



# A writer who returned from exile to become a beloved figure

## Obituary

Acclaimed as the foremost existential writer in English of his generation, John McGahern wrote in a plain style that allowed a large audience access to his fiction. He made his name in the 1960s with two powerful novels, *The Barracks* and *The Dark*, and the banning of the latter as "obscene", followed by his sacking as a teacher, attracted a notoriety that he did not seek.

*Amongst Women* (1990), praised by Séamus Deane as "millimetre away from perfection", is his masterpiece. Written in the fullness of his power, it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won him *The Irish Times*/Aer Lingus Fiction Prize. A BBC/RTÉ television adaptation screened in 1998 won several awards. *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) was a popular success that garnered several literary awards. Referring to the book's title, he said: "Irish culture is a great deal older than Christianity and people were buried so they would face the rising sun. All the pedantic priests would try to get them to face the church as the centre of authority, but they always thought the sun was more powerful than the church."

A non-believer, he nevertheless acknowledged Catholicism as the most important influence on his life. "In a very poor society it was my first introduction to ceremony and colour and sacrament. Before the printed word, churches were the bibles of the poor. In that sense the Catholic Church was my first book and it remains my most important book."

He saw through the "foolishness" of nationalism. "One is given the place one is born into, but first and last one is a human being. And the humanity is much more interesting than the locality or nation." He resisted toeing a nationalist line, his friend Dick Walsh explained, because "he comes from a place not far from the Border and his own experience is too much for that, it is too real and genuine".

Born in Dublin on November 12th, 1934, and brought up in Ballinamore, Co Leitrim, he was the eldest of the seven children of Francis McGahern, a Garda sergeant, and his wife, Susan (née McManus), a teacher. He and his siblings spent their early years with their mother and when she died of cancer, just before his 10th birthday, the children moved in with their father to Cootehall Garda Barracks. "There was a certain sense that I was going back to the

fortress of the enemy, of living in an alien place," he later recalled. Asked about his relationship with his father, he said he was a "dutiful son". Books borrowed from Protestant neighbours stimulated his literary imagination, and his early reading included *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, *David Copperfield* as well as the Westerns of Zane Gray. He also enjoyed comics like the *Wizard*, *Hotspur* and *Rover*. In later life, he grew to admire Turgenev, Flaubert, Jane Austen, George Eliot and Evelyn Waugh, and he counted among the classics of Irish literature Ernie O'Malley's *On Another Man's Wound* and *An tOileánach* by Tomás Ó Criomhthain.

Educated by the Presentation Brothers in Carrick-on-Shannon, he won a scholarship to St Patrick's Teacher Training College, Drumcondra. Qualifying in 1954, he taught for a year in Drogheda, Co Louth, before taking up a post at St John the Baptist national school in Clontarf. He studied by night for a BA at University College Dublin, graduating in 1957.

Notwithstanding the oppressive social and moral climate of 1950s Ireland, he found much to enjoy in Dublin. "There were many good second-hand book shops, there was the National Library, there were plenty of cinemas, there was an incredible number of small theatres. I remember one very good company which would perform Pirandello and Chekhov at the back of the gas showroom."

He began work in 1957 on his first novel, *The End and the Beginning of Love*. It was never published but a shortened version appeared in the London literary magazine *X*. In 1962 an abstract of *The Barracks* won him the AE Memorial Award, and the completed book made a tremendous impact when published in 1963. Awarded the Macauley Fellowship in 1964, he took a year's sabbatical and lived abroad – mainly in London, though he also travelled to Spain, France and Germany.

In 1965 he married the Finnish theatre director and translator, Annikki Laaki. That year also his second novel, *The Dark*, was published, immediately falling foul of the Censorship Board. Returning to Ireland, a letter from his school manager, Fr Patrick Carton, informed him that his services as a teacher were no longer required; no reason was given. In time it emerged that Archbishop John Charles McQuaid of Dublin was involved in the sacking.

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation refused to take up his case. An official told him that if the book alone was at issue, it might have been possible to do something for him. "But by going and marrying this foreign woman in a registry office you have made yourself a hopeless case." He was further pointedly reminded that there were "hundreds and thousands of Irish women going round with their tongues out looking for a man". He decided not to contest the banning of *The Dark*, maintaining a public silence and discouraging protests on his behalf by other writers, including Samuel Beckett. "I was secretly ashamed. Not because of the book, but because this was our country and we were making bloody fools of ourselves."

Years later, he expressed the view that "literary censorship is nearly always foolish, since it succeeds in attracting attention to what it seeks to suppress. There is no taste so tantalising as that of forbidden fruit."

Modesty prevented him from adding that the banning of his book undoubtedly hastened the end of the censorship regime introduced in 1929.

Moving to London, he worked on building sites and as a supply teacher. He also wrote occasional reviews for the *Times Literary Supplement* and adapted 19th-century novels for radio. He identified with his fellow-emigrants, and later noted how the experience of the Irish in Britain was written out of Irish history, in contrast to the official celebration of Irish America. In 1968 he became a research fellow at the University of Reading and resumed writing fiction. The following year he travelled to the United States, beginning a long professional association with Colgate University, New York.

In 1970 his short-story collection, *Nightlines*, was published. By this time his marriage had ended and he returned to Ireland with his partner, Madeline Green, an American photographer. They lived for a time in Connemara before buying a farm near Mohill, Co Leitrim, and marrying in 1973. Their hopes of self-sufficiency quickly evaporated, and his writing subsidised the farm, the animals becoming "more pets than anything else".

He published two novels in the 1970s, *The Leavetaking* (1974) and *The Pornographer* (1979), as well as a second collection of short stories, *Getting Through* (1978). The *New York Times Book Review* praised the "lyrical touch" of *The Leavetaking*, while *The Irish Times* noted the "creative and recreative energy" evident in *The Pornographer*. A third collection of stories, *High Ground* (1985), followed the publication of a revised edition of *The Leavetaking* (1984).

A particularly personal novel, *The Leavetaking* focuses on exile, betrayal and despair. Working with the French

translator, Alain Delahaye, he felt that the second half was unsatisfactory and rewrote it. It was a bold step, one that few novelists are prepared to take, and it resulted in a better book.

His play, *The Power of Darkness*, had mixed reviews when staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1991. However, his mastery of the short story was confirmed by *The Collected Stories* (1992), which included a novella, *The Country Funeral*. For him, the short story "generally makes one point and one point only, and has a very strict rhythm, and every word counts in it".

*Memoir* (2005) was a fitting finale to an outstanding literary career, an important work in its own right and one of the great critical and popular successes of recent times. In this newspaper, Declan Kiberd described it as the personal utterance of an artist too serene for self-assertion, "but one who once again allows an entire culture to speak through him, as once it expressed itself through the scrupulous, unshowy words of Tomás Ó Criomhthain".

Denis Donoghue in the *New York Review of Books* said it had taken McGahern many years and four novels to write his anger out of his system – "good riddance is slow work". He praised the remarkable beauty of the prose, concluding: "The risk of *ennui* in the quiet life is clear, but it is a risk McGahern has very impressively negotiated."

He enjoyed an international reputation and his work, which stands comparison with Joyce and Beckett, was particularly popular in France among both academic and general readers. Official recognition came in the form of the *Chevalier des Arts et Lettres* awarded in 1989, and in 1996 he received the *Prix Étranger Écureuil*.

He was in 1985 the recipient of the Irish-American Foundation Award and in 2002 received a PEN Lifetime Achievement Award. Trinity College Dublin, University College Galway, Université de Poitiers and Dublin Institute of Technology conferred honorary doctorates on him. In 2003 he was appointed to the Arts Council.

His wife Madeline Green survives him.

John McGahern: born November 12th, 1934; died March 30th, 2006

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