THE DEATH OF JOHN McGAHERN

Ronan Gallagher

John McGahern is dead. The RTE man announced it with a slight hesitation, as if he didn't believe his own news. It stopped me in my tracks as I am sure it did many in this county and beyond in a much wider world. I have to confess that my introduction to McGahern's writings at the tender age of fifteen, had more to do with teenage hormones than literary knowledge.

It all started when a very large padded envelope addressed to my father, 'Pat (the Vet) Gallagher' Mohill, arrived, carried with great reverence into our house by our postman as it was too large to fit in the letterbox. Printed on the envelope was the very prominent and glamorous masthead of 'The New Yorker Magazine' which clearly impressed the Postman. 'Be God Pat, that's a very important looking package' he quipped as he passed the envelope to my father with the care and precision of a man handling a priceless Faberge egg. 'And a heavy one too' retorted my father as he placed the package on a shelf and thanking the postman, continued his work, crushing all my hopes and the Postman's, that its contents might be revealed.

Disappointed, I soon forgot about the package until, a few days later I came across it, opened, and unattended on my father's office desk. Having thought about it for all of a nano-second, I opened the envelope to discover inside, a hardback book by a man called John McGahern with the delicious title 'The Pornographer'. A hand written note attached on headed New Yorker note paper read something like 'I thought a brown envelope might attract too much attention.Ha Ha! Hope you enjoy. Say hello to all back home. John.'

Having a good idea that this might not be on my fathers approved list of literary classics for fifteen year olds, and drooling at the promise of the title, I immediately dived into page one. Well, I was bitterly disappointed to find that as Trainspotting has no trains neither did 'The Pornographer' have much pornography. However I was absolutely thrilled to discover that it did have the wonderful writing that this man's pen could yield up. Here was a book about people and places that I recognised and could relate to. John McGahern drew a huge amount of his inspiration from his native Leitrim where he lived among the people. He was one of them, and could be seen out and about, often more concerned about having enough fodder for the cattle than winning the next literary award or reading the latest accolade.

I cannot claim to have known Mr McGahern save to meet him the odd time at my father's house or in Luke Early's bar cum Undertakers in Mohill where McGahern the 'Antennae' would sit in a corner listening to stories and banter from my father and his friends Tom Reynolds and Tom Murphy among others. McGahern would soak up the atmosphere, but always with the ability to be a part of it. He was of the people. He saw our history and our past through eyes that did not lie and refused to embellish, a history that many of a certain generation could relate to, but never speak of. Though his work contained beautiful romance, he never romanticised, and he recognised that as there is great beauty in every-day life there is also cruelty and harshness. His were the eyes of truth, a truth we refused to face for many years, that repression and dogma are no substitutes for freedom of expression and creative thinking.

Nearly twenty five years after the padded envelope arrived to our house, its author John McGahern, was the first person to walk forward and shake my hand as I stepped out of Luke Earlys hearse to bury my father. I'll never forget his words to me then, 'There will never be another Pat Gallagher. May God bless him' and they are the words which come to me now on hearing the sad news of his departure from us.

'There will never be another John McGahern. May God bless him.'

> *"His were the eyes of truth, a truth we refused to face for many years"*

JOHN McGAHERN

Maura Connolly

The pen was heavy in my hand,
As I tried to make a rhyme,
To mark the passing of a man,
Born seventy two years back in time.

A legend famed by stories,
Written with great grace,
Stories of his life and times,
In Leitrim his own place.

On 30th of March in the year 2006,
We did not know,
Your end was nigh,
Even though you were quite sick,

But just at noon, God whispered,
John come along with me,
Your mother is waiting for you,
So happy you will be.

You must leave the lanes of Leitrim,
Physically that's all,
You have famed those lanes forever,
In your stories short and long.

You spoke the truth with honesty,
With an impish humour too,
Leitrim people everywhere,
Are very proud of you.

Thank you John for putting,
Lovely Leitrim on the map,
You spoke of Augharan school,
Where Mrs McCann dished out the slaps.

Life back then was cruel,
In the land of saints and scholars,
Let you live long enough,
To hear those "saints" say sorry.

God grant you rest and peace John,
They'll miss you now your'e gone,
You can rest assured your memory,
Will for centuries live on.

May the sod of Aughawillan soil,
Rest lightly on you now,
My peace and comfort will surround,
Your darling Madeline somehow.

JOHN McGAHERN'S LEAVETAKING

Eileen Battersby, Irish Times Photo: Brian Farrell

"He was a countryman who knew how his characters thought because he thought that way himself."

HE SPOKE in a preoccupied whisper, yet his voice, unexpectedly resonant in a reading, would fill a room – and will, through his stories, continue to be heard. John McGahern, a writer of place, and a most deliberate artist, made a study of the ordinary while also chronicling the closing chapters of traditional Irish rural life and its haphazard transformation into suburbanised anonymity.

There is anger in his domestic realism, a rage as immense as that of Kavanagh. But his fury is shaped by an important difference. McGahern, the admirer of Flaubert, Hardy, Chekhov and Scott Fitzgerald, was never bitter. He kept his festering resentments in check and his sly humour framed moments of lyric inspiration, astute melancholic observation and candour.

McGahern's critical intelligence was finely tuned and highly sophisticated, while his grasp of social, political and behavioural nuance, those tiny defining gestures and slights, real and imagined, that define the personality of an individual, or a nation, was second to none.

The work, 34 short stories, six novels, a seriously under rated, poorly produced play and Memoir, published in September 2005, tell his story and also that of the emerging modern Irish state. His intensely personal, quasi confessional fiction achieves the resonance of art through its complex simplicity and deliberate, persuasive, rather formal, rhythmic prose. In common with the American Richard Ford, McGahern's prose rolls with a distinctive, thoughtful rhythm His narratives are oddly vibrant, often bleak and always authentic Irish social history.

He listened and described; felt and suffered. Above all, he understood. It is John McGahern's humane scrutiny of life, love and grief which set him apart. His was a life shaped by two defining emotions; his love for his mother and his fear of his tyrannical father. It is almost fitting that he was to have no children, such was the almost oppressive impact of his childhood upon him throughout his entire life. Even in death, he remains a son. The sheer energy demanded by such contrasting emotions felt towards both parents first made him a witness, eventually a writer and ultimately, a recorder of life as lived.

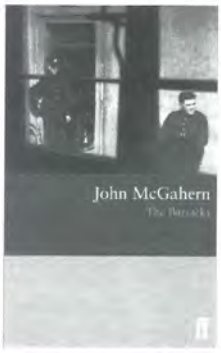
There was also courage; he was a truth teller and those truths tended to be harsh. Having learnt about suffering as a child denied an adored mother; he become apprenticed to humiliation by his father. The State subsequently took over, McGahern's books were banned, while the Church decreed marriage to a divorced woman would cost him his teaching career – and it did. Unlike many Irish writers, McGahern stayed put. He did not choose exile, nor did he retreat into lofty seclusion. He was able to write about Irish rural life because he chose to be part of it.

He was amused that the despairing honesty, once considered a crime of betrayal, had become his badge of honesty, particularly as he knew there were those who had seen his wider comments are more reflective of his private fixations. He parodied this in 'Oldfashioned' in which the clever educated son Johnny becomes academically successful beyond his social origins and is ridiculed for it. McGahern the revered writer neither lost his sense of irony nor his memory. "The barracks itself was a strange place" he writes of the barracks at Cootehall, the most famous of his childhood homes in Memoir (2005) "like most of the country at the time. Through the Free State had been wrested in armed conflict from Britain, it was like an inheritance that nobody quite understood or knew how to manage.

The Catholic Church was dominant and in control of almost everything directly or indirectly. In a climate of suppression and poverty and fear, there was hardly any crime and little need of a barracks in a place like Cootehall, other than as a symbol."

A long gap – almost 30 years – stands between the appearance of his outstanding debut The Barracks (1963), the story of Elizabeth Reegan, once a nurse and now an ageing, childless, dying wife, and his fifth novel, Amongst Women (1990), the work which should have won him the Booker Prize but didn't although it did secure for him belated fame and national approval. The Ireland which decided to celebrate Amongst Women was the same Ireland which had shunned The Dark in 1965.

But by the 1990s, his earlier rejection had been relegated to myth, the poor response to the Abbey's laboured production of The Power of Darkness (1991) merely an unsuccessful theatrical experiment. His stories had become classics and the appearance of his graceful earthy, cyclical pastoral, That They May Face The Rising Sun, in December 2001—some three months ahead of the original publication date – was a cause of jubilation. Never had a one time prodigal been so thoroughly rehabilitated. That elegiac final novel in which McGahern was effectively to announce his leave-taking, examined



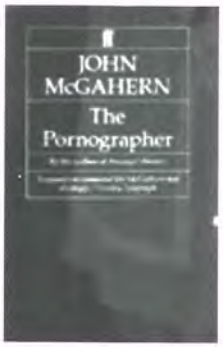
The Barracks. 1963
A novel

The Dark. 1965.
A novel

Nightlines. 1970.
A collection of stories

The Leavetaking.
1974

Getting Through. 1978.
A collection of stories



The Pornographer.
1979. A novel

the society of a small community and its specific history composed of lives, events and rituals evolving over the course of one calendar year.

It is a jaunty performance, as if much of the natural darkness, brutality, injustice and hallmark power swings of his work have been depleted. The tone of the narrative is a milder variation of that which sustained his finest of several magnificent short stories, The Country Funeral, itself a study of the weakening tensions that once separated the rural from the urban. A mood of content settles over That They May Face the Rising Sun although several of the characters are caught in their personal turmoils. The non party political but highly political McGahern again airs his anit-Republicanism.

Gentle and slow moving it may appear, that final novel in which McGahern more determinedly that ever observes the natural world and its cycles, is knowing and quick witted and now must become his defining testament. His landscape is Roscommon and Leitrim, the barren villages near Mohill, Carrick-on-Shannon and Boyle and Lough Key – sparse, narrow clusters of settlement clinging to a small, pitiless life in which the priest, the schoolmaster and the garda sergeant dominate the minds, the fears, the dreams, the very souls of the people trapped within them. In contrast with this grim pastoral of the west and the midlands are the furtive raids on Dublin in which his characters undertake desperate pilgrimages to shabby ballrooms, dance halls and pubs in search of escape, company, romance and possibly love.

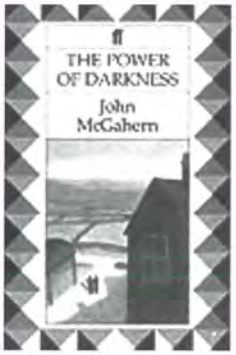
Taking a cue from Kavangh's sonnet 'Epic' in which Homer's ghost confides to the poet "I made The Iliad from such/A Local row. Gods make their own importance." McGahern crafted his "own importance" by evoking the authenticity of sorry experience. His themes are obsessional: death, suffering, pain and loss of love, of faith, and of hope. If his men are weak and tend to approach romance with equal measures of apathy and desperation, his women are practical, almost heroic if never idealised. Few portraits of any female character in world literature convince as powerfully as the carefully plotted account in Amongst Women of Rose's determined pursuit and capture of Moran, followed by her stoic acceptance of his domestic tyranny and the dreary existence he hands her.

Right up until that final, almost breakthrough final novel dead mothers and bullying police sergeant fathers overshadow the lives of central characters who are invariably bored unambitous teachers haunted by suffocating childhoods and whose adult lives add up to failed relationships and possibly even a failed vocation. It is interesting to see the breadth of vision and social analysis achieved by McGahern within what was a small, almost predictable repertoire of themes, devices and motifs. Most importantly, it was he who forced a reluctant country which has never enjoyed looking at itself to shed the old sentimentalities and complacencies and admit the hypocrisies. Yes, his vision is larger than his surroundings because he was an inspired psychologist who knew the Irish psyche and as a writer possessed an ability to convincingly enter the heart and mind of a given character.

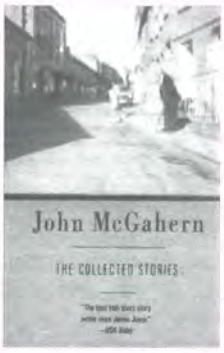
He was a countryman who knew how his characters thought because he thought that way himself.

High Ground. 1985.
A collection of stories

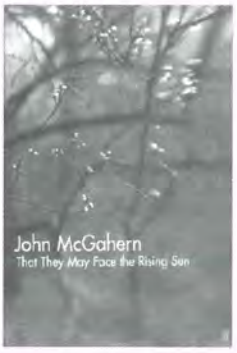
Amongst Women.
1990. A novel



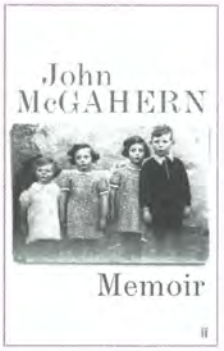
The Power of Darkness.
1991.Collection of stories



The Collected Stories.
1992



That They May Face the
Rising Sun (By the Lake)
2002. A novel



Memoir.
(All Will Be Well)
2005. A novel

While The Barracks is a heartbreaking book, no doubt drawing on the memory of his mother's illness there are wonderful moments such as Elizabeth's rueful irritation on being drawn into yet another banal conversation in which she has no interest. "...this world on which she'd used every charm to get accepted in was falling to ashes in her hands...She'd escaped out of London, she'd not escape out of this...she could scream, the desperation she'd experienced on her coming back on this conversation".

In common with William Trevor, McGahern shares a feel for characterisation and is capable of making a character express a multitude in what seems a passing comment. In 'Along The Edges' yet another McGahern character must pay the price of his careless dithering as the woman he has treated too casually for too long, had had enough and rejects his belated proposal. "There was a time when I thought I was getting involved with you, but then you didn't seem interested, and women are practical."

Obviously the early work: The Barracks, The Dark and The Leavetaking (1974, partly reworked and republished in 1984) is strongly autobiographical, while The Pornographer is yet to be reassessed as it is the one work which many of his most intense readers have tended to overlook, appears less so. Although the autobiographical is central to McGahern it should not detract from the range of the stories, several of which, and most notably, as had already been mentioned, The Country Funeral represent the best of McGahern. His finest short stories stand equal to those of O'Connor and Trevor, and he could summon a moment, a gesture with their timing, a timing shared by Chekhov or Scott Fitzgerald.

It is fitting and curiously satisfying that a career begun in such personal grief should conclude in the thoughtful recounting detail in Memoir. Yet before that there is the daringly autobiographical element which runs through That They May Face The Rising Sun, a narrative of voices, chat, much gossip, and local scandal. In that book with its sequences of social comedy juxtaposed with vivid insights into country life such as market day, animals being bought and sold, the laying out of a corpse and a disastrous match, McGahern boldly had a married couple Joe and Kate Ruttledge settling in middle age in the lakeside community. There they engage with their neighbours, share in the local dramas and raise their embarrassingly well tended animals. Perhaps they are the McGaherns? Perhaps it is only coincidence? Included among the social set pieces are many silences, meditations, descriptive passages, which are lyric and significantly, melancholic. Of all his work this final novel contains more passages of sustained descriptive writing than anywhere in his writings.

It is also the prelude to his death; That They May Face The Rising Sun is the leave-taking. It was his farewell begun with his slow illness and completed in a death that was not unexpected, but is no less shocking for that. I had been about to drive to Dublin that lunch time, Thursday, March 30th, to collect a National Museum monograph book I had agreed to launch. Barely passed the gates of my farm I realised I had forgotten the phone. I was tempted to leave it, but my office needs to know where I am. Back inside the house, the phone rang just as I lifted it from the kitchen table. It was the RTE News At One. "Have you heard?" asked the caller, "John McGahern?" I remember suddenly feeling very cold—chilled, and sad. "Oh, no" I heard my voice answering as if independently of me. "Can you talk to us about him." "When?" There was a pause, "Now." I was overwhelmed and stumbled into an incoherent speech of sorts about the man I knew and the writer I had read and written about it. I remember being aware that I was telling the Irish people about the death of a great Irish writer, the writer I always tell foreign visitors to read before they come to Ireland. It was a distressing responsibility at the time, and since then, I realise a privilege. I phoned the museum and deferred collecting the book. I knew I could not drive.

Two enduring images of McGahern linger in my mind. One is of the man eager as a boy showing off the wide views from his modest house of Leitrim's watery landscape. The other is of the professional writer, complete in dishevelled black suit, as if hastily dressed for a funeral or perhaps merely to stand at the back of the church, reading at Cuirt three years ago. His strong voice contrasted with his frail appearance. On the night of his funeral, after the funeral service at which I had watched felt emotion stamp the faces of Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel, Michael Longley and Tom Murphy; after the funeral lunch in Carrick-on-Shannon which he had wanted us all to enjoy; after the friendly remininisces were exchanged; my daughter and I explored what I call McGahern country. We drove to Dromod Station where John McGahern had met me years ago, before I could drive, we went to Ballinamore and we arrived in Mohill. I showed her the cattle mart. We stopped at a newsagents and signed the book of condolence which had been placed on a music stand.

We met people who knew him as a neighbour, not an international writer. It was dark and well after 10pm, when Nadia and I arrived back at the little church yard in Aughawillan, quiet now, free of the many mourners. I took a white carnation, intending to press into the Collected Stories when we got home. We recalled the night his friend Alistair MacLeod, the Cape Breton writer had been presented with the International Impac Dublin Literary Award. McGahern was delighted as he had championed MacLeod's writing. He had also complimented Nadia's dress that night. Standing at his grave I reminded her of that night in 2001. "Remember when he said 'that's a great dress'?" She looked very serious and said "No, he didn't say that." I insisted he had and this "yes he did" "no he didn't" tennis type exchange persisted until she elaborated. "What he said was 'that's a grand frock'." Same meaning but my daughter had grasped the linguistic exactness of McGahern's language. This exactitude was always true of his prose, particularly when writing dialogue.

In Judge on Trial, a major European novel by the Czech Republic writer, Ivan Klima, he refers to "moral grandeur". it is a phrase that applies to John McGahern whose belief in truth and the worth of small lives, and an abiding sense of justice, taught a nation to look at itself with open, more honest eyes.

"...where change is imperceptible and the precious life is everything."

HOMILY PREACHED AT THE FUNERAL MASS OF JOHN McGAHERN

Liam Kelly 1 April 2006

JOHN DONNE, the English poet and priest, was born in the year 1572 and died in 1631. His poetry was good and much of it has survived. A sermon, which he preached on the theme of death in the year 1623, has also survived. Hemingway borrowed his title "For whom the bell tolls" from that sermon. "No man is an island" is another well-worn phrase first used by Donne in that homily as he tried to persuade his hearers that all human beings are linked to one another, that all share in a common humanity. He then went on to say "any man's death diminishes me". And it does.

Whenever someone we know dies, a bit of us dies with them. The truth of this statement is very obvious today as we gather for the funeral Mass of John McGahern. His death is a death in the family, not just for his own family and friends, but for the whole country which has come to know him through his writings and for people world-wide who hold him in great affection and high esteem. A great writer and a good man has died and we are all the poorer for his passing.

Some of John's best writing, like the seasons, is cyclical in nature, ending up where it began. And so it seems appropriate that we should gather for this funeral here in St Patrick's Church in Aughawillan where John came to Mass as a small child. It was here that he learned to serve Mass. It was here that he had his first brush with church authority when, as a small boy, he was denounced for rattling his beads too loudly during prayer. There would be other brushes with church authorities later—and even though he was treated badly he never held any grudges or traces of bitterness. He was bigger than that. The church was, he said, his first book and he had learned much from it. He wrote in his Memoir that it was through the church that:

I was introduced to all that I have come to know of prayer and sacrament, ceremony and mystery, grace and ornament and the equality of all women and men under the sun of heaven...I have affection still and gratitude for my upbringing in the Church: it was the sacred weather of my early life, and I could no more turn against it than I could turn on any deep part of myself.

Like Proust, John McGahern realised the importance of the church spire in the local village "pointing upward into the sunset where it loses itself so lovingly in the rose-coloured clouds." He identified two parallel movements within Catholicism—one the fortress churches with their edicts, threats and punishments and the other the churches of the spires and brilliant windows that go towards love and light. The latter was his church and he lived his life on the river that led towards love and life. Today we remember that life, we celebrate it and give thanks to God for it.

St Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, states that "there is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit" and "that the particular way in

which the Spirit is given to each person is for a good purpose." John was a gifted writer and his work, like all good art, is essentially spiritual. He dedicated his life to writing about the local and the ordinary, the minutiae of life, the things that others see yet never notice. And through hard work, clear thinking and deep feeling he has produced works of art that are admired around the world, works of art that will survive the test of time. Only a person with a great gift and a deep spirituality could produce such spare and lyrical prose about ordinary days in ordinary places in rural south Leitrim.

In his Memoir John recalls a time when, as a small boy, he walked with his mother to Aughawillan school, just down the road from here. She had come home from the hospital and he felt safe in her shadow once more: He wrote: *I am sure it is from those days that I take the belief that the best of life is lived quietly, where nothing happens but our calm journey through*

the day, where change is imperceptible and the precious life is everything.

Only a person at peace with themselves and rooted in their world could write like this.

John McGahern's happiest memories were of walking the lanes of Leitrim with his mother when he was still a boy. He wrote: *I must have been extraordinarily happy walking that lane to school. There are many such lanes all around where I live, and in certain rare moments over the years while walking in these lanes I have come into an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace, in which I feel I can live forever.*

Immediately after this Mass he will be buried alongside his beloved mother just outside the church walls.

Today, as we remember John McGahern, our thoughts and our prayers are with his wife Madeline. We include in our prayers too John's sisters, Rosaleen, Margaret, Monica and Dympna, all the extended family and his many friends who will miss him and grieve for him. May God comfort them all.

John and Madeline have been good and dear friends of mine for over thirty years now. I have spent many happy hours in their company enjoying their hospitality and being enriched by their friendship. Over the past few weeks we had precious time together when John talked openly about his impending death and the arrangements for his funeral. He loved life but did not fear death. He had lived with the reality of death since he was a child and liked to quote Achilles: "speak not soothingly to me of death". That was his way. He was never one to run away from the realities of life and death and he would agree with the reading from the book of Ecclesiastes which states that "there is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven; a time for giving birth, a time for dying"—and to him one was as natural as the other.

He was completely at peace during his last days and did not complain about his cancer or about dying while still in his early seventies. Instead he quoted from Yeats's Oedipus at Colonus:

Endure what life God gives and
ask no longer span
Cease to remember the delights of youth,
travel-wearied man...
Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say;
Never to have drawn the breath of life,
never to have looked into the eye of day;
The second best's a gay goodnight and
quickly turn away.

May he rest in peace.

SOUNDINGS
(JOHN McGAHERN)
Sheppard Ranbom

Last words ring like school bells
in tones that fork the mind.
I measure truth against these lines
cast like eel hooks in the brine,
singly, in the cold deep - my secret
wallow, shabby but discrete
where memory couples imagination
in soundings taken on clean sheets.

Our motto: do unto the other...
That eejit must've evolved from cattle...
Leitrim nights are a riot of gossip—
good company with the kettle.

I, too, am the subject of talk.
The sheep gone beyond the pale
is sport for the rest of the flock,
their bleating a mockery of betrayal.

The human wool is easily cut
but skin replaces skin in seven years -
the same period it takes to publish
new parchment from my own rubbish.

THE WISDOM OF McGAHERN

Peg Sheehan

"To write well, to write well and truly about fellows like yourself"

THE FUNERAL OF John McGahern—one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, small farmer, one time teacher and dear friend to his native Leitrim where he lived happily for the last thirty years with his wife Madeline surrounded by friends and neighbours–took place on 1 April 2006 in Aughawillan Cemetery. Hundreds attended—lined routes along the way from Dublin—the small church coped admirably. Tributes were paid—warm, sincere, respectful and were beamed on newsreels around the world. The funeral was like John's writing—no pomp, no embellishment. His wishes were carried out—no eulogies, no sympathizing—just a Mass. Father Liam Kelly, his cousin, delivered the only address. That too came from the heart—reflected McGahern's humanity and humour. John's first denunciation from the altar was recalled—for the sin of rattling his rosary beads too enthusiastically—but all was reverent, respectful and healing too. His first cousin, Paddy McManus and his friend John Fox—both from Ballinamore—carried the coffin. A traditional, country funeral.

Later standing by the graveside with Aiden Kelleher (last year's editor of the Leitrim Guardian), and Kathleen his wife, and before the rain started to speed his soul to heaven as Brian Leydon told us, we noticed a lone sheep peering through a hole in the hedge with great curiousity. Around her, a giddy, gamboling lamb was joyously, and distractingly, celebrating his arrival into the world. Well it was April, and gambolling was abroad. At a certain stage his mother had had enough. She administered a sharp, and not so politically correct puck to his backside that shocked and quietened him for the duration. Was this McGahern having a joke from heaven? Is giddy gamboling sheepspeak for rosary beads rattling. We shall never know. McGahern was laid to rest beside his beloved mother.

Since McGahern's death two things made me think again about his work. The first was a simple conversation with a young mother in Leitrim who is devoting a lot of time to opening up the world of drama and art to her children. She posed the simple, disturbing question:

" If legislation has removed a controlling person's need to dominate someone—where does that violent energy go now?"

I saw her point very clearly on a wet windy morning shortly after in the Mayflower Ballroom, Drumshanbo. This was a one woman dramatic production on domestic abuse called "Don't Say a Word" written and presented by Patricia Byrne and organized by DAWN—a South Leitrim based Domestic Abuse Awareness Network. Over 300 people attended—mostly over 16's from Schools, Colleges and Training Centres around Leitrim and their teachers, Gardai, and Leitrim Partnership people. Breaking the silence, telling the truth poetically—the essence of McGahern's work—will continue to inspire artists for generations to come.

The day after McGahern's funeral, in the Sunday Tribune, Nuala O'Faolain celebrated McGahern's life of "heroic honesty" as someone who "fully accepted things the way they were. In the simplest way, he was always ready to die."

On the same page a leading article takes the Vatican and Pope Benedict XV1 to task for a deafening silence on the content of the Ferns Report on clerical abuse. A measure of the shift in collective awareness of this problem since the banning of "The Dark" where McGahern first lifted the lid on the issue, is that such an article appeared today in an authoritative newspaper. We do not have to dwell on the consequences for McGahern in that dark period of our history—it has been done elsewhere. He was banned—but not silenced. He was neither a campaigner nor a political activist but his love of language and respect for truth made him a reformer in the most radical sense. In "Memoir", responding to the father's intrusive questioning about his career, or so called lack of ambition that kept him—by choice—farming in a snipe run behind the Ivy Leaf Ballroom:
"What is your aim?"
"To write well, to write well and truly about fellows like yourself"

To appreciate McGahern's moral strength and artistic discipline it helps to pay serious attention to the rural Ireland into which he was born. Susan McManus from Drumderrig, Corleehan, married Frank McGahern from Gowna in 1933. Seven children and eleven years later she was dead. John was her eldest. Around the same time another Leitrim man, Jimmy Gralton was deported from his own country for the "crime" of organizing Community/Self Development activities for farmers living around the Pearse/Connnolly Hall, Efferinagh—an activity that to-day would attract substantial government grant aid. The Gralton tragedy has been sensitively and poignantly documented and dramatized by John Rooney from Carrick-on-Shannon. In the 1980's McGahern described the deportation as the action of an "insecure State and a colluding Church". With Gralton out of the way, the Pearse

"Walking these lanes I have come to an enormous sense of security, of deep peace in which I feel I can live forever."

Connolly Hall was burned down in an arson attack, and the 1937 Constitution went on to copperfasten the stranglehold on Women's Development in Ireland for decades to come.

Despite the bleakness of the 20's and 30's, Susan McManus had a happy childhood and loving relationships with her brothers and sisters—all reared in the three-roomed house up the mountain road at Drumderrig. This closeness endured throughout her life, but for all their love and support, they were helpless to protect her, or her children from Frank McGahern's violent temper. The law was on the side of the tyrant – in fact the tyrant was the law. McGahern in "Memoir" lays bare—economically and compellingly the reality of the father's near despotic power over the family. It would have been immeasurably worse—as it was for most women and children of the time—had the mother not been a respected teacher and wage earner. Although the McManus siblings were all highly intelligent, only one—McGahern's mother from the mountain farm—could avail of an education.

By any standards—given the constraints on women's freedom—the mother did a heroic job. Using her gifts of intelligence, discipline and humour, she raised those around her to a higher level of consciousness and imbued her eldest son with the discipline of the aesthete. The higher intelligence to which she referred led her to unshakeable faith in God. For John McGahern it led to near perfection in his chosen art—words. The rural Ireland we have just visited was hostile, even cruel, but to-day while we are far from perfection, the moral, social and political landscapes have been transformed by spirits like McGahern. When Michael Harding laments that:

"Romantic Leitrim's dead and gone, it's with McGahern in his grave". He has to be speaking tongue in cheek. If what we have seen is "romantic" then most of us would say "Good Riddance".

By all accounts McGahern has had as many, if not more, visitors since his death than he and Madeline entertained in Foxfield by the lake. Some leave a small wild flower on the grave remembering the love of nature reflected in his work. Some shed a tear for the mother left dying in a house stripped bare of furniture by her husband and for the innocent children so cruelly wrenched from her on her deathbed. Others come, cannot find their way to the grave, don't like to enquire, and go away again quietly. This is a pity—it is very easy.

From the Rockquarter in Ballinamore (still under construction) head for Swanlinbar passing the Aunt Maggie's shop (now Gala) on the corner. Pass the Old Railway Station (now St Phelim's School) where the Uncle Pat met the trains in his hackney. Pass the GAA Grounds, the Bottle Bank and Lisacarn Lane (where teacher and children travelled to school on wet days in Master Foran's Model T) on the left. Immediately pass the McGahern home (now Duignan's) on the right, then the Model Farm. Turn next right into Aughawillan Lane (signposted). Down the winding lane to the T Junction. Turn left. Continue to the next T Junction and Aughawillan Church and Churchyard are on the corner on the right. It is only over three miles on the clock. On the return journey to Ballinamore the quiet beauty of the landscape will give an inkling of the peace to which McGahern alludes in "Memoir":

"Walking these lanes I have come to an enormous sense of security, of deep peace in which I feel I can live forever."

Well, we now know we will not meet him on the lanes. Only evocative moments and well-known faces pop up like sepia photographs in a family album. RTE's Seamus Hosey at Aughawillan Church, Leonie McKiernan and the ever professional, ever affable Willie Donnellan from the "Leitrim Observer", Aughavas born Dr Michael O'Rourke's learned appreciation of McGahern's works in the "Leitrim Observer", Marese McDonagh's haunting pen picture" a lonely black and white dog raced excitedly to the sound of a car. But the master is not coming home." Olive Braiden, Arts Council Chair from the next parish, Sligo " He listened, he said little, but anything he said made a difference." Gabriel Owens, like the rest of us, waiting for the funeral not quite knowing what to do, washes an already clean shop window *(photo: Brian Farrell below)*. It goes on and on.

These images will also fade, but the light McGahern shone into the dark corners of the last century will endure. In "Memoir" he says of his mother "She never really left us". In a way, perhaps he never really left us either.

GOING HOME TO LEITRIM

Tiernan Dolan
Tiernan is a secondary school teacher in St Mel's College, Longford. He is also a dedicated aid-worker with Goal

How ironic, that the genius of Irish literature, John McGahern, should be laid to rest on April Fool's Day. It seemed fitting though, that the astute observer of the changing seasons, should be returning just as the primroses, daffodils, cherry blossoms and whin bushes were beginning to brighten the dark, tired landscape.

As the cortege approached the Longford/ Letrim border just after 11 on Saturday morning, the sun shone extra brightly and the first warmth of spring was felt. It was as if the great man was being welcomed home. And home he was, because it was just at the county border where the first little group of people gathered to pay their respects. One had left herding his cattle, another stopped on his journey to Dublin, another clutched a newspaper photo of McGahern.

In Rooskey, along the Shannon, the crowd was a little bigger. A group of post-graduate students and their two lecturers from Limerick, Tom Geary & Aileen Fitzgerald, stood outside the Shannon Key West hotel (where they were doing a weekend residential school)—to show their esteem for the writer that they had all studied, read or taught at various levels.

At Dromod the cortege left the main N4 and headed into real rural Leitrim. Old and young stood at crossroads, in gardens and at front doors, blessing themselves as their unlikely hero passed on his final journey.

The town of Mohill came to a respectful stop. McGahern loved Mohill, its mart, its shops but most of all, its unasuming people. Shops and businesses closed their doors, engines were turned off, the people stood in silence, an elderly wheelchair-bound lady paid her respects as did a small group of hardy men at the mart entrance. He'd have liked that.

At Fenagh some wore black arm-bands, a couple stood at the derelict Ivy Leaf ballroom as the fourteen car cortege wound its way past rushy cattleless fields. In a field outside Ballinamore, two cheeky goats lay on some hay in a round feeder, as three bullocks did their best to pull at the scarce hay. How beautifully he'd have described that scene.

Outside the Library in Ballinamore, children stood with parents. This day would be etched in their memories for ever. A large group stood motionless and silent down where the old station used to be. How often the young McGahern gauged time by the passing trains. The school was passed. After he was sacked from his teaching post, McGahern, I think, was secretly happy to be away from the narrow petty minds. Hypocrisy and petty politicians were not to his liking.

Aughawillan was waiting for the return of its most famous son. The little church was already full. Locals, literary people and journalists stood outside together; the visitors in awe of the scenery but the locals unfazed by the visitors. They had come to bury a friend, a neighbour, one of their own. That he was one of the best in the world at his chosen trade was simply a bonus. They held him in high esteem as they would a great footballer or the breeder of prize cattle.

As Fr Liam Kelly spoke lovingly of his dear friend, a bee distracted the porch standers, a cock crowed from a nearby yard and a jet streaked across the skies. Ordinary sounds on an extraordinary day.

In his last work, Memoir, he says "our heaven was here in Aughawillan". John McGahern was back home in heaven. Back home in Leitrim.

THE LYRE OF LEITRIM

JOHN McGAHERN (1934-2006)
Sheppard Ranbom

Standing in the Harvard Chapel to read in the
Court of Lowell,
his left wrist bent in his left armpit to make a holy wing,
he read like Orpheus, begging his lost beloved to return.
He pined for her, then dove into subterranean memory
to bring her back, pretending he never got the girl.
A gifted barman, he'd add ice and fizz to his 90 proof,
saying 'Every lie is based on an element of truth...
In the moment of loss, we are most ourselves...' as if
staring down the mouth of Hell was
a kind of homecoming.

In his voice, the gods commingled.
In his unflinching stance they stood with him
and made the truth stronger.

These are the words I chalk upon his wagon.
What blinds will open with this ending?
Who will take his place at the gates, looking back?
Who will be willing to stare into Medusa's mirror?
Who will sing the addict's song, ready to find
the right vein, the mother lode of beauty
captured in the other's loss and pain?

Liars, cast out your lines and see
what truths you can hoist from the darkness.
Beloved, we call you back, knowing we will fail,
but wanting to find a homecoming
in the sadness of your passing
that passes through us as we pass.

A MAN OF NO SELF-IMPORTANCE

Shep Ranbom is a Washington, DC based poet and president of Communication Works LLC, a public affairs firm that focuses on education and cultural issues.

Shep Ranbom

I WAS a student of John McGahern, and I would like to say just how remarkable a teacher and inspiration he was. His comments were so high minded and unique, his manner and presence so kind and gentle, and his awareness so acute, that I hung on every word he said, and remember most of them more than 25 years later. "Your greatest weaknesses can become your greatest strengths." "It's easier to rob banks than to make money as a writer. Become a lawyer or professional and do this on the side, out of love..." "Every lie is based on an element of truth." He'd quote Baudelaire ("who would have too much technique would be a monster, who would do without, would be a fool") and Frost ("only the sound of the human voice entangled in the words is all that saves poetry from singsong, prose from itself,") and Lawrence ("true tragedy ends in triumph, and is a great kick at suffering") and anyone else he could pull out of the library of his mind that illuminated his thinking.

He gave me a tour through Irish literature that I would not trade for anything, and like so many people, every several years I eagerly awaited his own contributions, mesmerized by each page he wrote and by the clarity and lyricism of his prose and the personal risks he took in writing.

He also was a real mentor towards me as he was towards others. I remember how he befriended everyone in the English Department, particularly the secretaries. He was always aware of other people's needs. He had just finished writing The Pornographer and asked me to do him a favour and copy the manuscript (which would have been an incredible honour) but he recognized I was in the middle of studying for finals, and he instantaneously took his offer back, "It wouldn't' be right. You are far too busy yourself."

When I saw him several years ago give a reading outside of Baltimore and talked to him afterwards for a good hour or more, he sensed I was feeling small about myself, and made a big show of me to his friends. "I'd like you to meet Shep Ranbom, whose making a living conning people in Washington... This is Shep. He's conning people in Washington." It may be standard Irish behavior, as when a family member returns home and is made a fuss of, but he was on my turf, and he needn't have done so. What struck me was how he knew how important he was to me. And he knew his own importance in a way that was anything but self-important.

He always made me laugh. He re-scuplted reality as a kind of witnessing that helped repair the world. And he was wickedly funny, with the emphasis on the word "wicked." Many years later he told me stories about my professors that put the college town that once seemed big as the world into comic perspective.

He was scheduled to come to Washington, DC to read at the local bookstore a block from my house a few weeks before he died, and I had expected to see him. All the workers and booklovers at Politics and Prose were buzzing with anticipation. His book had become the top bestseller at the store, and I'd thought about taking a photo of memoir in its place of honour (No 1 Bestseller) on the New Arrivals wall. I kept asking the man behind the counter what his schedule would be in advance of the reading before I learned how the schedule had suddenly—and terribly—changed.

When my mother called to say that she'd seen John's obituary in the papers, and when I read the New York Times obit, I was deeply stricken. I can barely begin to describe in words the tremendous influence he has had on me and my life.

Below, is an excerpt of an interview with An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern on the occasion of the opening of the John McGahern Library in Lough Rynn.

Recorded by Ronan Gallagher

'It's a great honour to be here in Leitrim today in the famous Lough Rynn House. to open this library dedicated to John McGahern, one of our most famous authors and someone who has made a major contribution to Irish literature. It is especially wonderful to have a library dedicated to him here, so close to his native home.

It is a huge honour that there will be forever more a library dedicated to his name, and it was wonderful today to meet Madeline and all his friends and to open a place that will carry his name into the distant future, a place where many of his own books, personally signed and dedicated by him will be housed and available to people.

It is indeed a historic day and though it has been a difficult year for the family, it's great that we are all gathered here today, especially to hear Madeline make her own contribution and for us all to be part of the dedication of this excellent library to him.'

An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern

JOHN McGAHERN—A TRIBUTE

Seamus Heaney, the Irish Poet who won the Nobel prize for Literature in 1995

IT'S A personal loss. I knew John for more than 40 years, and when I thought of him and Madeleine in their home in Leitrim beside the lake, I always had a sense that something was safe, that high standards of living and writing were guaranteed as long as they were there.

John McGahern not only did good work himself. He established high standards for others, standards of artistic excellence and personal integrity that worked silently and strongly within the whole literary community.

McGahern once declared that he was only interested in poetry which occurs, as he said, 'more often in verse than in prose'. Certainly his own prose had the melody of poetry. All his writings have a cello depth to them and while they depict the sociological shifts of twentieth century Irish life, they are as much the register of a spiritual journey as the record of a society in change.

I see him as the heir of Synge and Beckett, a writer who seemed, like them, to be on his own errand from the beginning. He was strict in judgement, sympathetic in understanding, courageous and dignified in the face of personal difficulties, always capable of merriment and grace. Even when he lost his job in the repressive clerical Ireland of the early 1960s, there was an edge of humour to his hauteur. To quote the poet Andrew Marvell, he "nothing common did nor mean," and he won not only the affection and respect of his peers in the literary world, but the respect and affection of generations of readers at home and abroad. John may be gone but his work is here for good.

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