

BIOGRAPHICAL & EDUCATIONAL REFLECTIONS IN THE LIFE OF JOHN MCGAHERN

Part Three: The Power of Literature to Heal, Some Hints for the Aspiring Writer, A Writer Fellow at Trinity College and Some Favourite Writers of John McGahern.

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Introduction

In the *Leitrim Guardian* 2015, part one of biographical and 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 part two, published in the *Leitrim Guardian* 2016, the notion of theocracy in John McGahern's Ireland was under consideration. Here in part three, the main preoccupation will be concerned with the power of literature to heal, some hints for the aspiring writer, John as a Writer Fellow at Trinity College Dublin, and finally, some of the writer's favourite authors.

The Power of Literature to Heal

The writer and psychiatrist, Irvin Yalom, once remarked that the lessons from literature allow the reader to confront existential issues vicariously, to illuminate existence and to assist in the accomplishment of the creative adjustment to living. He states: "The task of the writer, the philosopher and of the therapist as well, is to de-repress, to reacquire the individual with something he or she has known all long. This is precisely the reason that many of the leading existential thinkers and writers, Sartre, Camus, Unamuno, Buber, Kafka, prefer literary exposition rather than formal philosophical argument" (Yalom, 1980, p16). The writer for Yalom must lay all the constructive alternatives before the reader and Yalom compares this method to a fisherman offering various kinds of bait and waiting to see which bait receives a response. Likewise, there is a similar notion in the McGahern conspectus for as he reminds us in one interview, "the truth of fictional characters moves because it is our own truth." (Interview with John McGahern, 20th October 1992.)



Great works of literature teach us about ourselves because they are scorchingly honest. The great novelist, however his or her personality may be split among many characters, is ultimately self-revelatory. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a less auspicious environment for the nurturing of a writer than that described by John McGahern in his novels and short stories. Having lost his mother at the tender age of ten and having to deal with a boorish, authoritarian father, the young writer had indeed to confront the dehumanizing forces which enveloped him in his domestic situation and in the narrow irredentist conservative society in the Ireland of the time. Responding to a suggestion that there must have been in him a strong inherent urge to write, he agrees: "Well, that's the only reason one writes: that one needs to write. If I didn't need to write, I would quit it...By putting it down, one clarifies things for oneself...How can I know what I think until I see what I say" (McGahern Interview, 1987). It was through literature that the young writer began the journey to the interior of his own being: that inward exploration that is the means by which the individual comes to self-knowledge, to insight into his own condition and, by

■ *Seeds of Contemplation: John McGahern in deep reflective thought with his life-long friend and neighbour, Francie McGearty (Courtesy of Luke Early, Early's Pub Mohill)*

extension, to an understanding of the human condition in general:

It was through literature that I fell into consciousness—through the very fact of reading. One began to read for the excitement and pleasure of a story and this was fantastic and magical—like a movie. Then there comes a time when one realises that these stories are actually about one's own life. When one grows up in the unconscious, there is a very serious danger of becoming either mad or eccentric. It is literature that gives one the sense that this is actually normal; that there is nothing wrong about seeing in this way. In that sense, there was the comfort of generality (McGahern, 1992, p64).

When he speaks of "growing up in the unconscious" as being potentially damaging, McGahern would seem to have in mind young people of sensibility, sensitivity, creative

individuals, who fear that their peculiar vision of life is abnormal (McGahern, 1987, p142). Such people, living perhaps in the culturally pinched ambience of a rural environment and as culturally deprived as McGahern's own environment was, come upon Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy, Kafka, Sartre or Camus and hear there an answering, a confirmatory voice that reassures them that they are not alone in their feelings (McGahern, 1992, p64). But the process of moving towards higher levels of consciousness is a painful one. People who live at a low level of consciousness may be denied the richer intellectual and emotional fruits that fall to the self-aware, but they are spared the anguish and the angst that sometimes accompanies self-knowledge. John reflects:

In a way, I think you are a much happier person belonging to the unconscious. It is not a virtue and you would not inflict it on anybody, because it entails a good deal of pain and suffering. And one must remember that for every one person who will grow through the suffering and pain (and I think the notion of consciousness is inseparable from the idea of suffering, just as I think the notion of suffering is inseparable from growth), it will break many more people. It is a distinct contradiction that the only way one grows is through suffering, and that suffering is something that one would wish away from oneself and from those we care for (McGahern Interview, 1987).

The great landmark on the journey towards consciousness is the reality of the inevitability of death; the certainty that the world is a prison cell "from which daily the inmates are led forth to die" in John's own words. He remarks on the safety devices that people bring into action to shield themselves from the reality of their own mortality:

We are different from the animals in that we do understand our own death and accept it, while animals just behave instinctively. Now I think that, while people accept the idea of death, they really accept it for other people. Deep in every normal egotism somehow we think that we are

going to escape in some way. You see this in a very visible form where people say the most terrible things about other people. If they heard even a fraction of the same things about themselves, they would go white. This wouldn't happen to somebody conscious; they mightn't find it very pleasant but they wouldn't be shocked. It is important to keep in mind the advantage of remaining aware of death, of hugging its shadow to you. Such awareness can integrate the darkness with your spark of life and enhance your life while you still have it (Education and the Arts, 1987, p143).

Irvin Yalom offers advice in this regard by suggesting that "the way to value life, the way to feel compassion for others, the way to love anything with greatest depth is to be aware that these experiences are destined to be lost (Yalom, 2008, p147). For McGahern, the writer, the fear of death plays a major role in our internal experience: it haunts as does nothing else; it rumbles continuously under the surface; it is a dark unsettling presence at the rim of consciousness. In a similar way, Yalom accepts the view that life and death are interdependent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively; death whirs continuously beneath the membrane of life and exerts a vast influence upon experience and conduct (Yalom, 1980, p 27-29).

Some Hints for the Teaching of Literature and the Aspiring Writer

The discipline that is involved in serious writing is, as John McGahern suggests, demanding and places an emphasis on observation and concentrated attention. He is in agreement with Guy de Maupassant and quotes a famous remark by de Maupassant for the aspiring writer: "Whatever we want to convey, there is only one word to express it, one verb to animate it, one adjective to qualify it. We must therefore go on seeking that word, verb, or adjective until we have discovered it, and never be satisfied with approximation, never fall back on tricks, even inspired ones, or tomfoolery of language to dodge the difficulty" (Education and the Arts, p133). McGahern is in agreement with both Frank O'Connor and

de Maupassant in placing the greatest emphasis on the development of the powers of observation in the aspiring writer; there is the necessity for looking at the world with concentrated attention. Only in this way, he suggests, can the individual learn to isolate and identify the essential elements of those things he wishes to describe and those thoughts he wishes to express. But, in the teaching of writing in school, the first requirement is that the teacher should cultivate his own garden. John advises:

First of all, read as much as you can. Then go through their essays. Point out what is dull writing; the cliché, the worn language. Get them into the habit of naming the exact names of the things around them. They should never use the word "flower", for example: what types of flower are they talking about? The same with trees. And if someone is walking up the street, it's not just any street. What particular street is he walking up? What are the shop-fronts like? Are there sweet papers or things in the gutter? I find that they pick it up rather quickly (Education and the Arts, p133).

John remarks on the way in which the personality of the writer must come through in his work. He comments: "I think the most interesting description of writing is "the revelation of a temperament in language", because that is actually what is revealed; and that the quality of the temperament is more important than the quality of the material" (Education and the Arts, p133). That is why, he suggests, people are attracted to one writer and not to another: "They are not really thinking about the writing—whether it is good or bad—although that is the suggestion; it is that the temperament that is revealed is unacceptable to them. Take Chateaubriand and Stendhal: they loathed one another although they were both excellent writers. Naturally, you would be attracted to people who are useful to you in your own area of feeling" (Education and the Arts, p133). John considers that helping pupils to develop a natural style, to speak with their own voice, is among the key considerations of most

English teachers. But one of the problems in the teaching of English composition is the lack of guidelines within which to work (McGahern, 1987). It is John's view that there are no publicly verifiable objectives towards which to aim. The only judgement brought to bear on pupils' writing is the subjective one of the teacher. It is thus important that the teacher should have developed his own ideas about what constitutes a good style in writing (McGahern, 1987). He has indeed reservations about the ability of teachers to teach the techniques of writing. John observes:

The teacher should have some knowledge of technique himself. The famous example of Chekhov, where he said that you are much more likely to describe a moonlit night by taking a river with a broken can or bottle in it and the metal, or glass, catches the moonlight, than describing the moonlight pouring down. In one of Michael MacLaverty's novels, there's another image of an old woman whose wedding ring always had to be searched for in the bed-clothes. That tells more about her physical shape than if it was described. That's technique, but very few teachers, I think, know anything about it (Education and the Arts, p 133).

McGahern is probably correct in assuming that the techniques of writing are not very well accentuated, but that is not to accept that the situation is irremediable. It is quite possible for a young person to be good at English and to have achieved good grades at secondary school and at university without ever having had to address himself/herself in detail to this aspect of his discipline. John would like to see some training in the techniques of writing included in teacher preparation; such training would probably be best done on the principle of learning by doing (McGahern, 1987).

Discussing the teaching of literature in schools, John reveals his dissatisfaction with the syllabus, particularly where non-academically minded children are concerned. We are referring here to the 1994 syllabus. He considers:

I think there is a place for the classics and that the classics should be in education. I think the curriculum here has never been thought out. For instance, I gave a lecture to a group of teachers on the notion of reading about six months ago. One very nice woman teacher, who taught in a Technical School, asked me would I come into her school and talk to the children about Persuasion. There was no way I would go into that school and talk to the children about Persuasion. It is an extraordinarily difficult book. I didn't understand it until I was twenty-seven or so, and I'm not sure that I do fully yet. There is no way that sixteen or seventeen-year olds coming from the country could know anything about Persuasion. If they had something like Tarry Flynn, or some other book like it which they could more easily relate to... I think all this has never been looked into seriously; it's a kind of hangover from the Victorian times. There is an Australian writer who was telling me that in Australia he was learning about Wordsworth's lines in Ode To Autumn: "Seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness" and he never saw a mist in his life. You might as well be talking about a landscape of the moon (Education and the Arts, p134).

John feels that students should begin with easily comprehensible material and then be helped to move on to more highly worked and sophisticated literature. Irish literature has a central place in this progression. Among the books John mentions in this connection are Thomas O Criochan's *The Islandman* and Ernie O'Malley's *On Another Man's Wound*. He was of the view that Patrick Kavanagh's Tarry Flynn would more than hold its own on a literature course and would be greatly enjoyed by young people (McGahern, 1987). But one could argue the point as to whether young people will relate more readily to literature that emanates from their own cultural milieu than to literature from another culture. John was clear in his conviction that the aspiring writer must first be a careful and responsive reader and in this regard, the story is told again and again by Joseph O'Connor

whose first work of fiction was in fact a story by John McGahern. "O'Connor recalls how as a young man he took his first tentative steps to becoming a successful novelist by repeatedly copying McGahern's story 'Sierra Leone', changing more of the story's details with each rewriting until, a hundred versions later, the original story had almost completely disappeared" (Van Der Ziel, 2016, p242).

Writer Fellow at Trinity College Dublin

John McGahern was appointed a writer fellow of Trinity College in the early eighties in the School of English which was a very happy experience for him over a six month semester and which he spoke of fondly whenever we met for the occasional pint. "To live in Trinity is to live in quiet surroundings in the very heart of Dublin. Everywhere I'd want to go in the city was but a few minutes walk away. A favourite walk of mine was to leave the room in Rubrics around ten at night, out by the front gate, up Suffolk Street, turning towards Exchequer Street, lingering at some of the menus outside the many restaurants, coming back through the little streets off Grafton Street, perhaps dropping into a bar on the way back before returning to Trinity before the front door closed at twelve" (M Ed Quatercentenary Re-Union Conference, TCD, 24th October, 1992, p68). In our interview with John, Dr Daniel Murphy and I, had the pleasure of a long dialogue covering education, writing styles, politics, the latest gossip, and many other matters! A few key exchanges are worthy of note:

How would you describe your experiences as a writer fellow when you came to live for six months in Trinity College?

"When I was young in this small country, Trinity College was so far removed from our lives and expectations that it seemed a complete elsewhere. We had read in the text books that Wolfe Tone had studied there, and Burke too, and Grattan and Goldsmith; but it was information we memorized and it never took on any life other than its textbook one. Maynooth was real because the priest went there, as were

the colleges of the National University that gave us doctors, solicitors, vets, Presentation Brothers, and the occasional semi-learned rake. Then, when it seemed that I too could attend university, I became aware that Trinity was an actual, living university like the others, that the scholarship was as valid at Trinity as in any of the other places but as a catholic I could never study there: not only was it a mortal sin to attend but a reserved sin as well...If someone had suggested then that thirty years later I would come to live for six months in Trinity as the Writer Fellow, I would have laughed...When I came to live in Dublin in the 1950's, Trinity was a prominent part of the landscape of what was then a fairly intimate city: the front statues, the railings, the blue clock, the playing fields within the walls, the thin, human stream passing in and out of the front gate, the accents mostly the accent of command. I knew nobody who studied or worked there. I suppose the Reserved sin (Catholics were forbidden to attend Trinity College by the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid) hovered over the place, but by the time I rid my own mind of that childish darkness it was a place I had no connection with. Looking back, I think the Trinity of that time lived very much within its own pale within the city, and this had its origins, like the Reserved sin, in history, in caste and class". (M Ed Quatercentenary Re-Union Conference, TCD, 24th October, 1992, p67).

The beauty of these passages in terms of style, exemplifies a subtle, austere and affectionate way of writing. He writes with such sedulous realism, in plain ordinary language. Not one word is ever wasted. There is no great tension or confusion about the material and writing. For John the material doesn't matter; it is how the writer handles the material that matters as the reader will see in the following passage.

I came to take up residency one wet, mild January evening. I was given keys and shown to the house where I would be living, number 25 Rubrics, XXV was cut on the

stone lintel above the doorway. Wide, freshly scrubbed stairs led to my room on the first floor. The dark brown door was solid and heavy. The room was enormous. To the left of the door three tall windows looked out on to the Front Square. I could see all the way across the cobbled square to the archway at the front gate, a long sweeping view at that time of evening, with the rain falling beneath the lamps. On one side of the windows the branches of the huge Oregon maple reached darkly up above the lawn. Each window had its own white wooden shutters, the wood warped with age. The long heavy brown curtains closed easily. Across the room three similar windows looked out on New Square. There was a writing desk, a single bed in a corner, a wardrobe, a brown sofa, two brown armchairs, a plain table and a few chairs. The whole sense of space was very beautiful...A gaitered clergyman could be imagined easily in this room, a servant putting coal on the fire, a horse tethered to the railing below. And it was freezing cold. Inside the room it was colder than it was outside on the cobbles, and it took the small gas fire more than a day to warm it. Behind a white door in the corner I discovered the smallest kitchen I had ever seen" (M Ed Re-Union Conference, TCD, 24th October 1992, p67).

What a beautiful passage of simple, crisp writing, and a wonderful example of concentrated attention through the lens of an acute observational code. His piercingly accurate eye for resonant minutiae blanket in the same way his novels and short stories with individuals and people whom we can all identify with. The writing is precise, uncomplicated, controlled. He has that pure artistic touch to elevate his writing to captivate the reader with a thrilling and memorable subtlety of style. The following passage is another good example.

"I grew to love that room, all the more watchfully since I knew I'd have to leave it in June. I could look on the square all day

from one of those high windows: the students hurrying in all weathers between classes, sometimes eagerly, more often anxiously, greeting or meeting, avoiding each other, flirting, impressing, courting. A professor goes by in emphatic conversation with a favourite student, the student frozen into an attitude of listening as they walk. A group of academics slowly cross towards the Senior Common Room, their relative importance measured by the quantity of attention each receives. A white-hatted cook runs between buildings. The porters move from car to car examining parking discs. A young faculty wife drives up and takes her baby in a basket from the back seat of her car. Always there was something of interest happening. For this reason the window at which I wrote and read was kept permanently shuttered, the heavy brown curtain drawn throughout the day...To live in Trinity is to live in close awareness of the great dead who worked and studied there. The person I found myself turning to most often when I was there was John Butler Yeats. Reading J B Yeats's letters in that same place where the old man in a hurry walked and studied when young deepened the sense of the actual day of the college even more than the bells that rang out our hours. I was very happy living in Trinity, but happiness is its own completion and cannot be described" (M Ed Quatercentenary Re-Union Conference, 24th October 1992, p69).

Favourite Books and Writers: Reading and Writing

Growing up in Aghawillan while attending primary school, John reminds us that there was a small collection of The Talbot Press books, mostly of the popular, mildly patriotic, which created an initial interest in reading". There was a good book of Daniel Corkery's called *The Threshold of Quiet*, and a lot of patriotic stuff—Mitchel's *Jail Journey*, Meagher of the *Sword*. There weren't many of them; you could get them all into a fair-sized box. There might have been twenty books, but that would be it" (McGahern, 1987). But at about the time he began his secondary



■ **Laura Lake/Lough Rowan—
A writer's paradise!**

education, the young teenager had a stroke of luck. There was a Big House nearby where his father lived which had an excellent library. John was given the freedom of the books there and it was in this way that he acquired his literary education. He states:

There was a Protestant house quite close by that had an enormous library and I had the run of that from when I was about eleven until I was eighteen. I often used to borrow five or six books a week. There seemed to be a lot of books about the Rocky Mountains; there were many of Zane Grey and Jeffrey Farnol; there was Scott. I would have read all Scott at that time, and Charles Dickens too. One didn't differentiate. I would have read everything I could get my hands on. It was an enormous library. I would just get lost in a book.

This is a good description of the total immersion in literature: the indiscriminate reading of

books of all kinds and quality. One wonders what would have been the consequence for the young McGahern if this treasure-house had not been available to him. Every writer is also a reader and in *Memoir*, John stressed again and again the relationship between reading and writing. In *Love of the World* Essays, he again states:

I came to write through reading. It is such an obvious path that I hesitate to state it, but so much confusion now surrounds the artistic act that the simple and the obvious may be in need of statement. I think reading and writing are as close as they are separate. In my case, I came to read through pure luck. I had great good fortune when I was ten or eleven. I was given the run of a library. I believe it changed my life and without it I would never have become a writer (McGahern, 2009, p87).

Robert Louis Stevenson noted that the most influential books and the truest in their influence, are works of fiction. "They do not pin the reader to a dogma, which he must afterwards discover to be inexact; they do not teach him a lesson, which he must afterwards

unlearn. They repeat, they rearrange, they clarify the lessons of life; they disengage us from ourselves, they constrain us to the acquaintance of others; and they show us the web of experience, not as we can see it for ourselves, but with a singular change—that monstrous, consuming ego of ours being, for the nonce, struck out. To be so, they must be reasonably true to the human comedy; and any work that is so serves the turn of instruction" (Stevenson, 2010, p105). In similar fashion, John McGahern's finest works of fiction, *Amongst Women* and *That they May Face the Rising Sun* have given readers a certain rugged austerity of joy, a certain innocence, novels to send the blood into the reader's face. John had an extraordinary capacity to clarify the lessons of life, to constrain us when we become angry with our neighbour. He knew that the angry picture of human faults, is not great art; we can all be angry with our neighbour; what we want is to be shown, not solely his defects, of which we are too conscious, but his merits, to which we are too blind. In reading McGahern fiction, it is the reader that is hunted down; these are your own faults that are dragged into the day and numbered, with lingering relish, with cruel cunning and precision.

During one of our discussions at Trinity College Dublin, Interview with John McGahern, 20th October 1992). I said to John:

In previous conversations John, you have referred to some of your favourite writers like Beckett, Chekhov, MacLeod, Flaubert, Proust, Scott Fitzgerald, Yeats, Jane Austin, Goldsmith, the Sicilian writers Sciascia and Pirandello. You are particularly fond of certain books, Goethe's *Life*, the *Essays of Montaigne*. You now mention John Butler Yeats (the poet's father) with special affection:"

John replied:

"To live with his letters is to live with some of the best company in the world, irascible, charming, pigheaded, extraordinarily intelligent, always passionate.

Whenever I look at Front Square, Trinity College, I cannot but think of his beautiful letter on dreaming, in which the spirit of Berkeley surely breathes. Yeats wrote: 'My theory is that we are always dreaming—chairs, tables, women and children, our wives and sweethearts, the people in the street, all in various ways and with various powers are the starting point of dreams...Sleep is dreaming away from the facts and wakefulness is dreaming in close contact with the facts, and since facts excite our dreams and feed them we get as close as possible to the facts if we have the cunning and the genius of poignant feeling... Scattered everywhere throughout his letters are jewels that are often echoed in his son's best lines (M Ed Quatercentenary Re-Union Conference, TCD, 24th October 1992, p69)."

In Stanley Van Der Ziel's wonderful new text entitled *John McGahern and The Imagination of Tradition* (2016), he devotes a chapter to each of the John's favourite writers, Shakespeare, Yeats, Proust, Synge and Beckett and states that McGahern found in those authors versions of many areas of literary thought. Interestingly, we learn in this particular study that John "spent most of his adult life intermittently rereading Jane Austin's novels and during his final stay in the Mater Hospital, where he died on 30th March 2006, he brought only a single book, and that book was *Mansfield Park*" (Van Der Ziel, p53). We learn from this same writer the three books that John described as his desert island books: "Shakespeare's plays, Yeats' poems and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*" (Van Der Ziel, p26 and p249). However, there are other writers, mainly Irish, which John alluded to in our interview of some years earlier. He states:

The writings of Oliver Goldsmith, W.B.Yeats, MacLaverty, O'Crithan, Frank O'Connor, Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney, are the great writers in Irish literature to be appreciated, weighed and winnowed...I should have mentioned Wordsworth earlier. Everyone has been

influenced by Wordsworth, a certain innocence, a night of the stars, "the silence that is in the lonely hills"; something of the cold thrill of dawn, cling to his work and give it a particular address to what is best in us. Yeats and Wordsworth are great spiritual writers with magic in their words (Interview with John McGahern, October 20th, 1992).

McGahern was clear in his conviction that no writer exists in isolation. If a writer is to be an important and original artist, he or she must first be a careful and responsive reader aware of the shape of the tradition in which their work exists (Van Der Ziel, 2016, p2). In relation to reading and writing, writing for McGahern was a form of dialogue with the great authors who had come before, 'breaking bread with the dead', in continuity with his forebears. He reminds us:

To continually break bread with such company is almost as necessary for our spiritual lives as plain bread is for our daily sustenance. To write without reading is an act of barbarism, as it breaks the continuity of the tradition. It may even be, in its refusal to break bread, a form of bad manners!...There are basic structures that one leans on, whether in speech or in meeting people. One could say that there are manners of the intellect as well as social manners, and that not to have read certain books is almost as ill-mannered as not being able to greet somebody coming into a room (Education and the Arts, 1987, pp19-43) and an (Interview with John McGahern, October 20th, 1992).

Conclusion

Art is triumph over the impossible. It is almost impossible to fulfil creative talent; in fact it is impossible, because recognition of talent within oneself seems to come hand-in-hand with a critical faculty. The artist has an awareness of excellence, of perfection always out of reach but attracting compulsively the focus of intense strife. It is towards perfection

that the artist is drawn with a mystical sense of urgency and relentlessness. Professor Ivor Browne suggests that "it is as if what he is struggling for is not his but only something for the production of which he is responsible, something which he is charged to drag out into the light of day. You may call it perfection, source, or grace, if you will; and, once aware of its existence, how can the artist be satisfied with less? His work seldom comes close enough to his goal or his expectation of art's potential to satisfy him" (Browne, *The Writings of Ivor Browne*, 2013, Cork: Atrium Press, p211). It is said of Charlie Parker, one of the most creative jazz musicians of them all, that when asked what he considered his finest recording, he replied, "Man, I haven't made it yet". This seems to be almost universally true of the artist, whether novelist, poet, painter, playwright or composer. What he has done may be good enough, better than anything he has done before, even better than every other artist who has tried to do the same thing, but if he is a true artist it still will not be good enough. Poets have said that it is a matter of finding the poem. It is as if the completed work is there all the time but the poet has to find his or her way to it, chip away at the dross to expose the art in its wholeness. It is like cutting a diamond, which on the outside is dull and opaque but holds the jewel within. Browne considers that creative artists are their own cruellest taskmasters. They never let up on themselves and much of their behaviour can be traced back to what Sigmund Freud called the wisdom of the unconscious; by that I mean that even when they are not aware of accomplishing anything, the deeper struggle and search is going on unabated, out of ordinary consciousness (Browne, p211). John McGahern spoke to this author of his constant quest for perfection and of the many drafts of a piece of work, sometimes exceeding ten and twelve drafts crafted in long hand. For John, writing was a seven day event and each morning he visited his desk and commenced the process. Even when out on the farm attending his cattle or on his way to the mart, ideas came to the surface from the deep swamps of the personal unconscious. These ideas had to be

consigned to paper, otherwise, they would be lost to consciousness. Words for him have always been presences as well as meanings:

As in reading, when we become conscious that we are no longer reading romances or fables or adventure but versions of our own life, so it suddenly came to me that while I seemed to be playing with words in reality I was playing with my own life. And words, for me, have always been presences as well as meanings. Through words I could experience my own life with more reality than ordinary living (McGahern, 2009, p9).

Not only then does creative writing seem to emerge out of struggle, it seems to need conflict and pain and confusion from which resolution can be sought. Suffering? I believe that the great artist is born just like the great teacher, the great psychotherapist, the great footballer, but the artist takes advantage of sufferings. This is neither to say that suffering is always creative for, indeed, suffering and poverty destroy many people, and kills creativity, nor that suffering makes the artist, but that the genius is one who seems to be able to use suffering creatively, as grist to the mill. Goethe once suggested that "you have to have chaos in your life in order to give birth to a dancing star". Ernest Hemingway remarked also: "use the damn hurt when you get it and don't cheat" for he believed that comfort seems to be anathema to art: bland comfort, middle-class contentment and mediocrity produce lack of awareness; he also wrote: "the world breaks everyone and afterwards many are stronger at the broken places". It is the view of Ivor Browne that: "affluent materialism seems to spell the death of creativity" (Browne, p 213). It was through literature that John McGahern discovered the sense that it is actually normal to grow up in the unconscious and that there is nothing wrong about seeing the human condition and the world in this way and dealing with its disappointments and disenchantments. For suffering is the cutting edge of genius and it

may not be an accident that the long suffering, struggle and poverty of the Irish has resulted in Ireland producing most of the great writers and playwrights in the English language, from a tiny population compared to Britain or America. It is hard to imagine a James Joyce, a Samuel Beckett, a Sean O'Casey, a Seamus Heaney, a Patrick Kavanagh, or indeed a John McGahern, emerging from a well-adjusted, affluent environment.

John's life was one of great suffering from losing his mother at the tender age of ten to dealing with an aggressive, uncouth, bullying father. His years in third-level education, in particular in the introspective and claustrophobic atmosphere of St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, which he portrayed so vividly in *The Dark*, his sacking from his teaching position in Belgrove Primary School, Clontarf, were all horrendous episodes in his early life. In hindsight, it is true to state that these experiences were like grist to the mill for the creative artist and he might well agree with Vincent Van Gogh's remark: "Loneliness, worries, difficulties, the unsatisfied need for kindness and sympathy—that's what is hard to bear. The mental suffering of sadness and disappointment undermines us more than dissipation-us, I say, who find ourselves the happy possessors of disordered hearts (Van Gogh, 1999. P146).

John McGahern's existential world is thus a dark, disenchanting, Kierkegaardian one. The main preoccupation in life is concerned with survival. Survival and morality are juxtaposed in some of the wonderful passages unveiled in these interviews for the three part series of articles as appeared here, and in the last two issues of the *Leitrim Guardian*. In the existential world of John McGahern happiness may be possible but can be known only in retrospect. "The days were quiet. They did not feel particularly quiet or happy but through them ran a sense, like an underground river, that there would come a time when these days would be looked back on as happiness, all that life could give of contentment and peace

(McGahern, 2002, p206). And finally, in one powerful passage of particular beauty and significance, John lays bare the key given for an understanding of the human condition:

With a rush of feeling he felt that this must be happiness. As soon as the thought came to him, he fought it back, blaming the whiskey. The very idea was as dangerous as presumptive speech; happiness could not be sought or worried into being, or even fully grasped; it should be allowed its own slow pace so that it passes unnoticed, if it ever comes at all (McGahern, 2002, p183).

Professor Howard Gardner in his celebrated text (*Creating Minds*, 1993, p260) holds the view that all creative artists adopt a position of marginality in order to survive in the society. He states: "I have encountered a feeling of marginality and the capacity to exploit that marginality in the service of one's life mission. The case of the artist also suggests that when such marginality does not arise of its own accord, the would-be creator may attempt to raise his or her ante of marginality to a level of fruitful asynchrony. Since marginality only makes sense within a possibility of community, one will observe an oscillation in the creator's life between feelings and moments of marginality, and feelings and moments of community." Perhaps, this is another way of recognising that highly creative individuals belong in part to the whole world, and in part to themselves alone, with the oscillation between these poles providing much of the positive and negative asynchronies in the life of the creator. "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). For John McGahern, literature is a way of seeing and knowing the whole world. He reminds us:

A time comes when the way we read has to change drastically or stop...This

change is linked with our growing consciousness, consciousness that we will not live forever and that all human life is essentially in the same fix. We have to discard all the tenets that we have been told until we have succeeded in thinking them out for ourselves. We find that we are no longer reading books for the story and that all stories are more or less the same story; and we begin to come on certain books that act like mirrors. What they reflect is something dangerously close to our own life and the society in which we live. A new, painful excitement enters the way we read. We search out these books, and these books only, the books that act as mirrors. The quality of the writing becomes more important than the quality of the material out of which the pattern or story is shaped.

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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 Gardner, Howard (1993) *Creating Minds*. New York: Basic Books.

Maher, Eamon (2011) *The Church and Its Spire: John McGahern*

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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 2008-2016.

John McGahern A Private World
 RTE DVD Arts Series Production 2005

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, 'The Church and its Spire', 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 1987.

John McGahern in Conversation with Dr Michael O'Rourke and Dr Daniel Murphy, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, 20th October 1992.

Awards and Honours:

John McGahern received all of the literary awards: The AE Award 1962; The Macauley Fellowship 1964; The Arts Council of Great Britain Awards 1966, 1968, 1971, 1978; The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon Award 1980; The Irish American Foundation Award 1985; Chevalier d'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres 1989; The Irish Times/Aer Lingus Literary Award 1990; The Hughes and Hughes Award 1980; The GPA Award 1992; and The Prix Etranger Ecureuil 1994. He was short-listed for The Booker Prize in 1990 for *Amongst Women*. His work has been translated into many languages.

Professor M.L.O'Rourke is a lecturer in the School of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin, and The Military College, The Curragh. He is a Visiting Professor to the University of Indiana, South Bend, USA, and to the Jungian Institute, Zurich, Switzerland. He is an External Examiner at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland. His most recent published work includes: *Grief, Bereavement and Loss; The Psychology of Suicide; Spirituality and Psychotherapy; Carl Gustav Jung: An Icon Among Icons; Multiculturalism and Cross-Cultural Counselling; Life-Span Development and Career Regeneration*. Dr O'Rourke is a native of Aughavas, Co Leitrim, and has represented club and county at all levels in Gaelic Football.



■ Anna Gallagher and her husband, the late Pat Gallagher MRCVS, Mohill, at a dinner dance in the 1950's