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## *A Lesson in Living*

Alison Light

Was any novelist – or journalist come to that – writing about breast cancer in the early 1960s? Did anyone – apart from the medical profession and a few bold souls – even talk about it? When I was growing up, the word ‘breast’ was usually only encountered in literature or hymns and was likely to summon a snigger; women and girls had ‘chests’. A mastectomy was considered almost a matter of shame. Astonishing, then, that John McGahern’s first novel, *The Barracks*, published in 1963, has Elizabeth Reegan’s breast cancer at its centre.

My own brush with the disease is comparatively recent so for me the subject is rather close to the bone. When I came across a second-hand copy of the novel on holiday in Ireland I might have put it back on the shelf, but the blurb only mentions an ‘illness’ and the title suggests a wider canvas. The cover of the 1980s Faber paperback shows two men in garda uniform lounging outside a police barracks, a regulation bicycle just in sight. Was this choice of image intended to attract a male readership? Not entirely, I think.

Elizabeth is married to a police sergeant and is bringing up his children in their quarters in the barracks. The pattern of their days, shared with the other gardai and their wives in a close-knit Irish village, is a counterpoint to her inner life. Her illness often puts her at one remove from people she knows intimately, their stories and their everyday dramas. Like the writer himself, she is a sympathetic but also a critical observer. And so *The Barracks* is a novel about how to live and what matters in a life; the way we all feel part of things and yet, so often, are alone and disconnected. Elizabeth’s illness is a kind of crucible for McGahern, intensifying and clarifying what matters to him.

Breast cancer used to be thought of – and often was – a sentence of death. A sense of awful inevitability hangs over the novel, and the stages of Elizabeth’s disease – diagnosis, hospital treatment, recuperation – form the time-frame of the book. But the forward march of chronology is halted in its tracks by moments of reprieve or remission, when Elizabeth sees the beauty of the world and feels at peace. One of the achievements of the book is its pace: a slowing down and savouring of experience.

The Reegans and their neighbours live a bare existence, cultivating allotments because they cannot even afford vegetables for their families, and struggling to find the money for doctors’ bills (there is no NHS). McGahern speaks from inside these lives without condescension or self-consciousness. His often rather formal prose elevates the ordinary almost to a sacred plane – the

right type of rain to fish by, the soaking of bacon in warm water when it is too salty, a circle of white frost under the shade of a sycamore tree. The novel celebrates the small rituals which, like those of religion, can offer 'calm and grace and reassurance'. Elizabeth derives sustenance from the daily drawing down of the blinds, putting tea on the table, or warming her husband's clothes in front of the fire before he comes in from his rounds. These are the creative acts of everyday life which are quietly precious.

McGahern spent much of his own young life in a police barracks where his father was indeed a sergeant, and an authoritarian. Though his novel is affectionately humorous and steeped in the language of the rural community, there is never any sentimental 'Oirishry' or what the novelist Anne Enright recently called 'Paddywhackery' about it. McGahern knows that routines also cramp and stifle us; that the same funny story, endlessly retold by a neighbour, soon becomes banal. Elizabeth's husband John is eaten up with anger and resentment. One of the generation of idealistic young men who fought for the Irish Free State and hoped it would give them better lives, he finds himself lorded over by a censorious and despotic Superintendent whose petty diktats echo the conservative Irish society of the time. John and his fellows have little to do. They write fictional patrol reports and spend most of their time grubbing an existence from the land. Reegan's desperate need for money to free himself from the police makes him exploit his children, bullying them in turn and warping their lives.

McGahern is always breathtakingly truthful about other human beings. Having lost one wife, John's first private reaction to Elizabeth's illness is utterly believable: 'How could two wives die on the same man? It was incredible.' Yet this selfish, surly man is capable of tenderness. One of the most touching scenes is that of middle-aged lovemaking between the couple – another taboo broken, perhaps – where familiarity, comfort and warmth are every bit as important and uniting as passion. 'It didn't have to mean anything more than that, it'd be sufficient for this night.'

*The Barracks* is not 'sick lit.' There are few physical details. We follow Elizabeth through her disbelief and terror, and her rage and despair, but we also see her enjoyment of hospital where responsibility slips from her and she has the rare treat of being looked after. Coping with the reactions of other people exhausts her. In one darkly comic scene her well-meaning but nosy women neighbours want all the details of her disease and stay all hours, 'holding back the dogs of their egos till they could unleash them to the sweet indulgence of their own unique complaint'. (Anyone who has been laid up will recognize this.) Yet we never lose sight of the loneliness and weariness of their lives. Elizabeth herself is petty and tyrannical and far from noble. Sometimes she finds the idea that life will go on after her death horrifying; in a different mood, it provides solace. She realizes she would have asked the same questions as she got older in any case: 'What matters in a life? Does life have a purpose?' At best she is simply happy to acknowledge that 'she was just passing through'.

I love the seriousness of this novel and its meditative quality. *The Barracks* is ultimately concerned with humility, with the getting of wisdom. For Elizabeth the basis of a spiritual life means embracing the world rather than rejecting it or looking to the next (unlike the patronizing priest who urges her to join the local 'Legion of Mary' and is furious when she resists his probing of her faith). McGahern is sceptical, though, about Ireland's future if it becomes a purely individualist, secular society where 'getting on in the world' is all that matters. The local doctor remarks to Elizabeth that Irish society post-war is now freer and less class-ridden. 'The pig-in-the-kitchen days are gone,' he tells her, boasting that he can now enter a swanky hotel in Dublin without apology or trepidation. Elizabeth is impressed by his conviction but asks herself, 'What difference could being able to walk proudly into the Shelbourne Hotel possibly make in any real person's life?'

McGahern became better known in Britain when he was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1990 for *Amongst Women*, another nuanced account of female lives under the sway of male authority. Was *The Barracks* a book before its time? When it was reprinted as a Faber First in 2009, the cover carried a photograph of a woman peeling potatoes into a colander. Would author and editor give the novel a different title now, more in keeping with the central character? But what else could it be called? The barracks is a place of regulation and confinement, of generosity and of kindness – like the village and the home – places where differences between people can be weapons or a source of delight. We all struggle against the deformation of our lives by power or money or ego, trying to live with others and yet be ourselves.

I've come to John McGahern's novels crabwise, scuttling sideways. Ten years ago I read his gentle, Proustian *Memoir*, which treats of his childhood and his mother's death, also from breast cancer. I can see now that *The Barracks* was an extraordinary leap of imagination for a young man, putting us in the woman's position. But it is more than that. Like Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych facing his death, Elizabeth's narrow, local life takes on the force of a universal truth. Like her, we don't know when we will die, only that we will. *The Barracks* made me weep but it also filled me with wonder. I found the novel consoling and enriching, for it is founded on a sense of mystery, a word the author returns to, alive to those moments of grace and joy in the everyday world, and to the 'ecstatic' power of remembrance which protects us against violence and stupidity, and the capacity we all have for destructiveness. Separate and sometimes sealed off in our individual consciousnesses, still the need for union and connection returns and gives us the peace which for Elizabeth resolves into 'the one desire to love and to cause no living thing pain'. These themes reach their consummate expression in McGahern's final great work, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, written nearly forty years later. But *The Barracks* is just as full of humanity and compassion.

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Alison Light's latest book, *Common People*, used her family history to follow the lives of the itinerant working poor. Like many English people, she has Irish ancestors but doesn't think she will get very far with only 'Murphy from Ireland' to go on.