



Reinvented, Re-imagined and Somehow Dislocated: The Evolution of Two John McGahern Short Stories

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‘Reinvented, Re-imagined and Somehow Dislocated’

In the preface to *Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories* John McGahern wrote of his short stories: ‘The most difficult were drawn directly from life. Unless they were reinvented, re-imagined and somehow dislocated from their origins, they never seemed to work. The imagination demands that life be told slant because of its need of distance.’ (*Creatures of the Earth*, pg vii) An examination of the drafts of two of John McGahern’s short stories, “Christmas” and “The Recruiting Officer” illustrates the process by which the stories were, to use McGahern’s terminology, reinvented, re-imagined and dislocated from their origins.

In the case of ‘Christmas’ one can see the process where by the story is first ‘dislocated’ from its origins and then ‘re-imagined’. This process was also accompanied by some radical changes in style. While these experiments with style do not necessarily follow directly from the dislocating and re-imagining of the story they do in many ways mirror that process. The John McGahern archive includes one extremely rare example of documentary evidence for the origins of one of McGahern’s short stories from a source other than McGahern’s own autobiographical writings. This comes in the form of a letter from Tom Jordan a friend and former teaching colleague of John McGahern. The letter includes details of Jordan’s last day as a Christian Brother which are re-imagined in the story ‘The Recruiting Officer’. ‘The Recruiting Officer’ also includes a passage which can be traced back to McGahern’s unpublished novel ‘The End or The Beginning of Love’.

The John McGahern Archive consists primarily of drafts of his published works; it also includes a small amount of correspondence relating to his career, a number of press clippings, and transcripts of a number of interviews. The collection includes drafts of all six of John McGahern’s published novels, of all his published short fiction, and of both original dramatic work and adaptations of his own work for radio and screen. In addition, the collection includes drafts of several pieces of non-fiction, including McGahern’s memoir, and essays and book reviews which have never been published in collected form. In all the archive includes more than 1300 drafts and fragments of John McGahern’s work, of which over 400 relate to short stories. The number of drafts which survive for each story varies considerably for example only two handwritten drafts, a number of handwritten fragments and part of one typescript draft of ‘The Recruiting Officer’ survive, while at the other extreme over twenty five drafts and fragments of ‘Love of the World’ survive.

It became evident while processing the collection that it included drafts of a number of short stories which were never published because they subsequently formed part of full length novels. Conversely some works which were published as short stories were at some point considered potential novels; the cover of a copy book containing a draft of the short story ‘Bank Holiday’ bears an inscription reading ‘Bank Holiday: A Novel’. McGahern himself said in an interview "when I start writing something, I don't know

whether it's going to be a short story or a novel. After a while I know from the rhythm of the prose if it's going to be a short story. And if I realise it's going to be a novel I think 'oh no, not again' - that's the next four years, then." (Dalley) The collection also includes a complete typescript draft of an unpublished novel 'The End or The Beginning of Love'. The novel which was written by John McGahern while he was working in Dublin as a national school teacher was completed c.1961, before he began work on his first published novel *The Barracks*. 'The End or The Beginning of Love' was accepted for publication by Faber and Faber, however McGahern withdrew it himself believing that it wasn't good enough. The collection also includes fragments of even earlier handwritten drafts of the same work. Elements of this novel were subsequently incorporated into other novels and short stories including 'The Recruiting Officer' and 'The Key'.

There are over twenty drafts and partial drafts of the short story 'Christmas' in the John McGahern archive, these drafts don't represent a linear progression, they include a number of 'dead-ends', i.e. instances where McGahern amended or rewrote the story before discarding the changes and reverting to an earlier draft. For the purposes of comparison I shall concentrate primarily on three distinct versions of the story, a typed draft dating from the early nineteen-sixties or earlier, the first published version of the story dating from 1968 and the version of the story which appears in John McGahern's first short story collection *Nightlines* published in 1970. All three share the same essential narrative: a boy in early adolescence works cutting wood with his father (or foster father), one of their customers is an American woman who has lost her own son. Knowing he would have to give it to his father, rather than taking money as a Christmas tip the boy asks the American woman to get him a gift of her own choosing. She gets him a toy airplane similar to one she had given her own son. The boy is unable to hide his disappointment with the gift, while the father is enraged when he finds that the boy turned down money.

The three versions can be identified as the first typed draft (which followed at least three handwritten drafts) entitled 'The Aeroplane' (P71/324), the first published version which appeared in the *Irish Press* under the title 'Christmas' and the version which appeared in the *Nightlines* collection also under the title 'Christmas'. In analyzing the evolution this story through the drafts in the archive one can clearly see the story being stripped-down both in terms of descriptive detail and in terms of the prose itself to a much shortened version. In later drafts new elements are added to the story and the point of view and tone change.

While in 'The Aeroplane' the boy is explicitly described as the man's son, in *The Irish Press* version of the story the two are described as 'the man' and 'the boy', no hint however is given that their relationship is other than father and son. In the *Nightlines* version of the story, which unlike the other two is told in the first person, the boy is an orphan who was boarded out to 'the man' Moran and his wife who apparently have no children of their own.

The opening page of a typescript draft (P71/325) of the story which is very closely related to 'The Aeroplane' (P71/324) includes John McGahern's address in Clontarf, Dublin an address at which he ceased to reside in 1965. The typewriter impression and the size of the paper both strongly suggest that the story was typed at or about the same time as the original version of 'Strandhill, The Sea' which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1963. It seems likely then that John McGahern wrote this version of the story before he began work on *The Dark*. It is possible that he began work on it before writing *The Barracks*. While it is impossible to give a precise date to the early drafts of the story, certainly he began work on the story several years before it was first published in 1968¹.

The boy in 'The Aeroplane' (P71/324) is named 'Stevie' a name given to the protagonist of another of McGahern's early stories 'Coming into his Kingdom'. Stevie's family circumstances resemble McGahern's own circumstances as a child, as is illustrated by the following passage from 'The Aeroplane'.

...and then when he opened the door and saw his father eating at the table, his sisters and young brother all about, there was just one shock that his mother wasn't there. It was easy to realize that she was dead when he was sad or frightened, but it was almost impossible when he was happy, impossible to understand how she was dead and he was happy together. (P71/324, pg 8)

On being offered money by Mrs. Logan (renamed Mrs. Grey in 'Christmas') Stevie reflects that it was "what his father expected; for money was better than anything else to the poor. But he did not want it. He'd have to give it up, and his father would either hoard it for a little time or spend it on the Christmas." He imagines his father's response " 'In our house there are mouths to feed. Neither money nor Santa Claus comes down in a shower of rain' ". The father in 'The Aeroplane' is conscious of the financial burden of his family, he also has a tendency to complain about that burden; 'Such children I never saw! If she gave money it'd be more in our line.' Unlike the father figure in later versions of the story who wanted the money 'to pour drink down his gullet', the father in 'The Aeroplane' isn't much of a drinker. At one point he offers Mrs. Logan a glass of whiskey from a bottle kept in the press for special occasions. While he joins Mrs. Logan in a Christmas toast in this version of the story the father figure doesn't go to the pub on Christmas evening. In this the father figure resembles somewhat McGahern's own father who apparently was not much of a drinker either and also complained of the financial burden his own children were putting on him. (*Memoir*, pp156-157)

In the *Nightlines* version of the story the boy asks Mrs. Grey to give him "What ever you'd prefer to give me." Similarly in 'The Aeroplane' he says 'I'd prefer to leave it to your choice'. The origins of this sentence are made clear in an earlier handwritten draft of 'The Aeroplane' (P71/319) in which it is explained that 'he'd learnt how to say [prefer] from a story they'd read in school 'Bartleby'. And when people asked Bartleby to do something he'd say I'd prefer not to, and it sounded marvelous, and now he was saying it.'² While in the *Nightlines* version of the story the use of 'prefer' is described as 'nicely put for a Homeboy', in 'The Aeroplane' he is 'nearly drunken with the notion of how nicely he'd managed to put it. Every thing suddenly seemed wonderful; the star-

filled sky overhead...’ This introduces a mood of euphoria and optimism in Stevie which is related to his hopes for the Christmas present from Mrs. Grey. While in reading the *Nightlines* version one is forced to speculate as to what ‘the boy’ hoped to receive (McKeon) in ‘The Aeroplane’ when asked what he would like to be given Stevie is initially tempted to ask for a real football or size five football boots then decides that ‘left up to herself she might give him something marvelous, a whole set—ball and boots and togs and the saffron and blue jersey and socks of Roscommon. Or something even more marvelous and unimaginable than any of these.’³

On the journey home Stevie’s imagination runs riot, first imagining himself playing in the All-Ireland final ‘It’s a goal. Oh what a score! What an unbelievable footballer that man Moran is! Just listen to the crowd roar.’ The fantasy of the All-Ireland winning goal scorer soon evolves into that of Moran ‘heavyweight champion of the world, battering contenders to pulp, a racing car outside hotels and a dark girl with a red rose in her hair, as Carmen Jones the time they’d gone to the Abbey Cinema, and the Girl was Crazy with love for Stevie Moran.’ While this euphoric mood isn’t entirely absent from the later versions of the story in the *Nightlines* version of the story it is reduced to ‘...I led the jennet out of the yard, delirious with stupid happiness.’, while in the *The Irish Press* version of the story ‘he felt exultant as he drove the jennet home, the humiliation of the shop wiped away...’

‘The humiliation of the shop’ refers to an incident introduced in *The Irish Press* version of the story and maintained in the *Nightlines* version. In ‘The Aeroplane’ Stevie ‘stopped at Henry’s in the village to get paraffin...’ apparently without incident. In the later versions of the story men congregating in the shop mock the boy in a failed attempt to ‘get a rise out of him’. The earliest drafts of the story to contain this incident are a handwritten draft P71/329 which is the first draft to bear the title ‘Christmas’ and a typescript draft P71/330 which is more or less identical to P71/329. As well as introducing this incident these drafts also bring a more stripped down prose style to the story as illustrated by the following passage:

Then the cart moving again. Last mile to Mounteagle, frozen sky of moon and stars, the thin ice over the potholes of the road catching their light. Close to Mounteagle the police-man goes by on his lighted bicycle (P71/330, pg 1)

While this ‘stripped down’ style remains in *The Irish Press* version of the story it is tempered by some embellishment, the above passage becomes in *The Irish Press* version of the story:

Ice over the potholes of the road, was catching the first stars. Lights of bicycles, it was confession night, started to come at him, wavering hesitantly: that he wasn’t able to recognise them as they pedaled past in a dark shape behind their lamps...(*The Irish Press*, 27 April 1968)

The father in ‘The Aeroplane’ may not be a drinker, Mrs. Logan, at Christmas at least, is. When she arrives at Stevie’s house ‘She shows in her arms a huge box covered with

Christmas wrapping and it was obvious, especially from the slurred speech, that she'd been drinking. In a drunken daze she feebly handed Stevie the box...' Made more drunk by the whiskey given her by Stevie's father she unburdens herself :

...how she'd been brought the news of Paul's death, the shock, what they said , what they did, how Mr. Logan's health broke, how they came to Mouteagle in the hope that the air of his childhood might make him well again after they'd tried Switzerland and everything. She finally ended in an outburst, 'this place here is driving me crazy. It's the dead and quiet. You need movement about you to forget. You need to have things to do not to think. Oh, I wish I was this Christmas in New York. (P71/324, pg 13)

This is followed by the realisation that 'This kitchen could have none of the luxury of dreaming. She didn't know what absurd urge caused her to bring the aeroplane. She felt shamed by the way she'd broken down. How could they understand or care.' These emotions are present below the surface in the later versions of the story, *The Irish Press* version of the story makes no mention of her drunkenness, in the *Nightlines* version she arrives 'smelling of scent and gin'. In both later versions she comes close to tears when reminded of her own son, she doesn't however 'unburden herself' in the same way she does in the *Aeroplane*.

The drafts P71/329 and P71/330 represent the most striped down versions of the story. A side effect of this transformation is that the story is now extremely short, only three typed pages. *The Irish Press* version of the story isn't much longer. Had it been included in *Nightlines* in this form it would have been considerably shorter than any other story in the collection. Another version of the story is contained in a number of typescript drafts of the story (P71/335-337) and a handwritten fragment (P71/323) which post date *The Irish Press* version of the story. The typescript drafts of this version bear the title 'Each in Their World', these drafts have a very different tone from earlier versions of the story, as can be seen in the following extract:

...there was nothing to do but walk beside over the fields to the cartpath round the lake and watch. Watch the way the wheels crunched down the frozen tussocks to leave two lines in the whiteness behind. Watch the way the old jennet swayed with the shafts between the grass ridges inside the wheeltracks as the cart fell from rut to rut of the path round by the lake.

Watch, watch, and watch, and walk in this cold. The lake frozen over, a mirror fouled by white blotches of the springs and red streaks from the sun impaled on the firs of Oakport across Nutley's boathouse. (P71/335, pg 1)

The changes in the text introduced in 'Each in Their World' were however discarded completely and McGahern reverted to the earlier version of the text (P71/334) before writing the *Nightlines* version of the story. 'Each in Their World' can thus be seen as a 'dead-end' in the evolution of the story.

The most obvious difference between the striped down version of the story and the *Nightlines* version of the story are the addition of what might be considered a prologue and an epilogue. Added to this the *Nightlines* version is narrated by an adult looking back on an incident from his youth. In the prologue we learn that the boy comes from ‘a home’ and that he’s reasonably content with his life with Moran and his wife. In the epilogue the boy attends mid-night mass (The mass itself doesn’t feature in the earlier drafts) knowing that he will probably soon be sent back to the home. At mass he finds common cause with a drunken police man who attacks the hypocrisy of the congregation (Whyte, pg 150-151). On returning home he smashes the Airplane to pieces. The prologue serves to ‘dislocate the story from its origins’, the boys circumstances can no longer be seen to resemble McGahern’s, indeed a completely new set of circumstances have been introduced. One can only speculate as to the extent to which the epilogue is drawn from McGahern’s own experience.

These two new elements in the story are introduced in P71/338, a handwritten draft of the story. While the narrator is looking back knowingly on the incident which he describes as ‘a stupid wish on my part, which set off an even more stupid wish in Mrs. Grey, and what happened has struck me ever since as usual when people look to each other for their happiness...’, elements of the earlier striped down style however still survive in this version of the story. For example a paragraph which in P71/330 reads:

‘The chainsaw starting up in the wood again, he’d saw while there was light. No joke to make a living, mouths to feed, a drink or two for some relief, all this ballsing.’ (P71/330 pg 1)

Becomes:

The chainsaw started up in the wood again; he’d saw while there was light. “No joke to make a living, a drink or two for some relief, all this ballsing. May be better if we stayed in bed, conserve our energy, eat less,” (*Nightlines*, pg 40)

While *The Irish Press* version of the story can be seen to have successfully dislocated the story from it’s origins by removing many of the details included in ‘The Aeroplane’, McGahern then re-imagined the story for the *Nightlines* collection. This was achieved by the addition of new details and by changing the style and point of view. In practical terms this required the addition of a prologue and epilogue to the story.

While one can clearly see that even the *Nighlines* version of ‘Christmas’ owes something to John McGahern’s own experience, the story ‘The Recruiting Officer’ draws in part on the experiences a teaching colleague and friend of McGahern’s, Tom Jordan. According Declan Kiberd while teaching in Belgrove National School ‘because McGahern didn’t sing, he swapped classes with a fine teacher named Tom Jordan, who did.’ Writing an obituary for McGahern in *The Irish Times* Kiberd goes on to say that:

McGahern remained close to Tom Jordan (who was famous in the school for saying the Angelus with his eyes shut tight - on one notorious day, he blessed

himself so forcefully that he somehow set a box of matches in his jacket pocket on fire). After his retirement, Jordan went for a holiday with John and Madeline in Co. Leitrim every year, hoping to convert them to the ways of the righteous, but never succeeding. But they loved his visits and the tenacity of his conviction. (Kiberd)

The John McGahern archive includes two letters from Tom Jordan addressed to John McGahern. One of the letters dated 3 December 1968 consists primarily of an account of Jordan's last days as a Christian Brother. This information which may have been included in the letter at McGahern's prompting is incorporated in John McGahern's short story 'The Recruiting Officer' which was first published in *Nightlines*. While Jordan's account of leaving the Christian Brothers is the only incident in McGahern's story that can be documented as having sprung from Jordan's own experiences it seems likely that other incidents, the account of The Brothers going swimming for example also have their origin's in Jordan own recollections of his time as a Christian Brother.

The John McGahern archive includes just two handwritten drafts, several handwritten fragments and part of a typescript draft of 'The Recruiting Officer'. One of the handwritten drafts P71/397 relates to the first half of the story, the other P71/398 relates to the second half of the story. As a result it is not possible for a researcher to analyse the evolution of the story, in the same way 'Christmas' can be analysed. However the origins of two passages in the story can be traced to other documents in the archive . One of these passages has its origins in Tom Jordan's letter, the other is related to a passage in McGahern's unpublished novel 'The End or the Beginning of Love' .

The central character and narrator of 'The Recruiting Officer' is a former Christian Brother now working as a national school teacher in a rural school. The story takes place over the course of a school day and also includes a number of flashbacks to the narrator's time as Christian Brother. During the school day the school is visited first by the school's manager and parish priest Canon Reilly and later by a Christian Brother. The priest is there to punish one of the pupils for stealing from the poor box while the Christian Brother is a recruiting officer for the order.

A version of one passage from the story appears in a typescript draft of McGahern's unpublished novel 'The End or The Beginning of Love' (P71/8), and also in a hand written draft of the same work (P71/1). John McGahern was working in Belgrove National School with Tom Jordan when he wrote the novel, it is certainly possible that Jordan's own experience inspired the passage which describes the recruiting officer's pitch to the senior boys. In 'The Recruiting Officer' the narrator standing outside the school overhears the recruiting officer's speech to the boys, though he might just as well be recalling his own recruitment into the order. In the handwritten draft of 'The End or the Beginning of Love' the protagonist Jude listens to a similar speech from a Christian Brother. The Christian Brother's speech is quoted directly in the handwritten draft of 'The End or The Beginning of Love' and begins:

“My dear, honest, god fearing, Christian boys of Carriack-on-Shannon and district I wish to take you this beautiful July morning to a lake-shore in Galilee. The sun is shining on the lake as it is shining on your beautiful little lake before the school, only the rays are fiercer, the glint of sky on the water a deeper blue. At the edge of the lake a row of palm trees are standing and all about stretch the hot sands. Now my dear boys, you will see a small group of bearded fisherman-roughly clothed, ragged a fierce tired look about their face. Ah! But my dear boys, the hearts beneath rough appearances are of solid gold, now priceless in the kingdom of heaven...”(P71/1 pg 3)

In the typescript draft of the novel the speech is described rather than quoted ‘Carefully he created his scene: a blazing hot day, golden sands, people listening in the shade of trees, boats a little way off shore.’(P71/8 pg 63) In the published version of ‘The Recruiting Officer’ McGahern reverts to direct speech, however it’s clear that only a smattering of the speech is being quoted, ‘ “Hot sands,” his word drift out. “Palm Trees, glittering sea, tired after fishing all the night and washing their nets, tall dark man comes through the palms down to the water...” ’(*Nightlines*, pg 163)

One of the handwritten fragments of ‘The Recruiting Officer’ describes the narrator’s dismissal from the Christian Brothers. This passage isn’t present in any other handwritten drafts of the story and is paginated a-c (P71/399). The use of letters rather than numbers as pagination is usually an indication that a passage is to be inserted in a story or novel. This handwritten fragment is very similar but not identical to the same section in the published version of the story.

In his letter Jordan describes how he left the Christian Brother in 1945 before taking his final vows, he writes ‘Anyhow I didn’t apply for my final vows and no effort was made to persuade me. Often the defaulter is summoned to G.H.Q. and talked into staying on, not in my case.’ (P71/1174)In places the details of Jordan’s account of his dismissal are repeated almost exactly in the short story. For example a passage from the story reads:

Old Cogger showed me the letter. I was to get a suit of clothes, underwear, railway ticket and one pound. It revived me immediately. I told him the underwear I had would do and he raised the one pound to five. (P71/1174)

According to Jordan’s letter:

He showed me the letter. I was to get a suit of clothes, underwear, my ticket home and £1. I told him the underwear I had would do and he raised the £1 to £5, telling me to keep it quiet or he would be called to account for it. (*Nightlines*, 166)

In other places details are changed, in the most obvious example of an attempt to ‘dislocate’ the story from its origins the source of the narrator unease in a café the day he left the order is changed. According to his letter Jordan ‘Went into a café. I’ll never forget how I started and blushed when the waitress said: Yes Sir? First time called ‘Sir’.

My first contact with...’ The ellipsis appear in the actual letter, presumably Jordan is referring to his first contact with a woman after leaving the order. In the published version of *Nightlines* this incident becomes ‘Though what I remember most was the shock of the *sir* when the waiter said “thank you, sir,” as I paid him for the cup of tea I had on the train.’ On the surface a recently ‘released’ Christian Brother’s first contact with a woman might be considered a more dramatic incident than his first experience of being called ‘Sir’. This example illustrates the strength of McGahern’s ability to ‘re-imagine’ an incident. Rather than focusing on the protagonist’s liberation from enforced celibacy and his first contact with a woman, McGahern instead focuses on the experience of being addressed as ‘sir’, illustrative as it is of the protagonist’s ‘first freedom’ after years of wearing ‘the black clothes and white half-collar’ and being ‘surrounded by the rules of the order in its monastery;’ (*Nightlines*, pg 151). This has the effect of drawing the reader’s attention to the more mundane aspects of the transition from the regimented and institutionalised life of a Christian Brother to the secular world. The focus on the less obvious point from the original letter also makes for a better formed character in the story. In the context of the story that well remembered, if simple, ‘first freedom’ is followed by fear, loneliness and ultimately regular ‘infusions of whiskey at the Bridge Bar’. (*Nightlines*, pg 167).

An examination of the drafts of John McGahern’s novels and short stories provides a great insight into the writer’s work. The stories ‘Christmas’ and ‘The Recruiting Officer’ are of interest for different reasons. The large number of drafts of ‘Christmas’ and the fact that the earliest drafts pre-date the final published version by seven or more years make the material relating to the story particularly useful for comparison with other works written by McGahern during the same period. While there are far fewer drafts of ‘The Recruiting Officer’, the story includes one of a number of examples in McGahern work where versions of passages from his unpublished first novel appear in later works. The story also provides a rare example of documentary evidence of the origins of a passage which was later ‘reinvented, re-imagined and somehow dislocated’. This article has looked at the genesis and evolution of two of McGahern’s stories in isolation, while the task would no doubt be time consuming a comparative study the drafts of several of McGahern’s works would no doubt lead to greater insights into McGahern’s technique and development as a writer.

The John McGahern Archive can be accessed in the Special Collections Reading Room of the James Hardiman Library. A comprehensive descriptive list of the material is available in the Reading Room, and a full online version can be accessed on the Library’s website at www.archives.library.nuigalway.ie/mcgahern

¹ McGahern wrote of the years after the publications of *The Dark* “In the evenings I wrote sentences, but they never seemed to grow into work or anything interesting. I suspected I had been exhausted by those Dublin years of work” (*Memoir*, pg 270)

² McGahern was clearly an admirer of Melville’s story ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’, in a letter addressed to Michael McLaverty dated 7 December 1963, he wrote of the story ‘...it seems to me a beautiful shocking

vision of all-is-vanity, and the last passage a pure poem.' McGahern also delivered a lecture on Melville entitled 'I'd Prefer Not To' at 'Festival 67' in Belfast. See 'John McGahern Gives Insight on Melville' by Ray Rosenfield, *The Irish Times*, 25 November 1967.

³ Despite his association with Leitrim, John McGahern was a supporter of the Roscommon G.A.A. team. According to *Memoir* "In our first summer in the barracks, the Roscommon team that had won the All-Ireland in 1943 was advancing towards the Double. I became an avid follower. I read everything I could get my hands on about the players. In our games in Charlie's field we took high balls out of the air like Jimmy Murray, did solo runs like Frankie Kinlough, and took angled points like John Joe Nerney, who was the postman in Boyle." (*Memoir*, pg 175)