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A Democracy of Feeling

John Kenny

Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories

By John McGahern

Faber & Faber

408pp, £16.99

He would have resisted it, this tendency we have to elevate the life of the artist over the commonality, to glorify exceptionality of sensibility, especially after its bearer has passed to posterity. John McGahern's sophistication was proven rather than belied by his characteristic modesty, mannerliness and amicability, his particular sense of the social inscribed in one of his favourite words: tact. Whether his tactfulness was endemic or was the practised, sometimes mischievous, guardian of other selves is not at issue; what matters is its intended effect, within and without the work. He admired E.R. Dodds' distinction between the moral impulse necessitated by man's relations with others, and the religious impulse that emerges from man's relationship with his total environment. His combined respect for both impulses was tantamount to a profoundly intuitive democracy of feeling, and his resultant disallowing of absolutes of human value was total. "A writer's opinion on anything", he remarked, "is no more interesting than a footballer's".

This is the inevitable irony of such rejection of self-importance. Like Moran with his rifle in *Amongst Women* (1990), McGahern had us frighteningly in his sights and was usually deadly accurate; archetypically levelling thoughts were never so honestly or provocatively or resoundingly expressed as in his hands. So we listened, want to listen again, to him above others.

In our attending, it would be a lapse to separate his novels and short stories. It is a conventional differentiation – one McGahern firmly held to – that the novel is more at home in society and stability than is the short story. Introducing the stories of Alistair MacLeod he wrote: "The short story ... comes into its own like song or prayer or superstition in poorer more fragmented communities where individualism and tradition and family and localities and chance or luck are dominant". McGahern came into his own in exactly this perceived scene, and, if only to provoke speculation about the slipperiness of genres, it could be said that he never wrote a novel (his problem with rewriting *The Leavetaking* (1974/84) is indicative). Rather, he distilled famously long drafts of novels into long short stories.

The newly listed extensive McGahern Papers at the James Hardiman Library, NUI Galway, show the intimate interaction of the longer and shorter prose genres in his sense of story. In particular, there are drafts of unpublished stories that were incorporated in various forms into the novels. *Amongst Women* and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002) are already accepted as the real McGahern monuments. Individually, his short stories can hardly match their stature; collectively, they may be surpassant.

The Collected Stories (1992) was exactly that. All the stories of his three collections, *Nightlines* (1970), *Getting Through* (1978) and *High Ground* (1985), were included, with occasional minor revisions; only two stories, 'Sierra Leone' from *Getting Through* and 'Gold Watch' from *High Ground*, were rearranged from their

original sequence; 'Bomb Box' from *Nightlines* was retitled 'The Key'; two new stories, 'The Creamery Manager' and 'The Country Funeral', closed the collection.

Seven stories are omitted in the change from *Collected* to *Selected*, three from *Nightlines*, four from *Getting Through*; the sequencing of *Nightlines* is retained, but there are further placing rearrangements of the stories from *Getting Through* and *High Ground*; 'The Creamery Manager' is now arranged among earlier stories; two new stories previously published in *Granta*, 'Creatures of the Earth' and 'Love of the World', are placed towards the end; and, with clear poignant import, 'The Country Funeral' now closes 29 stories.

The omissions will encourage heated relative assessments, not least because of the implicit explanation of exclusions in a Preface: "Unless they were reinvented, re-imagined and somehow dislocated from their origins, they never seemed to work. The imagination demands that life be told slant because of its need of distance". And so will begin re-examination of the glorious *Memoir* (2005) for hints of what finally remained too close to him for the retrospective comfort of a story.

Beyond admiration for McGahern's precision forces of artistry and feeling, occasional post-eulogy reconsiderations creep in. This is naturally so: that footballer of his would have demanded it. Amid the principals convincingly locked off in privacies there regularly falls a third-person voice whose narration is so strongly and uniformly and bleakly philosophical that character specificities fade (this may of course be exactly the point of such archetypally designed fiction). His core emphasis on the image can sometimes seem forced, especially in the most familiar alignment of busting furze pods and the buttons of an executed soldier's tunic in 'Korea'. There are also some rare flights of verbal fancy and whimsical conceit, what he would usually have rejected as 'literary' moments. And if it were a case of straight swapping, the poorest story here, 'Faith, Hope and Charity', could surely have been dropped in favour of 'Coming into His Kingdom', a key story for one of McGahern's most intriguing constants: a simultaneously wink-and-nod and animalizing treatment of sexuality.

Such carping is only internally relevant; in comparative terms, all of his stories have been lethally pruned for formal perfection. It is conventional to envy the luck of readers coming new to work of this stature, but repeated reading only intensifies the impact of such structural refinements, such prayer-like patterns. The sheer work quotient involved is humbling: in the NUI Galway papers, there are for instance 15 drafts and further fragments of 'Parachutes', 20 of 'Christmas', 23 of 'Bank Holiday'. The energy never faltered: there are 21 drafts of his last story, 'Love of the World'.

He quoted Rilke in deferring to his idealised solitary reader: "There are certain books that long for the death of their authors so that they can assume their own lives". The Preface here is dated "March 2006"; by end of month he was gone. He allowed that all the writer can do with any good grace after placing himself on the public stage is bow. We have *Creatures of the Earth*, and the curtain falls. Applause. Applause.

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