, especially when she ends up pregnant. His suggestion that she have an abortion in England, which he is prepared to pay for, elicits a horrified reaction in Josephine, who finds it difficult to understand his indifference to her plight and his unwillingness to marry her in

...the two have more in common that might appear at first glance.

order to regularise the situation. The distance that Ireland has travelled in the period between the publication of the two novels can be seen in how McGahern treats openly of sex outside of marriage, the use (or non-use in the case of Josephine) of contraceptives, the possible recourse to abortion and the inclusion of passages of pornography in his narrative, without the novel being banned. In a way, the very title of his novel indicates a possible provocation by McGahern of the Censorship Board for the banning of his second novel, as though he were saying: 'You thought *The Dark* was pornographic. Well here is what real pornography reads like!' In an interview with me, McGahern admitted that *The Pornographer* shows how an obsession with sexuality, such as characterises the main character of the novel, ends up being enervating. He continued: 'So the pornography was a kind of backdrop to see if the sexuality, in its vulnerability and humanness could be written about. My own feeling is that it probably can't.' And yet there are moments, especially those interludes shared by the pornographer and Nurse Brady, with whom he falls in love, when he experiences something mystical:

This body (the nurse's) was the shelter of the self. Like all walls and shelters it would age and break and let the enemy in. But holding it now was like holding glory, and having held it once was to hold it – no matter how broken and conquered – in glory still, and with the more terrible tenderness. (*Pornographer* 177)

At no time when he is with Josephine does he experience anything nearly as spiritual as this. With Josephine, the mechanics of sex, though pleasurable, serve to drive the couple farther apart rather than bringing them closer. The underlying message is that sex without love is meaningless and yet it takes time and numerous different partners for the dissolute pornographer to come to that realisation. The narrative is strewn with philosophical observations that cause one to wonder whether McGahern set out deliberately to write an existential account of one young man's path to self-knowledge. The following passage is a good example of this:

The womb and the grave... The christening party becomes the funeral, the shudder that makes us flesh becomes the shudder that makes us meat. They say that it is the religious instinct that

The underlying message is that sex without love is meaningless...

makes us seek the relationships and laws in things. And in between there is time and work, as passing time, and killing time, and lessening time that'd lessen anyhow ... (*Pornographer* 30)

There is ample material in these lines to form the basis of a PhD thesis. Certainly, McGahern's presentation of Irish society in *The Pornographer* has evolved to the point where he is more adventurous with regard to the situations he is prepared to engage with and the commentary he shares with his readers. In terms of his depiction of Dublin in the 1970s, a definite loosening of sexual mores is evident, as young people indulge unashamedly and even wantonly in sexual activity, while at the same time satisfying their increased appetite for gastronomic experiences where continental wines and cheeses are indicative of more sophisticated palates. The pornographer's boss Maloney is a disillusioned poet whose mantra is 'Ireland wanking is Ireland free' and he regularly bemoans the pious religiosity he sees all around him. On the way back from the funeral of the pornographer's aunt in the west of Ireland, Maloney gives full vent to his frustration:

'Look at today – isn't the whole country going around in its coffin! But show them a man and a woman making love – and worse of all enjoying it – and the streets are full of "Fathers of eleven", "Disgusted" and the rest of them. Haven't I been fighting it for the past several years and giving hacks like you employment into the bargain.' (*Pornographer* 249)

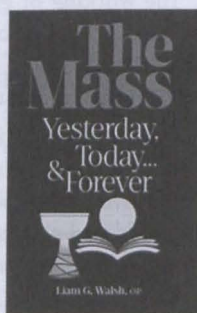
Whereas Maloney is clearly employing a fair dose of hyperbole to make his case, he was certainly right in his observation that Ireland was far from being anything approaching a liberal democracy at that time. While there are signs in *The Pornographer* of a change in the moral climate of Ireland, the year following its publication was the beginning of a new decade, the 1980s, when referendums on divorce and abortion were defeated, mainly as a result of the opposition of the Catholic Church. There was the tragic death of Ann Lovett, a young teenager who died after giving birth to a full-term baby in the grounds of a church in Granard, Co. Longford. Her family and friends maintained they had no knowledge that she was pregnant. There was also the Kerry Babies scandal and the atrocious treatment meted out to Joanne Hayes, a 25-year old woman who was having an affair with a local married man by whom she became pregnant and who was

falsely accused of murdering her baby. Then there was the recent revelation of how a female member of the Garda Síochána, Majella Moynihan, was coerced into giving the baby she conceived outside of marriage up for adoption. The times may have been 'a changing', but the dominant mind-set of the 1980s was still conservative and misogynistic. Who could have foreseen at the time the radical changes that would come in subsequent decades which saw the decriminalization of homosexuality, the passing of divorce legislation, the introduction of same-sex marriage and the repeal of the 8th amendment? And whereas McGahern's quest as a writer was not necessarily to act as a social critic, his skill at depicting the dilemmas of his characters living in a repressive social and religious environment enabled him to paint the canvas of an Ireland that was slowly and painfully shaking off the shackles of a difficult past and looking to a more optimistic future. That may well constitute his unique literary legacy.

Who could have foreseen at the time the radical changes that would come in subsequent decades...

The Mass: Yesterday, Today ... & Forever

Liam G. Walsh, OP



How does one discuss liturgical matters in the Church of today? What is needed, Liam G. Walsh believes, is to see liturgy, first and foremost, as the work of God, a work humans receive and respond to in acts of grace and creative gift. It is to draw on the accounts of how the liturgy was divinely given in Scripture and Apostolic Tradition.

Liam G. Walsh, OP, has taught theology all his life – in Ireland, Rome, and Fribourg. He has written on the theology of Aquinas; and among his frequent writings on liturgical matters there is a major study called, in its second edition, *The Sacraments of Initiation: A Theology of Rite, Word and Life*. He has been active in promoting liturgical education, notably as a member of ARCIC and as a consultant of the Holy See's Council for Christian Unity.

112 pages Paperback €13.00

Dominican Publications
42, Parnell Square
Dublin 1 DOI P5R7

www.dominicanpublications.com

ISBN 978-1-905604-
40-1