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Epistolary McGahern

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The letters of John McGahern, edited by Frank Shovlin, London, Faber & Faber, 2021, 851 pp., £26.99 (hardback), ISBN 9780571326662

The publication of McGahern's letters was awaited with great anticipation and, although Professor Frank Shovlin has done invaluable work by bringing the correspondence together from various sources (aided greatly in this task by McGahern's widow, Madeline), there is a sense in which the 850 odd pages leave one feeling somewhat disappointed. This is due in no small part to the fact that McGahern was never really part of the literary circles of Dublin or London and so did not get up to the same amount of skulduggery as Joyce or Kavanagh, for example. Neither was he a public figure in the way that Yeats and Heaney were, preferring to concentrate on his private world of friends and literary acquaintances. On the 5 July 1961 he wrote to his editor at Faber, Charles Monteith, a person whose opinion he came to value greatly, indicating his disenchantment with the artistic scene in Dublin: "The literary Ireland is much a single house, without a figure of any real authority, and I've no real connection with it." (50)

His life was upturned when he lost his job as a primary teacher in 1965 after the banning of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965. The previous year, the AE Memorial Award had allowed him to take a sabbatical from teaching, most of which was spent in London, where he met his first wife, Annikki Laaksi, whom he married in a registry office, a fact that did him no favours when it came to holding on to his teaching post after the controversy caused by the banning. He wrote to Brian Friel (with whom he seems to have had a fractious relationship) on 26 August 1970: "I have been living outside Ireland since 1964, and in Paris for the last year" (283). Similarly, on 14 October 1975 he wrote to Jonathan Coleman: "It's eleven years of having no place now" (403), a comment that doesn't square with the purchase of the Foxfield residence in Leitrim a few years previously. One of the great advantages of the collection for me is how it maps McGahern's peripatetic existence from when he left Ireland in 1965 and returned in 1970. He spent protracted periods of time in Paris, where Madeline had an apartment, and travelled regularly to the United States for stints as visiting Professor in Colgate University. He also returned to Ireland most years and, on Richard Murphy's recommendation, spent a good deal of time in Cleggan, before he and Madeline bought their house and farm near the lake in Foxfield in 1971 – they did not move in until 1973.

His personal life was marked by the death of his mother Susan when he, the eldest child, was just 10, an event which led to the children moving from Aughawillan to the barracks in Cootehall (County Roscommon), where they lived with their father Frank, a veteran of the War of Independence and a Garda sergeant in that small village. McGahern had, at best, a problematic relationship with his father, whom he found authoritarian, violent and self-obsessed. Frank was a great letter writer apparently and yet he is completely absent from this collection, apart from the opening letter in the book, written in 1943, when John was still a young boy. There must have been several epistolary exchanges between father and eldest child, but these were not made available to the editor, which does not surprise me unduly, given the toxicity that characterised that relationship.

I had the pleasure of exchanging letters with McGahern myself, but I did not feel entitled to release them without the writer's authorisation. They are not very different in content and tone from many of the ones I read in the collection. They answer my queries in a polite and open manner, wish me luck with various projects and express the hope that my wife and children are keeping well. I interviewed him on three separate occasions and the most revealing of these was in 2000 when he came to Tallaght and I was on crutches after serious back surgery. Afterwards, he remarked with a wry smile that the interview had been enjoyable, **too** enjoyable. My feeling is that he believed he had been more open with me than he should have been, and that was probably because of my physical frailty at the time. In response to an article I wrote to accompany the tape script of our interview which was published in the Jesuit quarterly *Studies*¹ in which I took issue with what I found a disparaging and ill-conceived reading of his writing by a critic, McGahern wrote that I seemed to think he needed defending, which he didn't. He continued: "I always think one puts oneself in a weak position by defending work unless it is against a very powerful opinion and even then it is questionable." He was right, of course, and his comment underlined his inherent belief in the primacy of what he referred to as "the solitary reader," the person who on opening a book can see things that the author and professional critics might not notice, but which are no less valid for that fact.

The most revealing letters are those that discuss the literary process, something that McGahern took very seriously indeed. In this regard, his correspondence with Michael McLaverty is key, but that two-way correspondence, edited by John Killen, was already published by The Linen Hall Library in 2006. McGahern clearly admired McLaverty and trusted him with some of the most private reflections on his art. For example, on 19 June 1961 he confided in his mentor: "I often think the realest reason I write is, having lost my formal faith, I am self compelled to pray or praise. If I did not need to do it I would stop tomorrow, but there seems little else" (48). The concept of writing as a form of prayer is a strong leitmotif in McGahern's reflections on literature. He was always very considered in his comments about what he sought to achieve through his writing. In a letter to Patrick Swift on 5 September 1960 he commented on the unpublished novel, *The End or the Beginning of Love*, excerpts of which had been published in *X* magazine thanks to Swift's intervention: "THE WHOLE BOOK (capitals in original) owes everything to my experience, the way I suffered and was made to laugh, the people I have lived among, the landscape and the books I liked – in that way it is as auto as I was capable of making it. But it is seldom possible to be ourselves in real life because of the need FOR MONEY, for friends, for a beloved, or even, I suspect, because of the need to have enemies" (32). One wonders

if the overly autobiographical dimension of the novel made McGahern hesitant about publishing this work. But if that was the case, it still did not prevent him from reproducing many passages from it in his subsequent fiction, especially *The Dark* and some of the short stories.

As one might expect, there are quite a few letters between 1964 and 1965, before and after the publication of *The Dark*. In January 1964, he anticipated some of the problems that would arise in a letter to Faber: "The only thing that its eroticism is sure to cause trouble here (in Ireland) but I'm hoping to be gone" (101) – his year of absence was coming up. On 9 May of the same year, he wrote to Charles Monteith: "Needless to say it would be much nicer not to be banned, though there's absolutely no pornography in the book" (117). On 11 April 1965 he admitted to his friend Joe Kennedy that although he thought there was a good chance the novel would not be banned, Faber were more pessimistic (149). McGahern often expressed his belief that *The Dark* would not have been banned had it been better written, something which does not withstand scrutiny. After all, it is not as if the Censorship Board was composed of literary gurus. They saw their role simply as protecting the Irish public from material that had the potential to corrupt. With its numerous detailed descriptions of the masturbatory habits and fantasies of its adolescent male hero, his abuse at the hands (literally) of his father, and the suggestion that his cousin Fr Gerald, whom he consults in relation to a possible vocation, might be trying to groom him, it was very farfetched indeed to think that *The Dark* could have escaped sanction in 1960s Ireland. One of the last references to the banning can be found in the letter to Michael McLaverty on 22 November 1965 in which McGahern admits that he is almost certain to lose his job: "As you know the Union (INTO, primary school teachers' union) is a paper tiger, the Church has all the power, and they'd have given me a little money to go quietly, but I refused, so the case is in their hands now, I've promised not to give the case to the press till the Union goes over the ground" (177). In the end the INTO was bought off by promises (by Archbishop Charles McQuaid) of a pay rise and inevitably, the manager of the school where McGahern was teaching, a Father Carton, informed him that he had no option other than to put an end to his employment. Thus began a period in exile, which was painful initially and prevented him from being able to write, but which ultimately gave him the time and space that enabled McGahern to become in the view of many the most significant Irish novelist of the second half of the twentieth century.

Several readers will find the exchanges with literary magazines like *The New Yorker* and *Granta* in relation to various drafts of his short stories of more than a passing interest. His attention to detail is unrelenting and he was constantly seeking the exact word to express what he wanted to say. His irritation at being compared to Joyce is consistently voiced also, as is his disdain for proposed book covers (primarily for the US editions of his work) which convey Ireland as being a twee, idyllic rural society dominated by the Catholic Church. There is plenty of talk too about the fees he was due and, although he always appeared largely indifferent when it came to money, he did know how to drive a good bargain – his years of farming had most likely imbued that quality in him.

His relationship and eventual marriage to Madeline Green (on 3 February 1973 in a civil service at the Mairie on the Place Saint-Sulpice) provided stability and happiness, something that was desperately needed because of the emotional damage inflicted on them both by apparently dysfunctional and oppressive fathers. Madeline is portrayed as someone who knew him well and complemented his personality. So, McGahern felt no need to

explain to her his lack of any real sorrow when the news reached him that his father had passed away on 12 May 1977 and was buried in Ardcarne cemetery, near his home in Grevisk. Indeed, the episode barely rates a mention in the published letters. The most comprehensive description is found in his correspondence with Niall Walsh on the 10 July of the same year:

It was the heart my father died from, but he sank slowly, fighting each inch. Madeline was home in early May to open the house and saw him. The sisters seem calm enough. The prospect had been dramatized so that I suspect the real thing was a let down. (444)

In a similar manner to the eldest son Luke in *Amongst Women*, McGahern would not have been bereft at the passing of his father, whereas his sisters most likely were.

Given the amount of vitriol that the 70-year-old poured on Frank McGahern in *Memoir*, it is significant to see the letters making reference to his own son Joseph, the product of a brief love affair that McGahern had with Joan Kelly in 1962. James Swift acted as go-between to arrange a meeting between father and son. Thus, a letter to Swift (18 November 1979) describes the outcome of that intervention:

I spent most of the day with Joan and Joseph Kelly in Portsmouth. They were very hospitable and kind and I think the day may have went (sic) as well as it could have. I found Joan as beautiful and as impossible as before. The boy was very nervous, which wasn't surprising, but I suspect he may well be that way by temperament as well. (491)

There are no other references to meetings contained in the letters, which leads one to suspect that McGahern never became close to his son. He did include Joseph in his will, but the amount bequeathed to his only offspring did not seem overly generous.

When it came to his mother's family, the McManuses, the descriptions are universally warm. He is especially affectionate when writing about his uncle Pat, who was called the "Shah" because of his control of the petrol pumps in Ballinamore – Routledge's uncle of the same name in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is plainly modelled on this intriguing character. Pat's funeral is described in a letter to Neill Joy on 10 February 1988: "A light snow was swirling about the churchyard. The priest quoted 'The Hound of Heaven' (a poem by English poet Francis Thompson). . . . Few had any notion what the priest was talking about. I heard them say they thought he'd never stop" (604). The understanding McGahern had of the local community is very evident. He refers affectionately on several occasions to his neighbour across the lake, Francie McGarty. He wrote to his friend and favourite French translator, Alain Delahaye, on 14 April 1982: "The hunger for news is a symptom of a long oppressed people. It rages here. Francie hates to see you twice the same day – 'No good. Nothing new. No news. No news'" (541). The similarities with the loveable character Jamesie who was always on the lookout for gossip in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* are clear.

Apart from McLaverty, McGahern was also very friendly with Heaney, who was a regular visitor to Foxfield and whose letter (22 January 1990) that is quoted by Shovlin in an explanatory footnote (621), reveals a heartfelt admiration for *Amongst Women*: "It is a work of heart-breaking purity and surety. . . . It wakened me and read me inside out." These words show the extent to which Heaney was moved by McGahern's chef d'oeuvre. To Colm Tóibín (18 February 1990), McGahern admitted that "it was a pure pig to write. There were times when I thought it had me beaten and that I was finished as

a writer" (620). The pain the composition of *Amongst Women* caused was rewarded by the beautifully sculpted and pared-down prose which contains insights into the human condition that are as remarkable as they are moving. In spite of his friendship with Heaney, one detects a slightly disparaging tone in McGahern's comment to Joe Kennedy (17 January 1996): "I'm glad Seamus got the Nobel. Nobody will enjoy it more" (692). Writing to Paul Durcan (26 March 2006), just a few days before his death, he observed: "You must know that I have found no sustenance in Heaney's verse for many years, and even the charm of the early work has worn badly" (804). It is hard to fathom the origin of this disillusionment with Heaney's work, but what it shows is that McGahern was more than capable of being snippy and judgemental at times – in this regard, he may have resembled his father a lot more than he would have liked people to believe.

Readers will find many gems among the letters. One example would be the comment made to Joe Kennedy (7 February 1999): "[t]he literary stuff doesn't matter. Literary reputations last as long as the body of work they represent remains useful, whether to one reader or to many, and will disappear into the long night like ourselves, eventually. What matters is the spirit to which they give utterance" (719). There is a lot to digest in these lines, but the sentiments are completely in sync with McGahern's view that literature was not just about notoriety, prizes and book sales, but more importantly about what he described often as "getting the words right," a task that is not as simple as it might seem. At a certain point, when he was earning enough from his books to be financially secure, he commented to his North American editor (6 November 1989): "We have arrived at that troubling stage when we have more money than life" (615). The "troubling" aspect is not connected to having money, but to the realisation that material possessions do not matter when it comes to facing into the vastness and uncertainty of eternity.

Frank Shovlin's painstaking research during the seven years he spent working on this project have resulted in a collection that puts many of the most important people, places and events from McGahern's life in context. It will inevitably be a help to Shovlin as he sets about his next task, the authorised biography, which will be eagerly awaited.

Note

1. The interview was entitled "Catholicism and National Identity in the Works of John McGahern" and it took place in IT Tallaght on the 8 December 2000. The article was "Disintegration and Despair in the Early Fiction of John McGahern". They both appeared in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol 90, No 357, pp. 72–91.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).