



JOHN MCGAHERN

Author of *Amongst Women* and *By the Lake*

ALL WILL BE WELL

A Memoir

“Everyone has a life and a true story to tell, but few have a story so full of pain and beauty as that of the revered Irish man of letters John McGahern.” —*The Boston Globe*

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John McGahern

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Acclaim for John McGahern's

ALL WILL BE WELL

"Extraordinary, spellbinding, spiritual."

—*The Irish Independent*

"Magnificent. . . . Stand[s] supreme in the Irish canon."

—Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Times*

"McGahern's writing has endured."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"This book is a story about a lost country, for McGahern's Ireland is not found on a map; and a story about innocence and grace, power and the abuse of power. It illuminates his work—six novels, four story collections—and confirms his status. Simply, McGahern is the best writer; this is his best book."

—*The Sunday Telegraph* (London)

"John McGahern writes with pastoral passion and a painter's eye about the fields, flowers, hedges, waters and gentle sweep of hills in County Leitrim. [He is] a master of contemporary Irish fiction."

—*The New York Times*

"[A] complex and beautiful book."

—*The Sunday Times* (London)

“John McGahern has always been a mesmerizing writer of fiction. His ravishing memoir discloses the source of his genius, telling the story of a little boy and his growth to manhood after his mother died of breast cancer when he was only nine. . . . This memoir is his offering to her, a mass for his own people, the Irishmen and women of decades ago. . . . Now, in this account of his and their ‘precious’ lives, he has spoken out, exquisitely, for all of them.”
—*New Statesman*

“Superb. . . . [A] wonderfully felicitous and heartening exercise in autobiography.”
—*The Independent* (London)

“McGahern has created a work of personal testimony that brims with remembered detail, and possesses an emotional intensity that, in places, is almost overwhelming. . . . [A] constantly arresting chronicle.”
—*The Observer* (London)

John McGahern

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John McGahern wrote six highly acclaimed novels and four collections of short stories and was the recipient of many awards and honors, including an award from the Society of Authors, the American Ireland Fund Literary Awards, the Prix Ecureuil de Littérature Étrangère and the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. *Amongst Women*, which won both the GPA Book Award and the *Irish Times* Award, was short-listed for the Booker Prize. He died in 2006.



INTERNATIONAL

ALSO BY JOHN MCGAHERN

By the Lake

The Collected Stories



I want to thank my editors, Sonny Mehta for his support over many years, and Neil Belton for his painstaking reading of the manuscript. Ian Jack first read the manuscript in a very rough draft, and his suggestions were invaluable.

I want especially to thank my sisters, Rosaleen, Margaret, Monica, Dympna, for their careful readings, corrections, their help with letters, and for bringing back into the light two important scenes that had slipped my memory.

I owe Madeline McGahern debts of advice and help stretching back over many books.

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THE SOIL IN LEITRIM IS POOR, in places no more than an inch deep. Underneath is daub, a blue-grey modelling clay, or channel, a compacted gravel. Neither can absorb the heavy rainfall. Rich crops of rushes and wiry grasses keep the thin clay from being washed away.

The fields between the lakes are small, separated by thick hedges of whitethorn, ash, blackthorn, alder, sally, rowan, wild cherry, green oak, sycamore, and the lanes that link them under the Iron Mountains are narrow, often with high banks. The hedges are the glory of these small fields, especially when the hawthorn foams into streams of blossom each May and June. The sally is the first tree to green and the first to wither, and the rowan berries are an astonishing orange in the light from the lakes every September. These hedges are full of mice and insects and small birds, and sparrowhawks can be seen hunting all through the day. In their branches the wild woodbine and dog rose give off a deep fragrance in summer evenings, and on their banks grow the foxglove, the wild strawberry, primrose and fern and vetch among

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the crawling briars. The beaten path the otter takes between the lakes can be traced along these banks and hedges, and in quiet places on the edge of the lakes are the little lawns speckled with fish bones and blue crayfish shells where the otter feeds and trains her young. Here and there surprising islands of rich green limestone are to be found. Among the rushes and wiry grasses also grow the wild orchid and the windflower. The very pooriness of the soil saved these fields when old hedges and great trees were being levelled throughout Europe for factory farming, and, amazingly, amid unrelenting change, these fields have hardly changed at all since I ran and played and worked in them as a boy.

A maze of lanes link the houses that are scattered sparsely about these fields, and the lanes wander into one another like streams until they reach some main road. These narrow lanes are still in use. In places, the hedges that grow on the high banks along the lanes are so wild that the trees join and tangle above them to form a roof, and in the full leaf of summer it is like walking through a green tunnel pierced by vivid pinpoints of light.

I came back to live among these lanes thirty years ago. My wife and I were beginning our life together, and we thought we could make a bare living on these small fields and I would write. It was a time when we could have settled almost anywhere, and if she had not liked the place and the people we would have moved elsewhere. I, too, liked the place, but I was from these fields and my preference was less important.

A different view of these lanes and fields is stated by my father: "My eldest son has bought a snipe run in behind the Ivy Leaf Ballroom," he wrote. In some ways, his description is accurate. The farm is small, a low hill between two lakes, and the soil is poor. My father would have seen it as a step down from the world of civil servants, teachers, doctors, nurses, policemen, tillage inspectors to which he belonged. Also, it was too close to where my mother's relatives lived and where I had grown up with

my mother. The very name of the Ivy Leaf Ballroom would have earned his disapproval.

A local man, Patsy Conboy, built it with money he made in America. He first called it Fenaghville—it was the forerunner of the Cloudlands and the Roselands—and later it became, more appropriately, the Ivy Leaf. All through the 1950s and into the 1960s he hired famous dance bands. In spite of being denounced from several pulpits, the ballroom prospered and Patsy Conboy became a local hero, dispensing much employment. People came by bus, by lorry, hackney car, horse trap, on bicycle and on foot to dance the night away. Couples met amid the spangled lights on the dusty dance floor and invited one another out to view the moon and take the beneficial air: “There wasn’t a haycock safe for a mile around in the month of July.” All the money Patsy Conboy made on the dancehall was lost in two less rooted ventures: a motorcycle track that turned into a quagmire as soon as it was used and an outdoor, unheated swimming pool amid the hundreds of small lakes and the uncertain weather. They were not rooted in the permanent need that made the ballroom such a success.

Patsy was more than able to hold his ground against the pulpits. When he was losing money digging the unheated swimming pool out of daub and channel, men turned up for work with letters from their priests stating that they had large families to support and should be employed. Patsy was unmoved: “My advice to you, Buster, is to dump the priest and put a cap on that oil well of yours. They have been capping such oil wells for years in America. Families are smaller and everybody is better off.”

He was living close by when we bought the snipe run. The Ivy Leaf was then a ruin, its curved iron roof rusted, its walls unpainted, and Patsy had gone blind. Nothing about Patsy or his ballroom or the snipe zigzagging above the rushes would have commended themselves to my father. We settled there and were

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happy. My relationship with these lanes and fields extended back to the very beginning of my life.

When I was three years old I used to walk a lane like these lanes to Lisacarn School with my mother. We lived with her and our grandmother, our father's mother, in a small bungalow a mile outside the town of Ballinamore. Our father lived in the barracks twenty miles away in Cootehall, where he was sergeant. We spent the long school holidays with him in the barracks, and he came and went to the bungalow in his blue Baby Ford on annual holidays and the two days he had off in every month. Behind the bungalow was a steep rushy hill, and beside it a blacksmith's forge. The bungalow which we rented must have been built for the blacksmith and was a little way up from the main road that ran to Swanlinbar and Enniskillen and the North. The short pass from the road was covered with clinkers from the forge. They crunched like grated teeth beneath the traffic of hoofs and wheels that came and went throughout the day. Hidden in trees and bushes on the other side of the main road was the lane that led to Lisacarn where my mother taught with Master Foran. Lisacarn had only a single room and the teachers faced one another when they taught their classes, the long benches arranged so that their pupils sat back to back, a clear space between the two sets of benches on the boarded floor. On the windowsill glowed the blue Mercator globe, and wild flowers were scattered in jamjars on the sills and all about the room. Unusual for the time, Master Foran, whose wife was also a teacher, owned a car, a big Model-T Ford, and in wet weather my mother and I waited under trees on the corner of the lane to be carried to the school. In good weather we always walked. There was a drinking pool for horses along the way, gates to houses, and the banks were covered with all kinds of wild flowers and vetches and wild strawberries. My mother named these

flowers for me as we walked, and sometimes we stopped and picked them for the jamjars. I must have been extraordinarily happy walking that lane to school. There are many such lanes all around where I live, and in certain rare moments over the years while walking in these lanes I have come into an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace, in which I feel that I can live forever. I suspect it is no more than the actual lane and the lost lane becoming one for a moment in an intensity of feeling, but without the usual attendants of pain and loss. These moments disappear as suddenly and as inexplicably as they come, and long before they can be recognized and placed.

I don't think I learned anything at school in Lisacarn, though I had a copybook I was proud of. I was too young and spoiled, and spoiled further by the older girls who competed in mothering me during the school breaks. I remember the shame and rage when they carried me, kicking and crying, into the empty schoolroom to my mother. Everybody was laughing: I had sat on a nest of pissmires on the bank until most of the nest was crawling inside my short trousers.

I am sure my mother took me with her because she loved me and because I had become a nuisance in the house. I had three sisters already, the twins Breedge and Rosaleen and the infant Margaret, not much more than three years spanning all four of us. Our grandmother had been a dressmaker and stood arrow-straight in her black dresses. My handsome father, who stood arrow-straight as well until he was old, was her only child. She had been a local beauty and was vain and boastful. She was forever running down the poor land of Leitrim and its poor-looking inhabitants, which must have done nothing for her popularity. It was true that my father's relatives were tall and many were handsome: "When we went to your mother's wedding and saw all those *whoosins* from Cavan—Smiths and Leddys and Bradys and McGaherns—we felt like scrunties off the mountain," my Aunt Maggie told me once laughingly. The McGaherns set great store

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on looks and maleness and position. There was a threat of violence in them all, and some were not a little mad and none had tact. There was a wonderful-looking first cousin of my father's, Tom Leddy, a guard like my father, who had also married a teacher. He was stationed at Glenfarne on the shores of Lough Melvin. Years later, out of the blue, he called soon after my father had remarried to find my stepmother alone in the house, a clever, plain-looking woman who adored my father and was both his slave and master. Having introduced himself forthrightly, he demanded, "Who are you? Are you the new housekeeper?" "I'm Frank's wife," she responded. "Frank's wife," he looked at her in amazement and broke into such uncontrollable laughter that he had to sit down. "Frank's wife. That's the best one I've heard in years. The whole country must be going bananas." When he rose, he repeated, "Frank's wife. You have made my day. Well, whoever you are, tell Frank that his cousin Tom Leddy called and that I'll call soon again one of these years," and left as abruptly as he came.

Whether my grandmother was a little mad as well, I was too young to know. She either had a great influence on my father or their temperaments were similar. Who can tell whether certain temperaments are ever influenced by nurture? They were both violent and wilful. Once, when she caught me burning bits of paper in the open grate of the small range to watch them blaze in the fascination children have with flame, she caught and thrust my finger between the glowing bars. She disregarded both my cries and my mother's horrified protestations. "You have the child half ruined already. There's only one way he'll learn." Neither she nor my father had any sense of humour, and they hardly ever smiled or laughed, and they looked on any manifestation of enjoyment in others as a symptom of irresponsibility. They also saw it as diverting attention from themselves. The difference between them was great as well. My father was intelligent and could be charming, even gallant, when he wanted. Though he was

as vain and proud as she, he was never boastful: "Nobody blows themselves up other than fools. If you need praise, get others to do it for you."

I was a single star until the twins arrived, and I became insanely jealous of the natural transfer of attention. On dry days, when my mother was at school, my grandmother often left the twins out in the sun between the house and the forge, high on the sloping pass of clinkers that ran to the open gate on the road. I was forever around the forge, and she would warn me to mind them before going back into the house, having locked the brake on their big pram. I must have been planning how to get them out of my life for some time. I learned to unlock the brake, and one day, after careful checking that nobody was watching either from the forge or the house or the road, I pushed the pram down the slope. The pass wasn't steep and the wheels would have bumped and slowed on the clinkers, but before it came to a stop the pram wheeled off the pass and overturned. The twins weren't hurt, but all this time my grandmother had been observing me from behind a curtain, and made not the slightest attempt—she had only to tap the window—to protect the twins, though she was out of the house and able to seize me as I was watching the pram overturn in terrified dismay.

I saw this same calculating coldness in my father many times. When he retired and was living on a small farm in Grevisk, he saw two boys on their way from school leave their bicycles on the side of the road to cross the fields into his orchard. Instead of confronting them there or giving them a few apples, as many would have done, he walked out to the road and wheeled their bicycles into the house. When they returned from the orchard, they found their bicycles gone. That night he telephoned the parents.

As well as becoming troublesome in the house, I was also beginning to cause trouble around the forge, haunting the place, persecuting the men with questions, wanting to swing from the bellows. I was fascinated by all that went on in that dark cave, the