

Readings & Conversations
John McGahern
with
Hermione Lee
7 April 2004

READING

Hermione Lee: Welcome to tonight's Lannan reading. I am Hermione Lee. I'm a biographer, a critic, and a teacher of literature. It's a great honour and delight for me tonight to be introducing John McGahern who has come to Santa Fe from his home in County Leitrim in Ireland to read and to talk to you tonight. *By the Lake*, his last novel, which dwells with tender, realistic, eloquent detail on the lives of a small rural community in the corner of Ireland that he knows so well, has been a huge success here in the States as it has been in Europe and it's added to his already immensely distinguished reputation. As well as being a recipient of the Lannan Literary Award this year, John McGahern has a veritable cornucopia of literary prizes and honors including the title from France of the Chevalier de Louvre des Artes de Lettres, the American-Irish Award, *The Irish Times* Aer Lingus Prize, the A.E. Memorial Award, and the GBA Book Prize awarded by John Updike.

Without slipping into the kind of exaggeration or blarney that his own characters are so wary of, I do believe that John McGahern is a great writer, to be spoken of alongside of his countrymen, Joyce and Beckett or Frank O'Connor or Patrick Kavanaugh. He's not a prolific or a fast writer. In the 1960's and '70's he published four startling, daring, bleak and remarkable novels of Irish life: *The Barracks*, *The Dark*, *The Leavetaking* and *The Pornographer*. They dealt with what he's called 'the moral climate' in which he grew up, 'the terror of damnation, the confusion and guilt and plain ignorance that surrounded sex', I'm quoting here, 'the power of the Church, violence and abuses within family life, and the Catholic education system.' These were shocking books in their time, and *The Dark* was banned in Ireland. It was twenty-five years after that that his magnificent, powerful, moving novel of Irish family life, *Amongst Women*, was published in 1990 to huge acclaim both within and outside Ireland.

From the 1970's onwards, John McGahern was also writing plays for radio, for the television, and for the stage and his marvelous short stories, many of which were brought together in the 1992 volume of *Collected Stories* which includes some long, almost novella-like stories such as 'The Country Funeral'. *By the Lake* was published in 2002 – that's twelve years after *Amongst Women*.

John McGahern is not a writer who lets go of things. He works his fiction over and over, slowly and painstakingly, sometimes returning to his books, for instance to *The Leavetaking*, and revising them. And he returns too to his places and landscapes, his characters and subjects, like Monet painting and repainting his water lilies or Chekhov dwelling over on his scenes of Russian life in his stories. For instance, the tyrannical father, Michael Moran, in *Amongst Women*, and his long-suffering second wife, Rose, recur in several of the stories. The landscape of lake and farm, of meadows and hills, of church and graveyard in *By The Lake*, has long haunted him. John Rutledge, the character who I think is most like his author in this novel, notices when he's helping to build the roof of a new shed that when the rafters frame the sky the whole sky grows out from that small space. So do McGahern's novels and

stories seem to reach out beyond the local frame that he returns to and that shapes them.

Though he's so concerned with return and memory and with the relation between the past and the present, I don't want to make him out to be glum or static and you will see in a moment that he's very far from glum. The novels are full of shocks and surprises; sometimes they are violent and cruel, but sometimes they are funny and absurd. The smallest things in everyday life create excitement. "It's all going to be very interesting" says one character at the beginning of Spring in *By the Lake*. The pictures he paints also have a marvelous quality of grace and stillness. There's a phrase he uses in this novel where he talks about "a deeply affecting serenity" and I think he has that quality in his own writing. He once said that "good writing should have an inner formality or calm." And I think it's this that makes John McGahern's writing so rare.

He's going to come and read to you. Then there's a kind of little rearrangement of the stage before we have our conversation and then there'll be a book signing afterwards. So please welcome John McGahern.

[Applause]

John McGahern: I'll begin with a very small scene from *The Pornographer* where, in the novel, everything is done in terms of something else and this was a ritual in Ireland called Sunday visiting. The telephone has more or less done away with it but I think that anything real never goes away. It just takes other forms.

"Cars pull up outside. Apologies and cautious smiles ease themselves out of front seats. A child stands at the back door. Having first discerned who has landed, from the cover of the back of the living room, smiles of surprise and delight are wreathed into shape on the doorstep of the porch. Little runs and trills and pats and chortles go to answer one another 'til all hesitant discordant notes are lost in the sweet medley of hypocrisy. Tea is made. The visit ends as it began relief breaking through the trills of thanks and promises and small playful scolds. 'And now, be sure and don't let it be as long until you come again.' 'We'll think bad of you.' 'Now it's your turn to visit us the next time. You've been just promising for far too long.'

And then, each family settles down to a solid hour of criticism of the other. [laughter] The boring visit ended. It is the way we define and reassert ourselves, rejecting those foreign bodies as we sharpen and restore our sense of self."

[Applause]

And now I'll read a very short passage from *Amongst Women*. I suppose it's... I received many letters from women about this novel. I received one in particular from a woman in County Sligo and she said that her father was like Moran, the father in *Amongst Women*, except he was far worse. There are three daughters in the novel but they had seven. And she said that the father wanted to get all the girls married locally and his way of getting them married – she had a marvelous phrase which was not unlike Jane Austen's where she said that he first found a piece of land that had an unattached man attached to it. [laughter] And then she said "If you saw

what was brought in that was attached to the land you wouldn't wonder that the whole seven of us are in England." [laughter]

The young boy has run away and the girls come home to mourn and they expect that he'll be very angry with them but he's very surprising and when he actually behaves nicely they are inordinately grateful as often happens with difficult people. And when I was writing this I often leaned on this passage to get rid of the worst passages.

"I'm thankful for all you did for Michael," he surprised them by saying as they waited in the car outside the railway station the next evening.

"Well, we're sorry we couldn't get him to come home," Mona said.

"I know you did your best. That's all anybody in the family can do."

On the platform he kissed them as the train drew in. They told him they would be down again before very long. The two sisters were silent as the train crossed the Shannon, traveling through fields. As the train was pulling into Dromod, the small platform black with people like themselves returning to Dublin at the end of the weekend, Mona said in an emotional voice, 'No matter what they say, Daddy can be wonderful.'

Sheila nodded her head in vigorous agreement, 'When Daddy's nice he's just great. He's like no other person', and even the small white stones under the lights on the station platform took on a special glow.

Moran went out to the road and closed the iron gates under the yew after returning with the car from the station. He listened for the noise of the diesel train crossing the Plains behind the house but it had already passed. The light was beginning to fail but he did not want to go into the house. In a methodical way he set out to walk his land, field by blind field. He had not grown up on these fields but they felt to him as if he had. He had bought them with the money he had been given on leaving the army. The small pension wasn't enough to live on but with working the fields he had turned it into a living. He'd be his own man here, he had thought, and for the first time in his life he'd be away from people. Now he went from field to field, no longer kept as well as they once were, the hedges ragged, stones fallen from the walls, but he hardly needed fields any more. It did not take much to keep Rose and himself.

It was like grasping water to think how quickly the years had passed here. They were nearly gone. It was in the nature of things and yet it brought a sense of betrayal and anger, of never having understood anything much. Instead of using the fields, he sometimes felt as if the fields had used him. Soon they would be using someone else in his place. It was unlikely to be either of his sons. He tried to imagine someone running the place after he was gone and could not. He continued walking the fields like a man trying to see."

[Applause]

I'll read the end of a story.... from "Gold Watch". Ireland is a very old country but it's also a very young country. People from my generation...the difference between their lives and their fathers' lives because of education was often very great and that created tensions. And this story is that the father gives the son a gold watch because he feels he won't get it working any more. Communication isn't very good. The son has got married without telling the father and the father has sold the farm without telling the son. So the son comes home as he does every year and he's a lawyer and married to a lawyer and he's brought the father a new watch that he bought at Montreal airport to replace the old gold watch. This is what happens:

"All the meadows had been cut and saved, the bales stacked in groups of five or six and roofed with green grass. The Big Meadow beyond the beeches was completely clean, the bales having been taken in. Though I had come intending to make it my last summer at the hay, I now felt a keen outrage that it had been ended without me.

"What happened?" I asked when I found my father at last.

"The winter feeding got too much for us," my father said. "We decided to sell the meadows."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

My father and Rose exchanged looks, but my father spoke as if he was delivering a prepared statement.

"We didn't like to. And anyhow we thought you'd want to come, hay or no hay."

"Anyhow, I've brought these." I handed Rose the box of chocolates and a bottle of scent, and gave my father the watch.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"It's the watch I told you I'd get in place of the old watch."

"I don't need a watch," he said.

"I got it anyhow. What do you think of it?"

"It's ugly," he said, turning it over.

"It was expensive enough." I named the price. "And that was duty free."

They must have seen you coming, then.' [laughter]

"o. It's guaranteed for five years. It's dustproof, shockproof, waterproof.'

"The old gold watch – do you still have that?" he changed after a silence.

"Of course."

"Did you ever get it working?"

"No," I lied. "But it's sort of nice to have."

"That doesn't make much sense to me."

"Well, you'll find that the new watch is working well anyway."

"What use have I for time any more?" he said, but I saw him start to wind and examine the new watch, and he was wearing it at breakfast the next morning. He seemed to want it to be seen as he buttered toast and reached across for milk and sugar.

"What did you want to get up so early for?" he said to me. "You should have lain in and taken a good rest when you had the chance."

"What will you be doing today?" I asked.

"Not much. A bit of fooling around. I might get spray ready for the potatoes."

"It'd be an ideal day for hay," I said, looking out the window on the fields. The morning was as blue and cool as the plums still touched with dew down by the hayshed. There was a spider-webbing over the grass. I took a book and headed towards the shelter of the beeches in the Big Meadow, for, when the sun would eventually beat through, the day would be uncomfortably hot.

Halfway down each page I'd find that I had lost every thread and was staring blankly at the words. I found myself stirring uncomfortably in my suit-missing my old loose clothes, the smell of diesel in the meadow, the blades of grass shivering as they fell, the long teeth of the raker kicking the hay into rows, all the jangle and bustle and busyness of the meadows.

I heard the clear blows of hammer on stone. My father was sledging stones that had fallen from the archway where once the workmen's bell had hung. Some of the stones had been part of the arch and were quite beautiful. There seemed no point in breaking them up. I moved closer, taking care to stay hidden in the shade of the beeches.

As the sledge rose, the watch glittered on my father's wrist. I followed it down, saw the shudder that ran through his arms as the metal met the stone. A watch was always removed from the wrist before such violent work. I waited. In this heat he could not keep up such work for long. He brought the sledge down again and again, the watch glittering, the shock shuddering through his arms. When he stopped, before he wiped the sweat away, he put the watch to his ear and listened intently. [laughter] What I'd guessed was certain now. From the irritable way he threw the sledge aside, it was clear that the watch was still running. [laughter]

That afternoon I helped him fill the tar barrel with water for spraying the potatoes, though he made it clear he didn't want help. When he put the bag of blue stone into the barrel to steep, he thrust the watch deep into the water before my eyes. [laughter]

"I'm going back to Dublin tomorrow," I said.

"I thought you were coming for two weeks. You always stayed two weeks before."

"There's no need for me here now."

"It's your holiday. You're as well off here as by the sea. It's as much of a change and far cheaper."

"I meant to tell you before, and should have but didn't. I am married now."
[laughter]

"Tell me more news," [laughter] he said with an attempt at cool surprise, but I saw by his eyes that he already knew. "We heard but we didn't like to believe it. It's a bit late in the day for formal engagements, never mind invitations. I suppose we weren't important enough to be invited."

There was no one at the wedding but ourselves. We invited no one, neither her people nor mine.'

"Well, I suppose it was cheaper that way," he agreed.

"When will you spray?"

"I'll spray tomorrow," he said, and we left the blue stone to steep in the barrel of water.

With relief, I noticed he was no longer wearing the watch, but the feeling of unease was so great in the house that after dinner I went outside. It was a perfect moonlit night, the empty fields and beech trees and walls in clear yellow outline. The night seemed so full of serenity that it brought the very ache of longing for all of life to reflect its moonlit calm, but I knew too well it neither was nor could be. It was a dream of death.

I went idly towards the orchard, and as I passed the tar barrel I saw a thin fishing line hanging from a part of the low yew branch down into the barrel. I heard the ticking even before the wrist watch came up tied to the end of the line. [laughter] What shocked me was that I felt neither surprise nor shock.

I felt the bag that we'd left to steep earlier in the water. The blue stone had all melted down. It was a barrel of pure poison, ready for spraying.

I listened to the ticking of the watch at the end of the line in silence before letting it drop back into the barrel. The poison had already eaten into the casing of the watch. The shining rim and back were no longer smooth. It could hardly run much past morning.

The night was so still that the shadows of the beeches did not waver on the moonlit grass, seemed fixed like a leaf in rock. On the white marble the gold watch must now be lying face upwards in this same light, silent or running. The ticking of the watch down in the barrel was so completely muffled by the spray that only by imagination could it be heard. A bird moved in some high

branch, but afterwards the silence was so deep it began to hurt, and the longing grew for the bird or anything to stir again.

I stood in that moonlit silence as if waiting for some word or truth, but none came, none ever came; and I grew amused at that part of myself that still expected something, standing like a fool out there in all that moonlit silence, when only what *was* increased or diminished as it changed, became only what is, becoming again what *was* even faster than the small second hand endlessly circling in the poison.

Suddenly, the lights in the house went out. Before going into the house this last night to my room, I drew the watch up again out of the barrel by the line and listened to it tick, now purely amused by the expectation it renewed – that if I continued to listen to the ticking some word or truth might come. And when I finally lowered the watch back down into the poison, I did it so carefully that no ripple or splash disturbed the quiet, and time, hardly surprisingly, was still running; time that did not have to run to any conclusion.”

Thank you.

[Applause]

I’ll read from the recent novel, *By the Lake*, called *That They May Face the Rising Sun* in Ireland. I’ll just read the opening. There’s nothing to explain in an opening. A man walks into a room and a novel begins.

“Hel-lo. Hel-lo. Hel-lo,” he called out softly, in some exasperation.

“Jamesie!” They turned to the voice with great friendliness. As he often stole silently into the room, they showed no surprise. “You are welcome.”

“Ye are no good. I have been standing here for several minutes and haven’t heard a bad word said about anybody yet. Not a bad word,” he repeated with mocking slowness as he came forward.

“We never speak badly about people. It’s too dangerous. It can get you into trouble.”

“Then ye never speak or if you do the pair of yous are not worth listening to.”
[laughter]

“Kate.” He held out an enormous hand. She pretended to be afraid to trust her hand to such strength. It was a game he played regularly. For him all forms of social intercourse were merely different kinds of play. “God hates a coward, Kate,” he demanded, and she took his hand.

Not until she cried, “Easy there, Jamesie,” did he release his gently tightening grip with a low crow of triumph. “You are one of God’s troopers, Kate. Mister Rutledge,” he bowed solemnly.

“Mister Murphy.”

"No misters here," he protested. "No misters in this part of the world. Nothing but broken-down gentlemen."

"There are no misters in this house either. He that is down can fear no fall."

"Why don't you go to Mass, then, if you are that low?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You'd be like everybody else around here by now if you went to Mass."

"I'd like to attend Mass. I miss going."

"What's keeping you, then?"

"I don't believe."

"I don't believe," he mimicked. "None of us believes and we go. That's no bar." [laughter]

"I'd feel a hypocrite. Why do *you* go if you don't believe?"

"To look at the girls. [laughter] "To see the whole performance," he cried out, and started to shake with laughter. "We go to see all the other hypocrites. Kate, what do you think about all this? You've hardly said a word."

"My parents were atheists," Kate said. "They thought that all that exists is what you see, all that you are is what you think and appear to be."

"Give them no heed, Kate," he counselled gently. "You are what you are and to hell with the begrudgers."

"The way we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived are often very different," Rutledge said.

"Pay no heed to him either. He's just trying to twist and turn. When thought was married he pissed in the bed and thought he was sweating. His wife thought otherwise. You'll get on good as any of them, Kate." He took pruning shears from his pocket and placed them on the table. "Thanks," he said. "They were a comfort. Pure Sheffield. Great steel."

"I bought them from a stall in the Enniskillen market one Thursday. They weren't expensive."

"The North", he raised his hand for emphasis. "The North of Ireland is a great place for bargains."

"Would you like a whiskey, Jamesie?" she asked.

"Now you're talking, Kate. But you should know by now that 'wilya' is a very bad word."

"Why bad?"

"Look at yer man," he pointed to where Rutledge had already taken glasses and a bottle of Powers from the cupboard and was running water into a brown jug.

"I'm slow", Kate said.

"You're not one bit slow, Kate. You just weren't brought up here. You nearly have to be born into a place to know what's going on and what to do."

"He wasn't brought up here."

"Oh, not too far off, near enough to know. He wasn't at school but he met the scholars. Good health! And more again tomorrow," he raised his glass. "The crowd lying below in Shruhaun aren't drinking any drinks today."

"Good luck. What's the news?"

"No news. Came looking for news," he cried ritually, and then could contain his news no longer."

[Applause]

Everything again in the novel is repeated in terms of something else and there's a ritual where Jamesie and Rutledge watch the All-Ireland finals on television – it's a bit like the Super Bowl here.

"September and October were lovely months, the summer ended, winter not yet in.

The little vetch pods on the banks turned black. Along the shore a blue bloom came on the sloes. The blackberries moulded and went unpicked, the briar leaves changed into browns and reds and yellows in the low hedges, against which the pheasant could walk unnoticed. Plums and apples and pears were picked and stored or given around. Honey was taken from the hives, the bees fed melted sugar. For a few brilliant days the rowan berries were a shining red-orange in the light from the water, and then each tree became a noisy infestation of small birds as it trembled with greedy clamouring life until it was stripped clean.

When the All-Ireland finals in Croke Park were live on television, Rutledge walked round the lake to watch the match with Jamesie. Jamesie poured whiskey and Mary made tea and sandwiches. The irregular striking of the clocks from every quarter of the house throughout the match served as a cool corrective to the excited commentary. The team Jamesie supported nearly always won, his support completely based on which of the teams he thought most likely to win and provide a triumphant, satisfying ending to the year. Once they lost, it was as if his judgement had been impugned.

"No use," he thrust out his hands. "They should have been ashamed to turn out. It wasn't even worth looking at."

When the match ended and was talked over for a while, Rutledge and Jamesie, accompanied by the two dogs, walked out to the lake.

"Thanks for the game. It was great fun," Rutledge said.

"The right team won this year anyway," he remarked complacently.

"We'll watch it again next year."

"With the help of God," Jamesie said firmly as they separated.

The shore was dry, the fallen leaves rustling against his tread. Not until he reached the alder at the gate did he see the Mercedes stationed in front of the porch. Once he entered the house, he could hear his uncle chatting happily with Kate.

"Will he be able for it, Kate? That's the sixmarker!"

They were discussing the sale and transfer of the business.

As he listened to the two voices he was so attached to and thought back to the afternoon, the striking of the clocks, the easy, pleasant company, the walk around the shore, with a rush of feeling he felt that this must be happiness. As soon as the thought came to him, he fought it back, blaming the whiskey. The very idea was as dangerous as presumptive speech: happiness could not be sought or worried into being, or even fully grasped; it should be allowed its own slow pace that it passes unnoticed, if it ever comes at all."

Thank you.

[Applause]

Now there's one villain in this novel who's already got married twice and has had many women and the third wife which he got out of the Knock marriage bureau where the Virgin appeared to the children, had the great good sense to run away after a week. [laughter] Now, as Jamesie missed out on the news of the wedding – he's often referred to as the local TV/radio station – he's determined not to miss on the break-up. And this is what happened:

"Already, the new wife had come to realize that she had made a big mistake, but was keeping her own counsel.

On the last evening the family gave a dinner at the Central, with toasts and all kinds of wishes for long lives and much happiness to the new couple, and afterwards there were drinks and a singsong in the bar till late. They all said goodbye to one another that night in the Central, with promises to see one another when they came again the following summer, if not before that, when, as they hoped, the happy couple would visit them in London. The next day, while the convoy of cars was crossing England, the wife packed all her personal belongings while John Quinn was away and walked to Shruhaun.

A tall, fair-haired young man came by the car to the village an hour earlier. He had a single pint of stout in the bar. Though he was polite and answered readily enough to the small talk of the bar, he didn't volunteer either where he was from or what business had brought him to Shruhaun. As soon as John Quinn's wife walked in the door, he rose and put his glass back on the counter and went and took the two suitcases she was carrying. They left without a word. There were only a few in the bar at the time. Nobody thought to get the registration number of the car but they guessed by his appearance and by the way he went towards her that he was one of her sons.

Jamesie had great belief in two spoons he used for casting from the shore, but fishing wasn't much on his mind this day. He was waiting to attract John Quinn's attention. Moving away from the house, he knew he had only to wait.

The old sheepdog came first. While continuing to cast and reel in the copper spoon, Jamesie was able to observe John Quinn's approach. He was still dressed in his wedding suit.

"John Quinn is one happy and contented man this bright morning," Jamesie sang out as he drew close while reeling in and lifting the copper spoon from the water.

"It's lovely to see good neighbours innocent and at peace and looking for something good for the table," John Quinn said.

"You must be one happy man to be safely married again to a fine woman," Jamesie was all smiles as he turned his attention around.

"I do my best to be happy and not live alone, as the Lord intended – 'Tis not good for man to live alone,' He himself has said – but I don't mind admitting that we have had a little setback [laughter] that I'm hoping and praying will only be very temporary."

"A setback?" Jamesie enquired. "A setback for John Quinn?"

"Yes, Jamesie. You could call it a setback but I'm hoping it'll be only temporary, no more than a hitch or a small hiccup. It's down in holy writ that what God has joined together no man can put asunder. I was away on some business yesterday evening and when I came back I found she had left for her own part of the country. All she left behind was a note and it wasn't a love note." [laughter]

"Was there no signs or warnings?"

"No signs. No signs worth remarking. We had a most wonderful week, the children taking us everywhere and all happy and getting on wonderfully well together. Except one night when we were most content and peaceable after the usual love performance she turned to me and said, 'John, I think I've made a big mistake.' [laughter] Women get strange notions like that from time to time, like children, and have to be humoured. I told her what you have to tell them on such occasions and when I heard nothing more thought it was the sweet end of that figary and we were back to happiness again."

"Still, you must have had a great week in spite of everything, John Quinn?" Jamesie had known him over a lifetime. John Quinn had circled and wheedled and bullied many in search of advantage. Now he was being circled expertly.

"The children have done well for themselves and got on well in the world and wanted to do as good for their old father. They came in a great show of strength. Nothing was too much for them or too good. They brought us everywhere. Then we had the nights to ourselves. I don't mind telling you Jamesie, it was like being young again. It was youth come back and it wasn't wasted. We had the strength but not the know-how when we were young."

"She was a fine woman," Jamesie said.

"As fine as was ever handled, Jamesie, hadn't to be taught a single thing and was more solid and wholesome than a young woman. You could tell she had an easy, comfortable life and never got much hardship. She was as ripe as a good plum picked when it was about to fall off the tree. It was most beautiful. It was like going in and out of a most happy future."

"You're a terror, John Quinn. A pure living holy terror," Jamesie cheered and John Quinn luxuriated in the rapt attention.

"Then this little slip-up came along and sort of went and spoiled everything but please God it'll be soon rectified and everything will be back happy and everybody getting on wonderfully well together again."

"I don't doubt it. I can't see John Quinn letting anything go without an almighty struggle. I don't doubt it for a minute."

"Even now I'm negotiating for a happy outcome. Once you marry you know you have rights as well as duties. It can't be put away like a pair of old boots. It's my belief anyhow that she won't be got back to this part of the country. My plan is very plain and simple and I tell you man to man, Jamesie: if the mountain won't go to Mohammed, then, it was always said, Mohammed has to go to the mountain."

Jamesie went straight from John Quinn to the Rutledges. There were no games of stealth, of ghosting into the house to listen. The trolling rod was left in the fuchsia bushes at the gate and he whooped and called out as he came in the short avenue and rapped with his palm on the glass of the porch. He could have been a small crowd returning victorious from a football match or a spectacular cattle sale. Kate was alone in the house and went to meet him in the porch. Rutledge heard the commotion and came in from the fields.

"Finding it much easier now, thanking you very much for your most kind enquiry," he called out mockingly as he threw himself down in the armchair, and then could contain his news no longer. "Gone!", he laughed out. "Gone. Out the gap. Gone!".

"Who's gone? What's gone?"

"A drink in the name of God before I die. [laughter] John Quinn's wife has gone. Skipped it before the children were right back in England, gone and left him, stranded as long as he ran. Hit it for her own part of the country."

Over whiskey and water he went over the story at his ease, occasionally choking as he drank into his speech but more often banging his glass down to hoot with laughter. "I heard going to the boggy hollow described as many things in my time but never as 'going in and out of a most happy future.' [laughter] Lord bless us. John Quinn is a living sight. He could think or do anything. He said it was like being young again and she tasted like a ripe plum picked from the tree. I'd give good money to know what the plum thought." [laughter]

"You're a disgrace, Jamesie. You were leading him on," Kate said.

In answer, he cheered.

"Did she give no sign or warning?" Rutledge asked.

"Oh yes. Oh – yes, but those like John Quinn are too bound up with themselves to heed. When they had done the love performance one night and were most happy and peaceful, she turned to him in the bed and said, 'I think I may have made a big mistake.' " [laughter]

"That's the end," Kate said. "Imagine having to go to a place like Knock to find someone like John Quinn." [laughter]

"Lots go and won't be stopped," Jamesie laughed. "Nature starts jabbing them. This tangle is far from over. Mark my words. John Quinn won't be got rid of so easily."

They walked him to the gate, where he retrieved the rod and copper spoon from the fuchsias, and then down to the water and part of the way round the shore. The sloes were already ripening on the blackthorn. Patches of yellow were appearing in the thick wall of green along the shore. There was rust on the briar leaves. Certain grasses and early vegetables were dying back.

The lake was an enormous mirror turned to the depth of the sky, holding its lights and its colours. Close to the reeds there were many flies, and small shoals of perch were rippling the surface with hints of the teeming energy and life of the depths. The reeds had lost their green brightness and were leaning towards the water. Everything, everything that had flowered had now come to fruit."

Thank you.

[Applause]