All Will Be Well: A Memoir

In his award-winning novels and stories, John McGahern (one of "the greatest Irish writers"-The New York Times Book Review) explores the ordinary lives of men and women to reveal the intricate workings of the human heart and mind. Now, in All Will Be Well, he turns to his own life, telling the story of his childhood in the Irish countryside and the beginnings of his life as a writer.

McGahern grew up the eldest of seven children in County Leitrim, where North and South meet under the Iron Mountains. His early years were marked by his father's violent nature, the selflessness of his mother-a teacher of uncommon independence-and the tragedy of her death when McGahern was only nine. With extraordinary poignancy, he describes her and how her love remained a source of strength for him and his siblings, helping them to survive their father's tyrannical rule and, ultimately, enabling them to break free into their own lives.

McGahern traces his career as a writer as it takes him increasingly far from home-to Dublin, London, Paris, Helsinki, Spain, the United States-before it brings him back to the almost unchanged landscape in which he had grown up and which had indelibly shaped his life and work. His lyrical descriptions of the fields and quiet roads of his home catch the subtle beauty of one of Ireland's least known counties, while his portraits of its inhabitants are drawn with great insight and tenderness. "The people and the language and landscape...were like my breathing."

All Will Be Well is a haunting, illuminating memoir.
John McGahern is the author of six highly acclaimed novels and four collections of short stories, and has been the recipient of many awards and honors, including an award from the Society of Authors, the American Ireland Fund Literary Award, the Prix Ecureuil de Litt rature trang re and the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Amongst Women, which won both the GPA Book Award and the Irish Times Award, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He lives in County Leitrim, Ireland.The soil in Leitrim is poor, in places no more than an inch deep. Underneath is daub, a blue-grey modelling clay, or channel, a compacted gravel. Neither can absorb the heavy rainfall. Rich crops of rushes and wiry grasses keep the thin clay from being washed away.

The fields between the lakes are small, separated by thick hedges of whitethorn, ash, blackthorn, alder, sally, rowan, wild cherry, green oak, sycamore, and the lanes that link them under the Iron Mountains are narrow, often with high banks. The hedges are the glory of these small fields, especially when the hawthorn foams into streams of blossom each May and June. The sally is the first tree to green and the first to wither, and the rowan berries are an astonishing orange in the light from the lakes every September. These hedges are full of mice and insects and small birds, and sparrowhawks can be seen hunting all through the day. In their branches the wild woodbine and dog rose give off a deep fragrance in summer evenings, and on their banks grow the foxglove, the wild strawberry, primrose and fern and vetch among the crawling briars. The beaten pass the otter takes between the lakes can be traced along these banks and hedges, and in quiet places on the edge of the lakes are the little lawns speckled with fish bones and blue crayfish shells where the otter feeds and trains her young. Here and there surprising islands

of rich green limestone are to be found. Among the rushes and wiry grasses also grow the wild orchid and the windflower. The very poorness of the soil saved these fields when old hedges and great trees were being levelled throughout Europe for factory farming, and, amazingly, amid unrelenting change, these fields have hardly changed at all since I ran and played and worked in them as a boy.

A maze of lanes link the houses that are scattered sparsely about these fields, and the lanes wander into one another like streams until they reach some main road. These narrow lanes are still in use. In places, the hedges that grow on the high banks along the lanes are so wild that the trees join and tangle above them to form a roof, and in the full leaf of summer it is like walking through a green tunnel pierced by vivid pinpoints of light.

I came back to live among these lanes thirty years ago. My wife and I were beginning our life together, and we thought we could make a bare living on these small fields and I would write. It was a time when we could have settled almost anywhere, and if she had not liked the place and the people we would have moved elsewhere. I, too, liked the place, but I was from these fields and my preference was less important.

A different view of these lanes and fields is stated by my father: "My eldest son has bought a snipe run in behind the Ivy Leaf Ballroom," he wrote. In some ways, his description is accurate. The farm is small, a low hill between two lakes, and the soil is poor. My father would have seen it as a step down from the world of civil servants, teachers, doctors, nurses, policemen, tillage inspectors to which he belonged. Also, it was too close to where my mother's relatives lived and where I had grown up with my mother. The very name of the Ivy Leaf Ballroom would have earned his disapproval.

A local man, Patsy Conboy, built it with money he made in America. He first called it Fenaghville-it was the forerunner of the Cloudlands and the Roselands-and later it became, more appropriately, the Ivy Leaf. All through the 1950s and into the 1960s he hired famous dance bands. In spite of being denounced from several pulpits, the ballroom prospered and Patsy Conboy became a local hero, dispensing much employment. People came by bus, by lorry, hackney car, horse trap, on bicycle and on foot to dance the night away. Couples met amid the spangled lights on the dusty dance floor and invited one another out to view the moon and take the beneficial air: "There wasn't a haycock safe for a mile around in the month of July." All the money Patsy Conboy made on the dancehall was lost in two less rooted ventures: a motorcycle track that turned into a quagmire as soon as it was used and an outdoor, unheated swimming pool amid the hundreds of small lakes and the uncertain weather. They were not rooted in the permanent need that made the ballroom such a success.

Patsy was more than able to hold his ground against the pulpits. When he was losing money digging the unheated swimming pool out of daub and channel, men turned up for work with letters from their priests stating that they had large families to support and should be employed. Patsy was unmoved: "My advice to you, Buster, is to dump the priest and put a cap on that oil well of yours. They have been capping such oil wells for years in America. Families are smaller and everybody is better off."

He was living close by when we bought the snipe run. The Ivy Leaf was then a ruin, its curved iron roof rusted, its walls unpainted, and Patsy had gone blind. Nothing about Patsy or his ballroom or the snipe zigzagging above the rushes would have commended themselves to my father. We settled there and were happy. My relationship with these lanes and fields extended back to the very beginning of my life.
When I was three years old I used to walk a lane like these lanes to Lisacarn School with my mother. We lived with her and our grandmother, our father's mother, in a small bungalow a mile outside the town of Ballinamore. Our father lived in the barracks twenty miles away in Cootehall, where he was sergeant. We spent the long school holidays with him in the barracks, and he came and went to the bungalow in his blue Baby Ford on annual holidays and the two days he had off in every month. Behind the bungalow was a steep rushy hill, and beside it a blacksmith's forge. The bungalow which we rented must have been built for the blacksmith and was a little way up from the main road that ran to Swanlinbar and Enniskillen and the North. The short pass from the road was covered with clinkers from the forge. They crunched like grated teeth beneath the traffic of hoofs and wheels that came and went throughout the day. Hidden in trees and bushes on the other side of the main road was the lane that led to Lisacarn where my mother taught with Master Foran. Lisacarn had only a single room and the teachers faced one another when they taught their classes, the long benches arranged so that their pupils sat back to back, a clear space between the two sets of benches on the boarded floor. On the windowsill glowed the blue Mercator globe, and wild flowers were scattered in jamjars on the sills and all about the room. Unusual for the time, Master Foran, whose wife was also a teacher, owned a car, a big Model-T Ford, and in wet weather my mother and I waited under trees on the corner of the lane to be carried to the school. In good weather we always walked. There was a drinking pool for horses along the way, gates to houses, and the banks were covered with all kinds of wild flowers and vetches and wild strawberries. My mother named these flowers for me as we walked, and sometimes we stopped and picked them for the jamjars. I must have been extraordinarily happy walking that lane to school. There are many such lanes all around where I live, and in certain rare moments over the years while walking in these lanes I have come into an extraordinary sense of security, a deep peace, in which I feel that I can live forever. I suspect it is no more than the actual lane and the lost lane becoming one for a moment in an intensity of feeling, but without the usual attendants of pain and loss. These moments disappear as suddenly and as inexplicably as they come, and long before they can be recognized and placed.

I don't think I learned anything at school in Lisacarn, though I had a copybook I was proud of. I was too young and spoiled, and spoiled further by the older girls who competed in mothering me during the school breaks. I remember the shame and rage when they carried me, kicking and crying, into the empty schoolroom to my mother. Everybody was laughing: I had sat on a nest of pismires on the bank until most of the nest was crawling inside my short trousers.

I am sure my mother took me with her because she loved me and because I had become a nuisance in the house. I had three sisters already, the twins Breedge and Rosaleen and the infant Margaret, not much more than three years spanning all four of us. Our

grandmother had been a dressmaker and stood arrow-straight in her black dresses. My handsome father, who stood arrow-straight as well until he was old, was her only child. She had been a local beauty and was vain and boastful. She was forever running down the poor land of Leitrim and its poor-looking inhabitants, which must have done nothing for her popularity. It was true that my father's relatives were tall and many were handsome: "When we went to your mother's wedding and saw all those whoosins from Cavan-Smiths and Leddys and Bradys and McGaherns-we felt like scrunties off the mountain," my Aunt Maggie told me once laughingly. The McGaherns set great store on looks and maleness and position. There was a threat of violence in them all, and some were not a little mad and none had tact. There was a wonderful-looking first cousin of my father's, Tom Leddy, a guard like my father, who had also married a teacher. He was stationed at Glenfarne on the shores of Lough Melvin. Years later, out of the blue, he called soon after my father had remarried to find my stepmother alone in the house, a clever, plain-looking woman who adored my father and was both his slave and master. Having introduced himself forthrightly, he demanded, "Who are you? Are you the new housekeeper?" "I'm Frank's wife," she responded. "Frank's wife," he looked at her in amazement and broke ...

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