



## The McGahern Archive at the James Hardiman Library

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The John McGahern Archive held by the James Hardiman Library was acquired by the University in 2003, and further material was deposited by his wife, Madeline, after his death in 2006. It represents a major research resource for the University and the Library. However, an archive is not really accessible to scholars until it is fully listed, and thus the challenge has been to complete the detailed, meticulous work of arranging and listing in a way most useful to those who will work on these McGahern papers.

The 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 his memoir, and essays and book reviews which have never been published in collected form.

A highlight of the collection is a complete typescript draft of an unpublished novel 'The End or The Beginning of Love'. The novel was written by John McGahern while he was working in Dublin as a national school teacher and was completed sometime around 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, but McGahern himself withdrew it 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 works including *The Dark* and *The Leavetaking*. There are also drafts of a number of short stories which were never published because they subsequently became 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 the inscription 'Bank Holiday: A Novel'. McGahern has 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'.

The principal challenge that faced the archivist in processing the collection was ascertaining which published works each draft related to and then placing those drafts in chronological order. As McGahern published a comparatively small number of novels, identifying drafts of these was relatively easy. The task was slightly more difficult when it came to the short fiction because McGahern published thirty-seven stories, and a number of these are similar enough to cause

confusion. The task of identifying non-fiction pieces was equally difficult due to the fact that they have never been collected so it was necessary to track down the published versions of the pieces. This was done with the aid of a very useful bibliography published in the 2005 special McGahern issue of *The Irish University Review*, a trip to the National Library, the help of Inter Library Loans and the Library's Electronic Resources. The job of identifying non-fiction pieces was further complicated by the fact that there is a certain amount of overlap between them. For example, McGahern famously published a number of different but interrelated articles on the Irish revolutionary, Ernie O'Malley, whose writings he much admired.

A far more time-consuming task was arranging the drafts of each work in some kind of chronological order, because none of them was dated. It should also be noted that many drafts are incomplete and evidently a number of drafts are 'missing'. McGahern himself said that 'You can work for five or six months and find the waste paper basket is your publisher'. Drafts were classified as being 'handwritten', 'typed' or 'fair copy', 'fair copy' being a typescript with very few handwritten amendments and almost identical to the published version of a work. This evolution from handwritten draft to heavily amended typescript, then to fair copy and finally to published work, provides a great insight into McGahern's writing technique. One could not assume that a handwritten draft pre-dated all typescript drafts of a work, since in a number of instances McGahern re-wrote some or all of a work by hand after having it typed and, in the case of short stories, sometimes after the story's initial publication.

It was necessary to analyse changes in the text between drafts by identifying common passages and comparing them. This task also involved checking handwritten amendments or 'mark-up' and checking where they had been implemented.

This is demonstrated by a simple example from 'Wheels', the opening story in McGahern's first collection, *Nightlines*. The Archive includes several handwritten partial drafts and fragments of this story. Although there are some handwritten drafts of its opening passage, none of them bear a title. Then there are also several typescript drafts of the story, and the first title to appear on these is 'My Future At My Back' which is written by hand. On a later typescript draft, this title is amended, again by hand, to 'The Future That I Had'. And in the final draft, the title is again changed, this last time to 'Wheels'.

This task ultimately involved hundreds if not thousands of 'decisions' as to which drafts came before which draft, but this can never be an exact science. Bearing in mind the fact that the collection includes over one thousand drafts, one could spend a lifetime trying to put these in exactly the 'right' order. Insofar as it was possible, the drafts have been arranged chronologically. Another constraint was the fact that in many instances one physical item, for example a copybook, might contain drafts of two or more different works. Even though in some cases it would have been possible to separate the different works, it was decided to leave them together in order to preserve the evidential value of the fact that they were written at roughly the same time. For example, a draft of the short story 'A Ballad', published in 1983, appears in the same copy book as the story 'The White Boat', which wasn't published until 1997.

The volume of material varies considerably from work to work. The drafts of McGahern's first two published novels, *The Barracks* and *The Dark*, comprise one archival box each, for instance,

while the material relating to his last novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, comprises five boxes. McGahern had complained in the past about the prohibitive cost of having drafts of his early works typed, so rather than reflecting any evolution in McGahern's work practices as such, this increase in relative box numbers may simply relate to the advent of the word processor.

The John McGahern Collection 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](http://www.archives.library.nuigalway.ie/mcgahern)