

John McGahern: Une forme de vie intense by Daniel Rondeau

In 1984, Daniel Rondeau, then chief editor of books for *Libération*, wrote a piece for his newspaper. It contains a mix of quotes from McGahern and descriptions of Luke Early's bar in Mohill.¹ McGahern wrote to Alain Delahaye, his French translator and friend, about the article.²

*To Alain Delahaye
(from Foxfield)*

1 October 1984

Dear Alain,

It seems we'll get to France late October, early November instead of when we planned.

We'll go by way of London.

Madeline's ½ sister was here - she left today - and brought Libération. It seems they went for local colour. Most of the quotes seemed wrong, or worse, ½ right - but I suppose it can do little harm.

Early's bar was a damp and dark country bar with leatherette benches – all spilling their insides – and low Formica tables. A counter, as dirty as it was imposing, housed a pile of tins and pharmaceutical products. Mortuary wreaths of red, pink or purple plastic, and strange statuettes, with Christ lying in a miniaturised coffin, also made of plastic, hung from the ceiling beams. Early's Bar & Lounge was also an undertaker's and sold funerary items. It was raining. A family sat on high stools at the bar, parents and children all next to one another, drinking stout and no-one talking. The silence was so dense that you could hear the rain slapping off the front window. Early's bar was located in the centre of Mohill, a small town in County Leitrim.³ This county, in the northwest of Ireland, is the poorest in the country. It's said that if a crow wants to land in this part of the world, he needs to bring his dinner with him. In a way, Early's bar was at the centre of Irish poverty.

John McGahern's home was only a five-minute drive from Mohill in his old white Volkswagen. But he used to hold his appointments at Early's because his house was difficult to find, accessible only by a narrow road guarded with thick hedges, between two lakes populated with perch, pike and eel and frequented by a herd of wild swans. At home, a peat fire was burning in the fireplace. 'When I was young,' he said, 'it was normal for an Irish writer to go into exile. I am the very example of those who rebelled against this situation. I wanted to write here. But a writer is always in exile in his own imagination. Despite everything, I think it's hard to write in the countryside. People invade you easily: when they see me writing they don't think I'm working. That's why I

¹ Published in *Libération*, 1984 and in Daniel Rondeau, *Les fêtes partagées lectures et autres voyages*, (NiL, 1994); translated from French by Fiona Slevin.

² Frank Shovlin, ed., *The Letters of John McGahern*, (2021).

³ Incorrectly identified as Dromod in the original essay; corrected here.

like to write in Paris, because writing is always painful and everything easily becomes a pretext to escape this pain. Prison must be good for writing.'

McGahern and Ireland have an affectionate but complex relationship. This pioneer of the refusal of exile has never failed to respond to invitations from foreign universities that offer him chairs in the history of literature. This good-natured Irishman has always been published in London or New York but never in Dublin and never appreciated by the Irish literary society. For his part, he does not miss what he calls Dublin provincialism: 'Dublin is too small a city, where the small literary world spends part of its time self-congratulation.'

When his second book, *The Dark*, was published in London, McGahern was driven out of the school in Dublin where he taught and the book was banned in Ireland. Twenty years later, all of his novels, except *The Pornographer*, are studied in the schools on the banks of the Liffey, and McGahern was a founding member of the Irish Academy.

His English crackles softly, without heat, in long sinuous tirades, infused with regret and occasional digressions. 'You must first be a reader to become a writer. I read a lot: Hemingway and Faulkner, excellent novelists, D.H. Lawrence, excellent critic, and Evelyn Waugh. Among the Irish, my favourite is Patrick Kavanagh, a son of a peasant shoemaker who became the poet of the people in the bars of Dublin when I was a student. He was very important for my whole generation. The goings-on in Dublin bars at that time could be quite entertaining. Kavanagh beat up Flann O'Brien, author of *La Kermesse Irlandaise* (At Swim Two Birds) and *The Third Policeman*, who was influenced by both Joyce and Beckett. But O'Flaherty, famous for writing *Le Mouchard*, was a nationalist born in the Aran Islands and bigger and stronger than Kavanagh, and often inflicted severe punishment. To summarise, they all drank a lot.'

McGahern locks himself up every day for three hours to work. He lets ideas come, writing without ever knowing where he is going. 'Each book is for me a total adventure that I try to renew. Even though I know we always write the same book.'

The evening was closing in, and we had already drunk a few jars of an old whiskey when someone knocked on the door. A man came in. It hadn't stopped raining and water dripped from his cap. He was wearing rubber trousers and his too-large jacket hung loosely. He was limping and leaning on a stick. His was a strange story. A foundling, employed for decades by unscrupulous farmers, he barely knew the colour of money; perhaps he was not even rich enough to go for a drink at Early's bar. He belonged to the dark people sung by Patrick Kavanagh: 'We are a dark people / Our eyes are ever turned / Inward...' He only had to push the door open and the smell of damp earth countryside entered with him. John McGahern told me about his life as if he were one of his characters but without failing to dot the i's and cross the t's of literature and life: 'I said that literature was a great suffering, but it is also the most intense form of life. Any life would be small without literature.' _____