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# An Interview with John McGahern: Introduction

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MCGAHERN

### Introduction

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My admiration for John McGahern's writings is immense. He is an indispensable reference for anyone who wants to understand the mentality and lives of people in rural Ireland during the 1940s and 1950s. These decades were significant ones in the forging of Irish identity. The country did not know much prosperity (apart from a minority of merchants and professionals) and the Catholic Church was an all-powerful institution. John McGahern's relations with the Church were difficult from the time he got married in a registry office and published his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965. He was removed from his teaching position in Scoil Eoin Bhaiste in Clontarf and was forced to move for a time to England. In spite of the role the hierarchy played in his dismissal (Archbishop McQuaid instructed the Manager of the school to remove the offending teacher from his position), John McGahern never displayed the bitterness towards the Church that one would expect. In fact, he says that he feels nothing but gratitude towards the Church for introducing him to ritual, ceremony and good manners. The positive terms that he uses to describe the Church may surprise a few, but no one should doubt their sincerity.

When talking about Irish identity, McGahern observes that what is important is not so much to be Irish as to be human, decent and moral. The present preoccupation with Irishness doesn't really interest him. Our Irishness is given and he believes that we should have enough confidence and maturity to know what values we espouse and where we stand in relation to other nations. He, himself, is a writer who succeeds in reaching the universal through concentrating on the local. This goes a long way towards explaining his huge popularity in France and Great Britain, among readers who have never lived in Ireland but who are fascinated by the dramas and landscapes that he sketches in his writings.

The insights into the creative process are also fascinating. McGahern's concern with "getting his words right" is always foremost. He never sets out to prove a thesis, nor does he seek consciously to make his characters into "types". He works at the words and allows them to develop in their own time and in their own way. He hasn't a massive literary output and this can be put down to the attentive way in which he sculpts his sentences and develops his plots. It has been almost 10 years since the publication of *Amongst Women*. We await with anticipation the new novel, which should see the shelves later this year.

It was a singular honour for me to be allowed to conduct this interview. When thinking about it afterwards, I was reminded of a saying of the French philosopher, Pascal: "I was expecting to meet a writer: instead, I met a man." The video of the interview shows the marvellously expressive face of a man at ease with himself and with the world and whose human qualities and breath of knowledge are plain to see. Proust, Flaubert, Beckett, Chekhov, Torja, David Hume, Yeats and Joyce are all quoted, not in an attempt to impress, but rather by the appropriateness and validity of their experiences and testimony. I hope that the humour is also evident because it is a side of McGahern that is too often missed.

Finally, I'd like to say a word of thanks to Fr. Noel Barber S.J., editor of *Studies*, for the opportunity to reproduce the tapescript in so prompt a manner. I'd also like to acknowledge the Seed Funding and technical support I received from the Institute of Technology (Tallaght) to carry out the interview.

**Eamon Maher**