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"Fellows like yourself": fathers in John McGahern's short stories"

Michael L. Storey

- 1 The publication of John McGahern's memoir, *All Will Be Well*, in 2005, the year before the writer's death, confirmed what many readers had long suspected: the tyrannical, moody, abusive father figure that dominates the novels and short stories is modeled closely on the author's own father, Frank McGahern. Reegan in *The Barracks*, Mahoney in *The Dark*, Sergeant Moran in *The Leavetaking*, Michael Moran in *Amongst Women*, as well as the fathers in such stories as "Wheels," "The Key," "The Stoat," "Gold Watch," and "Sierra Leone," are all portraits of McGahern's father. Many of the outward details of the father figures, such as their occupations as police sergeants or farmers and their status as widowers or their remarriage after the death of their first wives, have, of course, been recognized by readers as those of McGahern's own father. But the memoir now reveals in elaborate detail that the often detestable behavior of the fictional fathers, and the attendant emotional and psychological traits, including the most repugnant, were, in fact, those of Frank McGahern.
- 2 Commentators have also, of course, found similarities between the fictional lives of McGahern's young protagonists and his own life: his upbringing in rural Ireland; the death of his beloved mother; his interest, for her sake, in the priesthood; his work as a teacher and dismissal from his school position; his departure for England; and so. These correspondences between the author and his characters have led critics to refer to McGahern's fiction as "semi-autobiographical." But, having no substantial evidence to do so, critics have refrained from attributing the bullying, abusive behavior of the father figures to Frank McGahern.¹ Now it is possible to do that and – more importantly – to explore more deeply the significance of the father figure in McGahern's fiction. The following study shows just how closely the fictional fathers in the short stories are modeled on McGahern's father, and it attempts to explain McGahern's obsession with the father figure in these stories.

- 3 Factual, public details of the elder McGahern's life recurrently woven by the author into the fictional lives of the father figures in his novels and stories include his father's involvement as a young man in the War of Independence; his career as a police sergeant in the Garda Síochána and his life in the police barracks at Cootehall, Co. Roscommon; his occasional, brief visits home to see the family and the occasional overnight stays and summer holidays spent by the children in the barracks; the death of his first wife, followed by the children's move to the barracks; his second marriage; and, following retirement from the Garda, his second career as a small farmer. Most of the father figures in his fiction share several of these biographical details. Reegan in *The Barracks*, Moran in *The Leavetaking*, and the fathers in "The Key" and "Oldfashioned" are police sergeants, while Mahoney in *The Dark*, Michael Moran in *Amongst Women*, and the fathers in "Wheels," "Gold Watch," and "Sierra Leone" are all small farmers. Reegan, Sergeant Moran, and Michael Moran took part in the War of Independence, as did the fathers in "Korea" and "Oldfashioned." Mahoney, Sergeant Moran, and the fathers in "Coming into His Kingdom," "The Key," and "The Stoat" are widowers, while Reegan, Michael Moran and the fathers in "Wheels," "Gold Watch," and "Sierra Leone" all have remarried after the death of their first wives. The persistence with which McGahern assigns these public details of his own father to his fictional fathers strongly suggests that the personal — emotional and psychological — traits that he attributes to these characters are drawn from his own father as well.
- 4 Indeed, the father figures possess such similar and complementary personal traits that they all seem to be the same character, or at the very least different portraits of the same character. Collectively, they portray a father who is domineering, mean-spirited, moody, embittered, peevish, suspicious, calculating, secretive, self-pitying, and verbally, physically and sexually abusive. These fictional fathers also demand love and respect from their children (or son) and wives and are hurt when they do not receive it. All of these traits, as we will see, are revealed in the memoir as belonging to Frank McGahern.
- 5 In addition to the four novels mentioned in the opening paragraph, eight of the thirty-four stories portray father figures that closely resemble, in behavior and personality, McGahern's own father.² A reading of the memoir, *All Will Be Well*, shows that in writing these stories McGahern not only represented the outward details of occupation, marital status, living arrangements, and the like, of his father, but that he often recreated specific events and incidents from his father's life that illustrate his personality in all of its complexity — and loathsomeness.
- 6 Two of *The Collected Stories*³ — "The Stoat" and "The Key" — illustrate the great extent to which McGahern borrowed incidents from his father's life. Both stories are taken nearly whole cloth from incidents in Frank McGahern's life, and both represent closely the character of the elder McGahern. "The Stoat" recreates an incident in which McGahern's father attempted to remarry, though it changes a few details, combines and rearranges material and then frames the story with an apparently fictional incident. The story captures well both his father's cold calculation in his dealings with others and his fear of losing control.
- 7 In the story, the father (curiously, a schoolteacher, not a police sergeant or farmer) has decided to remarry but seeks approval from his son, the narrator. The request for approval seems calculated to draw the young man, now living away from home, back into his father's life. The son has no objections to his remarrying, telling the father, "Mother is dead. You should do exactly as you want to."⁴ So the father advertises in the paper: "

Teacher, fifty-two. Seeks companionship. View marriage" (CS 154, italics in text). From a pile of responses, the father selects one from a Miss McCabe, "[a] schoolteacher in her forties. . . small and frail and nervous" (CS 155). After several months of courtship, and with the intention of becoming engaged to her, he asks the son to go with him on holiday to Strandhill to meet Miss McCabe. The son likes her and gives his approval, but the father becomes concerned that Miss McCabe might not have "her feet on the ground" and, when he learns that overnight she has suffered a mild heart attack, he decides to "[c]lear out" (CS 156). Ashamed for his father, the son remains at Strandhill, despite the risk of running into Miss McCabe and having to explain his father's sudden departure. At the end of the story, the son's thoughts return to the episode that opens the story. Playing golf, he had come upon a gruesome scene: a stoat had caught a rabbit and was drinking blood from a wound behind its ear but was scared off by the narrator's approach. He brought the dead rabbit back to his father, but after briefly considering it they rejected the idea of serving it to Miss McCabe for dinner⁵ He now thinks, "I saw that my father had started to run like the poor rabbit" (CS 156). The rabbit-stoat relationship seems to be an ironic analogy for that of the father and Miss McCabe, with the father beginning as the hunter (stoat) but ultimately becoming the hunted (rabbit).⁶

- 8 In his memoir McGahern reports that, after the death of his mother his father advertised for a woman: "*Young widow, Garda Sergeant, with young family, seek...*"⁷ He notes, however, that the ads were placed as much for a maid as for a wife, and, although his father received many responses, none proved suitable. Later in the memoir McGahern recalls that his father continued to look for a wife (no more ads are mentioned) and came very close to marrying "a Miss McCabe, a small, gentle woman, a principal of a school . . . probably in her early fifties." After a period of courtship, the father took the children (including John, who was 15 at the time) on their annual holiday to a bungalow at Strandhill, where Miss McCabe was staying at a hotel. As in the story, the father planned to become "engaged at the end of the holiday," though there is no mention of his requesting his son's approval.⁸ One morning he got "a message that Miss McCabe had a 'turn' in the seaweed salt baths that morning" and was being attended by a doctor. He "assumed that the turn was a heart attack." McGahern then writes: "The effect was startling. Within an hour he had gathered up the pots and pans we'd brought, written a letter to Miss McCabe, and packed the whole family except myself into the small blue Ford. I was left behind to deliver the letter to the hotel . . . and travel home on the next day's bus" (AW 192-93).
- 9 A comparison of the story with the account in the memoir shows that, in addition to adding the apparently fictional account of the stoat and the rabbit, McGahern made a few changes in writing the story. Minor changes include Miss McCabe's age and occupation (though obviously not her name!) and the father's occupation. More significant changes are that, in the story, the father does not write a letter to Miss McCabe, and the son, older than McGahern was at the time, decides on his own to stay behind at Strandhill. Furthermore and perhaps of most interest, McGahern leaves out of the story a scene, recounted in the memoir, in which he delivered his father's letter to Miss McCabe. He writes that he took the letter up to her hotel room and stayed while she read it. The two of them then had a sympathetic exchange in which the boy told her that he was sorry to bring the news of his father's departure and that the children had hoped that she would marry their father. She, in turn, gave him a pound note to spend on himself, which he did by buying "a raft of comics, ice-creams and chocolate éclairs." These pleasures did little,

however, to lessen his "strange, uncomfortable feeling" that he eventually came to recognize "as both unease and shame" (AW 193)—emotions that are felt by the narrator of the story as well. McGahern's characterization in the memoir of his father's recurring attempts to remarry as "both sad and funny" (AW 192) is captured well in the story, as is the characterization of his father as both calculating hunter and pursued victim — both stoat and rabbit.

- 10 The plot of "The Key" (originally entitled "Bomb Box" in *Nightlines*, 1970) also hews closely to its real-life incident as McGahern describes it in the memoir. Both story and memoir demonstrate the father's proclivity toward self-pity and hypochondria, accompanied by peevishness, as well as his manipulation of his son's feelings. In *All Will Be Well* McGahern says that his father took to his barracks bed shortly after the aborted love affair, perhaps "not to be outdone by Miss McCabe." Ever the hypochondriac and often filled with self-pity, his father routinely read medical books and stocked the press with various medications and medical instruments. And he often retreated to his bed in belief that he had some kind of ailment—"named [or] unnamed." This time, McGahern writes, he appeared to be much worse: "His voice was weaker except when he forgot himself in irritation or anger. His movements were limping and slow when he rose, and I had to help him the few times he needed to come down the stairs [of the barracks] and climb back up" (AW 194).
- 11 The doctor came to see him every day, and the other guards became worried about his health. The elder McGahern told his son that he probably would not survive the illness and showed him a metal box that contained money for the funeral expenses, bank accounts, bonds, insurance policies, his will, and instructions for burial and other matters. One package in the box "contained mementoes and things of sentimental value that might be of interest as [the children] got older — [their] mother's rings and jewellery, medals and certificates, old photos, old letters." He told John that the children would have to leave the barracks after his death, and he instructed his son to purchase a small farm and house — specifically Paddy Mullaney's, which "was going cheap." McGahern says that he "begged [his father] not to die," but his father "counselled [him] gently," telling him that "we can control neither the day nor the hour" and that he would be joining the children's mother and "that the two of them would watch over [the children] and pray for [them] together" (AW 195-196). He then gave John a key to the metal box.
- 12 A little later his father left for the hospital for a more thorough diagnosis, but he was back in a week, having been found to be "in perfect health." A couple of days later, he resumed his barracks routine in his usual peevish and bullying manner. McGahern writes that he did not know what to do with the key to the metal box, so he "left it on a small table by his [father's] side of the bed, and was relieved when next [he] looked to see that it had disappeared. Not a word was said" (AW 197).
- 13 "The Key" stays true to the narrative line and most of the details of the incident as described in the memoir. The fictional father, a police sergeant, imagines that he has an illness, as McGahern's father does, after poring over a medical book. Eventually believing that the illness is terminal, he takes to his bed and calls his son to his side. As in the real incident, the father shows his son a metal box that contains money, a will, deeds, and other important papers, and he instructs him to purchase a small farm from Paddy Mullaney. He then gives the son a key to the box. A conversation ensues between father and son, similar to the one described in the memoir, in which the son begs his father not

to die. The father, having elicited what he takes to be an expression of his son's love for him, consoles the son, saying, "we can't control our days, we can only pray" (CS 52). The doctor, who has regularly visited the Sergeant in the barracks and is rather puzzled by the case, agrees to send him to a hospital for a specialist's opinion. Within the week the Sergeant is back in the barracks, apparently having been diagnosed as healthy. But rather than being elated, or even relieved by the news, he seems almost disappointed and resumes his routines in his usual peevish manner, without a word about the diagnosis to his family or the other guards. Unable to bring himself to give the key back to his father, the son attempts to throw it into the river — perhaps the one significant change in the story — but it lands short of the river, falling instead into the sedge and nettles. In the characterization of the Sergeant, the story captures well the elder McGahern's self-pity, hypochondria, and manipulation of his son's feelings. In the memoir, McGahern says he later realized that his father, in imagining his terminal illness, was "indulg[ing] his fantasy" and must have known that his son, being only "fifteen years of age and legally a minor," would not have been permitted to conduct the transactions his father instructed him to carry out (AW 196).

- 14 At the other end of the spectrum from these two stories that extensively recreate specific incidents from the elder McGahern's life are stories with narratives that rely less on large incidents from Frank McGahern's life and more on imagined incidents and scenes that, nevertheless, incorporate aspects of his behavior and personality. McGahern, for example, does not relate in the memoir having an experience similar to the one experienced by Stevie, the adolescent protagonist of "Coming into his Kingdom," that results in Stevie's learning about the sexual facts of life. But Stevie's subsequent, vague realization that his father's nightly fondling of him is a form of sexual abuse does have an analogue in the memoir. Stevie, whose mother is dead, thinks:

The whole world was changed, a covering torn away; he'd never be able to see anything the same again. His father had slept with his mother and done that to her, the same father that slept with him now in the big bed with the broken brass bells and rubbed his belly at night, saying, "That's what's good for you, Stevie. Isn't that what you like, Stevie?" ever since it happened the first night, the slow labouring voice explaining how the rubbing eased wind and relaxed you and let you sleep. (CS 21)

- 15 In the memoir McGahern, using some of the same phrasing, describes similar abusive behavior by his father, though he is far more explicit about his father's motives. After his mother died, his father slept with him:

When my father came late to bed and enquired as he took off his clothes if I was awake, I nearly always feigned sleep. He never interfered with me in an obviously sexual way, but he frequently massaged my belly and thighs. As in all other things connected with the family, he asserted that he was doing this for my good: it relaxed taut muscles, eased wind and helped bring on sleep. In these years, despite my increasing doctrinal knowledge of what was sinful, I had only the vaguest knowledge of sex or sexual functions, and took him at his word; but as soon as it was safe to do so, I turned away on some pretext or other, such as sudden sleepiness. Looking back, and remembering his tone of voice and the rhythmic movement of his hand, I suspect he was masturbating. During the beatings [that his father gave to him and the other children] there was sometimes the same sexual undertow, but louder, coarser. (AW 200)

- 16 This passage from the memoir confirms that the elder McGahern did, in fact, engage in a kind of sexual abuse of John (notwithstanding McGahern's comment that his father "never interfered with [him] in an obviously sexual way") and that the author's

characterization of fictional fathers as sexually abusive (Mahoney also sexually abuses his son in *The Dark*) is a trait drawn from life.

- 17 "Korea" also characterizes the father in ways that resemble Frank McGahern without using actual incidents from his life to illustrate those traits. There is no mention in the memoir of the central incident of the story, in which the son overhears the father excitedly telling a cattle-dealer that neighbors, the Morans, received a \$10,000 death benefit from the U.S. Army after their son, Luke, was killed in Korea. Since his father has been urging him to emigrate to America, the son naturally assumes that the father's motive in doing so is the potential death benefit, should the son join the U.S. Army and be killed in Korea, or at least a monthly income of \$250 like the Morans received while their son served in the army. Nor does the memoir mention an experience resembling the one that opens the story, in which the father recalls for his son an execution he saw while he was an IRA prisoner during the War of Independence. He had thought that he would be the one to be executed, but he was spared. The son's comment following his father's recollection — "It was new to me to hear him talk about his own life at all" (CS 55) — does, however, recall McGahern's remark in the memoir that his father was "extraordinarily secretive" about his past, including his IRA experience in the War of Independence. McGahern says that he knew his father "had fought in the war, but none of the details, since he never spoke about either the war or his part in the war" (AW 52-53). Had his father specifically told him of witnessing an execution similar to the one that opens "Korea," McGahern most certainly would have included it in the memoir. It is likely also that, had his father advised him to emigrate to America, he would have mentioned it in the memoir. Nevertheless, despite (apparently) not being based on specific real-life incidents, "Korea" does seem to present the brutal, self-serving, and domineering father as an accurate psychological model of the elder McGahern, and its imagined incidents might represent McGahern's own desire to discover the source — perhaps some dark experience in war — of his father's brutal, sadistic behavior.
- 18 "Oldfashioned" also presents a father — a police sergeant and widower living in the barracks — very much like the elder McGahern, without apparently relying on specific incidents from his life to create the character. The story differs, however, from the other stories about fathers and sons in that neither the father nor the father-son relationship is the primary focus. Rather, as Denis Sampson remarks, the story —which has the scope without the length of a novel—"place[s] the experience of father and son . . . in wider social and historical contexts."⁹ These wider contexts include Anglo-Irish society, embodied in the Sinclairs, an elderly married couple who hire the Sergeant's son, Johnny, to work in their garden. The Sergeant at first likes the arrangement, thinking "that some benefit would flow from the association with the Sinclairs." (CS 260). To his mind such employment would be better for the boy than advanced education. But he becomes enraged when he learns that Colonel Sinclair has ideas about sending the boy to Sandhurst to train for a career as a British officer. Being "most proud of . . . the years [he spent in] the War of Independence when he was the commander of a small company of men on the run" (CS 258), the Sergeant cannot tolerate the idea of his son becoming a British officer. His rage is directed as much at the son for expressing an interest in the idea as at Colonel Sinclair, and he orders him to stop working for the Anglo-Irish couple. He also denigrates Johnny's scholarly success, telling him, "You'll be like the rest of the country—educated away beyond your intelligence." In spite of the father's disdain for education, Johnny wins a scholarship and goes on to a successful career in making

"documentary films about the darker aspects of Irish life" (CS 268). His success apparently contributes to a lasting rift with his father.

- 19 In *All Will Be Well* McGahern writes of his father's admiration of Anglo-Irish Protestants: "My father was greatly impressed by Protestants. He considered them superior in every way to the general run of his fellow Catholics, less devious, morally more correct, more honest, better mannered, and much more abstemious" (AW 182-83) — an attitude that would explain the Sergeant's initial willingness in "Oldfashioned" to allow his son to work for the Sinclairs and his expectation that his son would benefit from the association. But the memoir does not mention any disputes between the elder McGahern and his Protestant neighbors. Nor does it mention that the father, despite his years in the IRA, had strong nationalist feelings of the kind that trigger the Sergeant's rage at Colonel Sinclair's suggestion, though the memoir is filled with examples of his bouts of blind rage over many other matters. The story's biographical truth, then, seems restricted mostly to capturing, in the character of the Sergeant, the elder McGahern's explosive temperament and his desire to control his son's life. The Sergeant's refusal, at the end of the story, "to get on" (CS 269) with his son does, however, parallel Frank McGahern's refusal to get on with his son. Both the fictional and the real father seem motivated in their refusal in part by the fact that the sons have chosen careers not approved by the fathers.
- 20 The final three (of eight) stories presenting father figures resembling Frank McGahern all contain episodes of the adult son's return to the father's small farm to visit with the father and stepmother — a ritual that, McGahern writes in the memoir, he enacted regularly. In each story, "Wheels," "Gold Watch," and "Sierra Leone," the son's return generally resembles visits by McGahern to his father and stepmother, but the visit is combined with either imagined incidents or with real incidents that took place in another context. Most importantly, in these stories, as in the memoir, the son's return, intended as a ritual act of reconciliation, has the opposite effect of renewing the father-son conflict. Although the three stories illustrate several of the elder McGahern's repugnant traits, such as his mean-spiritedness and his obsessive need for control, the most important trait they convey is his absolute refusal, or inability, to reconcile with the son who very much wants reconciliation.
- 21 When Jim, the narrator of "Wheels," arrives for a visit with his father and stepmother, Rose, his father at first refuses to acknowledge his presence or speak to him but eventually reveals the reason for his smoldering silence. He had written to his son about his desire to move to Dublin, suggesting that they might once again live together. Jim had responded that he would search for a place in Dublin for his father to live but that he "wanted no room in it." The father tells him that the letter was like "a right kick in the teeth," and the son replies honestly, "I want to live on my own. I didn't want you to come thinking differently" (CS 8). The next day, Jim departs, without any reconciliation.
- 22 In *All Will Be Well* McGahern recounts in more detail his father's idea about moving to Dublin and explains the perverse calculation behind it. McGahern's analysis of the incident focuses on what the memoir stresses throughout: the father's obsessive need for dominance and his cold calculation in exercising dominance. Once he lost his role of police sergeant — a role that gave him power and dominance in the community — the only comparable role his father had left, McGahern writes, was that of "Daddy": "This remained his most permanent role, changing subtly with his declining powers and increasing dependence. With extraordinary assistance from Agnes [his second wife], he never stopped trying to draw us back within the orbit of Daddy" (AW 241).

- 23 The real incident differed from the story in that the older McGahern intended that several of his children, not just John, would live with him and Agnes in Dublin.

He would move to Dublin, away from where he was no longer protected by his position of sergeant, away from where he had accumulated enemies and much dislike. Once he acquired a Dublin property, we would all move in with him and pay him the rent we were now paying landlords. I began gradually to see how attractive it would be from his point of view. In this one move he'd discomfort and uproot his wife, rid himself of her relatives and the people he had antagonized as sergeant, and establish himself as Dublin Daddy. (AW 241)

- 24 McGahern and two of his sisters decided to reject the plan. John wrote a letter to their father, signed by all three, offering assistance in finding him a place but declining the offer to live with him. The father did not reply to the letter, and when the two sisters, Margaret and Monica, visited him, he took to his bed and would not see them (AW 242). McGahern does not say whether or not his father ever rebuked him over the refusal, as the father rebukes Jim in "Wheels." Hence, the climactic scene of the story, in which the father angrily confronts the son over his refusal to accept the plan, would seem to be an imaginative variation of the real incident, while the general pattern of the son's return to the father in search of reconciliation is true to life, as is the portrait of the father as calculating, domineering, and petulant.
- 25 In both "Gold Watch" and "Sierra Leone," the son's relationship with the father is complicated by the son's relationship with a woman. In "Sierra Leone" the son risks losing his lover (herself the mistress of an aging politician, who has invited her to follow him to Sierra Leone) by missing a promised weekend with her. His father has sent a telegram with an urgent request that the son come to see him on that weekend, which he does, resulting in the woman's decision to leave the young man and join the politician in Sierra Leone. The story seems to be a combination of both imagined and real incidents. McGahern makes no mention in the memoir of being involved with a woman who was a mistress of another man, or of losing a lover because of his relationship with his father, but he does relate a proposal his father made to him that resembles one made by the father to the son in "Sierra Leone."
- 26 When the son arrives, his father explains that he has a plan to circumvent an act being considered by parliament that would require a good deal of a man's property be left to his widow. The father fears that, if his second wife inherits the property, her relatives will eventually wind up with it. So he proposes transferring his property to the son. But the son refuses the offer, seeing it as mean-spirited and cruel to the stepmother, Rose, who has been very loyal to her husband. The father is angry with the son for rejecting his plan, and next day the son leaves, saying goodbye only to Rose and thereby foregoing — as in the other stories — any possible reconciliation with the father.
- 27 McGahern recounts in the memoir a proposal his father made to him that resembles the one the father makes in "Sierra Leone." (It appears, however, that his father made the proposal in a letter rather than during a visit to the farm.) As in the story, the plan was to circumvent a recent "Act of Parliament [that] had been brought in to prevent men like him from disinheriting their wives." McGahern says that he gave his father "short shrift" and told him that "Agnes should get everything." He does not, however, describe his father's response, saying only that "he approached my brother [Frankie] with more success" (AW 280-81).

- 28 Of these final three stories, "Gold Watch" seems to contain the least amount of actual incident from the father's life, yet it too captures the behavior and personality of the elder McGahern. In the story the son brings his lover to meet his father and stepmother, Rose, at their small farm. In the course of the visit, the son asks for his father's gold watch, no longer working but considered by the son to be a family treasure (it had once belonged to his father's father). The father reluctantly gives it to him but rejects the offer for a new watch in its place. Meanwhile the son's lover refuses to spend more than one night at the father's home because of an insulting remark the father made about her age, though not in her presence. A short time later, the lovers marry without informing the father. Then the son, without his wife, visits the father to give him a new watch and to tell the father and stepmother about his marriage. The father rudely accepts the new watch, calling it "ugly" and unnecessary. Later, he attempts to damage the watch by wearing it while he is hammering stone and sticking his arm with the watch on it into a barrel of water he is preparing as potato spray. When the son tells the father about his marriage, the father angrily reveals that he has already heard about it. Later the son finds the new watch hanging by a fishing line in the barrel of corrosive spray. Like the protagonists in "Wheels" and "Sierra Leone," though with more equanimity, he realizes that his relationship with his father is irreconcilable.
- 29 In *All Will Be Well* McGahern recounts no such incident about a gold watch originally belonging to his grandfather. In fact, he says that neither his father nor his paternal grandmother ever mentioned his grandfather (AW 18-19);¹⁰ nor is there any mention of a gold watch passed down from grandfather to father to son. McGahern does mention, however, that when he brought his first wife, Annikki Laaksi, a Finnish woman, to meet his father at the farm, she so disliked him that, like the woman in the story, she refused to spend more than one night in his house and never returned for another visit (AW 268). Nevertheless, despite few actual similarities to real events, "Gold Watch," like "Korea," seems to present the father as still another version of Frank McGahern. The ritual of the son returning home in hopes of reconciling with the father, enacted twice in the story, suggests that the characterization of the father as embittered, rude, unforgiving, and entirely unwilling or unable to reconcile with his son resembles very much McGahern's father.
- 30 In addition to accounts of his father's behavior incorporated into the stories, *All Will Be Well* contains passages that comment on the McGaherns' father-son relationship and are therefore helpful in understanding the significance of McGahern's obsession with the father figure. He writes, for example, of perceiving "a certain primal pattern of the father and the son" in the fact that he has not "a single memory of [his] father staying in the bungalow" with the rest of the family, even though his father must have come often from the barracks to visit them. This primal pattern, he writes, is reinforced by his earliest memory of his father, in the barracks and in his Garda uniform, cutting off young John's "head of curls . . . in spite of [his] frightened protests, made worse by [his] mother's and grandmother's obvious distress" (AW 12). This first memory establishes his father's dominance in the relationship.
- 31 McGahern writes also of an "open or latent sense of conflict that always lay between [him and his father] at even the best of times." He says that his sisters attributed this "sense of conflict" to the fact that their father felt "displaced in [their] mother's affections and was never able to forgive or come to terms with that hurt" (AW 12-13). As the eldest of the seven motherless siblings, John eventually came into violent conflict with his father over

the "sudden rages, the beatings, the punishments, the constant scolding" (AW 170) that the elder McGahern frequently administered to the children. At first reluctant to confront his father, he became bolder as he grew "[m]entally and physically" stronger, going so far as to keep a twenty-two rifle loaded and leaning in the corner of his room. Then one night his father began to beat him for no apparent reason, though McGahern "suspect[ed] there was something sexual in his violence" (AW 202). McGahern describes his reaction:

I remember feeling a wild sense of unfairness and a cold rage as I fell [from his father's blow]. I rose and went straight up to him, my hands at my sides, laughing. He hit me. I fell a number of times and each time rose laughing. I had passed beyond the point of pain and felt a strange cold elation. He was growing uncertain. I had passed beyond fear. . . . He and I knew that an extraordinary change had taken place. (AW 202-203)

- 32 A short time later McGahern confronted his father as he was beating one of the girls. When the elder McGahern turned and struck him, the son responded: "Do that again and you're finished." His father "fell back, crying. 'I reared a son. I reared a son that would lift a hand to his father. I reared a son.'" From that point on, John became his siblings' protector: "there would never be uncontested violence in my presence in the house again" (AW 203).
- 33 These and other examples in the memoir of the conflict that existed in McGahern's relationship with his father obviously account for the frequent father-son conflicts in the fiction, as well as the characterization of the father figure as explosive, bullying, and violent. But McGahern also mentions in the memoir another aspect of his father that complicated their relationship. He writes of his father's frequent overtures to "court" him by, among other things, giving him presents and spending time with him. About these efforts, McGahern says, "I was charmed and delighted by his favour" (AW 87). Nevertheless, his father's attempts to win him over often became just another source of conflict. For example, at the end of one of the visits to the barracks, during which his father was particularly pleasant to him, the elder McGahern invited his son to live with him. But when young John realized that doing so would deprive him of his mother's companionship, he rejected his father's invitation. The rejection brought "a look of hatred in his [father's] eyes" — because, as the son later realized, "he hadn't got his way" (AW 116). It is this pattern we find in such stories as "Wheels" and "Sierra Leone": the father makes an overture unacceptable to the son; the son rejects it; the father responds angrily because he has not gotten his way; and the story ends in unresolved conflict. "Gold Watch" and "Oldfashioned" reverse the pattern: the son makes an attempt to reconcile with the father, but the father rejects the overture.
- 34 The theme of failed reconciliation in the fiction between father and son has, of course, often been examined by critics. What the memoir — in its graphic descriptions of the elder McGahern's pathological behavior — might help to answer, however, is the question of why reconciliation was impossible. It might also suggest an unconscious process that McGahern pursued in writing fiction in hopes of resolving the conflict with his father. In the memoir, as in much of the fiction, the father figure dominates the narrative — often more than the protagonists in the fiction and more than the author in the memoir. His dominance is so great, in fact, as to make him larger-than-life — a father figure, as Sampson says (of the fictional characters), of "mythic stature . . . , the Lear of Oakport, the Cronos of Cootehall."¹¹ Or, to use another literary allusion, he is like the father figure in

Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy": he must be brought into existence by the author precisely to be exorcised. Then the child can be free of him.

- 35 Before the publication of *All Will Be Well*, it appeared that McGahern had been able to do just that—free himself of his father's dominance. In his last novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, Joe Ruttledge (McGahern's alter ego) makes no mention of a father, and no father presents himself to dominate the narrative, as he does in so much of McGahern's other fiction. One of the great pleasures (or relief) in reading that novel—as it might have been for McGahern in writing it—is the absence of the dominating father. But in writing the memoir a few years later McGahern was compelled to bring his father back into his and his readers' consciousness—and to have to deal once more with the father's overwhelming presence. Even his father's death, as he relates it in the memoir, did not bring full resolution, though the sentiment expressed at the end of the following passage conveys a sense of release:

When word of my father's death reached me, the intensity of the conflicting emotions—grief, loss, relief—took me unawares. I believe the reaction was as much for those years in which his life and mine were entangled in a relationship neither of us wanted as for the man who had just met the death each of us face. He made many demands but gave little and always had to dominate. A life from which the past was so rigorously shut out had to be a life of darkness. Though I have more knowledge and experience of him than I have of any other person, I cannot say I have fully understood him, and leave him now with God, or whatever truth or illusion or longing for meaning or comfort that word may represent" (AW 288)

- 36 The many similarities in personality and behavior between McGahern's fictional fathers and his real father as described in the memoir would seem to argue for more extensive autobiographical, even psycho-biographical, interpretations of his fiction, as is sure to happen. But critics should also heed Patrick Crotty's warning that "attempts to read [McGahern's fiction] as autobiographical are generally confounded" and his "capacity for imaginative amplification of his [autobiographical] resources is... considerable."¹² Although these new revelations in the memoir give us a much better sense of how much McGahern borrowed from the character and behavior of his father in creating the father figures in his fiction, they are unlikely to gainsay less personal interpretations of the father figures.¹³
- 37 Finally, we might ask: What light does the memoir shed on McGahern's own sense of his father's relationship to the many fictional fathers he created? Or, to rephrase the question: How conscious was he that he found the model for his fictional fathers in the life of his own father? There are, unfortunately, just a couple of statements in the memoir that might help to answer the question, and in one of them McGahern seems somewhat disingenuous. He says that he sent his father a prepublication copy of *The Barracks*, without any expectation that he would read it but because he did not want his father to think that he "had anything to hide." He then says, "the characters[in *The Barracks*] are all imagined. The sergeant in the novel bears hardly any resemblance to my father. He is relatively uncomplicated and far more attractive" (AW 260, my italics).¹⁴ This is his only comment in the memoir about a specific father in his fiction; he says nothing about Mahoney, Sergeant Moran, Michael Moran, or any of the fathers in the short stories. But he does make a remark that might unwittingly reveal his recognition that his obsession with the domineering, abusive father can be traced back to his own father. During a contentious exchange over his writing career, his father asked him, "What is your aim [in writing]?" McGahern answered simply: "To write well, to write truly and well about

fellowslike yourself' (AW 279, my italics). It is, of course, too late to know for certain just how much McGahern consciously cast his father figures in the mold of his own father, but it seems certain that, at the very least on an unconscious level, they were modeled very closely on Frank McGahern.

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RÉSUMÉS

John McGahern's Memoir, *All Will Be Well* (2006) confirmed what many readers had long suspected: the tyrannical, moody, abusive father figure that dominates the novels and short stories is modelled closely on the author's own father, Frank McGahern. The memoir reveals in elaborate detail that the often detestable behavior of the fictional fathers and their repugnant emotional and psychological traits were, in fact, those of McGahern's own father. Two of the stories - "The Stoat" and "The Key" - are taken nearly whole cloth from incidents in Frank McGahern's life, while other stories mix incidents described in the memoir with apparently imagined ones to recreate a faithful portrait of Frank McGahern. *All Will Be Well* also contains passages that comment on the McGahern's father-son relationship and are, therefore, helpful in understanding the significance of McGahern's obsession with the father figure.

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