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JOHN MCGAHERN'S *AMONGST WOMEN* – AN EXPLORATION OF IRISH WOMEN, FROM FAMINE TO REVOLUTION

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Abstract

This paper sets out to be an introduction to Irish women in the period from the Irish famine, (which is known in the Irish language as the Górta Mor) 1847-1852 and the years post revolution.1924-1969. The John McGahern novel Amongst Women *(1990) is used as a way of approaching an understanding of Irish people in the post-colonial period - how poverty, emigration, famine, war and hardship informed the Irish condition, in particular the lives of women, and how their role in society was shaped over time. I also examine how women, and their work, is depicted in fiction and how the lives of women are shown through photographic images from the period of the 1890s to 1930s.*

Keywords: Irish women; Irish revolution; John McGahern; Irish famine; photographs.

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1. Introduction

The post revolution period in Ireland, 1950s and 1960s, is explored using John McGahern's novel *Amongst Women,* first published in 1990. This novel is used as a focal point for this paper on Irish women. In John Singleton's thesis "John McGahern's house of vision: From darkness to the rising sun", he describes how McGahern believed that books could act as mirrors, and Singleton's thesis puts forward the argument that the books "can act as windows on the world." As Singleton suggested, McGahern's books create images of the house, the home and the family unit but also allow for an understanding of the social, cultural and political undercurrent (Singleton, 2019,1).

This paper seeks to be an exploration of those social, cultural and political undercurrents, looking at how Irish history and the experiences of Irish women - their work, their religious ritual, poverty - are depicted both in works of fiction and surviving images – do these sources give us an understanding of Irish society? It assists us in a new understanding of the relationship between men and women, revaluing the patriarchy in light of the images we see and the literature created. This paper will thus examine this past using both literature and photography. Our interpretation of women, their work and their role in society is being altered when we use the adjustment of the gender lens. I look at the work of a male writer, arguing that male photographers have also created a fiction by using staging in their work depicting the women of Ireland for the commercial market in the early 20th century both in Ireland and abroad. This suggests new areas of research, so the question is: did these images shape the view of Irish women and men abroad, do they give a true or distorted reflection of those lives?.

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An understanding of this historical context is an important underpinning to the fictional world created by John McGahern's novel *Amongst Women* (first published in hardback, 1991) alongside the visual representation of women. This paper is written for the international audience with a limited knowledge of Ireland and Irish history. Using easily available source material of photographs from collections such as the National Library of Ireland and the United States Library of Congress (public domain) to demonstrate the image of Irish women, what do those images tell of us of women and their work in Ireland, as depicted by male photographers using images from the 1890s onwards? Interviews with John McGahern (in the public domain) were also used to get original testimony. The context of Irish history from a women's perspective was sourced using the timeline available on the online platform www.mná100.ie which was created by the author as part of the Irish Government Programme, the Decade of Centenaries Programme 2012-2023[2]. This timeline would be a useful tool to read alongside this paper.

2. Women in John McGahern's works

John McGahern (1934-2006) wrote his first book *The Barracks* (1963) which followed on from the success of a short story published in a literary journal in London which was well received and award-winning. In an interview in 2003 (three years before his death), McGahern opened up about his life as a writer, speaking to Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis for an interview reproduced in the *Journal of the Short Story in English* McGahern explained that when he began as a short story writer, his father "was suspicious of his writing…My father didn't read and didn't approve of writing, but he liked to give advice" (3). McGahern went on to explain that his father wanted him to be humorous in his writing, like his favourite writer John D. Sheridan. When Sheridan gave a favourable review of *The Barracks*, John McGahern's father never referred to Sheridan's writing again. McGahern said that the lead character in *The Barracks* was not his father, as he explained to Collinge d Vernadakis that the character in that book was "a nicer man than my father" (Collinge, Vernadakis, 2003, 3). John McGahern's father was by then a retired police sergeant. McGahern had grown up in his father's workplace. McGahern reflected that a barracks was a hostile place, because of Ireland's long history of oppression and that the police force (or Garda Síochána, more commonly known simply as the guards)[3] were to the Irish people "an alien force, a hostile force, not "belonging to them." As a result, he and his siblings were "slightly cut off from the other children and the community at large" (Collinge, Vernadakis, 2003, 3).

McGahern's experience informs in his writing as evidenced in the opening paragraphs of the novel *Amongst Women.* McGahern tells the reader: "They were the aristocratic Morans of Great Meadow, a completed world" (2008, 2). Declan Kiberd, in his foreword *John McGahern: Impossible Things* described that McGahern liked to joke that Ireland was a nation composed of thousands of self-governing anarchist communes, otherwise known as "families" (Hand & Maher, 2005, 2). In *Amongst Women*, the family is altered by the death of the mother. The loss of the mother figure shapes the narrative, although she is barely mentioned. McGahern's mother died when he was a child, his memories of this were vivid and long lasting. In his autobiography, simply called *Memoir* (McGahern, Faber, 2005), focusing on his upbringing during the 1940s and 1950s, the author explores his mother's illness and death with a vividness of recall of someone profoundly affected by loss of the devoted caregiver who had also been a National Teacher who taught McGahern about love of people and place during her short life. The death of McGahern's mother has been explored in Jamie Dockery's "*Writing Out of Love: McGahern and the influence of the Mother"* (Dockery, 2010) and in James Whyte's "*Strategies of Transcendence: History, Myth and Ritual in the fiction of John McGahern* (2002). In *Amongst Women*, Moran's first wife is dead, and while she is not given any place in the novel some of the darkness of the novel is from her loss. The children's childhood was dominated by a single parent whose moods, both violent and depressive, influences everything they do. Yet the female characters, (his second wife and his three daughters) continue to love and seek his approval, despite all of this. Depicted as a form of subservience by the women, the male characters, his sons create physical distance

[2] https://www.mna100.ie/

[3] https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/justice/law-enforcement/garda-siochana-national-police-force/#2473e9

and often refuse to fulfil his wishes to do what they want and assert their independence even when living under his roof and ultimately, disassociate from him by leaving the country.

John McGahern's writing, with his "mirror" to the Irish people forty years after independence, was not welcomed in Ireland in the 1960s. His book, *The Dark* (1965), was banned under the Censorship of Publication Act. *The Dark* was set in Ireland's Northwest and the story of a young man and his relationship with his father who molests him. A 1966 American review of the book by *Time* magazine was entitled: "Hit Him Again, He's Irish" (*Time*, 1966). In this review, the author describes McGahern's novel as depicting despair. The author of the review wrote that "parochial Irish critics" had been scandalized by McGahern's "lascivious imputations" against the clergy and family and concluded that "the author may not be true to life but he is true to significance…he ended with quoting Samuel Johnston "The Irish are a fair people. They never speak well of one another" (*Time*, 18 February 1966).

In Ireland, *The Dark* was described as a book of "pornographic depravity" and McGahern was forced to resign from the Catholic school where he was teaching at the time on the direct orders of Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid. In the 1960s, when McGahern began to publish his work, 98% of the population were Irish Catholics according to census records and this decade was also the peak of those entering religious life in Ireland. The religious ran the hospitals and the schools. As McGahern described to Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis, the "Catholic Church had total power in Ireland". He said in his 2003 interview that teachers in that era were being trained as "non-commissioned officers to the priests in all things, including education." He said the church wanted them to be "obedient and conformist – cogs in a wheel of power" (Collinge, Vernadakis, 2003, 4).

The title of *Amongst Women* references the words of the Catholic prayer the *Hail Mary* with its lines "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus" and is the basis of the "The Rosary", which is a set of prayers, aided by a set of rosary beads[4]. The saying of the Rosary was a daily ritual of Irish Catholic families in the first decades of the 20th century. It also is a beat within *Amongst Women*, an action that happens over and over in the novel. In rural areas the ritual of religion had deep roots to the changing of the seasons. The pagan gods of the ancient Celts had become religious saints. The four Celtic festivals were Imbolc (1 February) which became St Bridget's Day; Bealtaine (1 May) linked to veneration of the Virgin Mary, Lughnasa (1 August) the harvest, and Samhain (1 November) Halloween, the night before All Saints Day, and its veneration of the dead.

When McGahern was dismissed from his teaching post, he went to England as he was unable to get work in another Catholic run school. Although it has been described as a self-imposed exile, during his time in England he stopped writing. It was only in 1975 when he came back to farm a small holding in Leitrim that he started to write again. "Picking up once again his themes of life in rural Ireland, everyday lives, relationships, his own life with a violent father and the early death of his mother continue as a common narrative in his work"[5].

In *Amongst Women*, Moran's second wife Rose is often the main voice in the novel and her insights are key to understanding the main character. As McGahern wrote – imagining the thoughts of Rose – "soon he would need to vent the anger she felt already gathering, and she was the nearest person. Her life was bound up completely with this man she so loved and whose darkness she feared" (McGahern, 2008, 60).

Moran's eldest son rejects his father, refusing to have an adult relationship, refusing to return to Ireland or the farm, and he does not feel he has to do this because of kinship or blood ties. The women of the novel acquiesce and go along with whatever Moran chooses to do as he is their father. It is his house, "The Meadow", and the position as the Morans of the Meadow at the centre of the novel. This paper attempts to give a wider context to explore Irish women and their relationship in the family.

[4] https://rosarycenter.org/how-to-pray-the-rosary
[5] https://www.askaboutIreland.ie

The character of Michael Moran, the father in *Amongst Women*, was seen as a type of Irishman of the post-revolutionary generation. In the 1990s, after McGahern published *Amongst Women*, he told Collinge and Vernadakis that he got a lot of correspondence and that "Moran seems to have been a very common type and was present everywhere in the country" (McGahern, 2003, 13).

To understand these, we need to examine the historical context of Ireland. Like Michael Moran, John McGahern's father was of the generation who fought the War of Independence (1919-1921). The Truce and peace settlement led to the Articles of a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland, but the country was partitioned and plunged into a Civil War (1922-1923). In McGahern's own words: "My father was violent. He went into the guards straight after fighting in the War of Independence. He was instantly promoted because of his rank in the guerrilla company to which he had belonged. He would have entered the army as an officer, and probably would have been promoted further or killed in the civil war" (Collinge, Vernadakis, 2003, 3).

The main character in *Amongst Women*, Michael Moran, was a veteran of the campaign of independence and was now an enforcer and dominant force in his own home. *Amongst Women* begins with the enactment of Monaghan Day when the daughters of the house witnessed their father in happy spirits with his friend McQuaid. Both men had been part of the volunteer army that fought for independence. However, their plan to recreate this day was not something Moran wanted: "Just as he resented gifts, he resented any dredging up of the past. He demanded that the continuing present he felt his life to be should not be shadowed or challenged" (McGahern, 2008, 3). We learn from Moran what he remembers of his comrade: "McQuaid was a drunken blackguard who was with me in the war. I felt sorry for him. If I didn't give him a square meal on Monaghan Day, he'd drink himself stupid in Mohill…" (McGahern, 2008, 4).[6]

In the novel, the planning for this event allows for his story of the war to be shared: "Don't let anyone fool you. It was a bad business. We didn't shoot women and children …but we were a bunch of killers…Of the twenty-two in the original column only seven were alive at the Truce…" (McGahern, 2008, 5).

The character continued: "What did we get for it? A country, if you'd believe them. Some of our own johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen. More than half my own family work in England. What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod" (McGahern, 2008, 5).

His disillusionment with Ireland's independence is described by the author by the following description: "Run by a crowd of small-minded gangsters out for their own good. It was better if it never had happened" (2008, 5). Yet elsewhere in the novel Moran says that the war was the best of his life: "Things were never so simple and clear again" (McGahern, 2008, 6).

McGahern described in his interview with Collinge and Vernadakis his own view of Ireland, which was: "always a very violent society, and, like most things there, it was very hidden there as well. There was also much sexual frustration. The authority was paternalistic. God the father in Heaven. The Pope in Rome, the father who said the Rosary each night in the house…Men and Women lived mostly separate lives. Men dominated outside and the women dominated in the houses, if they were not cowed by violence" (Collinge, Vernadakis, 2003, 8). In *Amongst Women*, McGahern writes of Moran, described with the voice of Moran's second wife Rose: "Often when talking with the girls she had noticed that whenever Moran entered the room silence and deadness would fall on them" (2008, 53).

The title *Amongst Women* refers to the central character's relationship with his daughters. The novel opens with the line; "As he weakened, Moran became afraid of his daughters" (McGahern, 2008, 1). As he weakens and loses his independence, his second wife and his three daughters" devotion to him

[6] Ireland's levels of alcohol consumption continue to be higher than the European average. https://www.drugs.ie/news/article/Irish_spend_three_times_EU_average_on_alcohol Accessed 15 December 2023

brings a shift in power. At the very end of the novel, the power is transferred to the women. It also reflects a change in Ireland for women from the late 1960s onwards. In the years after the civil war only one woman took her seat in the houses of parliament (The Houses of the Oireachtas, Dáil Éireann and the senate, known as Seanad Éireann) although there were women politically active in opposition to the State. Up to the 1960s the number of female representatives were low, with only three or four women serving in both houses at any one session.[7] The major change for women in the 1960s was free secondary education. In the early 1970s, when Ireland joined the European Economic Community, it brought new laws on equality for pay and employment. Before this, the options for the majority of women were limited - farm work, domestic service or emigration.

In *Amongst Women*, Moran's second wife had been a domestic for 12 years in Glasgow for a family called the Rosenblooms (McGahern, 2008). She returned to her homeplace to nurse her father then stayed at home instead of going back to service. She succeeded in her desire to marry the widower Moran, despite his "dark" reputation, and does so against the approval of her family. The children are already grown so the need for a mother figure to small children is not why she marries, nor does she have her own family with Michael Moran. In the book, McGahern underscored that her decision was not based on her experiences in Scotland, but her wish to marry and stay in Ireland. McGahern tells the reader: "Mrs Rosenbloom had written they wanted her back" (McGahern, 2008, 22). McGahern further described her suggestively: "The Rosenblooms had long known that they could take her with them into society" (2008, 24). This reference is important as it shows something of Rose's demeanour, her acceptance of her position. She decides to stay at home and marry a man who is full of darkness, and she selects this in preference to living away from Ireland. However, it is Rose who makes the plan to get Moran's oldest daughter Maggie away from life on the farm to train as a nurse in England. This was a common occupation for Irish women training in the period following the second world war. Moran reply to the plan for her leaving was: "she will have a roof over her head as long as I'm above ground (2008, 49). The home is there for her. Emigration did not always work out. We know that often life for the domestic servants was not good. "No Irish need apply" was common in advertising by Protestant employers in the United States. Such advertisements would run as following:
Girl wanted, Protestant housework girl to go to the country, wages 3 dollars, no Irish wanted. Call Wednesday 4 Holden Row, Charlestown. Reliable girl wanted for general housework, accustomed to children and with reference; no Irish. 13 Temont Street, Charlestown. For many young girls they swopped poverty in one country for poverty in another.

3. Photographic representations of Irish women, work and family life

In *Amongst Women*, Moran invested in the education of his daughters, and has a car, but is constantly worried about money. Free education for secondary was not available during the period that this novel is set but Moran educates his children. It is significant when the writer tells the reader: "Moran was not rich nor poor, but his hatred and fear of poverty was fierce as his fear of illness which meant that he would never be poor but he and all around him would live as if they were paupers" (McGahern, 2008, 10) or: "…his racial fear of the poorhouse or famine was deep" (McGahern, 2008, 68).

These lines speak to conditions of the past in Ireland. Following several conquests, the land of Ireland was in the hands of a small percentage of people, what were described as Anglo-Irish ascendancy. This minority were descended from British settlers who had been given large estates in Ireland and, in return were charged with keeping the local population under control and preventing rebellion against the crown. Penal Laws had prevented Catholic ownership of the land and education. Irish tenants in 1843 were recorded as paying on average of 70 per cent more than tenants in England. They did not have security of tenure - they could be evicted at any time on the "whim" of the landlord or his agent. Absent landlords meant that they did not have a relationship with their tenants. The right to vote was only open to land holders.

[7] Mna100 Timeline https://www.mna100.ie/exhibitions/ Accessed 15 December 1923.

The Irish Poor Law system was the in place from the early seventeenth century. In Ireland, it was paid for by the landowners but often as the crop failures continued, they could not fund the system. The Irish Poor Law legislation required people with small holdings of more than a quarter of an acre to give them up in order to qualify for assistance. The land held by Catholics was subdivided by family members and this generational subdivision meant that there were tiny plots all over the country. Almost half the population had been living in dire conditions. In 1841, their homes were described as windowless mud cabins of a single room. In County Donegal in the Northwest of the country in 1837 survey recorded the possessions of a population of 9,000 were described as "10 beds, 93 chairs and 243 stools." [8]

Throughout her history, Ireland, like much of Europe and other parts of the world had periodic outbreaks of famine caused by crop failure. These were often localised and of short duration. The Great Irish Famine, *An Górta Mór*, was something very different. The blight came in 1845 and the poor rural population depending on the potato crop suffered starvation on an enormous scale. The poorest lived on potatoes and buttermilk. Imported food was expensive as it was heavily taxed. The reason that there was mass starvation was the widely held belief of "laissez faire" which was the belief that the poor were poor because of their own failings, and as a result the ruling administration were slow to act. Over the years from 1845-1852 the accepted estimate is that 1 million died and 1.5 million people emigrated. Whole villages disappeared, the remains were recorded by visitors with cameras in the 1890s and into the early 20th century. The poverty continued over the next decades. *Harper's Weekly*, with its subtitle of The Journal of Civilization dated February 20, 1880, and published in New York depicts a drawing of an Irish woman on its cover. The woman is shown standing on the coast. She has a piece of fabric raised over her head; it reads HELP. She is looking out to sea and there is a ship on the water. Behind her is an emaciated and huddled family. One of the figures is lying down, and a small child lies on top, hugging them. On the rock the words are "we are starving Ireland." Ten years later the Congested District Boards were established by the Chief Secretary of Ireland the Right Honourable A.J. Balfour to alleviate poverty and the living conditions in areas in the west and northwest of Ireland. The newly formed Congested Districts Board dispatched inspectors to report on the local conditions in areas along Ireland's Atlantic seaboard. The report on the District of Achill, County Mayo [9] was compiled by one of the inspectors Major Robert Ruttledge-Fair b.1852 who resided at Cornfield, County Mayo.[10]

In the collection of the National Library of Ireland, there are photographs by Major Robert Ruttledge-Fair documenting the work of women - collecting seaweed with baskets on their backs, carrying dung, used to fertilise the fields or carrying peat, known as turf, to burn on the fires for cooking and heat.

Photo 1: Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, Tuke16

[8] Rural Life: 1690 to 1845 | Encyclopedia.com Accessed 15 December 2023. This information is used as part of the exhibition at the Famine Museum, Strokestown, County Roscommon.
[9] The report dated 27 April 1892 can be found at https://achilltourism.com/experience-achill/history/achill-district-cdb-report-1892, accessed 15 December 2023.
[10] Information taken from Irish peerage, https://www.thepeerage.com/p45357.htm, accessed 15 December 2023.

In the boglands of Ireland peat or turf was cut for burning. This photograph by Mayor Ruttledge Fair for James Tuke dating to circa 1892 was identified as "Woman working in the bog." On the reverse is noted: "drawing turf to the roadside – quarter of a mile to one mile."

Photo 2: Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, Tuke15

This photograph shows women transporting the turf in baskets on their backs. This is a photograph by Mayor Ruttledge Fair for James H. Tuke and is dated circa 1892. On the back is noted: "at the end of the day's work at the turf bog, they carry home a basket of turf for the house." There are other images in this set which depict women carrying dung and seaweed, also used for fertilisers.

These images were commissioned by Mr Tuke. A number of families were assisted to emigrate in 1883-1884 by the Tuke Fund Committee. The need for assisted emigration in some areas was because the people were living in absolute poverty. In Achill, weaving, spinning, knitting and sewing was confined to making of flannel for men's shirts. It was noted that the women did the spinning and knitting for their own families and that "nothing is ever sold" (National Library of Ireland). The report also included the information that girls brought home from Scotland large quantities of thread for knitting socks and small shawls. Seasonal migration to Scotland was common for those living in the Northwest of Ireland, counties of Mayo and Donegal. In Donegal, Major Gahan reported that the women of the Glenties area were the "sole support" for families, the men "do little or nothing beyond setting the crop or taking the harvest" (National Library of Ireland).

The findings of the Congested District Board reports show that women were more industrious than men in periods of abject hardship. Aside from seasonal employment and the sale of animals and migrant earning, most households got a cash income from women's work, cottage-based industries, butter and poultry, as well as by the 1890s spinning, weaving, sewing and knitting. This work was alongside their work of cooking, baking, cleaning and whitewashing. Payment in some areas was not given in cash but as benefit in kind, and this "truck" system was taken under control by the Congested District Boards.
In *Amongst Women*, Rose's voice is chilling when she speaks of her own life on the farm: "Sometimes in the evenings she had too strong a sense being locked into the life of the farmhouse" (McGahern, 2008, 22).

Is this life "locked in the farmhouse" reflected in photographic evidence? The "Lawrence Collection" which is over 30,000 images is in the National Photographic Archive (part of the National Library of Ireland) provides images of the rural population in Ireland. The images were sold as prints, stereoscopic views and lantern slides. The public could view them at Lawrence's Great Bazaar and Photographic Galleries 5-7 Upper Sackville Street, Dublin (now O'Connell Street). The Lawrence photographs rarely showed poverty or political conflict.

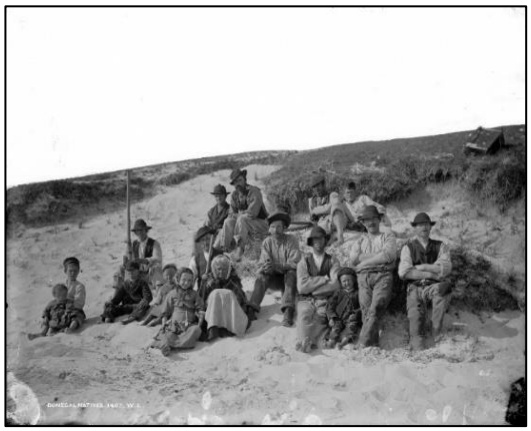

Photo 3: Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland L_ROY_01407.

Photograph by Robert French described on the glass plate negative as "Donegal Natives". Likely part of "Irish Life and Characters" series created for the tourist trade in the 1890s. It is interesting to note that this is in the period of the popularity of writing of Irish peasants by members of the Anglo Irish, such as the plays of John Millington Synge, the plays and books by Lady Gregory and poetry, plays and prose of W.B.Yeats.

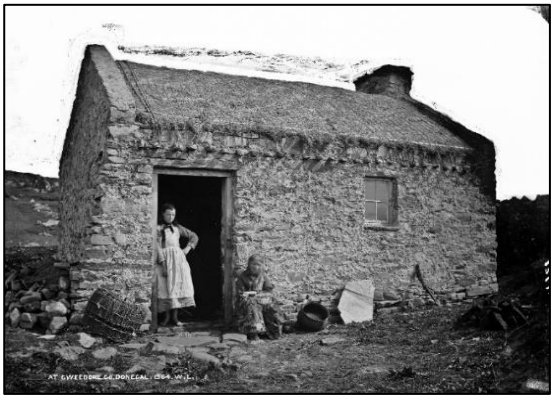

Photo 4: Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland L_ROY_01364.

Photograph by Robert French and described: "At Gweedore, County Donegal." The cottage was thatched in the traditional style with rope ties. Note the basket for farm work and the pot for cooking arranged outside the house. This cottage has one window, which was a better structure than those of earlier generations. The young girl is posed in a clean apron and bonnet, while the old woman is seated.

Photo 5: Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland L_ROY_02174

"Fish and Vegetable Women" Robert French (1841-1917.) The Chief Photographer Robert French (1841-1917) was employed at Lawrence Photographers from the mid-1870s until his retirement in 1914 to record scenic views representing all parts of Ireland. In his *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Noel Kissane entry for Robert French stated: "French emerged as one of the foremost chroniclers of his generation, albeit unwittingly, and endowed posterity with a unique cultural and educational resource.[11]"

Photo 6: Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland Eason 4057

This photograph was taken in County Mayo for stationers Eason & Company, circa 1910, being entitled "A woman driving cattle on Achill Island, Co. Mayo." This was most likely taken for the series of postcard views of Ireland. Clearly a posed shot with the girl looking directly at the photographer. A recognisable point on the island and today is the location of a viewing point for visitors to take panoramic photographs at Cloughmore, on the Wild Atlantic Way.

Irish women's lives were also captured by international photographers. These images were staged and sold commercially. As advertised on this photograph, the company Underwood and Underwood had offices in New York, London, Toronto, and their original location of Ottawa Kansas. It is entitled: "A raal convenience – A woife" (a real convenience – a wife) "a country farm yard in Ireland." This photograph by the Underwood Brothers' firm is identified as being from County Monaghan and dated to 1903. By this time, the company were the largest distributor of stereoscopic cards with boxed sets for sale from different parts of the world. The couple are depicted outside a whitewashed cottage, with an outhouse and a cart. The woman is shown sewing the man's button on his shirt sleeve. In Ireland, women in the poorest areas were an asset, as demonstrated in the Congested District Reports. The man seated again and the positioning of the cart, often described as a convenience, is noteworthy.

Photo 7: Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Underwood & Underwood. stereo 1s28032 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/stereo.1s28032.

[11] https://www.dib.ie/biography/french-robert-a3369

Photo 8: Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Charleton H. Graves LC-DIG-Stereo -1s28019

Another of the art nouveau stereograph photographers was Charleton H. Graves who produced postcards of Ireland for sale in the United States. He had studios in Philadelphia, Naperville and Illinois. He traded as The Universal Photo Art Company. One of his photographs shows two women at a cottage (possibly mother and daughter) one is knitting and one is spinning with a caption: "Domestic thrift. A study from real life". This image is believed to date to 1904. The use of the term "domestic thrift" comes up in Elizabeth Robinson's "Women and Needlework in Britain 1920-1970"[12]. While her focus is not Ireland, nor does she look at this time period, she looks at this term of domestic thrift and its use in the context of women"s needlework in times of peace and war (Robinson, 2012). The use of the term on this image speaks to a wider discourse that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

A deeper understanding of some of the subtext of how women were depicted can be seen in another image in the Library of Congress collection. Keystone View Company Meadville PA and St Louis sold an image entitled "Peggy is earning what Paddy is burning". A typical Irish home. "Peggy" stands in doorway knitting beside an empty chair, her standing may be significant; does this allude to the couple not being equal status? She stands and is knitting as the man sits on his stool with his pipe in his mouth. The Congested District Board's support of women's work by facilitating training, markets and payment in money allowed for a change from the prefamine period when men were in control of the household budget, from the period of the 1890s onwards women held the money (Cullen, "Breadwinners and Providers: Women in the Household Economy of Labouring Families 1835-61).

Congested District Board Reports show that men were given pocket money for drink and tobacco on fair days, but this was only when the family income allowed it (Cullen in Luddy and Murphy, 1990). This image may reference this practice.

Photo 9: Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-Stereo-Is28044

[12] https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/10907779/2012robinsonemphd.pdf

The International View Company and its founder Charles Lincoln Wasson from Illinois also created postcard images of the Irish, the comedy of their images was popular parlour entertainment. They were considered to be visual jokes and were described as public photography. *Pat if yez don"t sell that Pig he"ll soon be outside with all we own*" The subtitle reads "one of the humble cottage homes of county Kerry Ireland." This is in fact a prosperous farmhouse with religious imagery and a selection of dishes and wallpaper that show a degree of prosperity while the pig in the house is a reference to poorer class who sheltered their animals inside, as they were so valuable. This reference to "soon be outside" could be a reference to eviction. The woman with a stick raised is all part of the staging. The work of Wasson as racist and sexist and how they are described as exploiting radical and sexist stereotypes by Historian Martha Sandweiss is explored by Derek Peterson and Patrick Hamrick[13].

Photo 10: Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-Stereo – 1527767

4. Conclusions

In *Amongst Women*, McGahern draws a picture of the life of an Irish woman on a farm: "Maggie had been little more than a drudge round the house" (McGahern 2008). Rose set her free. Rose encourages the eldest girl Maggie to go to England, to get away and get a profession. During the Second World War when the Irish[14] 58,776 women travelled to work in Britain (Redmond, 2018). The most common jobs for women were teachers, nurses, midwives, domestics, as well as factory and transport workers. These jobs are also typical in the 1950s and 1960s when the novel is set.

Maggie's two brothers, Luke and Michael also leave the farm, both to work in construction, but Maggie goes to train as a nurse. Moran's sons have emigrated having no interest in farming the land that Moran had purchased with his army pension. The sons do not want the land or at least while he is alive. There is no question of it being given to Rose or Moran's daughters. It was only in 1957 that the "Married Women's Status Act" gave women separate rights to property and allowed a married woman to undertake any formal contracts. In 1965, the Succession Act was enacted to clarify and increase a widow's entitlement to her husband's estate.

Emigration had been a feature in Irish life from the time of the Great Famine 1845 with large numbers going each year, peaking again in the 1950s, but the outward flow of people continued until the 1990s. The worldwide diaspora of Irish people is considered today to be somewhere in the region of 70 million people. In the opening paragraphs of the novel *Amongst Women*, we learn that Moran's other daughters, Sheila and Mona, have also left the small holding (although returning frequently) and they live in

[13] https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/scalar/stereotypes-through-the-stereoscope/index

[14] There has been a common travel area Britain since independence in 1922, therefore the only period in the period from 1940-1945 when a travel permit was introduced. This is the only time when numbers were recorded.

Dublin. Well educated. they both obtained work in the Irish Civil Service. These were sought-after jobs in Ireland of the period, and only those with the highest grades in State examinations were accepted. These women are shown as professional women, in the service to the Irish State, in secure and stable employment. This is against the backdrop of Ireland in this period of economic hardship and mass unemployment and few State benefits. They have been accepted into the working of the State that their father felt excluded from.

The story of *Amongst Women* begins and ends with the power of women. McGahern's novel reflects a darkness, a shadow cast by the past, but in the end the women in the book are independent of the farm, the closed society of rural Ireland, but their bonds of kinship and family ties remain. They maintain a sense of identity with their family and their homeplace, as the Morans of the Meadow, but not living with the hardship of the life of the rural small holding. McGahern with his easy prose describes the freedom they have achieved. So much of what is dark is confined to the past. When this book was first published in 1990, it was the year that Mary Robinson (1944-) was elected the first female Irish President. It is seen by many as the year of the birth of a new era. In her inauguration speech, President Robinson told the assembled audience in St Patrick's Hall, Dublin Castle:

> I was elected by men and women of all parties and none, by many with great moral courage who stepped out from the faded flag of the civil war and voted for a new Ireland, and above all by the women of Ireland, Mná na hÉireann, who instead of rocking the cradle rocked the system, and who came out massively to make their mark on the ballot paper on a new Ireland (Robinson, 1990).

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