

# BIOGRAPHICAL & EDUCATIONAL REFLECTIONS IN THE LIFE OF JOHN MCGAHERN

Part Two: The Notion of Theocracy in John McGahern's Ireland-  
Against the Spirit of the 1916 Proclamation. *Professor Michael L O'Rourke*

IN LAST YEAR'S issue of the *Leitrim Guardian* and in part one of educational reflections in the life of John McGahern, the focus was very much on the early years of John's life: his education, inspirational teachers, the importance of a good secondary education, the art of teaching, learning by heart, and his views on the teaching of Irish. In this issue the main preoccupation will be concerned with the historical context of John McGahern's world view and his hope for a more open, pluralist and multicultural Ireland for he had wished to see the building of a multifaith plurality in the churches and society. In interviews with the writer and in John McGahern's own writings, it can indeed be stated that his world view was very much that of the cultural pluralist who had hoped to see a new inclusive sense of Irishness in contrast to the more exclusive, narrow nature of traditional definitions of Irishness long felt by minorities, and as best articulated by the poet John Hewitt:

This is my home and country. Later on  
Perhaps I'll find this nation is my own.  
But here and now it is enough to love  
This faulted ledge".

Tolerance, reconciliation, culture as a "bringer of pluralities", in the words of Joyce, more respectful relationships from the mess of distorted relationships reaching east and west, North and South, between Catholic and Protestant, and between our island's two competing nationalisms, one Irish, the other Unionist-these were changes which he longed for and lived to see as the tight leash of history was being slowly loosened in the final years of his life. John held the view that the key cultural project of the Irish should be what he called 'Hibernicising Europe and Europeanising Ireland' and that this cultural interaction was lost, he felt, with our oppres-



■ John McGahern, Dr M L O'Rourke and Dr Daniel Murphy, Trinity College Dublin.

sive and obsessive relationship with Britain over the centuries. Furthermore, John McGahern held the view that an ennobling ecumenism in the culture had much to offer in creating a climate of tolerance and reconciliation that would enable Irishmen of differing traditions to build a future together, creating in the process what the poet, John Montague, calls "healing harmonies". He saw the damage done in the society by an official supremacist, irredentist Roman Catholic Church and how a national identity implicitly identified nationality with Catholicism and Gaelicism. In the course of interviews and writings, this all pervading influence of Catholic, Nationalist Ireland, imposing its own moral authority on the new state, was indeed disquieting for the writer and he too was to suffer from the stifling impact of this majority church. I am reminded of those evocative lines from John Hewitt's *Collected Poems, 1992*, edited by Frank Ormsby:

"For prayer in this green island is /  
Tarnished with stale breath. /  
Worn smooth and characterless/  
As an old flag stone".

## An Irredentist Ireland during the most Formative Years of John McGahern's Life: Theocracy in the Making

John McGahern was trained as a primary teacher in the mid-1950s. He was therefore in St. Patrick's Training College before major changes began to appear in Irish education and Irish society. The publication in 1963 of the findings of the first full-scale scientific investigation of the system, entitled: *Investment in Education* was significant. The introduction of free secondary education by Donagh O'Malley, Minister for Education, in that period rendered the Primary Certificate redundant and, freed from the pressure of terminal examinations, primary schools were enabled to adopt a new, progressive curriculum. It came into operation in 1971. The new curriculum demanded a more flexible, child-centred teaching methodology. A more liberal anti-authoritarian, radical mood of the 1960s was reflected in Ireland, as elsewhere, and teacher training colleges were beginning to resonate with the new zeitgeist. These col-

leges are now co-educational and enjoy associations with the universities, St Patrick's College Drumcondra is now a constituent college of Dublin City University. This is a very different institution from the one that the young McGahern found when he went to Drumcondra in 1953. John reminds us thus:

I was from the country and I was never at boarding school before. I found it a horrendous place. The college was run by the Vincentian Fathers. It was an amazing institution at that time. It was all male. The teaching was very poor. You needed about 90 per cent to get into the place and you needed about 35 per cent to get out. We got out on Saturday and Wednesday for three and a half hours and we got out all day on Sunday until ten p.m., but we had to be in for meals. Food was grabbed at table. You'd starve if you had any manners. I saw the Dean beat up a student in full view of the refectory because he had complained too vociferously that he hadn't got his boiled egg (Education and the Arts, p137)..

This horrendous environment is given full play in the following description of those survival years:

In the junior year, the great threat was that you could be "left at home"; that you wouldn't be brought back for the second year. You couldn't teach then, you hadn't a university degree, so you were really screwed. There was nothing but the emigrant boat then. There were four or five people always "left at home" from the junior year, and it was for things like non-attendance at Mass and for not getting up in the morning, or for coming in late. There was one case where a fellow had only one good pair of trousers and he was late and wanted to get across the wall. He didn't mind getting his legs ripped, so he took off his trousers and fired them ahead of him across the wall, and they landed at the Dean's feet. He was left at home for his planning and foresight as regards his trousers. We had to get up for Mass in the

mornings (or be "left at home" if we didn't). There was chapel last thing at night, and there were prayers before meals. It was rather a nice chapel, and there were always religious people who spent a lot of time in the church. A few of those people had nervous breakdowns later. We used to get lectures (I haven't written about this because it is not really believable) that since we had a steady salary we would be an enormous source of sexual excitement: that girls might be prepared to do certain things because of our position and that it was our duty to restrain these women (Education and the Arts, p138)..

It is not surprising, in the circumstances, that the students were a fairly docile body. When the young McGahern did try his hand at subversion, it was of a rather subtle nature:

They used to take a class up from the school once a week, and the whole College went in, with the President sitting over on one side of the room with the Education Professor, and you had to teach this unfortunate class. It was a totally artificial atmosphere. Then you were criticised, by the different students on your teaching, and the Education Professor gave the final "Léarmhas", as it was called. I was one of the unfortunates in my final year (it was considered a sort of honour). I refused, and I was told that I would be expelled if I didn't do it. I spent a lot of time and made a comedy show for the class - it was a Comhrá scene, or something like it - about buying an ass from the tinkers. I wrote it myself. The kids liked it and everybody was in stitches. We pretended to get drunk. I had them taking free kicks with chalk and things like that. The Professor was furious. But when he questioned the kids, they knew the story perfectly, and even the President was rolling around. The Professor tore the living daylights out of the thing, but there was an enormous protest in the College, which was unusual at that time. Since I had actually obeyed all the criteria and since the kids had answered all his questions, he was forced to give some explanation. So eventually he said that he thought that my basic

attitude wasn't serious, and actually he was quite right. I had spent a whole week doing nothing else, with the intention of disorganising the whole affair (Education and the Arts, p 138-139).

This rather rugged existence was a tough gulag for the refined sensibility of the young writer. "The roughness of the social behaviour of the students in St. Patrick's College was matched by their generally philistine attitude towards all things intellectual" (McGahern, 1987). John considers:

I was too careful or fearful to belong to it but there was a small intellectual society in the Training College - four or five people who actually discussed Oscar Wilde and behaved as one would expect third-level students to do. They were nicknamed "Oideachas Eireann" and they were hounded. I was more interested in survival. I wasn't part of Oideachas Eireann simply because I knew that it would get me into trouble (Education and the Arts, p139).

John McGahern, the young writer, was quite impressed by his lecturers in English at St Patrick's College and it was here that he discovered the worlds of D H Lawrence, Thomas Hardy and T S Eliot:

I would never have heard of D H Lawrence or Joyce before (and I was nineteen at the time), or Hardy or Eliot. One never read anything except what was on the syllabus. It was amazing to find that there were other writers. Frank Mannion would not have known of Lawrence's or Joyce's existence; or Proust or even T S Eliot (Education and the Arts, p139-140).

For McGahern, "the state had become a theocracy in all but name by the 1950's, against the whole spirit of the 1916 Proclamation. The church controlled nearly all of education, the hospitals, the orphanages, the juvenile prison systems, the parish dance halls. Church and State worked hand in hand (McGahern, 2005, p 210). The island was now firmly in the grip of the Imperialism of Rome

John once noted to me in a memorable phrase, "we had merely exchanged the Imperialism of Westminster for the Imperialism of Rome after 1916 and 1921"! Race, language and religion were now concentrated in the Gael and the Gael must be the element that absorbs. Almost in despair the young writer had seen a new country transformed into an indigenous Irish den of sectarianisms, intolerances, racisms and prejudices. The Northern Irish poet, Louis MacNeice, best articulated McGahern's impatient disdain for his native land. Northern Ireland, the poet MacNeice judged, was mired in invincible sectarianism ('the minority always guilty'), while the southern state had become a byword for isolationist self-regard and cultural myopia. "Ourselves alone! Let the round tower stand aloof/In a world of bursting mortar!/Let the school-children fumble their sums/In a half-dead language;/Let the censor be busy on the books; pull down the Georgian slums/Let the games be played in Gaelic"(MacNeice, 1939 pp139-140).

The only other major figure of the period left to confront the flowing tide of insularism and irredentism for decades in De Valera's Ireland was one of John McGahern's favourite poets, W B Yeats: "But all is changed, that high horse riderless/Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode/Where the swan drifts upon the darkening tide." De Valera's Gaelic Eden with the help of John Charles McQuaid, Archbishop of Dublin, was now conveying an overpowering impression of Catholicism, Gaelicism and Authoritarianism triumphant and triumphalist with the censorship of books (including *The Dark*), an emphasis upon compulsory Irish, the ban on contraception and divorce, a Public Dance Halls Act. Sean Ó Faoláin's image of the entire landscape of Ireland was now of one shrouded in snow: "under that white shroud, covering the whole of Ireland, life was lying broken and hardly breathing (Ó Faoláin, 1959, p81).

In the new theocratic state emerging from centuries of past animosities, the profession of teaching had a particular role to play in this cultural myopia and was known then as

the second priesthood. However, the young gifted trainee teacher soon realized that it was important to survive in this confessional, claustrophobic teacher training environment of St Patrick's College as the alternative was rather bleak. "In the 1950's a half-a-million people emigrated from this small country, far more than in any other decade of the century. I had become one of the privileged few who had escaped the trains and the cattle boats and was allowed to work in my own country" (McGahern, 2005,p209-210). John adapted to the regime of the training college, accepting his 'call' to the teachers' training college with all of its vocational and religious connotations. John considers his predicament thus:

Everything that happened during that training pointed to the fact that our function had been already defined by the Church. We were being trained to lead the young into the church, as we had been lead, and to act as a kind of non-commissioned officers to the priests in the running of the parish. In all things we would be second to the priest, including education. However, when so much is being said against the Church, I believe that it was the church that was mainly responsible for the high esteem given to teaching and learning here in Ireland ( McGahern, 1987).

It is interesting to note that the young teacher showed a continuing interest in professional development when he commenced his career as a primary teacher. He soon enrolled on the BA Evening Degree in University College Dublin reading for a degree in Economics and English. He had wonderful experiences in Economics and spoke highly of Professor George O'Brien and another marvellous teacher, a priest, who taught economics:

Old George O'Brien. I liked him. He was very lively and he made his subject interesting...There was a very good priest there who taught economics. He was a marvellous teacher in the sense that he made it interesting. He belonged to some Order.... You can never interest a reader in material

that doesn't interest yourself. I suppose the same thing is true for teaching in general: a teacher can't teach well unless he is interested and has a talent for conveying that interest. The problem is that most teachers are teaching because it's a job. The very good teacher is an exception (Education and the Arts, 1987, p140).

His experiences in English were less edifying. The lectures were boring and a complete waste of time: "There was really no point in giving the formal lectures. If you tried to give them in America, you would be run out of town. Hundreds of people, all taking notes, which, if they were handed out to you, could be read in five minutes"(Education and the Arts, 1987, p140).

### **A Cause Célèbre, Banned by the Censorship Board, Samuel Beckett's Support and a Genuine Fondness for the Catholic Church**

In 1965, John McGahern was at the centre of a cause célèbre when his novel, *The Dark*, was banned by the Censorship Board and he was subsequently dismissed from his teaching post in Clontarf by the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid. He treated the ban with the contempt that it deserved, and discouraged others from making a fuss. His description of a meeting with *The National Irish Teachers' Union* is worthy of note and is quite hilarious:

They were careful and hostile. Some of the men had taken whiskey to brace themselves for the meeting. Word had leaked out that I had married a Finnish woman in a register office. The General Secretary, who had also braced himself with whiskey, allowed his irritation with me to overcome his caution. 'If it was just the auld book, maybe-maybe- we might have been able to do something for you, but with marrying this foreign woman you have turned yourself into a hopeless case entirely,' he said. 'And what anyhow entered your head to go and marry this foreign woman when there are hundreds of thousands of Irish

girls going around with their tongues out for a husband?' he added memorably, especially since not many of them had been pointed in my direction! (McGahern, 2005, p251).

He sees a big change in the situation of primary teachers today compared with his own day. They are no longer so much under the control of clerical managers and their private lives are not so subject to covert scrutiny as was once the case:

Things are changing. They don't care a damn. Teachers can't be sacked today as in my time. I remember when I was teaching in a small town I got into an awful lot of trouble. I used to get the hell out of the place every Friday, and there was enormous pressure put on me not to go to Dublin at the weekends so that I could teach Catechism after Mass on Sundays (Education and the Arts, p140-141).

Looking back as one who no longer subscribed to the beliefs of the Catholic Church, John was however grateful to it for two reasons: firstly, because it addressed itself to the great questions that hang over human life, to matters of Life and Death, to what John refers to as the Mystery. Secondly, while he rejected institutionalized religion and, more specifically, certain forms of Roman Catholicism for intellectual and philosophical reasons, there was always a general recognition in his writings of the spiritual dimension as an animating vision for the imaginative nurture, for language and symbolism. He states:

I am grateful to the Church but I am just an unbeliever. Certainly, the Church was the most powerful thing in my upbringing, in the spiritual and cultural sense; much more powerful than literature which was almost absent. The Church was my first book and it remains my most important one. It dealt with the Mystery, which nobody else dealt with. The society was basically against the Mystery (Education and the Arts, p141).

Hell, Heaven and Purgatory were far more real than Canada or Australia. We were far away from bank managers, not having much money. I'd say the priest, the doctor, the schoolteacher, the guards, the tillage inspectors, were the major figures... When I appeared on *The Late Late Show* after the banning of *The Dark*, I was expected to attack the Catholic Church. I described it, in a way I wouldn't change now, as the weather of my life, and since you only have one life I could no more attack that weather than attack my own life. I remember feeling ashamed with the ban. I belonged to the first generation to be born into the Free State, and I thought it was our country now and we were making fools out of ourselves. People wanted to protest in Paris as well as people here. Mr Beckett read it first and wanted to protest on my behalf. I was very grateful to him (Reading the Future, p140-145).

John McGahern from these early years attempted to open as many windows as possible through his writings so that a full and varied picture of a modern Ireland might emerge. McGahern's dream of a modern Ireland, multicultural and pluralist, had been shattered and was now lacking in many of the appurtenances of civilization. We had a country at the beginning of its creative history and at the end of its revolutionary history but maimed at the start in the words of Yeats. "Out of Ireland have we come/ Great hatred little room/ Maimed us at the start/ I carried from my mother's womb/ A fanatic heart". The people in the rural communities of Leitrim and Roscommon in which John grew up were not really too preoccupied or concerned with cultural pluralism or with the deeper moral or religious questions. Their attitude towards religion and Roman Catholicism was just "another ideological habit they were forced to wear like all the others they had worn since the time of the Druids" in the words of McGahern. This attitude was essentially superficial, he feels:

The Church was there to take care of the

Mystery, so they didn't have to think about it. The doctor did the same for the body, but the priest took care of the soul, so it was none of their business. I remember a very nice, quiet priest who came to Cootes hall, and in a very quiet way he began to relate the ceremonies of the Church to our lives. Everybody, especially my father, was absolutely furious. What he should have been doing was giving out about people. What they loved was a real hellfire sermon, which they always applied to their neighbours and which revealed what they knew to be the bad character of everybody else. So when this man, who was obviously well-read, simply related the Mystery and dealt with things like doubt and despair, they were absolutely furious (Education and the Arts, p141).

By trying to raise men's minds from the mire and the drudgery of their daily lives to some contemplation of the greater purpose of those lives, the Church acted as a leaven in the general consciousness of these rural communities. McGahern's gratitude to the Church was that it provided an aesthetic dimension to human existence which was otherwise devoid of refinement or grace. "Before the printed word, the churches were the Bibles of the poor, and the Church was my first book...My father's world went inwards to darkness and violence, lies and suppression: the school, the library, the river, the Church, all went outwards, to light and understanding, freedom and joy (McGahern, 2005, p203). John reminds us further in *Early Influences of the Young Writer, M.Ed Quatercentenary Conference, Trinity College Dublin, October 24th 1992*:

In a way, the Church was the only cultural constant in my upbringing. Looking at it from an aesthetic point of view, since there were no books and hardly any manners, the ceremonies of the Church were certainly the most beautiful things. In American literature you can see the same importance of the Bible for writers like Sherwood Anderson, Steinbeck, Hawthorne and Melville. In a similar kind



■ **Aughawillan Primary School- Formative Influences in the Life of the young John McGahern. Susan McGahern, his mother, taught here.**

of way, I think the Catholic Church fulfilled the same function in Ireland. It did what literature does; it dealt with the Mystery, with one's serious comings and goings. At the time of an anti-clerical movement in France, when a Curé de Combray was kicked off the town committee, Proust said that he should remain on the committee, if only for the spire of his church, which lifted men's eyes from the avaricious earth. The Church was philistine in itself, in its personnel, but it was the only thing against the general philistinism...Despite everything, I have retained a fondness for the Catholic 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 my own life (McGahern, 1992, p63).

**Conclusion:**

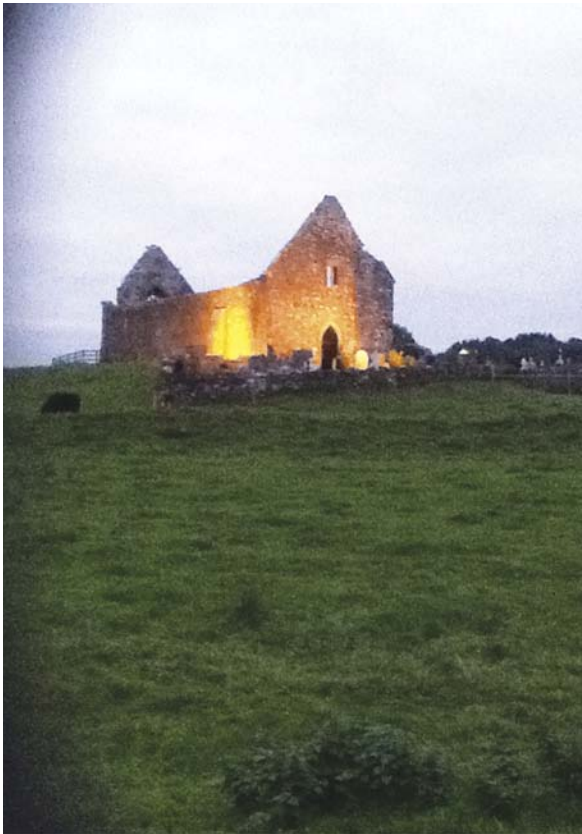
It would be difficult to imagine a less auspicious environment for the nurturing of a

writer than that described by John McGahern in these passages and recollections. In the light of all his travails with the church and censorship, he did realize that the church was trying to raise men's minds from the mire and the drudgery of their daily lives to some contemplation of the greater purpose of those lives. However, in his writings there are many disenchantments articulated about the contribution of the majority church to division and intolerance in the society, their role in building barriers of mind and heart. All of the Christian churches, he felt, could indeed radiate an authority of love rather than of power and provide a haven for society by abandoning fear as an instrument of control and influence. "Through the violent history of Catholicism run the two dividing movements: the fortress churches with their edicts, threats and punishments; and the churches of the spires and brilliant windows that go towards love and life" (McGahern, 2008, p271). McGahern's model of church was surely one of love and enriched life. John McGahern had little time for faith systems "whose sole motivation was the manipulation of power and the laying down of laws that had to be obeyed"(Maher, 2011, p183).The power of the Roman Catholic

Church in welfare, education and society in general, together with restrictions on family life and on the freedom of the individual implied in the denial of divorce, contraception, the operation of Ne Temere, censorship - all of these visible images of an authoritarian Church created for McGahern and other writers of the period, the final cleavage in the Irish psyche. Patrick Kavanagh in his periodical, Kavanagh's Weekly, denounced the tired mediocrity that Ireland exhibited at every hand: "from Independence Day there has been a decline in vitality. There is no central passion" he declared (Kavanagh's Weekly, Vol.1, No12, (28th June 1952), p3. A young Ulster poet of this time, John Montague, embodied in cogent fashion in his poem of 1953, The Sheltered Ledge, the fairly widespread sense of cultural and social despair of McGahern's Ireland:

Standing at the window, I watch the wild green leaves/Lurch back against the wall, all the branches of the apple tree/Stretch tight before the wind, the rain lash/ The evening long against the stubborn buildings /Raised by man, the blackened rubbish dumps,/The half-built flats, the oozing grey cement/Of hasty walls, the white-faced children/Deprived of sun, scurrying with sharp laughter/From point to point of shelter,/And arched over all, the indifferent deadening rain".

While these intimate and accurate portrayals of life in post-independence Ireland can lend themselves to social and historical critique, John McGahern's focus has always been on finding a way to move forward in order to transform the indigenous Irish den into a broader and more comprehensive multicultural identity. His preoccupation has always been on the 'whole world' encompassed in particular moments and localities. "The doors of the house were open. Jamesie entered without knocking and came in noiselessly until he stood in the doorway of the large room where the Ruttledges were sitting. He stood as still as if waiting under the trees for returning wildfowl" (McGahern, 2002, p1). If he is a parochial writer, it is in the sense



### ■ That They May Face the Rising Sun-Fenagh Abbey at Dusk

advocated by Patrick Kavanagh, of one who is 'never in doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish'. For parochialism is universal according to Kavanagh. Indeed, no other Irish writer since Kavanagh has imagined the local so completely as the telescopic image of the universal: McGahern's world of Lovely Leitrim has been compared to the worlds of Jane Austen, J M Synge, Thomas Hardy, and Maria Edgeworth. Eileen Battersby aptly remarked that he taught a nation to look at itself historically with open, more honest and tolerant eyes. *The Observer* of London pronounced in its admiration of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* that John McGahern is Ireland's greatest living novelist and John Banville described his experience of reading *Amongst Women* thus: 'we have not so much been reading as living inside the worlds he constructs' (*Irish University Review*, p vii). When once asked how he wished to be remembered in a tolerant and more open society in a hundred years time, John remarked simply: "I would hope that the reader of my work in a hundred years time

would receive pleasure and some illumination" (*Reading the Future*, 2000, p155). Without raising his voice John McGahern always held out the creative hand rather than the clenched fist!

*'I may not have travelled far but I know the whole world', Jamesie said with a wide sweep of his arm. 'You do know the whole world' Rutledge said. 'And you have been my sweet guide' (McGahern, 2002, p296).*

### Bibliography and Further Recommended Reading

#### John McGahern's novels include:

- The Barracks* (1963) London: Faber & Faber.  
*The Dark* (1965) London: Faber & Faber.  
*The Leavetaking* (1974) London: Faber & Faber.  
*The Pornographer* (1979) London: Faber & Faber.  
*Amongst Women* (1990) London: Faber & Faber.  
*That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) London: Faber & Faber.  
*Memoir* (2005) London: Faber & Faber.  
*Love of the World Essays* (2009) London: Faber & Faber.

#### His short story collections were:

- Nightlines* (1970) London: Faber and Faber.  
*Getting Through* (1978) London: Faber and Faber.  
*High Ground* (1985) London: Faber and Faber.  
*The Collected Stories* (1992) London: Faber and Faber.

#### His plays for radio and television were:

- Sinclair* (1971); *The Barracks* (1972); *The Power of Darkness* (1992); *Swallows* (1975); *The Rockingham Shoot* (1987).

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A brilliant series of the John McGahern Yearbook published by NUI Galway, compiled and edited by Dr. John Kenny, is a treasure house of McGahern holdings and coincides with The International Summer School in Leitrim each year from 2008-2011.

#### Journals:

*Irish University Review, A Journal of Irish Studies, John McGahern Volume 35 Number 1, Summer 2005.*  
*Education and the Arts, The Educational Autobiographies of Contemporary Irish Poets, Novelists, Dramatists, Musicians, Painters and Sculptors*. Published by the School of Education, Department of Higher Education and Educational Research, Trinity College Dublin, January 1987.

#### Conferences:

M.Ed Quartercentenary Conference, *Reflections on Educational Research*. Published by the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, October 24th 1992.  
 Institute of Guidance Counsellors Conference, Longford, "Personal Reflections on Teaching and Education", March 1991.

#### Interviews:

*John McGahern in Conversation with Dr Michael O'Rourke and Dr Daniel Murphy, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, 18th November 1986.*  
*John McGahern in Conversation with Dr Michael O'Rourke and Dr Daniel Murphy, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, October 14th 1992.*

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*Part III in the next issue of the Leitrim Guardian will reflect on The Power of Literature to Heal and Some Favourite Writers of John McGahern.*