

JOHN MORIARTY THE WRITER

The journey that we will go on tonight is a necessarily personal one. As his publisher at the Lilliput Press, we published eight of John's books over thirteen years, beginning with *Dreamtime* in 1994 and concluding with *Serious Sounds* and *What the Curlew Said* in 2007, whose proofs he passed during the last month of his life, creating a body of work that in time to come will establish John Moriarty as one of Ireland's greatest philosopher poets and thinkers, and undoubtedly the most original writer of his generation. The work, like anything worthwhile, requires attention and elucidation and interpretative commentary; it evolves its own special language and has its own rhythm and purpose; it uses leitmotif and variation, and is written as much for the ear as the eye. It is oracular and auditory and is built upon deep foundations of learning and inherited wisdom. It engages with life as John perceived it and gives to that life a vision of the future. It is in short a literary canon that is self-renewing and sustaining and will outlive the occasion of its origins and transcend its origins in the same way that Joyce and Yeats transcended theirs. These somewhat random notes will I hope offer a glimpse of that experience.

First of all, I would like to read to you an obituary I wrote for the *Connemara Journal* in August of last year, to give you a measure of the man as I perceived him, for the man and the writing are of a piece.

In memoriam John Moriarty

The life of the writer, philosopher-poet John Moriarty, is simply rehearsed. He was one of six children born to Mary O'Brien and James Moriarty in Moyvane, north Kerry on 2 February 1938. With his siblings Madeline, Baby, Phyllis, Brenda and Chris, he was reared on a small farm and sent to school at St Michael's in Listowel. In the late 1950s he went on to University College Dublin, where he took a double first in philosophy. After a brief spell at Leeds University he migrated to Canada to teach English Literature at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg for six years, returning to Connemara in 1971 to 'discover his bush soul' and to begin the process of uncovering and recovering his traditional Catholic faith,

fusing the sacred and the profane by working the land as a jobbing gardener, and building his own house at Toombeola, County Galway. These regenerative years laid the foundation for nine extraordinary books, beginning with *Dreamtime* in 1994 (revised 1999), and concluding with a posthumous volume, *What the Curlew Said, Nostos Continued*, forthcoming this autumn. In between came the trilogy *Turtle Was Gone a Long Time: Crossing the Kedron* (1996), *Horsehead Nebula Neighing* (1997) and *Anaconda Canoe* (1998), *Nostos, An Autobiography* (2001), *Invoking Ireland* (2005), *Night Journey to Buddh Gaia* (2006) and *Serious Sounds* (2007), each published by The Lilliput Press in Dublin. All constitute a profound engagement with the canonical texts of world culture — its wisdom literature, vision tales and mythography — in an outpouring of reflection and commentary that will nourish the mind of present and future generations.

In June 2006 John received an honorary degree (D.Litt.) from the National University of Ireland, Galway, and on 1 June 2007 he died from triple cancer at his home The Çoolies, Muckcross, on the side of Mangerton mountain. Fourteen priests attended his funeral mass in Pugin's Killarney Cathedral, and he was buried at Aghadoe Cemetery overlooking Lough Lene, the lake of learning, in one of Ireland's most beautiful valleys. He had taken his departure publicly the previous month on national radio, on Joe Duffy's RTE 'Liveline', in his candour bringing comfort to fellow cancer victims, signing off with the lines of his beloved Dylan Thomas, written aged nineteen: ' And death shall have no dominion. / Dead man naked they shall be one / With the man in the wind and the west moon; / When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone, / They shall have stars at elbow and foot'.

The presence of John Moriarty, 6 foot 2 inches in his stockings, hazel eyed, big haired and handsome out, stayed with anyone who met him or heard him talk. In his voice he carried the sonorous rhythmic lilt and speech-forms of his Kerry Irish origins, in his laughter the breath of generosity. In his sensibilities John was alpha-male. Women crowded to hear him speak and attended to him to the last, no least his long-term companion Eileen Moore, who was both Magdalene and Mary to him. Morrie Mostow, Anne Garvey and Marie Hughes counted among his particular helpmeets. A friend once saw him collide with a lamppost in Dublin's Dawson Street as

he emerged from a bookshop and turned to admire a female posterior. All his life John was in collision with lampposts, crossing boundaries, exploding language, enacting a personal calvary, illuminating darkened ways through the spoken and written word — questing, immoderate, fecund, ornery: a man now released from his confinement.

Through his writings and observations he captured Kavanagh's 'passionate transitory', using a linguistic outreach and a rare store of knowledge to encompass the local and the universal. Keen as a laser beam, delicate as a fern leaf, alive to the curvature of water over rock, John had both the eye and ear of his revered Darwin, and that naturalist's gift of description, combining with John Donne's subtlety of spirit. He was singular and solitary in his thinking. Peter Clare, a Carmelite beside whom John sat in silence during a year's retreat at Oxford in the 1990s, said he had never been so certain that he was in the presence of genius. Moriarty belonged to no community of writers, yet he hungered for the community of print. Among particular admirers during John's lifetime were Paul Durcan (who writes of his 'intellect being as visceral as the heart'), Aidan Carl Mathews, John F. Deane, Declan Kiberd, Michael D. Higgins, Tim Robinson, Moya Cannon, Brendan Flynn, Andy O'Mahony, Fintan O'Toole, Sheila Sullivan, Alan Titley, Michael Harding, Robert 'Iron John' Bly, Thomas 'Care of the Soul' Moore, David Lorrimer in Scotland, Robert Lumsden in Australia — and an ever-widening international constituency of readers. Other writers such as John O'Donoghue borrowed freely from his teeming pen (John Moriarty always wrote in longhand).

Moriarty's work is freighted with the wealth of his reading and cultural encounters: from Nordic sagas, Native American foundation stories and Irish prehistory, through classical Greece, Rome, Egypt and Mesopotamia to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Mabignonian and Malory; from the north European and Rhineland mystics to Boehme, Blake, Coleridge, Melville, Nietzsche, Yeats, Lawrence, Heidegger and Hughes. With these touchstones he built cairns of memory and memorials to the future.

He was both pantheist and animist, shaman and brahmin, determinedly Christian, instinctually pagan: he was respecter of traditions and the *via sacra* : he was sage in the holy fire and prince

of apple towns : he was deeply attuned to the terrors and splendours of the modern world.

John Moriarty delighted in the company of children, loved poetry, music (Séan O Riada was played at his funeral) and song ('Peggy Gordon' was sung over his open grave). He relished life and was unfearing of death. To be his publisher — Baskerville to his Milton — was my entire privilege. To be his friend was to partake in love's mystery.

As you might tell from this, the relationship between author and publisher is perforce an intimate one, with give and take and flux, and is in many ways like a marriage, a union determined by contractual agreement and enforced proximity, working towards a gestation that results in the book, a finely wrought intellectual artefact that makes its own way in the world. While the author is both mother and father, the publisher is both mentor and midwife, guiding his charge from the moment of conception to the delivery room. And John was an anxious parent, fussing over every detail of the birth, but after birth moving on and concentrating on the next embryo, the next work in progress, the next flight of the mind.

The works themselves carry introductions and glossaries to elucidate the specialist language I mentioned, loanwords and coinages conflating Latin and Greek with his native Irish and English, or simply technical terms drawn from philosophy or science or names from the mythographies and cosmologies that populated his imagination and formed the narrative underpinning of his writing — Egyptian, Vedic, Buddhist, Christian, Native American, Irish — civilizations whose foundation myths and stories he was deeply familiar with and could recount from memory .

In a way we were always running to catch up with John's outpourings and endeavouring to provide a sort of intellectual safety-net for the common reader. We adopted the sort of question-and-answer method, the Socratic dialogue, to frame some of the longer more difficult works in anticipation of the difficulties that reader might encounter. They formed a type of scaffolding and while some readers feel them to be unnecessary, others find them helpful as ways in to the texts. Joyce adopted this sort of method with his own Skeleton Keys, and biblical or talmudic texts are often framed by commentaries or interpretive aids.

As John's editor-publisher my task was to present the work as clearly as possible while respecting my author's wishes. This was always a balancing act and John was a vehement and able defender of his own willed obscurities, both hammer and anvil in his own smithy; he wanted I think the reader to wrestle with words and images as he had done and never condescended or talked down; indeed he expected much of his audience while sometimes overlooking the fact that few of them had the intellectual reach or life experience that he was bringing to his texts. *Nostos* for example might have been less taxing at almost half the length, but also less enriching in its cumulative force.

I think he valued the fact that my own background and tradition was a humanist or secularist one, the product of a catholic father and protestant mother, raised in the latter's faith but adopting neither, sent to a non-confessional school in England, albeit one where a catholic could not be head boy, much as many of my generation from the 50s and 60s were. This enabled me to play the outsider, to ask the naive question on behalf of the reader, to request explication where I felt it was required, to interrogate some of his obscure statements and observations where interrogation allowed. This was always conducted with humour and I hope grace. He made much of the fact that I was a boxer in my youth and had never lost a fight. But I often gave way to his enchanted stubbornness and failed to engage enough on occasion. He had a Kerry charm and loquacity that was utterly persuasive in person but sometimes didn't transfer or work on the page, and where I could I kept things in balance, culling and snipping and tucking here and there, containing the cataract of words and concepts within the boundaries of the printed page.

The book is nothing is not a product of the Enlightenment, a vehicle for a rational world outlook, a vessel of containment as well as release, and I respected these 18th-century traditions and the spirit of enquiry or scepticism in its original sense. It's curious and interesting that one of John's greatest champions was the writer and Lilliput author through whom I originally met him, his neighbour the Connemara-based mapmaker and writer Tim Robinson, who was himself a militant atheist but who would debate long into the night with John as their

minds and spirits locked in joyful combat. It was Tim indeed who persuaded John to write his autobiography to tell his unique lifestory in his inimitable way.

I saw John as an Enlightenment figure rather than as an obscurantist as some have branded him. A key to his writing is that it can be read aloud, and like all great texts it imposes its own meaning through the rhythm of the delivery. This is manifest in the recordings of his talks and lectures that have been made available since his death. His voice was singular and encapsulating: meditative, engaged, responsive, resonant, incantatory, singular, above all musical and deeply attractive. *One Evening in Eden*, the signature of all things.

And I feel that John always addressed the individual, both in his talks and writings. He had a profound sense of Other, other than himself; he would see the person in the crowd and engage with them one to one. He had what Keat's famously called 'negative capability', and combined this humility with an extraordinary self-assuredness. He quested, he absorbed, he listened, he gave of himself both in his person and in his work. He paid full attention. He never hurried.

Another vital component in his delivery was the humour and tenderness, which all who knew him will attest: the laugh, the Rabelaisian chuckle, the twinkle, the gaze, the brimming eye, the very physicality of his words and references. He gave of himself so that others could see worlds beyond themselves.

In the Proustian tapestry that his books comprise, John weaves himself in and out of every aspect of his work, a sensualist unlocking voluntary and involuntary memory – the *aural* was his madelaine: the cry of the curlew, the sound of the animal kingdom, for he was one of the greatest naturalists and observers, an aspect that permeates all his writings, a tribute to his master Darwin, whether describing the frozen winter landscape of Canada or the changing seasons and fauna of Connemara [cite first page of CURLEW, or pp. 537-8 from NOSTOS].

John's mind was one of the most widely informed I have ever encountered as a publisher. He had an intellectual hunger that knew no boundaries. His reading from Darwin to Marx to Malinowski, from the *Mabignogian* to Malory,

Nietzsche or Heidegger, encompassed all the texts, sacred and secular, and his cultural reach was wide and deep and *extra ordinary*. His knowledge of Irish language and myth was profound and intuitive, his apprehension of North American Indian, Greek, Egyptian Confucian, Hindu, Australian Aboriginal and Mesopotamian literatures encompassing. He was truly *knowledge-able*.

He had an abiding love of poetry, from the troubadours and Chaucer to Donne, Shakespeare, Milton, Traherne, the Romantics, Yeats (he could recite from him at will), DH Lawrence, Eliot, his friend Ted Hughes. He was his own lord of language and himself a wonderful and spiritual poet – much of the work he wanted to be remembered by is in volume one of *Turtle Was Gone a Long Time, Crossing the Kedron*, which went out of print some time ago and which he was persuading me to gather before he died. Paul Durcan, who launched *Nostos* for us at the Irish Writer's Centre in 2001, recited from memory verses that John had written in the UCD student's magazine during their time there in the 1950s. They were numinous and powerful and worthy of the Eliot of *Four Quartets*. Here is what Paul had to say when reviewing a subsequent book, *Invoking Ireland*, in the *Irish Times* [cite review].

As a reader John had two blindspots. One was fiction which although he drew heavily on Melville and knew his Austen, Dickens and Joyce, he on the whole dismissed as a higher form of gossip or social reflection. The other was the Koran which after 9/11 I used to tease him about in terms of a necessary understanding a significant portion on humanity. The Moslem world constitutes 19 percent of the world's population, the Catholic world 17.5 percent. But he said he struggled with the *Koran* and gave up, dismissing the Moslem view of women and the harsh desert mores that are inculcated in the codes of that religion, and this despite their contributions to science and literature and civilization at large. I felt that as a professed Christian he should engage with the other people of the book more than he did.

John's own attitude to women indeed was refreshing and interesting if perhaps fearful, and was an inherited part of a pre-modern or pre-electric background. He loved them fiercely, needed them in his daily being yet saw them as a race apart in a traditional and tribal way, as mother figures and providers of emotional and

domestic comforts as much if not more than as intellectual equals perhaps. A touch perhaps of ‘no broads on the Altar’ as the Chicago bishop decreed when preparing for the Pope’s visit to Ireland during the late 70s. This was also manifest in his ideas for his monastic hedge-school Sli na Firinne, which he would often debate with my son’s fiancée Liz Fletcher, his eyes ablaze with passion and gender assertion. His medievalism was manifest on occasion.

Another way into John’s writings is through his sense of story and ceremony, whether relating the death of his parents and upbringing in Kerry or personal encounters in the Peleponnese or by describing his visit to Chartres Cathedral or the Anthropological Museum in Mexico. Colin McPherson the playwright writes of the importance of ritual and drama in a recent piece about the Christian Mass, a universal trope wherein God shares man’s mortal feat and pain and dies on a cross that man’s sins might be forgiven, a story rooted in John’s psyche and one to which he returned as he faced his own death. Yet John’s work taps into something even deeper and in many ways his sensibility was informed by older *pre-Christian* beliefs, animist and shamanic, aware as he was that Christianity has adopted and absorbed older cultures as layered as the turf-spits he described on the Mangerton Mountain. Here is McPherson on his art as playwright, which finds an echo in Moriarty and in his readers:

“While working abroad, I’m always struck by the fact that Ireland is acknowledged as one of the greatest playwriting nations in the world. We take it for granted here but few other countries can match us for our influence in the form. I believe this is because we are still, at root, a superstitious people. We were intensely spiritual and pagan for thousands of years before we were Christian. In my eyes, somewhere such as Newgrange has more mystery and primal power than any chapel I’ve ever known. This is our pagan heritage and our theatre may be our pagan church, one where we can laugh and cry, and even search for God, in original diverse ways.”

In summary then I return to a theme announced at the outset, that the writing and the life partook of each other, from Manitoba where he taught in the late 60s and engaged with BlackFoot American Indian culture, through The Grand Canyon by way of Haight Ashbury in San Francisco – John was a flower child before his

time and embodied the virtues of that age of innocence – to Mexico, through the retreats and museums of England (with the Oxford Carmelites and the British Library in London's Bloomsbury) and the Welsh mountains, by way of the great cathedrals of France and Germany, and to the Mediterranean littoral, Italy and Greece, back to Ireland, to the midland citadel of Uisneach and the Donegal and Kerry fastnesses to his cottage in Connemara, where he began composing his great works over fifteen years, travelling, encountering, forever talking and opening his mind: this has been profoundly a physical as well as a mental journey; where his feet failed to lead him, his imagination, mediated by reading, did, as we in turn encounter him in perpetuity.

I'd like to conclude with another testimony from a brilliant young scientist Gary McDerby, who works in IT and was responsible for putting together the set of CDs called *One Evening in Eden* that capture John's lectures and spirit and his inimitable voice. Gary wrote it after a visit to John during May 2006, a year before he died.

An Evening with John Moriarty

I visited John on Friday 26th May 2006. His beautiful little house nestled near the base of the north western embrace of Mangerton Mountain in Kerry is a veritable welcoming masterpiece. Birdsong greets you as you make the final few steps over the soft bouncy grass, past the majestic standing stones to the front door. The scenery, no matter the weather, be it brilliant sunshine or shadowy mists, is a joy to behold. And then of course there is John's magnificent beaming smile to greet you in the hall.

The side-effects of the chemotherapy are taking its toll. He has lost a lot of weight, his face is gaunt and he feels very tired for long periods of the day but his eyes and mind are bright and brilliant as always.

About two minutes after the initial customary greetings and handshakes we are sitting in his front room surrounding by books covering numerous philosophies and thinking, ancient cultures and great religions of the world. When you get John on a roll superficialities are quickly left behind. I immediately had to 'suspend my disbelief' and strapped myself into the mystical roller coaster.

Orion left the heavens one night and in the early hours of the morning knocked on John's door. There was little communication between the two beings except that Orion handed back to John, in a very neat and organised package, all of humankind's understanding of the cosmos and shook his head.

'We do not recognise ourselves in your understanding of creation' he said and then he promptly left to return back to his place in the heavens.

There are those in the scientific community that believe that all of human knowledge can be contained in less than a terabyte or 1000 gigabytes. It is now possible to buy a personal computer with storage space of one terabyte as standard.

Have we lost our way? This question has driven John to seek truth in unorthodox ways, has meant that he has had to leave the mainstream mechanisms for the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom and has even meant that he face the boundaries of his own sanity.

'Some deep unspoken yearning that would not go away' he commented.

And so we are blessed with the gifts of *Dreamtime* and the *Turtle Journeys* and the magnificent *Nostos*, a spiritual journey by a modern day prophet to uncover what we have left behind or lost or forgotten in our pursuit to unlock the secrets of the universe we live in. And though we may not grasp his beautifully eloquent writings immediately it is clear that we have lost so much. What is also clear is that to discover what we have lost a new more powerful language is required. A language steeped in mythology and metaphor to express those deeper intangibles and immeasurables that Orion and his troupe would surely be happier with. John has striven to give us this.

Light years from Earth there is another planet of similar size and age. At the same time that our primal ancestors chose to use tools to shape the universe around us (the path of Prometheus) the beings on this planet chose the path of the dolphin (to allow the universe shape them). Their evolution is starkly different from human evolution. They are not bounded by space or time – their senses are very much one with the universe rather than apart from it and when they look out from their planet into the heavens they can tell which planets are enlightened and which are not. When they look at Earth they see a planet that has enlightened people but sits on a precipice.

For the human inhabitants of Earth are the people of the final Eureka. That is, a stark choice faces humanity.

One enlightened being, Meister Eckhart, a 13th century Dominican Mystic, points out that God cannot be known, is beyond the mind and so faith amounts to a letting go and embracing this unknowingness. And in that letting go, God will be there to shelter the souls nothingness with uncreated essence, safeguarding its creaturely existence. So one choice is the mystical choice, and that is to choose the path of unknowingness and face the final Eureka, that in letting go we become one with God and creation.

I was struggling. I am a scientist and letting go is not easy.

The scientific path is to reject the mystical God and to become God instead. The relentless pursuit of peeling back the onion of creation amounts to a desire to be immortal, to be all knowing, to be in control of creation – to become and reign as God. On this path there is no surrender, there is no letting go, there is nothing but a flatland universe there for the taking. And is it this choice that the majority of the ‘developed’ world seems to have made already? The final Eureka here is that in not letting go, we reject God only to find that God does exist and we are left to stare upon the desecrated path we have taken to discover that truth.

Indeed we may even destroy ourselves completely in the process.

So how did we arrive at this precipice – a place where the ultimate choice is between a path of absolute humility and a path of what could be perceived as absolute arrogance?

John is five years old and it is Christmas time. He goes outside into the farmyard of his home and he realises that he has crossed the boundary of Christmas. It is not celebrated in the farmyard. The robin he meets that night has no knowledge of the birth of Christ. Suddenly a divide has been created – us and them. Suddenly his oneness with existence is over.

And since then, for as long as he has been alive on this planet, John has struggled with this perspective of us and them. Humanity has set itself apart from creation. It considers itself something different and not integrated into the fabric of existence. This causes tension, and disassociation and war. Once there exists an us and them perspective one can kill the other. Once

there exists this fundamental divide, abuse of our scientific knowledge is possible, raping of the planet and environment can be justified and an unfounded superiority complex can sustain itself. There is a great need to re-invoke this oneness with creation. Balance needs to be restored for there can be no ecumenism whilst the us and them perspective prevails. John's view on ecumenism includes stones and grass and robins.

And so some questions that were on my mind had to be asked.

'What if we as scientists were to throw our energies into making the world a fairer place? Could technology not be a powerful enabler for a more sustainable world?' I asked.

'Absolutely' said John.

'These are necessary approaches but not sufficient. Meister Eckhart would say we should not think that holiness is based on what we do but rather on what we are, for it is not our works that sanctify us but we who sanctify our works'

'So what would you advise a scientist to do then?' I muttered knowing the answer in advance.

'Go to the temple and contemplate' he answered.

I did not have to ask any more questions to know what he meant. Whether he was suggesting a temple in Tibet or the temple of self the outcome was the same. Reflect on what you are doing, the path you have taken and where it is leading you. In essence he was telling science to begin a process of discernment. It is time to reflect on not what we can do but why we are doing what we do.

And then a moment of sadness. His energy levels dropped.

'You know, people tell me that my books are inaccessible – that they have tried to read them but struggle and just give up' he said.

I was sure he was asking me a question.

‘I am completely isolated in my thinking. Sometimes I come across an idea sitting here in this lonely but beautiful place and I perform a little jig here in the room to an audience of one only to sit down thinking that I will be the only person to ever do a jig to that thought’ he mused.

I needed an answer quickly because I was amongst the strugglers. I told him the truth.

‘Your books are difficult – that cannot be denied. However, I happen to know certain young people who are reading them but reading them in a new and different way because that is what your storytelling demands. You are giving us a new language and new tools to express the wonder of what we know exists but which we cannot measure’

His brilliant beaming smile justified my blundering effort at answering his implicit question and need for reassurance. We all need that. His energy suddenly returned and he asked:

‘Do you think so?’

I nodded. I did think so.

Divine ground is a magical space that is woven into the very fabric of existence. No scientific theory will ever ‘measure’ divine ground but it is as obvious a reality as the immeasurable beauty implicit in the lingering, haunting mists on Mangerton mountain. All great mythologies reference this place in one form or another. Our paths in this world, in whatever incarnation or form we take, can be a dance of delight within divine ground and ultimately we are welcomed back to this sacred place.

As I was leaving, he was combing his hair in preparation for a ‘station’ visit to one of his neighbour’s houses. I first thought that this meant he was going to do the stations of the cross (at one point he boldly stated that he was going to meet Christ later and I presumed there was a penitential element to the meeting) but I have since discovered that there is a tradition in the area where people have mass in their houses and invite neighbours to come along and participate. And so he was readying himself for communion.

The chemotherapy is causing his wonderful shock of wild hair to fall out.

He gathered a big ball of hair from the comb and threw it out the front door onto a bush. And then he looked at me and laughed.

‘Are you wondering what I am doing’ he asked.

I nodded.

‘Well, the old chemo is causing my hair to fall out and last week I discovered that a Wren is gathering up my discarded hair and making a nest out of it in my garden. I have begun the journey back to divine ground’ he said chuckling playfully.

His eyes are alive and bright as he says this. It brings tears to my eyes. Here is a great man, a gentle man, a humble man who is challenging us all. The courage, the huge colossal mound of loose sheets of paper, the ink pen and the desire to write down his thoughts are all it takes. And even though he is not well and his journey has clearly taken its toll, those marvellous eyes and that brilliant mind are still taking time to remind us of the divinity in our world reflected through a tiny delicate creature like the Wren. A creature who is gently preparing the path to divine ground for a most wonderful human being in an anonymous gesture that most people would consider utterly insignificant. However, John and his journey have illuminated most delicately, this forgotten and most precious piece of wisdom that generations long dead, cultures long lost would have recognised and taken for granted in an instant.

Even the standing stones in his garden will know his legacy.

He is opening his arms to embrace his deepest belief. He is flying free with the magnificent leap of faith into the unknown. He truly is a man who is not afraid to choose.