

The John McGahern Seminar takes place in Carrick-on-Shannon and other locations in the area over a weekend, usually in May. For information, check out www.leitrimcoco.ie or contact Leitrim County Council Arts Office at 071-9621694, or by email at arts@leitrimcoco.ie

Cootehall Barracks was formally handed back to the local community on 3rd December 2013 by Minister with responsibility for the OPW (Office of Public Works), Mr Brian Hayes. Cootehall Community Development Group have a licence to use part of The Barracks as a library in memory of John McGahern and also to use the main part of the property as a community house, where local groups can convene and plan their activities.

The Barracks Garden was recently created to function as a park and playground for local residents and visitors. Enjoy the views of Oakport Lake and the surrounding countryside from the garden.

Contact Maurice Gannon, Cootehall Community Development Group on 087-6290927 for more information, or go to www.cootehallbarracks.com info@cootehallbarracks.com

Roscommon Anthology and Literary Map

Illustrated by artists associated with the county, *The Roscommon Anthology* is a beautifully produced book comprising selected writings by thirty-one writers with close associations to the county. The anthology is accompanied by a unique literary map of the county. Co-edited by Roscommon-born brothers, Michael and John O'Dea, the anthology was launched in November 2013 to considerable local and national acclaim.

The Roscommon Anthology is also available online at www.theroscommonanthology.com

Also available in the Roscommon Literary Heritage Series:

Douglas Hyde: *a gifted writer, scholar and first President of Ireland. He was a key figure in the preservation of the Irish language, through his translations of many hundreds of near-forgotten Irish folk tales, poems and songs. He was and remains a hugely significant national figure.*

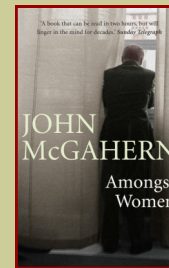
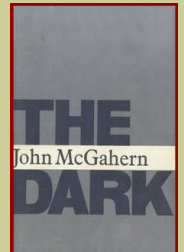
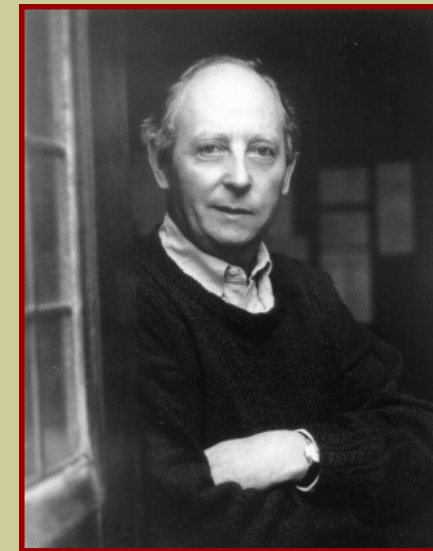
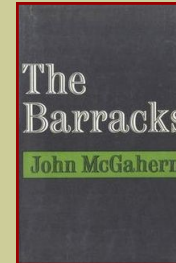
Percy French: *a remarkable man, a unique talent. One of Ireland's greatest songwriters and a fine watercolourist whose charm and wit won over everyone with whom he came in contact.*

More editions in the series will follow.

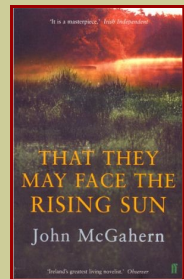
Text: Gerry Boland Layout & Design: Dympna Naughten

Roscommon Literary Heritage Series

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John McGahern



Roscommon has a proud history and a rich literary heritage. Its authors, writers and poets have made a significant contribution to the national literature of Ireland. Roscommon County Council welcomes the production of these literary guides in promoting its cultural tourism. This first edition of the Roscommon Literary Heritage Series features three major literary figures in the county.

*At the time of his death in 2006, at the age of seventy-one, John McGahern was widely regarded as the most significant Irish novelist of his generation. He was the author of six highly acclaimed novels, four collections of short stories, a collection of essays, and was the recipient of numerous awards and honours, including a **Society of Authors Travelling Scholarship**, the **American-Irish Award**, the **Prix Etrangère Ecureuil** and the **Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres**. He was that rare literary phenomenon: critically acclaimed with a large and loyal readership.*



A Writing Life

In a country which has produced — and continues to produce — an astonishing number of truly great writers (think Swift, Goldsmith, Wilde, Shaw, Joyce, Yeats, Kavanagh, Beckett, Heaney, Friel, Banville, and many more besides), John McGahern's name sits easily among them.

His quiet, measured prose captured the repressed emotions of his ordinary yet at the same time utterly memorable characters. Throughout his writing life, he strove for what he called 'that inner formality or calm that all writing, no matter what it is attempting, must possess'.

His intense attachment to his mother and his bewilderment at her early death from cancer — and at the fact that his father provided no occasion for grieving — are unsettling reminders as to the origin of his literary themes, themes that come to the surface in the early novels, *The Barracks* and *The Dark*, novels that take us into a harsh, unforgiving world where the social and economic realities of rural Irish life in the 1930s and 40s are dominant.

His work spoke to readers about their own lives or of lives that they could closely relate to. And always in the background, a society that was in the stranglehold of the two dominant authorities in the Irish state at the time: the Government and the Church.

He was a private person, yet he was also wonderful company. Friends described him as being warm-spirited, occasionally mischievous, frequently funny, a wicked mimic and, to his eternal credit, extremely generous towards younger writers.

He died on March 30th, 2006, aged 71, and is buried in St Patrick's Church, Aughawillan, close to Ballinamore, alongside his mother.

John McGahern Locations

In Roscommon

The Barracks, Cootehall & Oakport Lake, Cootehall.



Outside Roscommon

John McGahern Library in Lough Rynn Castle Hotel, Mohill, Co Leitrim & John McGahern's burial place in St Patrick's Church, Aughawillan, Co. Leitrim.



A Brief Biography

John McGahern was born in Dublin on November 12, 1934 and grew up just outside Ballinamore in County Leitrim. His mother raised the family of seven children (John was the eldest) on a small farm which she ran with outside help as she was also the local primary school teacher. His father, a policeman, lived twenty miles away in the barracks at Cootehall, in north Roscommon.

John was nine when his mother developed cancer and died, the family subsequently moving to Cootehall to live with their father in the Garda Barracks. A bright student, John won a scholarship to the Presentation Brothers secondary school in Carrick-on-Shannon and, six years later, won the county scholarship in his Leaving Certificate. The scholarship enabled him to attend teacher training college in Dublin, from which he graduated and was offered a teaching post at Scoil Eoin Báiste Primary School in Clontarf.

By now, he was writing seriously, and had his first novel, *The Barracks*, published in 1963. It was the publication of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965, which caused his entire life to swerve off course. The novel was banned by the state for its alleged pornographic content which included an implication of sexual abuse by the protagonist's father. The Catholic Church, which ran all the Catholic schools in the country, flexed its powerful muscles and ensured that McGahern was dismissed from his teaching post. His position wasn't helped by the fact that he had recently married a divorcee, a Finnish theatre director, Annikki Laaksi, in a registry office.

McGahern's response was that of many millions before and after him: to emigrate. He moved to London with Annikki, worked for the best part of a decade at a variety of jobs, including the rough and tumble of building sites. The marriage was not a happy one and he and Annikki divorced in 1969.

He returned to live and work on a small farm near Fenagh, County Leitrim, located halfway between Ballinamore and Mohill. It was here that he settled down to a simple life of small-holder farming and serious writing, sharing his life with his American wife, Madeleine Green, who he married in 1973.

He is not a sentimental writer. He writes with a clear-eyed truthfulness and integrity. His sentences are never flowery or showy. He is a writer who dispenses with the unnecessary, who writes with a refreshing simplicity that often masks a very deep intellect at work. Reading McGahern produces an inner mood in the mind of the reader, a sort of inner ache of recognition brought on by his quiet, precise words.

The Novels

His novels seemed to mirror the passage of his own life. His first published novel, *The Barracks* (1963), explores life in a rural Garda barracks, especially from the point of view of the sergeant's second wife, Elizabeth Reegan. She is dying from cancer, just as McGahern's mother died.

His second book, *The Dark* (1965), describes the teenage experiences of a young scholarship student in rural Ireland, who has to contend with his father — who beats him and the other children — as well as the indecision about what to do with his life after secondary school.

"The car slowed in the road of sycamores, and turned in open gates, the tyres sounding on the gravel. The church with its bell-rope dangling and the presbytery at the end of the circular drive were clear in the moon, the graveyard between, the headstones showing over the laurels along the drive. In the gravel clearing before the house the car stopped beside where a cactus flowered out of a bugled pedestal. He got out his case and coat and stood in the moon. Between the laurels of the drive a path of white gravel ran unbordered through the graves of the sacristy door".

(from *The Dark*)

The next novel, *The Leavetaking* (1975), introduces us to Patrick Moran, a young school-teacher in Dublin. The novel is set during his last day in the school. The book is a close reflection on McGahern's own experiences of being dismissed from his teaching post in the early 1960s for much the same reasons as Patrick Moran is dismissed in the novel.

In 1979, *The Pornographer* was published. The protagonist, who writes pornography for a living, has moved from a rural upbringing to a life in Dublin. The novel revisits the subject of death by cancer; in this case it is the writer's aunt who is dying in hospital.

His fifth and best known novel, published in 1990, is *Amongst Women*, the story of the ageing Michael Moran, an IRA veteran of the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War, who rules over his family in the unforgiving farmlands of County Leitrim. It is a remarkable novel, with at its centre a complex and troubled protagonist who shares his life with four women: his wife and their three daughters. The novel is a return to a Roscommon/Leitrim setting, after two Dublin/London books. The largely absent figure from the book is Luke, the eldest son, who has emigrated to London and who rejects any notion of a rapprochement with his father. The novel won the **GPA** and the **Irish Times Award**, was shortlisted for the **Booker Prize** and made into a four-part BBC television series.

His final novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), is a lyrical portrait of a year in the life of a rural lakeside community. The main characters have returned from London to live on a farm. The violence of the father-figure has largely though not completely disappeared, and life in the country is more easy-going and prosperous than in the early novels.

The Stories

Sentence for sentence, McGahern is one of the masters of the short story form. He was not a prolific writer of stories, yet every story possesses a quiet power and intensity few writers are able to achieve. It is perhaps his singular gift, the understated nature of his carefully worked prose, every sentence being thought about and discarded if found not up to the task. (He would routinely write eighteen or twenty drafts of a story before he was happy with it.) One of his stories, *Korea*, was made into a feature-length film, scripted by Joe O’Byrne and directed by Cathal Black.

His first collection, *Nightlines*, was published in 1970. Eight years later, *Getting Through* appeared, and in 1985, *High Ground* was published. All three collections contain stories that linger in the mind long after reading. 1992 saw the publication of *Collected Stories*, which contained several new stories. This is the definitive collection and an essential McGahern book to have on the bookshelf.

“I let the boat drift on the river beneath the deep arch of the bridge, the keel scraping the gravel as it crossed the shallows out from Walsh’s, past the boathouse at the mouth, and out into the lake. It was only the slow growing distance from the ring of reeds round the shore that told that the boat moved at all on the lake. More slowly still, the light was going from the August evening.”
(from *High Ground*)

Other Work

McGahern also wrote plays for radio and for television, including *Swallows* (1975) and *The Rockingham Shoot* (1987). His stage play *The Power of Darkness* (adapted from Tolstoy) was produced by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1991. His final book, *Memoir* (2005), was published the year before he died and is a deeply moving, sometimes funny, often heartbreaking, always insightful inner journey into his past. As with all of McGahern’s writing, *Memoir* is instantly recognisable as the work of a writer working at the highest level of literary endeavour. In 2009, three years after his death, *Love of the World* was published, a collection of non-fiction work and essays. In the essays, McGahern examines and comments on a wide variety of subjects, from Ireland’s history and culture to sectarianism and women’s rights, from short travelogue pieces to explorations of social change and the power of the Church in Ireland.

In 2003, he donated his archive, including the manuscript of an unpublished novel, to University College Galway.

