

John Moriarty

A philosopher-poet, he sought the rebirth of Christianity

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Just two weeks before he died from cancer, aged 69, the Irish philosopher-poet John Moriarty sent the checked proofs of the second part of his mighty autobiography, *Nostos*, to his publisher. During the last two years of his life, he managed to finish and have published three other books: *Invoking Ireland*, challenging contemporary Irish attitudes to their land, history, religion and culture; *Night Journey to Buddha Gaia*, a monumental work which builds a vision that confronts our western Enlightenment assumptions and conceptions; and *Serious Sounds*, a personal reflection on the seven Christian sacraments.

John sought a rebirth of a Christianity that was inclusive of all religions and mythologies, and that took account of the deep and often dark dimensions of our turbulent humanity.

Born in County Kerry to a farmer, John showed early promise at school in Listowel before going to University College, Dublin, where he gained a double-first in philosophy and English literature. He was widely regarded as having one of the finest minds of his generation. He confounded his peers and teachers by failing to appear at his graduation, drifting off across Europe and ending up in London. There, he was invited by James Cameron, head of the philosophy department at Leeds University, to read for a postgraduate degree, and because of his financial situation, he was offered the post of tutor to first-year students.

After a couple of years, John went to the University of Manitoba, Canada, where he taught English literature for a further eight years. But he was uncomfortable as an academic and decided to return to his beloved Ireland and search for his biological, cultural and spiritual roots, seeking to develop a relationship with the earth and his fellow creatures. When his money ran out, he helped out in hotels and then turned to gardening.

In 1977, he returned to England and became live-in gardener in the Carmelite monastery at Boars Hill, Oxford, where he found solace in confession. His table talk and ebullience entranced the novices. On returning to Ireland, he worked as a gardener again in Connemara and County Galway, and having been given a piece of land, he started building his own house.

Then, in 1985, he was discovered by Andy O'Mahony of RTE Radio 1, who introduced John by saying: "My guest tonight is the most remarkable person I have ever met." His work was brought to the attention of Antony Farrell of the Lilliput Press, Dublin, and in 1994 his first book, *Dreamtime*, was published. Having read this, I eventually met John in 1997 and we became good friends. The three-volume *Turtle was Gone a Long Time* (1996-98) was followed by the first part of *Nostos* in 2001.

John also hosted the radio discussion programme, *The Blackbird and the Bell*, for RTE and lectured widely, using his extensive knowledge of mythology and religion to enliven his talks with entrancing storytelling. In the mid-90s, he moved to his new home on Mangerton Mountain, near Killarney, County Cork. I invited him over to England to stay with us in Shropshire and organised conferences, lectures and storytelling events for fellow artists and others, and many fell under his thrall.

In 2002, he began to realise his vision of a Christian monastic "hedge school", *Sli na Firinne*, by buying a piece of land near Kilgarven. He hoped this would be "a place where Christianity can recover its nerve". The original hedge schools arose out of the prohibition of Catholic education in the 18th century.

Many recognise John as a major writer, comparable to Yeats, Joyce and Beckett. A collection of 13 CDs of his talks and lectures is to be released later this year under the title of *One Evening in Eden*, with proceeds funding *Sli na Firinne*. Last year he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Ireland, Galway.

A large, rough-hewn man with bright, deep set eyes beneath a leonine mass of curls, John had a rich and melodious Kerry voice that changed from a gentle softness to a bellowing ebullience that erupted into a laughter that shattered all pomposity. His pain at our blindness to the riches of our created world and the God who made us resonates through all his writing. A mystic and prophet in the Old Testament meaning of the word, his was an inspiring vision of a world and a culture that is truly healing.

His writing could be dense and difficult, requiring a knowledge of myth and religion similar to his own, but there are so many passages of such intense and vibrant beauty, one can forgive such heavy going.

The great love of his life, Eileen Moore, moved in to take care of him in the last year of his life, and he died surrounded by family and friends.

John Moriarty, philosopher-poet, born February 2 1938; died June 1 2007