

# SEAN AND I A TALE OF TWO BARRACKS

*Lionel Gallagher*

*'Sean and I were friends Sir,  
To me he was all in all'.*

Captain Boyle in O'Casey's play *Juno and the Paycock* starts his party piece with these lines. They can easily be adapted to describe my relationship with John McGahern for well over a half century.

At school in Presentation College, Carrick-on-Shannon, John McGahern – or Sean as we called him – was almost my contemporary. While we were very different in many ways, some aspects of our lives were similar or maybe just coincidental. We were both born in 1934, me first in August with Sean following in November. My father was the Garda Sergeant in Carrick, Sean's in Cootehall. I won a half-scholarship to secondary school in 1947, Sean did likewise a year later.

The school was small in those days, so much so that the final two years to Leaving Certificate shared the same classroom and as much as possible followed the same curriculum. Sean, in many of his works, writes of the English teacher Frank Mannion. In an article called "Schooldays : a Time of Grace" which he wrote for the Presentation Brothers he describes Mannion as "tall and sandy-haired, came from Galway, had been an army officer, played golf with a half-swing and drank. On certain days his teaching could be erratic and was often broken by



■ *Pictured at the opening night of Sligo Drama Circle's Season: Lionel Gallagher & John McGahern*

attempts to kick more heat from the pot-bellied stove in the corner".

Mr Mannion was an excellent teacher who gave us a love of literature. He was also lazy especially where the marking of essays was concerned. He set us one essay for every week-end but he was very selective in the way they were marked. One, or at most two, would be picked from the pile, thoroughly gone through and read out to the class on the following Wednesday. These were the cream of the crop. The rest were skimmed over and hurled at the heads of their authors with force and contempt. In my first year in that room my essays nearly always made the grade and I

fondly imagined a literary career on the horizon. In my final year only one student's work got the V I P treatment as Sean had joined our class. We all realised that what he wrote was well above anything the rest of us produced and we soon ceased to compete. As the titles and order of the essays exactly followed that of the previous year I took to copying out my old work. My only consolation was that Mr.Mannion often remembered some quotes from the year before and referred to them as he flung the copybook in my direction.

In May 1999, I had the pleasure of introducing John McGahern to the students of Sligo Grammar School from which I had recently retired. He was opening an exhibition of Transition Year work and I had entertained both his wife Madeline and himself before the function. I think he was even more entertained when I told the tale of the two essayists to the students and lightheartedly blamed him for me never fulfilling my early promise!

Another thing we had in common was the outcome of our Leaving Certificate Exams. A booklet produced by Carrick on Shannon Historical Society about the Presentation Brothers in Carrick

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■ *Róisín, Cormac, & Aengus Galligan (children of Darina & Patrick Galligan). Patrick is Monica McGahern's son and Darina is Lionel & Joan Gallagher's daughter.*

(1893-1975) bemoans the fact that the early Leaving Cert. classes were not great. It continues to record that: “the School, however, got its act together very quickly and Lionel Gallagher was awarded a scholarship to university in 1952. From there on, scholarships were won on a regular and consistent basis. John McGahern, later a prize-winning author, was offered a scholarship to university on his performance in the Leaving Cert of 1953, but opted instead for a teacher training course at St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra”

Our lives parted at this stage but when we both took up teaching posts in Dublin, our paths crossed again. Sean was a primary teacher in Clontarf with a flat in Fairview while I taught in a secondary school in Sandymount with “digs” in that vicinity. We met by chance one day outside the GPO, when he told me he was

writing scripts for Sponsored Programmes on lunch-hour radio. During my school days I had spent lunch time at home listening to similar programmes. Even after my father’s essential 1.30 News bulletin had ended, I could listen to one more pop song before walking back to school from the old barracks by the bridge and still be in time for afternoon class. Meanwhile Sean would have spent his mid-day break eating a cold lunch or fixing his bicycle with his friends in Gill’s shop across the road from the College.

We met on and off over the next few years. I remember an evening in his flat when we discussed James Joyce, particularly the short stories in “Dubliners”. I had read them quickly one after the other without digesting them too much whereas he talked with insight and enthusiasm about his favourite: “The Dead”.

Another time he read from a work in progress – a short story in which an important background noise was that of buses changing gear as they climbed the hill outside his flat. Sounds have an important place in many of his works like the Sligo train crossing the “plains” and the local sawmills round Rockingham. It was most interesting to hear the actual gear changes as the buses passed under his window and to admire how well they were recorded on the page. I read him a poem I was trying to write describing my landlady and her dog and caged budgie and was delighted when he praised one line. However my poem never saw the light of day and I have never come across his story in any of his works.

Once in Grafton St. he hailed me and offered to introduce me to Patrick Kavanagh whom he had

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just left in McDaid's Bar. When we got back to the pub Kavanagh had gone and the barman advised us not to look for him. Instead John, as he was now called, suggested we buy a bottle of white wine between us to smuggle into the Crystal Ballroom in nearby Sth. Anne St. The barman uncorked the bottle and we entered the dance hall with the bottle under John's coat. We went up to the balcony and picked up two glasses from the mineral bar. But a security man spotted us before we could pour the wine and the drink was confiscated as we were ushered to the exit!

We lost contact for a long time as I got a teaching job in Sligo Grammar School while Sean went on to fame, fortune and success on a world scale. When he returned to Leitrim we picked up the pieces again. We did not meet as often as I would have liked but whenever we did it was as if we had never been apart. I was involved with Sligo Drama Circle and in 1976 I got him to open our "Summer Season" of theatre which that year ran on to October! We played in the old Town Hall and before the Opening he was being pestered by a predatory Yeats Summer School student who demanded an interview as she was writing a thesis on his work. I rescued him by getting the Mayor of Sligo to open his "Parlour" where we both hid until she gave up and left.

Once he complained to me that the Sligo Literary Society had discussed "The Barracks" and been unfair about the work or so he had been told. I took pains to explain that I was the person who

*"...Sounds have an important place in many of his works like the Sligo train crossing the 'plains' and the local sawmills round Rockingham..."*

read a paper praising the book and that the widow of one of the Cootehall guards had attended and spoken affectionately of him. I don't think he was fully convinced.

It was a great pleasure to visit his hospitable home in Foxfield and an even greater pleasure to meet Madeline. Later I got to know and value her even more when she was appointed to the Board of the Hawk's Well Theatre in Sligo of which I was a founding member. With a good friend of mine, Joe Meehan, who was also on the Board, Madeline and myself would discuss the meetings over a drink in Hargadon's bar until John would collect her or she would drive herself back to Fenagh. It was a surprise to discover that Madeline had some Danish background as my own wife Joan was born in Denmark of a Danish mother and an Irish father. I expect that it must be unusual for two students of Pres. Carrick to have married women with Scandinavian connections.

Paddy Morahan, also from the Cootehall area, was in the same class as Sean. They were best friends at school and cycled the seven miles together most days. Their friendship continued over the years and is referred to in his books—"walking with him and remembering the part of our lives that had been passed together, it was like walking in a continuance

of days". Paddy was also a good friend of mine and, as he came to work and live in Sligo, we often met and usually our conversation turned to "Have you seen McGahern lately?" Paddy appears in disguise in some of the short stories, most notable as Jimmy McDermott in "Doorways". He was quite impressed that I recognised him in his role as secretary of the Sligo Pint Drinkers Association in that story. Knowing the two of them it was not a very difficult piece of literary detection on my part!

When Paddy died tragically some years ago, I was the one to ring Sean with the bad news. He came to the funeral and we waked "Jimmy McDermott" with pints in one of Paddy's favourite hosteleries. In a school photograph in my possession, Paddy Morahan is on the extreme left of the front row. Sean is in the middle row eight from the left. I am also in the middle row fourth from the left. Three teachers often mentioned in his writings are centre front – Frank Mannion, Bro. Damien and Bro. Francis in that order. The picture was taken in School Year 1950-51 so Bro. Placid had not yet arrived on the scene.

When my daughter Darina told me her new boyfriend was Patrick Gilligan from Drogheda it rang no bell. When I met him I found that his mother was Monica McGahern a sister of his "Uncle Sean". They got married in Sligo and held their



## PRESENTATION COLLEGE, CARRICK ON SHANNON 1950-1951

*Back Row: Tom Mc Govern, Jack Keville, Bill McNulty, Jackie Beirne, Charlie O'Malley, Séan McGreevy, Enda Ownes, Joe McGovern, Michael Moran, Jim Gowning, Donal Sheehan & Kevin O'Malley*

*Middle Row: Séan McDermott, Enda Mulvey, Conor Keaney, Lionel Gallagher, Séan Duignan, Val Cox, Mattie Gorman, Séan (John) McGahern, Frank Lawlor, Séan Mitchell, Paddy Smith, William Craig & Klaus Kramer*

*Front Row: Paddy Morahan (standing), Tom Gallogley (standing), Noel O'Driscoll, Pauric Doyle, Oliver Kerigan, Frank Mannion, Bro. Damien, Bro Francis, Séan McNamara, Paddy Keaney, Desmond Sheehan & Tommy Bohan*

wedding reception in Strandhill – a place so well depicted in John's works. Now I have grandchildren whose great-grandfathers were both Garda Sergeants seven miles apart ; Frank McGahern in Cootehall and Jim Gallagher in Carrick-on-Shannon.

John and Madeline came to the wedding and both Joan and myself have been welcomed into the

McGahern –Gilligan clan. After John's funeral in Aughawillan, I intended to write of how my life connected with John, but something held me back until now. Perhaps it was the fear of Frank Mannion once more flinging the script at my head!

At school in Carrick I had thought of Sean as being from Co. Roscommon. At our annual Gaelic

football match between the two sides of the Shannon he would line out for Roscommon while I would play for Leitrim. Little did I know then that his heart was more in Leitrim than mine was. When we meet again in the land beyond County boundaries, I'm sure we will tog out for the same side.