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‘Out of Proportion to the Small Loss’: Productivist Agriculture in the Farming Novels of McGahern and Laxness

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Agricultural policy in the EU has been consistently driven by productivist imperatives that privilege greater commodification at the expense of the producers, resulting in dispossession from the landⁱ and the fabrication of unequal class structures. As a result of productivist agricultural policies, small farms are disappearing everywhere and the remaining holdings are being forcibly absorbed by exponentially larger industrial farms. Productivist agriculture focuses on maximizing product output, often through intensive practices and the expansion of operations. In simple terms, it is generally seen as the antithesis to protectionist or post-productivist policies, which tend to evade market tendencies in order to champion a healthy lifestyle and liveable income for the producer. The economic crisis experienced by small farmers and produced by this agrarian regime may now have reached a peak, with advancement in technology that promotes the intensification of industrial farming and the championing of neoliberal ideas among the policymakers of the most affluent agricultural nations. Lost in political discussion, however, are the social capital and cultural value small-scale farming adds to local communities, as well as nations as a whole.

Irish writer John McGahern’s *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) and the Icelandic novel *Independent People* (1934) by Hálldor Laxness are two prominent examples of farming novels—even though seldom critically addressed as such—that ultimately stand in response to these agricultural policies during the periods they were made, albeit written more than 60 years apart. Ireland and Iceland, both (semi)-periphery islands in relation to Europe’s core hegemonic capitalism, once shared similar farming systems based on small holdings and rotational grazing. In the twenty-first century, however, agricultural development has

increasingly diverged in each country, for in critical junctures of agriculture policy decisions they took radically different paths. Each novel illustrates their respective country's transition to capitalistic agriculture as the result of specific policy ideology, and presents the sacrifice of cultural value that results from these decisions, albeit by using different aesthetic forms and approaches. As I suggest later, because there was still time for Laxness' warning regarding productivist agriculture to have an impact on his country, he sought to present the harsh realities of Icelandic farming after World War I in the aesthetic form of a realist epic, as is often the vehicle of political intent. McGahern, writing at time presumed too late to save family agriculture, instead composed a pastoral to record and honour the social capital that is forfeited with the loss of small-scale farming.

That They May Face the Rising Sun follows Kate and Joe Rutledge's unobtrusive existence within a farming community as they operate a small beef and sheep herd. With the exception of the death of a largely-absent character, the Rutledges are little disturbed as they entertain neighbours and pursue the daily tasks of small farming under idyllic, communal conditions. In contrast to this pastoral view, farming is represented as much more difficult and isolating in *Independent People*, in which Bjartur of Summerhouse struggles to maintain a small croft and save enough to purchase it outright from the landlord. Believing his farm to be the only embodiment of independence, he deprives himself and his family of comfort and nourishment for the sake of the farm, eventually finding himself alone and destitute. *Rising Sun* and *Independent People* are published 67 years apart, and arise from different cultures and historical circumstances. While both represent small farms based on rotational grazing, the machinery and farming technology available to the characters in *Rising Sun* is more advanced than that in *Independent People*. What is homologous, however, is their relationship to the type of changes in agriculture that are encroaching in each diegetic world. Both the Rutledges and Bjartur are presented as individuals that practice a simple

understanding of economics in an essentially pre-capitalistic environment that must face the coming productivist interpretation of agriculture.

McGahern and Laxness both write from farming backgrounds, but the socio-political understandings of agriculture that their work mediates have not yet been recognized by critics. The Friedmann–McMichael concept of food regimes, temporally organising the political dynamics of producing commodities, traces the use of productivist agriculture to achieve political or economic capital—the first regime (1870-1930s) characterized by colonial imports to Europe and the second (1950s-1970s) marked by the strategic redistribution of US surplus across Eastern Europe and the rise of transnational agribusinesses.¹ While scholars debate the parameters of the current regime and if it has yet found its equilibrium, expansionist agriculture spurred by deregulation, such as the EU practices discussed in this paper, is a flagship characteristic. Interestingly, Pechlaner and Otero suggest that this present regime ‘will be highly influenced by the force of local resistance’, particularly in regards to national regulations and the use of biotechnology.² Comparing these two texts through a world-ecological framework, and explicitly reading them as farming novels that represent the specific agricultural policies enacted and practiced at the time of their writing, this essay suggests that both McGahern and Laxness compose their respective novels in protest against expansionist agriculture and productivist policies. In

¹ McMichael, Philip. ‘A food regime genealogy.’ *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2009, 36:1, 139-169, doi: [10.1080/03066150902820354](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150902820354)

² Pechlaner, G. and Otero, G. ‘The Third Food Regime: Neoliberal Globalism and Agricultural Biotechnology in North America.’ *Sociologia Ruralis*, 2008, 48: 351-371. doi:[10.1111/j.1467-9523.2008.00469.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2008.00469.x)

doing so, not only can the lived experiences of farmers be given voice as a form of opposition to productivist agriculture during the regimes which each work was composed, but also the ways in which this defiance registers in decisions of form and aesthetics in the novels of Laxness and McGahern. This paper suggests that such decisions themselves are a form of 'local resistance.' As I contend, it should be a crucial aim for world-ecological approaches to Irish literature and culture to examine literary representations of farming and agriculture, both within the national tradition, and in relation to other contexts of European agriculture, in order to develop a deeper understanding both of the modes of literary representation at play in farming fictions, but also to expand critical literacy of political dialogues pertaining to farming policy, such as the debate regarding EU accession by Iceland, and the ways in which these are mediated within cultural production.

In a footnote to his essay 'Third-World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism,' Frederic Jameson contends that a new type of comparison of literature is necessary, one less concerned with the geography and time period texts were written, but based on the 'concrete situations from which the texts spring and to which they constitute direction responses'.³ Similarly, Franco Moretti, in defining world literature as 'literature of the capitalist world-system', borrows the supposition from world-systems theory that the world literary system is '*one*, and *unequal*: with a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality' and argues that these inequalities and hierarchies are mediated within literary form.⁴ Although they are written in

³ Jameson, Fredric. 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.' *Social Text*, no 15, 1986, 65-88.

⁴ Moretti, Franco. 'Conjectures on World Literature.' *New Left Review*. Vol. 1, (Jan 1, 2000), 54-68.

different decades and originating from diverse cultures, juxtaposition of these texts enables a world-literary critique of the inequalities and hierarchies structuring the imposition of productivist agricultural policy in different historical contexts, as well as the way the lived experience and habitus of farmers affected by it can be represented in fiction. As such, I read *Rising Sun* and *Independent People* in large part as novels representing the subordination of small Atlantic islands on the periphery of Europe to the capitalist mode of agriculture from the mainland. I argue that the central political intent of *Independent People* is to lay bare the consequences of Iceland's incorporation into the volatile markets of Europe during World War I, a subordination that the island had avoided previous to that decade. In a subtler, less polemical fashion, *Rising Sun* can also be read as highlighting the productivist agriculture imposed as a result of Ireland's membership in the European Union (the core) and subsequent subjection to its policies, thus echoing the earlier depiction of the Icelandic farmer's experience in *Independent People* from the vantage point of decades of Irish integration into the EU. First, I will demonstrate the EU's movement towards a productivist agricultural policy and suggest the evidence in *Rising Sun* of McGahern's apprehension of such a political shift, as such a trend towards encouraged expansion resembles that which has occurred in most other agricultural nations in the contemporary era, including the United States, New Zealand and Australia. Following that, I will consider the unique, perhaps singular case of Iceland, which may be the only Western nation to refute the productivist agriculture exemplified in *Independent People* and extricate themselves from outside markets.

The Old Ways Die: Irish Agriculture and Productivism

John McGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun* presents a rural society in which farming is central and ubiquitous. Kate and Joe Rutledge return from London to a small farm similar to the one Joe had left years ago and decide to remain despite the surprise of

neighbours and an offer of a better job in England. The novel was published in 2002, though the exact decade in which it is set is unspecified. Characters tend to hay with mowers and tedders, but remember using scythes and mules. They have a television to watch *Blind Date* (which aired from 1985 to 2003), but it is only at the end of the novel that telephone lines are laid down. As Eamon Maher suggests, McGahern ‘succeeds in conveying a strong sense of place and of a culture that transcends time’.⁵ It appears that McGahern meant to register a period in mid-twentieth century Irish history defined by lifestyle rather than an empirical date. What is perhaps more important, however, is that there are indications that this lifestyle is on the verge of change.

The laying down of telephone poles around the lake at the end of the novel suggests that a version of modernity will be forced upon the characters. Remarks such as Patrick Ryan’s worry that ‘after us there will be nothing left but the water hen and the swan’⁶ signify that the quiet regime of their existence may be under threat. An unfinished shed stands on the Ruttedges’ property, and while progress is made on it over the course of the novel, they are in no hurry to insist on its completion. It is as if the characters themselves are aware of the metaphoric value it may hold, suggesting the completion of the building would also herald the conclusion of a way of life. Perhaps such concerns are best emblemized by a late-born black lamb that, as Kate believes, is ‘a picture of happiness’ (p.264). Joe, however, is careless in running the sheep into the shed for an overdue dosing, causing the lamb to be trampled to

⁵Maher, Eamon. ‘John McGahern and the Commemoration of Traditional Rural Ireland.’ *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 95, no. 379, 2006, 279–290., www.jstor.org/stable/30095844.

⁶ McGahern, John. *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

death. The event is described as more than a typical, expected loss of livestock for a farmer: ‘it was as if the black lamb reached back to other feelings of loss and disappointment and gathered them into an ache that was out of all proportion to the small loss’ (p.265). Such heavy language sets the tone of a parable, in which the slaying of the lamb stands in place of a loss of innocence. At the time which *Rising Sun* was published Irish agriculture itself would have already experienced a sort of loss of innocence.

It is no small irony that it was an Irish man from Fianna Fáil—a political party founded on its support for the small farmer—who gave his name to the bill that began the shift in EU policy in a direction ultimately detrimental to family farming. Ray MacSharry, looking to reduce the level of government involvement in farmgate pricingⁱⁱ and allow EU products to better compete on the international market, introduced the ‘MacSharry Reforms’ in the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in 1992. As the European Commission asserts, ‘for more than twenty years, starting in 1992, the CAP has been through successive reforms which have increased market orientation for agriculture’.⁷ While some measures, such as shifting from product payments to producer payments and rewarding farmers for the public capital they provide were useful measures in supporting family agriculture, the additional focus on increasing production was not. The result was overproduction and ultimately lower farmgate prices.⁸ The EU agricultural trade markets were further liberalized during the 2004-

⁷ ‘Overview of CAP Reform 2014-2020.’ *Agricultural Policy Perspectives Brief*. No. 5, 2013.

⁸ Bjarnason, Magnus. *The Political Economy of Joining the European Union: Iceland’s Position at the Beginning of the 21st Century*. Vossiuspers: Amsterdam University Press, 2010,p.51.

2009 term of Mariann Fischer Boel, one result being the abolition of milk quotas.⁹ This drove down milk prices in the EU, ultimately leading to expansion in the dairy sector and the decline of the family dairy farm. While the EU does include more programs to benefit small farmers than agricultural nations such as the United States and Australia, it is still intent on driving expansion and a productivist mindset, which becomes even clearer when comparing it to the agricultural ideology of Iceland in the contemporary era, whose protectionist policies champion providing a viable and stable income to farmers over increasing commodity output.

McGahern was writing *Rising Sun* during the time when the small Irish farmer was beginning to feel the effects of the 1992 MacSharry reforms and the general paradigm shift in EU agricultural policy towards productivism that started to manifest itself in tangible changes to the Irish agricultural system. In order to compensate for lower profit margins, farmers were forced to invest in larger equipment and infrastructure to produce higher commodity volumes and seek purchasing and financing advantages in economies of scale. McGahern provided evidence that he was aware that the future of small Irish agriculture was indeed in peril due to continued expansion in the industry. In his essay 'Rural Ireland's Passing,' originally published at the turn of the millennium, he addresses the present state of farming:

Since then everything has changed. Like fishing, it has become an industry. The machines have taken away the hardship and the uncertainty, but larger farms and fewer people are needed to justify their cost and efficiency. Nobody can make a living

⁹ 'Agricultural and Rural Policy Under Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel.' *European Commission Agriculture and Rural Development*.

from the small farms anymore unless they have a job, or the wife has, or both have jobs.¹⁰

McGahern explicitly names productivist agriculture and the drive towards the expansion of holdings as the reason for the difficulties faced by farms such as those in *Rising Sun*.

McGahern's characters in *Rising Sun* frequently confront productivist and expansionist ideology. 'It's a sight how the world is going,' Jamesie remarks, observing how quickly the lambs Rutledge raised are turned into a commodity (p.149). It leaves both characters with a sense of unease, of the same type of discomfort that subtly yet frequently surfaces in this pastoral novel. Rutledge is wary of using the mower, despite the fact that it will allow him and Jamesie to complete the hay-making process in a fraction of the effort. Instead of celebrating the technology that allows them to produce more fodder at an expedited rate, he feels 'some apprehension but no excitement. He...got none of the pleasure he saw young men take in their power' (p.110). The next day, when Rutledge arrives at Jamesie's with the tedder (an implement that spreads the cut grass for better drying), he finds Jamesie and his wife manually scattering the windrows with pitchforks, despite being a futile act in wake of the tedder's use. 'Those pitchforks aren't a great sign of faith in the machines', Rutledge remarks (p.118). It can be easy to read such exchanges as mere nostalgia or a resistance to change by the characters, particularly in light of the awareness that change is indeed upon them. What shouldn't be overlooked, however, is the risk Jamesie is taking when he allows all of his hay to be cut at once with the machinery. If it was to rain during the

¹⁰ McGahern, John. 'Rural Ireland's Passing.' *Love of the World*. pp.166-171. London: Faber and Faber, 2009. Print.

three days which it takes to cut, ted and bale the hay, the entirety of his fodder would be lost. Previously Jamesie cut the hay on his holdings in thirds, as that was all that was achievable at once by previous practices. As a result, however, he would be guaranteed to save at least some of his hay, regardless of any unforeseen weather conditions. Such a conundrum embodies the risks of expansionist agriculture in which one is forced to participate in higher stakes in order attain a profit and keep pace with the growing technology and commodity sizes necessarily produced by farmers. Jamesie is lucky to exist in a diegetic world in which something bad seldom happens to characters. Nonetheless, when the hay is baled and Kate suggests that 'It's safe now,' her remark must be interpreted with a degree of irony, given McGahern's awareness of the agricultural changes ahead (p.119).

Some warnings against productivist economics are expressed more directly in the novel. Frank Dolan, having worked for Joe Rutledge's uncle, the Shah, desires to purchase the Shah's business. Rutledge negotiates with the bank himself on Frank's behalf to secure funding, and establishes a wink-and-nod agreement with the bank manager that all Frank has to do to receive the loan is tell them that he plans on growing the business: 'He'll have to say he intends to expand the business and employ more people. That's bank policy: it looks better for the bank when they have to face the politicians...' (p.167). Even though it is made clear that Frank is not actually bound to do so, he panics during the meeting and instead 'vowed to do less' (p.187). He loses the loan and becomes the laughing stock of the area financial sector. More than just a stock character of local colour or provincial innocence, Frank and his unfortunate fate could be read as an intimation of the forces that will eventually encroach on his pastoral vision. The novel was written at a time when farmers were becoming conscious of the fact that they would have to begin to increase their holdings to remain viable. Although this fear of entrepreneurial expansion is most sharply expressed in the novel by one of the few characters who do not farm, it is no less consequential for the world of the novel. In his

ecocritical reading of *Rising Sun*, Gerald Lynch states: ‘The joke expresses, of course, *Sun*’s fit with an ecological consciousness respecting sustainability, such as is represented in the Rutledges’ and others small-scale farming’.¹¹ In the end, Frank is able to bypass the banks and receive the loan from the Shah himself, thus successfully avoiding the necessity of expansion. Such a disconnect between characters’ understanding of economics and the productivist policies impressed upon them is not surprising in a diegetic world that is still trying to subsist in a largely pre-capitalistic mode, in which instead of hiring help farmers exchange labour among themselves, and no one is comfortable handling money.

The Productivism Iceland Left Behind

While the threat to small, idyllic farming is represented as subtle and gradual in *Rising Sun*, the costs of expansionist agriculture in a modernizing Iceland take centre stage in the latter portion of Háldor Laxness’ *Independent People*. In Laxness’ most recognized work both in Iceland and abroad, Bjartur stubbornly insists that farming is an act of an independent man, and always puts the farm first—even as it leads to the eventual destruction of his family. Following the market boom of World War I, Icelandic politicians encourage farmers to expand and become modern. This high-production agriculture is hard for Bjartur to resolve with his understanding of a farm being a venture restricted to what he and his family can manage with their own hands. Nonetheless, much to his detriment, Bjartur is persuaded to expand, acquiring new equipment and a modern-style house. When the war ends, however,

¹¹ Lynch, Gerald. ‘A ‘Fragile Interdependence’: John McGahern’s ‘That They May Face the Rising Sun.’’ *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2010, 160–175., www.jstor.org/stable/41955434.

sheep farming ceases to be profitable. Bjartur loses the farm, to which he has devoted his life, and from which he attains his autonomy.

The first volume of *Independent People* was published in 1934, the same year the Icelandic government introduced price supports for its farmers.¹² By narrating Bjartur of Summerhouse's struggle to maintain a small sheep farm, the novel chronicles the crisis that ultimately led to the Icelandic government (in real life) to adopt and maintain a protectionist policy that sought to support farmers instead of the free market. Imports of many products were prohibited, and price subsidies were introduced less than ten years later. In 1985, milk quotas were established based on domestic demand, and unlike in the EU, where milk quotas were phased out by 2015 to increase market competitiveness, Iceland's quota system has remained in place. Iceland also employs direct payments to farmers that are decoupled from the amount of commodities produced on a given farm. The result is a stable farmgate price that allows a small mixed farm to support a large family while readily investing in technology and infrastructure. While the EU reserves a significant portion of its focus for greater production, Icelandic agricultural policy advocates providing a quality lifestyle for farmers. The Icelandic Agricultural Information Services lists the following as one of Icelandic agriculture's objectives: 'The earnings and social conditions of the agricultural community shall be attractive enough to make farming a worthwhile profession.'¹³ The continuation of subsidies and quotas has allowed family agriculture in Iceland not only to still persist, but thrive.

¹² Bjarnason, Magnus. *The Political Economy of Joining the European Union: Iceland's Position at the Beginning of the 21st Century*. Vossiuspers: Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

¹³ 'From the Booklet "Icelandic Agriculture."' *Bondi.is* 3 Jan 2017, <http://archive.li/17tBt>.

Just as the MacSharry reforms were presented in Ireland as based on the ‘principles’ of competitive agriculture and market-based farmgate pricing, so are the expansionist post-World War I economics encapsulated in *Independent People* by the idealism of the politician Ingolfur Arnarson. Exulting the ‘new era of rural colonization and development’ brought about by the war (p.406),¹⁴ Arnarson encourages farmers to cultivate larger tracts of land and purchase expensive machinery previously unused on the island. The temporary boom in agricultural prices helps fuel the fever of expansion, which lending institutions are keen to fund. The collapse of the boom, however, results in a radical downturn in this overproduction and many farmers are left destitute. In a chapter titled ‘Ideals Fulfilled,’ the narrator lists the fates of Bjartur’s fellow farmers—most of them forced off their farms—and suggests that the only individuals to profit are those who were already wealthy like the Bailiff. Laxness, as if taking the words out of Frank Dolan’s mouth, states that ‘People take more upon themselves than they can manage if they aim higher’ (pp.436-7). While it is not the expansion of his farm that causes Bjartur to go bankrupt but rather the decision to build a new modern house, it is the failure to pay for the house after the drop in farmgate prices that is his downfall. This is Bjartur’s punishment for attempting to participate in the new modernity of Iceland. Much like the Ruttlidges’ shed, the house stands unfinished for several seasons—its ‘peculiar façade’ (p.432) suggesting the insubstantial character of Arnarson’s productivist agriculture. The characters in *Rising Sun* may have been wise not to finish the shed and face whatever metaphorical consequence its completion may have precipitated, as not long after Bjartur’s house is fully built he loses the entirety of his farm. In a final rebuke against free-market productivism, Bjartur concludes that ‘the fulfilment of important people’s ideals have proved

¹⁴ Laxness, Hálldor. *Independent People*. Trans. J. A. Thompson. London: The Harvill Press, 1934. Print. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

to be nothing more than a cloud of dust that has swirled up to obscure the lone worker's vision' (p.451).

Once again, Iceland is facing an important decision regarding the type of agricultural policies it will adopt. In 2009, Iceland formally submitted a bid to join the European Union¹⁵—though already a member of the European Economic Area (EEA), it was not bound by agreements regarding agriculture and fisheries. While Iceland's fishing industry was the central focus during the subsequent political debate, many, especially farmers themselves, were concerned at having to farm under EU policy and forfeit the measures that have kept family agriculture profitable. The proposition was eventually taken off the table by a newly elected government in 2013, and as of today a slim majority of Icelanders remain against it.¹⁶ Agricultural organizations in Iceland such as Landssamband kúabænda (Cattle Farmers' Association) remain active in opposing Icelandic accession into the EU. *Independent People* is still considered Iceland's national novel, but it remains to be seen whether Laxness' warning regarding productivist agriculture will once again find an audience and influence national policy.

Farming as a Cultural Act

¹⁵ Icelandic Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 'Summary Findings.'

<https://www.mfa.is/media/esb/Summary-Conclusions.pdf> Accessed 14 April 2017

¹⁶ Guðmundsson, Hjörtur J. 'Majority Rejects EU Membership.' Morgunblaðið.

http://icelandmonitor.mbl.is/news/politics_and_society/2016/02/03/majority_rejects_eu_membership/ Accessed 14 April 2017.

American writer Wendell Berry, standing at the crossroads of literature, farming, and economic concerns, called a good farmer ‘a cultural product’.¹⁷ Famous as a dissenting voice against expansionist agriculture, he starts his rebuttal to Former US Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz’s ‘go big or go home’ ideology in 1974 by stating ‘My basic assumption in talking about agriculture is that there’s more to it than just agriculture’.¹⁸ Much of Berry’s writing asserts that the lifestyle produced by small-scale agriculture maintains the health of the individual, rural community and the environment. When trying to find a non-quantitative and sociologically useful definition of family farming, researchers have long drawn on the non-production aspects of the occupation. Convey et.al. defines family farming as being part of a ‘lifescape’ with an interconnected emotional geography¹⁹, while John Gray speaks of the ‘consubstantiality’ that exists between the farming family and their holdings, citing that ‘family farming is more of a way of being in the world’.²⁰

It is indeed that ‘way of being in the world’ that is at stake for the characters of McGahern and Laxness. Small farming in *Rising Sun* is both the defining factor of a lifestyle and the principal way in which the community negotiates itself. When Joe Rutledge inquires why a mutual neighbour, Patrick Ryan, keeps cattle, he is told it is ‘for the name. The name of cattle and land. Without the cattle and the land he’d just be another wandering tradesman’

¹⁷ Berry, Wendell. ‘The Unsettling of America.’ *The Art of the Common Place*, Counterpoint, 2002, pp.35-46.

¹⁸ ‘Earl Butz versus Wendell Berry.’ *Co-Evolution Quarterly* 17 (Spring 1978), 50-59.

¹⁹ Convey et. Al. ‘Death in the wrong place? Emotional geographies of the UK 2001 foot and mouth disease epidemic.’ *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2005, 99-109

²⁰ Gray, John. ‘Family Farms in the Scottish Borders: a Practical Definition by Hill Sheep Farmers.’ *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1998, 341-356.

(p.15). Farming is the anchor that validates these figures in their local community, and the quality of their husbandry is often the principal manner in which we are to understand the characters themselves. Jamesie, the Ruttledges' closest neighbour, is nervous about the cattle mart on Monaghan Day, as the price he receives for his livestock would be an evaluation of his own worth. 'A hopeless man,' he condemns Patrick Ryan, as he 'gloated over the sleekness of his own cattle set beside Patrick's rough beasts' (pp.229-230). *Rising Sun's* characters are imbued with what Gray described as 'consubstantiality', infusing all their social and environmental interactions with more meaning than merely producing a commodity.

In *Independent People*, not only is the selfhood and autonomy granted by small-scale farming exalted by the individual character of Bjartur, but also in the discourse of the nation. At the time the first volume of *Independent People* was published, the Danish-Icelandic Act of Union was nearing expiration, after which Icelanders would vote overwhelmingly for sovereignty. It is not hard to imagine the allure of the novel's title, *Sjálfstætt folk*, which is more literally translated as 'Self-Standing People.' In his contribution to national mythopoesis on the eve of Iceland's transition to statehood, Laxness did not have a great cultural metropolis in Reykjavík to draw on for literary material as other European countries had, but the island did have a plenitude of farmers who could serve as the basis of national myth-building. In the same scene in which Laxness commits an authorial intrusion²¹ by referring to Iceland as 'our country' in narration discussing the effects of World War I (p.364), he juxtaposes Iceland's farming ethos against the cosmopolitan centres of Europe. When asked what would happen if all of Europe perished in the war, Bjartur suggests

²¹ See the discussion later regarding authorial intrusions in *Independent People*.

It would be a first-rate chance of discovering whether there are any prospects of good farming down there. It would half be a joke if Thorir of Gilteig's grandchildren should end up making dandelion chains on the ruins of London city, after all their damned China rubbish has been smashed to fragments; yes, and their statues. And I might even set to and dig myself a vegetable garden on the plain where Paris had been razed to the ground hahaha (p.368).

Laxness suggests that national consciousness can coalesce around farming because agriculture has endured and will endure, much like Iceland itself in the context of World War I in the novel. As Ástráður Eysteinnsson contends, in the early twentieth century, the Icelandic farm and surrounding countryside was viewed by nationalists as 'instrumental in preserving the Icelandic language and 'authentic way' of life, as opposed to towns and trade centres, which were 'contaminated' by a Danish presence'.²² Many characters echo the sentiments of the Bailiff's wife when she [contends](#) that 'the dale-farmer's dogged perseverance is a lever to which to lift the nation to higher things' (p.356). Many young Icelandic intellectuals at the time of the first World War, perhaps most famously Sigurður Nordal, did not believe the types of cultural and political modernity evolving in other European nations at that time were appropriate for Iceland, which possessed a cultural golden age dating back to the sagas of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Instead, they supported a form of nationalism that was closely linked to the past and a 'new modern Icelandic culture [built] on the values and

²² Eysteinnsson, Ástráður. 'Icelandic Prose Literature, 1940-1980.' *A History of Icelandic Literature*, edited by Daisy Neijmann. University of Nebraska Press, 2006, pp.404-437.

customs of the old agricultural society'.²³ In *Independent People*, Bjartur states that 'My farm is the world,' placing it at the convergence of geography, culture and history (p.384).

Ultimately, and each in their own way, *Rising Sun* and *Independent People* are novels meant to highlight the cultural destruction that results from the transition from small or subsistence-based farming to large-scale agricultural enterprises. When Laxness states that Bjartur couldn't get his head around capitalist agriculture because he was the type of person who 'fought nature and the country's monsters with his bare hands, and his higher culture was derived all from ballads and old sagas' (p.421), he is aligning his character with the history and ethos of the island itself, and, in total, not being ironic in suggesting that awareness of the nation's old stories was indeed a form of 'higher culture.' When wealthy farmers walked through Bjartur's farm as they would a museum or curiosity shop, not only is Bjartur's status as Berry's 'cultural product' further emphasized, but so is the fact that he is a cultural entity that is disappearing, or worse, has already been overtaken. Perhaps such loss is best embodied by returning to Bjartur's large, modern, yet nearly unliveable house that blocks the small turf cottage that they had dwelled in before. They miss the 'little cottage of Summerhouses with its rounded lines and agreeable proportions' (p.468). If Bjartur had been content with 'agreeable proportions' regarding the size of his farm he may have never lost it after the drop in markets.

Form and Style

²³ Jóhannsson, Jón Yngvi. 'Realism and Revolt: Between the World Wars.' *A History of Icelandic Literature*, edited by Daisy Neijmann. University of Nebraska Press, 2006, pp.357-404.

Both Laxness and McGahern write in protest of the contemporary agricultural policies of their respective islands, but each takes up a different approach in doing so. Laxness chooses to lay bare the difficulties of Icelandic farming in a work of social realism, while McGahern delivers a pastoral in which the farming is community-based, the work is pleasant and livestock are easy to care for. Farming in *Independent People* is a ‘dog’s life’ (p.55) carried out in isolation, at which the children work until they vomit from exhaustion. It is an epic that delivers in painstaking detail the dark realities of farming that McGahern ignores. Fredric Jameson suggests that social realism has often been the vehicle of political intent:

The possibilities of a literature which is at one and the same time a political intervention have traditionally been predicated on an epistemological dimension: such literature shows us things we have never seen before, whose existence we have never suspected — things which have possibly never been expressed or represented before in literature.²⁴

Composing *Independent People* at a period in Icelandic history in which governmental intervention was needed to protect Icelandic farmers—themselves the protectors of the island’s identity—from the volatile markets in which they had no countervailing agency, it was likely important to Laxness to subjectivize the lived experience of the farmer with accuracy, particularly after the World War I boom and bust. There was still time to influence his government and countrymen, and social realism allowed him the means to provide such a warning.

²⁴ Jameson, Fredric. ‘Antinomies in the Realism-Modernism Debate.’ *Modern Language Quarterly*. Vol 73, no.3, 2012, 475-485.

It is also possible that the status of Iceland as a (semi)-peripheral nation may have also affected the narrative delivery of *Independent People*. The Warwick Research Collective (WReC) contends that literature from the periphery and semi-periphery regions often exhibit ‘irrealist’ tendencies, which they define as irregularities in story telling techniques such as anti-linear plot lines or meta-narratorial devices. In *Combined and Uneven Development*, they suggest that ‘these formal features appear in the literary texts we examine as a result of the author’s self-conscious conversation with, and deployment of, relevant formal properties of adjacent forms (often non-literary) within their local or regional cultural ecology’.²⁵ Laxness’ ‘self-conscious conversation’ becomes apparent in his frequent authorial intrusions. As previously mentioned, he denotes Iceland as ‘our country’ when framing it against the supposed culture of mainland Europe (p. 364). Earlier, he ponders ‘Great is the tyranny of mankind’ after describing the difficulties Bjartur’s children are subjected to when making hay (p. 211), injecting his judgement from outside the diegetic story. It is as if Laxness is stopping the narrative to muse to himself, or perhaps align himself with the reader against the oppressive economics brought about by the European markets. Such instances create jarring deviations from the social realism they are embedded in. According to WReC, these occurrences in the text are part of a resistance to a hegemonic core, in this case mainland Europe. They become small moments of assertion derived from the tension of being tamped or overshadowed by larger forces.

In writing about Irish farming during the beginning of its economic turbulence McGahern chose instead to compose a pastoral in *Rising Sun*, despite the fact that much other Irish writing in regards to agriculture, from Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* (1942) to

²⁵ Warwick Research Collective. *Combined and Uneven Development*. Liverpool University Press, 2015, p. 52.

Sam Hanna Bell's *December Bride* (1951), is grounded in social realism. Perhaps even more evocative is that McGahern himself was a farmer and would have been acutely aware of the occupation's less romantic side, and indeed wrote about the harsh circumstances it often occurs under in his previous work, such as *The Dark* (1965) and *Amongst Women* (1990). Why would he then give in to the pastoral's tendency of, as Shirley Wong calls it, the 'aestheticization of the brutal realities of agricultural labor'? ²⁶

As critics have often pointed out, *Rising Sun* is more about a way of life than actual characters. While there are indications that small agriculture and its lifestyle in the novel are on the cusp of changing, at the time of writing it has already been lost. I suggest that the acknowledgment of this loss is represented in the novel's style and form. A passiveness pervades both the language of the exposition and the actions of the characters in the novel. Instead of using active verbs, McGahern writes 'Tea *was* made. Milk and several spoons of sugar *were* added to the tea and stirred' (italics added, p.8). In the same way, Kate never takes the opportunity to assert herself in any way, and Ruttledge is less a protagonist than a 'conduit through which the novel is narrated.'²⁷ There is little overt conflict in the plot, as if the characters are more concerned with maintaining their static existence than actively moving forward to meet whatever might lay ahead. A tone of resignation and a general sense of limitedness encapsulates the storytelling, suggesting that life based on small agriculture in Ireland—and the cultural value it provides—is not just disappearing, but is already assumed dead at the time of writing. McGahern knows it is too late to save an older Ireland in which

²⁶ Wong, Shirley Lau. 'Country Bumpkin and Cosmopolitan: Some Versions of Postcolonial Pastoral.' *The Global South*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2013, 153–172.

²⁷ Maher, Eamon. 'John McGahern and the Commemoration of Traditional Rural Ireland.' *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 95, no. 379, 2006, 279–290.

people gathered to bale hay together, and therefore has no use in making an exhortatory claim that social realism may have afforded. Yet, considering his unflinching and unadorned portrayal of rural Ireland in his previous novels, it is unlikely that *Rising Sun* is a work of unabashed nostalgia. To this extent, it is important not only to consider McGahern the author, but McGahern the farmer-author, and to keep in mind that his concerns as an individual were likely both literary and agricultural. He would have been acutely aware of the changes made to farmgate pricing in the EU, as well as the type of productivist farming it was starting to create. I suggest that McGahern's final novel should not be read as a simplistic recovery project of a lost Ireland, but rather, as a still-life of the social capital small agriculture provided, whose historical setting enables a contrast against the isolationism and economic difficulties which dominate farming narratives set in the twenty-first century. In regards to farming, McGahern wants it to be clear what is worth remembering as Irish agriculture moves to a new age.

Reading *Rising Sun* and *Independent People* through a world-literary perspective that takes capitalism as the 'substrate of world-literature'²⁸ allows a homology to be drawn between McGahern and Laxness' agricultural knowledge and awareness of the consequences of expansionist agriculture. Together the novels suggest the costs of small semi-peripheral islands not being able to extricate themselves from Europe's hegemonic markets, and the cultural value that is lost for both the individual and the nation as an outcome of the resulting expansionist farming. What's more, the authors' concerns are as relevant today as they were at publication. McGahern celebrates and mourns the passing of an autonomy-granting, community-based agriculture that strengthened rural communities. Whatever is left of

²⁸ Warwick Research Collective. *Combined and Uneven Development*. Liverpool University Press, 2015.

McGahern's small farming is exponentially disappearing. Although the 2010 EU Agricultural Census showed only a slight restructuring of Irish agriculture from 2000 (a 1.2% decrease in number of holdings and 4.0% increase in size of farms),²⁹ the results of the 2020 census are expected to be much more dramatic, as many farms that tried to persist through lower farmgate prices eventually found that they could no longer do so. Every year there are fewer Rutledges left. After World War I Laxness sent a warning to his country through a work of social realism that details the struggles of farmers when forced to participate in European markets. Perhaps it is his counsel that underlies Iceland's decision to persist in keeping its agricultural industry isolated from outside markets. Perhaps, too, he will be the writer the Icelanders will continue to go back to in grappling with the idea of EU accession. Regardless, as small-scale farming continues to disappear around the world, recognizing the resistance to expansionist agricultural policies in these novels will only become more imperative.

ⁱ Van Vliet, et. al. have pointed out that in failing to participate in the globalisation of markets by not sufficiently intensifying agricultural outputs, many European farmers have been forced to abandon their land or sell it to larger farmers. See Van Vliet. et. al. 'Manifestations and Underlying Drivers of Agricultural Land Use Change in Europe.' *Landscape and Urban Planning*, vol 133, 2015, pp. 24-36.

ⁱⁱ The farmgate price is the compensation received by the farmer for the commodity he/she produces, or in other terms, the value of the commodity as it 'leaves the gates of the farm.'

²⁹ Eurostat Statistics Explained. 'Agricultural Census in Ireland.'

[http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Agricultural census in Ireland](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Agricultural_census_in_Ireland)
 d Accessed 13 Jun 2018.