2011-2

No Surrender! War and the Death of Innocence in the Fictions of John McGahern

Eamon Maher

Institute of Technology, Tallaght, eamon.maher@it-tallaght.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.dit.ie/ittbus

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, and the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License
'No Surrender!'  
War and the Death of Innocence in the Fictions of John McGahern  
EAMON MAHER

THE REPUTATION of John McGahern (1934-2006) was forged in the main by the painstakingly authentic canvas he painted of the landscape and community of his native Leitrim and Roscommon. However, an aspect of his art that sometimes escapes attention is his fascination with his father's generation, the people involved in the forging of the Irish Republic, a period that features in his fiction to a significant degree, perhaps to the extent of overshadowing the Ireland of his own time. In this article, I wish to show the way in which the Irish War of Independence casts a major shadow over many of McGahern's characters who are veterans of the fight to end British colonial rule in Ireland. I will also attempt to draw parallels with one of the best firsthand accounts of this conflict, Ernie O'Malley's *On Another Man's Wound* (1936), a book which deeply impressed McGahern, for reasons which will, I hope, become obvious as the article progresses.

The Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) cannot be separated from the events surrounding the 1916 Rising, an insurrection that met with general disapproval at the time, as it was perceived as an act of betrayal towards the thousands of Irish men who had died or were still fighting in the British army during World War I. What changed public perception completely was the rash decision by the British authorities to execute the leaders of the rebellion. Ernie O'Malley wrote of the reaction in the wake of the executions: 'Something strange stirred in

---

the people, some feeling long since buried, a sense of communion with
the fighting dead generations, for the dead walked around again.'
As has often happened in the past, the dead became martyrs around
whom a swelling of revolutionary fervour built up, as O’Malley points
out once more:

Without guidance or direction, moving as if to clarify itself, nebulous,
forming, reforming, the strange rebirth took shape. It was manifest
in flags, badges, songs, speech, all seemingly superficial signs.... Now
was the lyrical stage, blood sang and pulsed, a strange love was born
that for some was never to die till they lay stiff on the hillside or the
quicklime near a barrack wall. (AMW, 45)

The men who were involved in this conflict experienced an excite­
ment that was never matched subsequently by anything else in their
lives. This is an important consideration when it comes to assessing the
impact the post-revolutionary phase has on McGahern’s characters.
They feel disillusioned about what has resulted from their struggle, the
emergence of an indigenous ruling class that was not essentially very
different from the colonial and Anglo-Irish aristocracy they replaced.
In a review of On Another Man’s Wound, McGahern wrote: ‘The war
was the most intense experience of O’Malley’s life. Several times he
mentions that he did not expect to live through the war. After such an
experience, no matter what shape his life was to take, it could not have
been other than difficult.’

This is equally true for the veterans of McGahern’s fiction. Nothing
could replace the adrenalin flow or the camaraderie experienced by the
guerrilla squadrons, the feeling that they were forging a new Ireland,
that they were part of the making of history. John McGahern’s own
father, a person with whom he had an ambivalent relationship at best,
fought in the flying columns during the War of Independence, after
which he ended up in the Garda Síochána, the new police force set up
after independence. It is my view that behind the seething resentment

quent references will be denoted by AMW, followed by page number.
2. ‘A Revolutionary Mind’. Review of Ernie O’Malley’s On Another Man’s Wound, The
Irish Times, 11 April 1998.
of the authoritarian and violent father there lurked a sneaky admiration for the heroic freedom fighter. In *Memoir* John McGahern describes how one day when he was on the run with the IRA and it was too dangerous for him to be seen around the house, Frank McGahern arrived dressed in a suit and tie when people were saving the hay:

He took hold of a pitchfork and proceeded to work with his neighbours until nightfall, when he left as suddenly as he came. What amused and interested them was that never once, in spite of the heat, did he remove his jacket or loosen his collar and tie. Amusement is tinged with approbation in this account. The aloofness and superiority of such behaviour were traits that struck a chord with his son, who appreciated the ability McGahern senior possessed to stand out from the crowd. While the antipathy and resentment towards his father were considerable, McGahern nevertheless returned again and again to the events which indelibly marked Frank McGahern’s character and impacted on his family. It’s as though the war assumed the proportions of a morbid fascination for the writer.

O’Malley was an indispensable reference point for McGahern, as he was someone who, in addition to being a warrior and politician, also possessed serious literary talent. *On Another Man’s Wound* contains insightful first-hand comments about what O’Malley and others like him experienced: ‘I felt an understanding, a sharing of something bigger than ourselves, and a heightening of life’ (*AMW*, 61), he writes. When faced with the prospect of execution, he was perfectly resigned to his fate and confident in the victory of the cause to which he had pledged his life: ‘I was not afraid of death now.... I would tell them that they were fools, that they could not win, dead men would help to beat them in the end.’ (*AMW*, 230) Diarmuid Ferriter offers the following assessment of the men involved in this conflict: ‘The statements suggest that the resourcefulness and commitment of this generation were exceptional. Theirs was overwhelmingly a revolution of the young; they were physically fit ... and, in the main, politically disciplined.’

And, looking back on 1919-1921, many of these Revolutionaries saw the years as glory days, as heady points of individual and communal-national life: these later came to be seen by many as the days of unity, belief and commitment, and of an attractive simplicity of political goal and argument.\(^5\)

Declan Kiberd attributes McGahern’s fascination with his father’s generation to the fact that these men believed they were in fact inventing Ireland, that they were trying to be the origin of a new kind of Ireland. He adds: “These people who in their youth said “Revolution or death”, ended up in their middle to older years fighting the death of the revolution, and its betrayal, its fizzling out, its failure.”\(^6\) We will see this to be an accurate summary of the plight of McGahern’s war veterans as we now turn to discuss some of his fiction.

**THE BARRACKS**

We’ll begin, logically enough, with the first novel McGahern published, *The Barracks* (1963). While the story is mainly narrated through the voice of its heroine, the terminally ill Elizabeth Reegan, her Garda sergeant husband is the first in a line of disenchanted war veterans in McGahern’s work. The main problem Reegan encounters in his professional life is the irritation at having to take orders from a superior officer, Quirke, who is younger than he and for whom he has no respect. Much of his energy and inventiveness go into devising schemes that will allow him to undermine the Superintendent – his experience as a commander and military strategist in the IRA stand him in good stead in this regard. There is a sense in which he never fully accepts the rule of law he is meant to be upholding: he remains something of a rebel throughout his life. After one particularly annoying day in court with Quirke, Reegan gives vent to his bile in the presence of his wife:

‘It’s the system of arselickin’: whoever’s on the bottom rung of the

---

ladder must lick the arse above him till the last arse at the top is safely licked; they lick the arse above them and to keep their minds easy the buggers below must keep on lickin' theirs. The poor bastard at the bottom has always the worst end of the stick! It's in the natural order of things then, as Quirke would put it."

Reegan's disdain for such rituals is apparent. His frustration is understandable when one considers his background: 'But he'd been born into a generation wild with ideals: they'd free Ireland, they'd be a nation once again: he was fighting with a flying column in the hills when he was little more than a boy.' (B, 109) Having reached the grade of officer in the IRA, he now has to suffer the ignominy 'of obeying officers younger than himself, he who had been in charge of ambushes when he was twenty.' (B, 109)

The confrontation reaches its inevitable climax in the last chapter of the book. Elizabeth's prolonged illness has eaten into all the money Reegan had put aside in the hope of buying a farm. Unknown to Quirke, he has handed in his resignation and now turns up unshaven and unkempt in the barracks in a successful attempt to provoke his superior. Reegan revels in giving verbal expression to his main source of discontent, shouting:

I wore the Sam Browne too, the one time it was dangerous to wear it in this balls of a country. And I wore it to command - men, soldiers, and not to motor round to see if a few harmless poor bastards of policemen would lick me fat arse, while I shit about law and order. And the sight of a belt on somebody else never struck me blind! (B, 231)

While he realises his ambition to belittle Quirke, Reegan's victory is both Pyrrhic and irresponsible, as he still has a young family to rear and only a pension with which to provide for them. But so imbued is he with the wretchedness of his lot that he is prepared to put everything on the line in order to get rid of his exasperation. The war is never over for him; peace remains an unrealisable chimera.

'KOREA'

The short story, 'Korea', widely considered among the best McGahern has written, provides another interesting portrayal of the War of Independence. First published in the collection Nightlines (1970), it relates an adolescent’s sense of betrayal on discovering that his father is planning to send him to enlist in the American army that is fighting in Korea. The father has learned that there is a generous compensation paid out to the next of kin of all those killed in action, in addition to a salary of $250 a month while in service. Because of the precariousness of his own livelihood – it looks as though his fishing licence might not be renewed – he sees his son’s emigration as the best chance of economic survival.

War has played a significant role in the life of the now elderly widower. Captured during the War of Independence, he saw a boy of no more than sixteen executed by the British army in Mountjoy. The memory of this event haunted him all his life, as he regularly relived in his mind’s eye the sight of the buttons of the boy’s tunic flying in the air. Years later, on honeymoon in Howth, the sight of furze pods bursting on the hillside brought back the horror of that scene, as he explains to his son: "The way they burst in all directions seemed shocking like the buttons when he started to tear at his tunic. I couldn’t get it out of my mind all day. It destroyed the day."

The adolescent is fascinated with this story and is surprised that his father, usually so taciturn, should share these memories with him. It was probably the knowledge that the son would soon be leaving home that prompted such talkativeness: ‘it was my last summer with him on the river, and it seemed to make him want to talk, to give of himself before it ended.’ (K, 55)

The father appears to be suffering from a form of post-traumatic stress disorder, brought about in the service of a country that has now forsaken him. That being the case, is it not somewhat unfeeling of him to think of subjecting his son to the same horrors as he endured? When the son refuses the fare to America, saying he will seek to make a life in Ireland, the father is aggrieved: ‘You won’t be able to say I

8. ‘Korea’, Collected Stories (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p.55. Future references to this story will be denoted by K, followed by the page number.
didn’t give you the chance when you come to nothing in this fool of a country. It’ll be your own funeral.” (K,58) War exerted a heavy toll on this man. Even at the moment when he was full of the joys of new love, it managed to rear its ugly head and ruin his honeymoon. Disillusionment and despair are the strongest emotions he felt, as he states in terms that echo the sentiments of Moran in Amongst Women:

‘Talking about the execution disturbed me no end, those cursed buttons bursting into the air. And the most I think is that if I’d conducted my own wars, and let the fool of a country fend for itself, I’d be much better off today.’ (K, 58)

AMONGST WOMEN

We now proceed to what I consider to have been McGahern’s masterpiece, Amongst Women, and its main character Moran, who in the words of Declan Kiberd, endures ‘the fate of those heroes who survive to live in the wan afterglow of a heroic engagement.’ Having put his life on the line in order to ensure the success of the revolution, he sees Ireland ruled by a new dispensation composed of priests, politicians and doctors. The reality is a far cry indeed from the idealistic objectives of his youth.

In the opening pages of the novel, Moran’s daughters, realising that their father is failing and anxious to bring him out of himself, decide to revive the occasion of Monaghan Day, a date in late February when the fair in Mohill meant a visit from an old comrade in arms, McQuaid. What the daughters don’t realise is the reason why these visits stopped all those years ago. It had to do with Moran’s obstinate desire to be top dog. He had been McQuaid’s superior in the IRA but when the latter became a wealthy cattle dealer who drove a Mercedes, he was no longer willing to toe the line. 


10. Joe Cleary offers the following assessment: ‘Moran and McQuaid represent the revolutionary nationalist generation in the novel. McQuaid is enterprising and aggressive and makes his way in the post-independence social order, but he is a vulgar philistine. Moran stubbornly insists that the new social order fails to measure up to the ideals of the independence struggle, but his rejectionist stance is productive of no alternative
remark about Moran’s reputation for being something of a ladies’ man during his youth caused a rift to develop that neither was willing to heal. McQuaid also told his friend he should take the army pension, which Moran stubbornly refused on principle, and then broke the habit of many years by announcing that he would not be staying the night. On hearing this, Moran observed his comrade ‘from under hooded eyelids’, but, true to his unyielding character, refused to utter the conciliatory words that were needed to heal the rift. In the yard, as he climbed into his Mercedes, McQuaid said in a voice that was intended to be heard: “Some people just cannot bear to come in second.” (AW, 22) Their differing roles in the Ireland post-independence meant that the power had shifted to the subordinate.

This is why they have such diametrically opposing views as to the fruits of their struggle. Moran says:

‘Look where it brought us. Look at the country now. Run by a crowd of small-minded gangsters out for their own good. It was better if it never had happened.’ (AW, 18)

Quite naturally, McQuaid, who could in a sense be considered one of the ‘gangsters out for their own good’, does not agree. His pragmatism means that he never questions the colour of any man’s money and he sets about benefiting as best he can from the opportunities that present themselves in a free Ireland.

The way in which McQuaid and Moran describe the incidents of the war is telescopic in its brevity: “The country was ours again. Next we had the Treaty. Then we fought one another.” (AW, 18) The two men relish reliving the various events that have left an indelible mark on their lives. Viewed in hindsight, we are told that in the daughters’ eyes Monaghan Day ‘had become large, heroic, blood-mystical, something from which the impossible could be snatched.’ (AW, 2) The echoes


11. John McGahern, Amongst Women (London: Faber&Faber, 1990), p.20. All future references will be denoted by AW, followed by the page number.
of Easter 1916 and its leaders’ extolling of the importance of a ‘blood sacrifice’ are deliberate. Moran acknowledges that:

‘For people like McQuaid and myself the war was the best part of our lives. Things were never so simple and clear again. I think we never rightly got the hang of it afterwards.’ (AW, 6)

But he is also anxious to point out that it was ‘a bad business’ and that they were ‘a bunch of killers’. (AW, 5) “The war was the cold, the wet, standing to your neck in a drain for the whole night with bloodhounds on your trail, not knowing how you could manage the next step toward the end of a long march.” (AW, 5)

Violence

The military manner in which Great Meadow is run is underlined by Moran’s insistence on referring to his children as ‘the troops’ and demanding immediate implementation of his orders. He is capable of inflicting pain without thought, which, given his propensity for violence, is not surprising: “The closest I ever got to any man was when I had him in the sights of the rifle and I never missed” (AW, 7), he says.

Note how the same type of forensic detachment is employed when he undermines Rose, his second wife, in a comment he utters ‘as quietly as if he were taking rifle aim.’ (AW, 69) All Rose had been trying to do was to make the house a bit more attractive, which earns for her this rebuke: “There’s no need for you to go turning the place upside down. We managed well enough before you ever came round the place.” (AW, 69)

When his daughter Sheila gets a university scholarship on the strength of her Leaving Certificate results and announces she wants to study medicine, her father can scarcely contain himself:

Sheila could not have chosen a worse profession. It was the priest and the doctor and not the guerrilla fighters who had emerged as the bigwigs in the country Moran had fought for. For his own daughter to lay claim to such a position was an intolerable affront. (AW, 88)

In the end, she opts for the civil service, knowing that Moran would never leave her in peace if she followed her initial inclination.
Crushed dreams

The dilemma for Moran, as for many of the men of his generation, was to see the dream that had inspired him as a young man reduced to tatters before he dies. The war had taken from him an appreciation of beauty and an ability to seize the present moment.

We find a strong echo of this disappointment in McGahern’s assessment of Ernie O’Malley’s fate:

He became a difficult marginal figure in a country he had helped to create. The myth he had been prepared to follow, no matter what the cost to himself or to others, had turned into an inward-looking, pedantic theocracy that he was forced to live in. (‘A Revolutionary Mind’, 73)

After his death, the ‘faded tricolour’ that is placed on Moran’s coffin and then removed by ‘a little man in a brown felt hat, old and stiff enough to have fought with Fionn and Oisin’ (AW, 183), is a symbol of crushed dreams and realised potential. The two local politicians who eye the locals gathered around the grave with ‘undisguised contempt’ (AW, 183) would not have been welcomed by Moran but he is as helpless after death as he was before it to change the course of history. Amongst Women is thus a stinging indictment of the legacy of war and it illustrates the consistency of McGahern’s approach which emphasises the ultimate vanity of such conflicts.

COVERING THE CRACKS

While people like Reegan and Moran might shout ‘No Surrender’ and are unwilling to broker any deals with the enemy, the war they are waging has long since passed and the peace lost, along with the innocent idealism that ignited their passion. Ernie O’Malley sensed that peace would only cover over the cracks for a limited time before the deep enmities again erupted. McGahern knew this to be the case also and some of his fictional accounts carry the imprint of historical authenticity. It could be argued that these fictions are, in fact, the dramatisation of the unease expressed by O’Malley at the end of On Another Man’s Wound in lines that provide a good summary of the points I have been
endeavouring to make in the course of this article:

Our comradeship in a desperate cause was reducing our disparities and was uniting us in a bond, yet class distinctions would jut out and our merging in what we liked to call ‘the people’ was a figment. We could not see any definite social shape or distinction to our efforts.... History might have taught us where in ourselves we would find reaction, but our blind spots were as many as the holes in a strainer. \(AMW, 323\)

As we contemplate the ruined economic landscape that is the Ireland of 2011, we can appreciate the distance we have travelled from the ideals of the Irish men and women who put their lives on the line to bring about Irish independence. This independence has all but been abolished because of the ‘blind spots’ and the greed that replaced the idealism and selflessness of those who forged a Republic and were lucky not to live long enough to witness its demise.

**The empty tomb** – In light of Jesus’ castigation of the religious leaders of his time and their religious practices as ‘whitewashed tombs’ (Mt 23:27), it is significant that his own death left but an empty tomb, a pointer to the resurrection. Its discovery marked the beginning of a profound journey of understanding for the disciples of Jesus, one which led to the recognition that his resurrection is the antithesis of the culture of the tomb that distorts memory by celebrating the heroic achievements of victors while ignoring the silence of their victims. That the tomb of Jesus is empty forces us to recognise that no earthly power, not even death itself, can contain him. He cannot be held in the tomb: he cannot be pinned down by any ideology or compelled to align with any cause; he cannot be grasped or controlled by human ingenuity or power; he cannot be contained even by the community that gathers in his name, as though he were its possession.

Joe Egan, From Misery to Hope: Encountering God in the Abyss of Suffering