

INTRODUCING JOHN MCGAHERN

Art is an attempt to create a world in which we can live: if not for long or forever, still a world of the imagination over which we can reign, and by reign I mean to reflect purely on our situation through this created world of ours, this Medusa's mirror, allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable. John McGahern

It seems appropriate to allow John McGahern himself to begin this brief account of his life and work with his own views on the role of art, for few other writers have managed to realise as effectively the realities of their life experience in literature, or as Denis Sampson has written "to sift through the familiar material and the established fictional modes in order to "see" the essence of his own experience in his given place and time that the ordinary life of farmers and policemen and teachers become the exotic, the mysterious.

Born in Dublin in 1934 McGahern grew up in Ballinamore county Leitrim and Cootehall, county Roscommon. While his early years were spent with his mother, a national school teacher in Ballinamore, McGahern was raised by his father, who was sergeant of Cootehall Garda station, after his mother's death in 1945. He was educated at the Presentation Brothers college in Carrick-on-Shannon before attending St. Patrick's teacher training college in Drumcondra where he graduated in 1954. He began teaching the following year at the highly regarded St. John the Baptist Boys National school in Clontarf. In 1957 he graduated with a BA from University College Dublin.

In 1962, McGahern was awarded the prestigious AE Memorial Award from the Arts Council for an extract from the novel *The Barracks*, which would be published the following year. The book began to establish McGahern's reputation for uncompromising realism in his work as it detailed, through flashbacks, the memories of a middle-aged woman dying of cancer. It also introduced McGahern's deceitfully accessible plain style which disguises a unique stylistic meticulousness and inner order. The book also won the Macauley Fellowship award and this allowed McGahern to spend a year living outside Ireland in London, Spain, France and Germany .

McGahern's second novel *The Dark* was published in 1965. This book, dealing with the experiences of an adolescent boy growing up in Roscommon with an abusive father and exposed to clerical tyranny, has been described as the best account of Irish adolescence since Joyce. However, the book was banned by the Censorship Board and this event and McGahern's subsequent dismissal from his teaching post at the behest of archbishop John Charles McQuaid, became a matter of huge public interest, featuring heavily in the national media for a time as well as been raised in the Dáil.

McGahern left Ireland following his dismissal and would spend the next ten years in England, France, Spain and the United States. He has admitted that the banning of his book and subsequent dismissal left him "unable to write for three or four years after the business" and it wasn't until 1970 that his next work was published, the collection of short stories *NightLines*. This was followed in 1974 by his third novel *Leavetaking* which partially portrayed the circumstances of his dismissal from his teaching position. McGahern moved back to Ireland in the same year with his second wife, Madeline Green and settled on a farm in county Leitrim . He published his second collection of short stories,

Getting through in 1978 and the following year his third novel *The Pornographer*. Another collection of his short stories, *High Ground*, was published in 1985, and this was followed in 1990 by arguably his finest work to date, the novel *Amongst Women*. This work won for McGahern the Irish Times/Aer Lingus Literature award and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The book details the final years and recollections of a politically disillusioned former IRA soldier, who dominates his family on a small farm in the west of Ireland and has been described by John Banville as a "masterpiece" and Thomas Kilroy as "one of the most significant achievements in Irish fiction." In 1998 the novel was made into a four part award-winning mini series. McGahern has also written a play, *The Power of Darkness* which was staged by the Abbey in 1991. A compilation of his short stories, *Collected Stories*, was published in 1992.

As well as the awards mentioned above, McGahern has also won the Irish American Foundation Award (1985), the Chevalier des Arts et letters (1989), and the GPA award. His most recent novel, *That they May Face the Rising Sun*, won the Kerry Ingredients Award at the Listowel Writer's Week in the summer of 2002. Desmond Traynor's review of this book in *Books Ireland* could well be applied to McGahern's work generally:

The impeccable gift he has for orchestrating conversation between people is perhaps his greatest conversational resource. For, what's finally important in fiction, far more important than ideas or wit or style or knowledge or theories, and just as important as vision, are moments of emotional truth. McGahern pulls it off every time without a false note or jarring moment.

Given that McGahern managed arguably more successfully than any other writer of his generation to capture in his work the intimate realities of life as he experienced it in rural Ireland, it is appropriate that his final book should have been his autobiography, *Memoir*, a work of heart-rendering beauty and moving intimacy that brought to life two powerful presences that recur throughout his work: his mother and father.