

University of Galway Research Repository

McGahern's Memory Lane

Title	McGahern's Memory Lane
Author(s)	Kenny, John
Publication Date	2007-10-06
Publication information	Kenny, J. (2007, 6 October) 'McGahern's Memory Lane.' On the John McGahern Archive at NUI Galway. 'The Irish Times', 'Weekend': 12.
Publisher	The Irish Times
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/473

How it Grows: The John McGahern Archive

JOHN KENNY

They say that Dublin, should it ever meet its end, could be easily and precisely rebuilt brick by brick courtesy of the sheer detail of James Joyce's depiction of the city in *Ulysses*. One of the very few subsequent Irish fiction writers whose careful formal architecture and sensory intricacies can justifiably be mentioned in the same breath as Joyce's, John McGahern in his work is the keeper of another equally important set of plans. In the much more likely event that the Irish countryside should be damaged beyond all recognition, we will at least have recourse to McGahern's books where there is evocation aplenty to help it all take root in the mind again. From his lines whole hedgerows could spring up, fields, flowers, animals and birds, freshwater fish, gardens and farmyards, bogs and laneways. And this would be no prototype for a casual pastoral idyll; it would all be a going concern, with crops to be sown, labours to be spent, harvests to be hard won. In his fiction McGahern was a forensic naturalist, and such is the ecology of his oeuvre that readers from abroad and from the future may readily visualise whole seasons of a full year's turning in rural Ireland during the twentieth century.

Since he had immediate knowledge of the environment and people he directly adapted to his fiction, it is understandable that McGahern is often thought of as primarily a kind of immersed sociologist, a spontaneous spokesperson for a small-town way of life which, over the course of the half-century he spent writing about it, was already beginning to change irreversibly. Certainly, his fiction has crucial social-documentary aspects. He was our most studious chronicler of human relationships in the familial and local context, a proud reporter of the modes of defence and attack deployed in village gossip, of the deft and unspoken social negotiations that comprise parish manners. He was the celebrant of an entire rural demotic and its glorious lip services and pleasantries, the humour of its self-confident maxims, the frequent bleakness of its non sequiturs. He was, in the broader sense, the empathetic recorder of a troubled national history, not in the sense of its facts and information – though some of that is there too – but of its psychiatric fallout, of what it meant in terms of conscience and consciousness to be alive on the ground in and after that dawn that seemed the foundation of the Irish Free State.

It might be supposed that anyone interested enough to keep their eyes and ears open in Ireland might achieve something similar, but McGahern was supreme in his treatment of these areas because of the quality and extent of the work he invested in getting it all down right on paper. To try, even via this distinction, to separate the Ireland McGahern both loved and criticised from other vital aspects of his achievement would be foolhardy; it would be as well nigh impossible to do as to resolve the old problem of identifying the exact difference between form and content in writing. A word with expansive meanings that applies above all others to McGahern is useful, however, in helping us to think about some of the related issues. That word is Cultivate.

With the enduring interest he had in the lifestyles, attitudes and obsessions that emerged from the cultivation of the Irish land, McGahern was a glorious embodiment of the fact that a regional sensibility is not mutually exclusive to a highly cultivated and internationally minded taste in, and talent for, literature. That he might have cultivated one side or other of these two dispositions to suit himself in particular

situations is perhaps not the least engaging thought left us by the delightfully mischievous persona he could present in public. Beyond these aspects of cultivation, the word applies to his work in all of its original meanings: to prepare, to foster the growth of, to develop, to improve, to care for, to study, to labour. The finest proof of this is the John McGahern Archive, held at the James Hardiman Library of NUI Galway.

The John McGahern Archive is an extensive collection of manuscripts and associated materials donated by the author to the Hardiman Library in 2003. Additional documents were donated by Madeline McGahern after her husband's death in 2006. The contents of the Archive, all of which are in excellent condition, relate primarily to McGahern's fiction itself, and there are copious handwritten and typed drafts of all the published novels and stories. There are also drafts of some unpublished fiction, including, most intriguingly, a number of versions of his first completed novel, *The End or the Beginning of Love*, written between 1957 and 1961. As well as other drafts relating to McGahern's work in non-fiction and in drama and television, there is a range of extra materials that illuminate major moments of his career, from a letter of 1963 from the great William Maxwell of *The New Yorker* to an Irish talent scout, enthusing about the story 'Strandhill, The Sea' and accepting it for publication; to reading lists and letters from McGahern's periods as a writing teacher in the US; to correspondence relating to agents, publishers, editors and literary festivals. Then there are the more personal items, such as identity documents and records of earnings, and correspondence concerning his purchase of his farm in Leitrim. The letters from his father, some of which McGahern included in *Memoir*, are of key interest given the famously regulating force of father figures in the work.

To have this Archive is like having a dedicated guide take us by the hand to lead us with McGahern through what he called 'the long and complicated journey of writing'. And there is a poignant immutability about how the end of that journey is signposted in the Archive. There are handwritten and typescript drafts of the short self-reflective essay 'God and Me', one of his final published pieces; and then, relating to a five-page document, there is item number 1274: '11 August 2005 – 21 March 2006, Oncology Diary for John McGahern'.

Aside from the argument that a society's present and future cultural health may be measured by its organisation of and its attentiveness to the records of its past, and aside from the natural attractiveness of the John McGahern Archive to enthusiasts of his writing from across the world, there are further particular reasons why this archive should be paid the proper respect of frequent use.

Subjectivity and objectivity, the interior and exterior worlds, must at some level meet in the work of art – in the artist's work *on* the work of art – as matters of equal force. This must be so if the artist's vision is to have any general truth and relevance, and is especially and ideally so with McGahern because, permanently working with closely personal subjects, he strove, through his lengthy processes of composition, to achieve strict emotional distance so that his art could become less about himself and more about others and the world outside. This is why his Archive is a special kind of practical resource for anyone interested in the society and culture of twentieth-century Ireland. The Irish milieu McGahern lived and worked in for almost all his life is meticulously revealed as he builds up in these manuscripts a keen sense of the observable world around him, its sights and its sounds, its historical inheritance and legacies, its customs and beliefs.

But what is of equal importance with this Archive is the sheer phenomenon of watching a man at work on his material, of seeing, on another level, the ordinary

public world become transfigured through the stylistic cultivations of an extraordinarily energetic imagination. In its finished appearance on the published page, McGahern's prose is beautifully frightening; it seems to have an unearthly completion, an air of predestination. But with the Archive material we get to see through to the core plans, the DNA of the fully formed creations, the stages he went through before he could hand over to the reader a kind of pruned organism. A formidable lesson in the craft is available here to anyone interested in either the study, or the sheer act, of literature, and even a cursory glance at the voluminous handwritten pages, constantly rewritten with sometimes only small variations and constantly emended again when transferred to type, will reveal the pure truth of the maxim that amateurs are those who sit around waiting for inspiration while the professionals are those who pull their chairs up to their desks each day and work at inspiration.

Even though he has passed away, a writer, like any other man, can in some way live on in those left behind by virtue of the power of memory that in McGahern's work is a ceremoniously exalted human faculty. The memories of a deceased writer's loved ones and of those who knew him best should always be respectfully granted their private sustenance. The reading public, for whom the absent writer became beloved through his work alone, is left with its own different need, and this Archive is that need's fulfilment. McGahern believed passionately in the radical freedom of the solitary reader and always insisted that good writing works primarily through suggestion; partially in remembrance of his own youthful encounters with books, he emphasised the importance of devoted suggestible readers in completing the contract of imaginative exchange with a writer. His work is done; now we must do ours. For readers who have it thankfully and easily at hand now, this precious Archive contains his very fingerprints; its pages are his footprints in the trickling sands, his cumulative bearing of witness to the steadiness and patience of a true artist's working life. This is the written testimony, the solid evidence we have to go on now. McGahern. Was. Here.

The full listing of the John McGahern Archive is available online through the James Hardiman Library, NUI Galway at www.library.nuigalway.ie/resources/archives