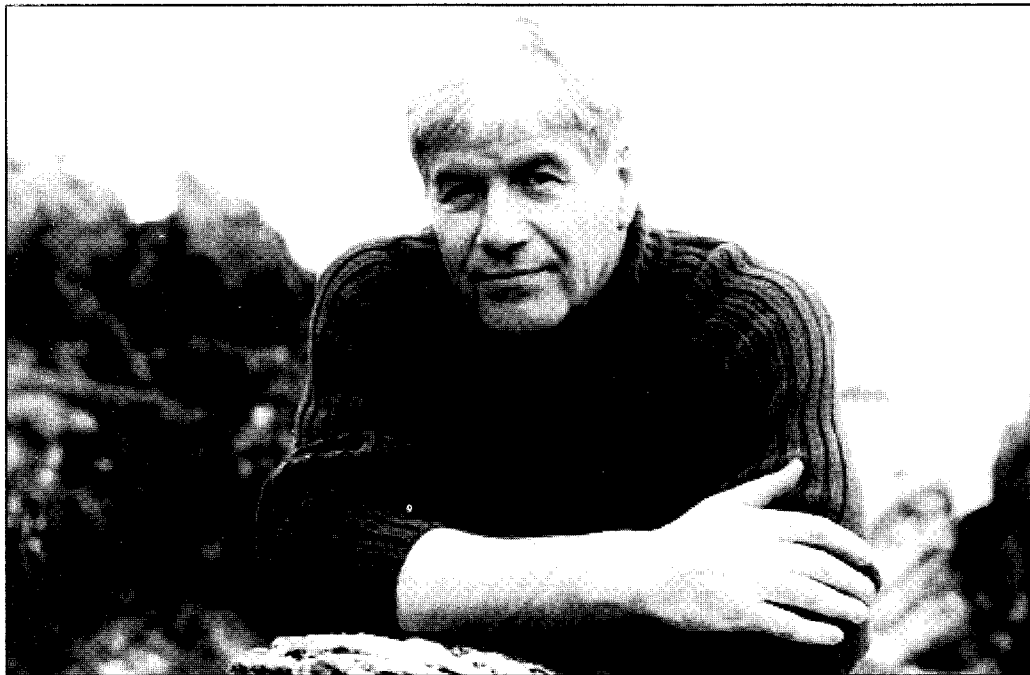


# A Celebration of Everyday Things and Ordinary People

Roddy Hegarty for Due North interviews Joe Mahon of 'Lesser Spotted Ulster'



*Broadcaster, Joe Mahon*

*DN: Could you tell us a little about your background, where you were born and grew up?*

*JM:* I was born in the City of Derry on 30 June 1951, half-way through the year and just about half way through the century. I mention that last bit because it makes my arrival in the world sound somewhat portentous, though quite what it portended I've yet to discover. I suppose one of the effects of that kind of timing is the tendency to look over your shoulder all the time to see what you've just missed and that might account, partly at least, for my fascination with the past.

I was the oldest of what would eventually become a family of seven but for the first two years of my life I lived alone with my parents in a one-roomed flat in a tenement in Upper Magazine Street just inside Derry's Walls, above Butcher Gate, below Walker's Pillar and St Augustine's Church, round the corner from the Apprentice Boys' Memorial Hall and more or less next door to First Derry Presbyterian Church. I'm being very precise about the location, not merely to boast about the neighbours we had, but because, alas, 4 Upper Magazine Street, like Walker's Pillar, is no longer with us, though as a result of a different kind of planning. It's now a private car-park.

We moved to the Creggan Estate in 1953 and, in spite of two more upwardly-mobile house moves in the following years we were still living in Creggan when I finally left home to get married in 1975. Creggan was one of the earliest post-war housing

estates and it sprawled across a huge hill overlooking the old town in which the great majority of its residents would once have lived in deplorably overcrowded conditions. My parents loved it and so did I. There was a very strong sense of community solidarity and shared experience. My mother would have had a number of neighbours who had worked alongside her in her shirt factory days and there was a great mutual support system among the women in general. Our house in Melmore Gardens was within ten minutes walk of the open countryside of Inishowen and it had a front garden in which my mother grew marigolds and an enormous back garden in which my father grew fruit and vegetables like a man possessed. This would have been unimaginable back in the tiny terrace streets in which they'd both grown up. Then, along with four of my uncles, my father had to go to England to find work. He did that, off and on, from 1955 until 1962 and I saw very little of him during that time.

*DN: Were you always interested in the things around you, history, geography, traditions?*

*JM:* When my father did return from England he began to take me fishing with him and I spent many happy Sundays from the age of nine onwards boiling a kettle for the tea on a little campfire by the side of a mountain lake or river in Donegal, catching brown trout and listening to the vast amount of country lore that my uncle Mickey McMenamin, a cattle man and

jack- of-all-trades, had built up over the years. My love of the countryside and the great outdoors is rooted in such experiences.

My father eventually became a plastering sub-contractor and from the age of fifteen onwards I spent a lot of my school holidays, even after I'd started teaching, working on building sites attending plasterers. The level of work I was permitted to do rarely extended beyond mixing mortar, nailing up plasterboard, slabbing, and shifting scaffolding, but I really admired the skill and craftsmanship of master plasterers like my uncle, Tommy Mahon and, of course, my father. I was profoundly impressed by the stern pride they took in their work and their absolute confidence that all problems could be solved by the application of intelligence and determination...the job had to be finished and that was that! No other outcome was possible.

The work was always hard and the pace unrelenting when you were hand-mixing cement and feeding it to hungry plasterers but it was also extremely satisfying. Apart from keeping me fit and putting a few pounds in my pocket, it taught me to have enormous respect for building tradesmen, and all people really who work with their hands - their craft, their cleverness and their sheer industry. At one stage I wanted to become a plasterer but my father thought the life was too hard. I'm sure he was right.

*DN: Was that your first job?*

*JM:* My first proper job was teaching in St Peter's CBS in Creggan. I had spent 3 years at UCD doing a degree in English and Philosophy, having given up history at the end of my second year, too much study involved, after which I'd gone to Queen's to do a Dip. Ed. I don't think I had any great burning ambition to be a teacher at the time. I hadn't particularly enjoyed my days at St Columb's College though there had been a few teachers there that I still hold in high regard, most notably the late Fr Kieran Devlin, a scholar and a gentleman who combined learning and wit along with great warmth and patience and decency. I think it fair to say that he was the source of any idealism I managed to cling on to as I tried to become a teacher over the next several years.

*DN: Looking back was there anyone in particular who you would see as having been a strong influence in developing your interest in Local Studies?*

*JM:* It was during teaching practice at St Breacan's in the Waterside area of Derry that I came across another teacher who was truly inspirational. His name was Dermot Logue and he taught history to a crowd of young lads and you'd have thought, watching them, that he was telling them the most riveting yarn ever

invented. He was very fond of dramatic reconstruction and he had the boys out on the floor re-enacting scenes from history and debating the arguments for and against this or that point of view, whether the topic was the Crusades or the Luddites or the Suffragettes. Dermot was an enthusiastic and tireless teacher, somebody I would have tried to emulate in my own teaching career though I'm sure I usually fell far short of his standards.

Jumping forward to when I was doing my next 'proper' job, which was working as a producer at BBC Radio Foyle, I met another young teacher who was equally inspirational. He was teaching in Magherafelt at the time (early 1980s) but thought nothing of taking a class of youngsters up to the city where he and I would produce radio features based on little dramatic reconstructions that he and his class had written on subjects such as the transformation of rural life due to the advent of barbed wire or the bicycle! They were always informative, amusing and thoroughly well prepared. The teaching profession lost a great asset when Pat Loughrey went on to become a broadcaster in his own right. Of course he had a stellar career in that profession as well and, quicker than you could fix a puncture, went on to become The Controller of BBC Northern Ireland.

Back briefly to my own teaching days. I taught in St Peter's from 1973 to 1981, mostly English and History. They were dark days for all of us and it was difficult to interest children in academic history when the real thing, in all its painful, tragic and messy actuality was happening out in the street, often outside the front door of the school. Most of the time the children found it exciting. I was on the top floor of a tall building and every day the wind whistled through the bullet holes in the steel window frames, a legacy of the army's occupation of the building the summer before I started teaching. I have the greatest respect for teachers in general and good teachers are worth their weight in gold. I taught alongside many such during that period and I think that our main priority was, quite simply, the safety and welfare of our charges.

I also have the greatest respect for many of those pupils who overcame considerable adversity to succeed in their own careers and it's interesting to name a few whose paths I still cross today. I taught Michael Bradley and Jackie Hamilton who became, (in spite of the careers advice I gave them) members of the Undertones and the Moondogs respectively, two fabulously successful pop groups of course, but both of them went on to become BBC producers themselves on radio and television. In my first year at the school I was given what was called a ROSLA' class. These were 36 disgruntled teenagers who wanted to be somewhere else but who suffered the indignity of being kept on at school for an extra year with no real prospect of any certificate to show for

their pains at the end of it. I had them for two classes each day teaching something called 'Language Development'. In desperation I started a magazine entitled 'Rosla Report' and allocated tasks according to the perceived talents of the class. Thus we had an editorial team, a production and printing team who mastered the intricacies of an old Gestetner machine, we had reporters, regular columnists, we had scribes (who had the best handwriting) and we had a sales and distribution team. We also had two lads who were brilliant cartoonists and illustrators. One of them was Kevin Hasson who became one of the celebrated 'Bogside Artists', responsible for all those iconic murals that have been beamed all over the world and the other, who also did occasional articles about music, was Jim Walker who now writes, performs and records all of the music that you hear on Lesser Spotted Ulster. A talented bunch!

*DN: What attracted you to broadcasting and in particular programming of a specifically local nature?*

*JM:* I suppose I've always regarded broadcasting, at least the kind of work I've mostly done, as an extension of teaching. The skills are very similar and the point of the exercise is much the same - you are trying to impart information in a way that holds the attention of your audience, you are selecting that information on the basis of its relevance and usefulness to your audience and also, of course, its importance to the people who are giving you that information in the first place. The big difference is that a classroom of pupils don't have much choice whereas a television audience can simply switch you off. So it must entertain, amuse, fascinate, hold your attention in some way. Local history seems to have the power to do that.

*DN: How do you think our history has shaped us as individuals and as communities?*

*JM:* It's probably stating the obvious to say that you can't possibly share your fascination and your enthusiasm for a subject with anyone unless you feel it yourself in the first place. As I said earlier I think I'd always been fascinated by the past, not history per se mind you, but the past lives that people lived, the day to day existence, the work they did, what they ate, where they slept, what they wore, how they travelled, how they talked...it was the tiny insignificant detail, the minutiae if you like, that I found intriguing. I was always nose-y! My mother was one of the world's great talkers and a very funny story teller and, with my father away so much working in England, I was the main beneficiary of her wit and wisdom and gossip. Perhaps that explains, partly at least, why I was curious about the things that I was curious about and why I learned to enjoy listening.

One of the first things I did when I became a radio producer was a series of documentaries on the city and its immediate environment. I was interested in the cemetery, in the gaol, the port, the Guildhall, the sewage works, the water supply, the shirt factories, the street names, the city walls, the churches, the monuments, the older buildings and, above all, the river. These things fascinated me and it was a childish kind of fascination, a little bit like fear. When we're children we fear the unknown. Knowledge dispels that fear. These things were all around me as I grew up and I realised that I knew very little about them, where they came from, how they worked, who worked on them, who owned them, how they related to my life, if at all? I discovered at that time that I wasn't the only one who found such matters so absorbing. The programmes turned out to be very popular. I also discovered, and this was more of a revelation than it sounds, that there were people around who had expert knowledge

It was around this time that I first met the late Olly McGilloway who was then chairman of the Faughan Anglers Association. I wanted Olly to do a 10 minute weekly slot on the radio about the catches that week on the river. It was a bit like asking Leonardo da Vinci to whitewash your outhouse. Olly and I became firm friends until his untimely death at the age of 58. He was a real polymath and I learnt a great deal from him about the world of nature as we made a number of radio series together and eventually worked together on his long-running UTV series 'McGilloway's Way', the brainchild, incidentally, of Denis Bradley who was a colleague of mine at the time. It was only after Olly died that I was persuaded, and it was not an easy decision believe me, to step in front of the camera and present programmes, as opposed to merely produce them. Seventeen years later I'm still doing it and I'm still learning on the job.

Things are so much easier in some ways than they were at the start, in the sense that there seems to have been a great burgeoning of interest in local history and local studies in general. There's hardly a parish in the province that isn't well served by a number of excellent local historians, many of them bristling with masters' degrees and doctorates. Alongside that aspect of things there's been a very healthy blossoming of local pride as young people, in particular, learn to appreciate the importance of identity and heritage.

*DN: Is this sense of place being eroded do you think in the modern era?*

*JM:* For a long time, I think, in rural areas as much as in the towns and cities, the past was associated with poverty and deprivation and, understandably, people wanted to put it behind them. Our schools and our

teachers, primary and secondary, deserve great credit for re-instilling pride of place in our young people. They do it through dispensing knowledge, dispelling fear, restoring perspective. Yes, there was poverty and deprivation. But there was also survival and progress, through ingenuity, through industry, skill, perseverance and self-reliance. There was also a value system that promoted mutual support and community cohesion. These are reasons to celebrate the achievements of our forebears, not to be ashamed of them. I thought there was a very powerful example of that in the penultimate series of Lesser Spotted Ulster, in the programme we did from Killeeshil and Clonaneese, where the primary school, with the support of the local history group, staged a re-enactment of a hiring fair at a festival recalling the days of the Cotton's Corner Fair. You could tell that those children gained an enormous amount of insight and understanding from the experience as they stood in the rain, in the clothes and in the bare feet of their recent ancestors.

Our approach to making the kind of programmes that we do ... I say "our" to remind people that I don't do this on my own, it's a team event ... is always celebratory. We're not just neutral observers. We have a vested interest in bringing out the best in every place we visit, whether that be its scenery, its history, its people, its folklore, its commerce, its social life - all of the things really that make up its unique character and atmosphere. Increasingly, we find that people are anxious to help us do this. They want to portray their place in the best possible light, naturally enough, and they're proud, not only of all the fascinating stories and sites their place has to offer, but also of their own involvement in the research that has brought these things to light. Twenty years ago, in many rural parishes, you were lucky to get your hands on a thin booklet of scanty information, welcome though these often were. Nowadays there's a wealth of professionally produced publications, often lavishly illustrated, thoroughly researched and beautifully written. That fact speaks volumes (no pun intended) for a burgeoning sense of attachment to place.

*DN: Is there a part of the country that you find of special interest, perhaps a favourite beauty spot or somewhere that you just feel at home?*

*JM:* A place does not have to be famous, or glamorous, or scenic or important to the rest of the world to hold a special interest. All places are intrinsically interesting if you approach them in the right frame of mind, if you ask the right questions and talk to the people that matter i.e. the people who live

there or whose roots are there. People who are passionate about their birthplace are a gift to people like us who make programmes. So too, it must be said, are the 'blow-ins' who have chosen to live there, who take a place to their heart and make it their home, for they rarely take it for granted. You'll find, very often, that they're among the most active members of the community when it comes to celebrating local lore and history. They've taken the trouble to inform themselves, to find out things and to explore the corners that others perhaps disregard. They do so in order to make sense of their environment, to make it meaningful to themselves. Essentially Lesser Spotted Ulster is a travelling 'blow-in'.

That's why I always find it difficult to answer properly when someone asks, "What is your favourite among the places you've visited?" I often answer that it's the most recent place I've been to because very often that's the honest answer. It's my job to celebrate the unique characteristics of each parish, town, village or townland that we visit, and that process involves taking a place to your heart and making it your own, for a short time perhaps, but it's quite an intense time.

When I'm not working though, which is rarely, I'm happy to say, I often holiday in and around Ardara in Donegal or further down the west coast in Clare. I love Fermanagh. I love Carlingford Lough. I love the Antrim coast. I love the Ring of Gullion. I love Lough Neagh. I love the Sperrins. So do most of us, I imagine. But the place I'm happiest to be in is my home town of Derry-Londonderry. Roots, family, friends, familiarity...they're all here.

*DN: If you could speak to any personality from the past who would you like to meet and what might you ask them?*

*JM:* If I had to choose a personality from the past that I would like to meet and spend time with it would be John O'Donovan. I first encountered him about 20 years ago when I was doing a number of films for the Tower Museum in Derry and one of them was about the Ordnance Survey. I think O'Donovan was one of the main reasons that it was called a 'peripatetic university'. He was an extraordinary scholar and linguist, an incredibly dedicated and hard-working researcher, an intrepid traveller (mostly on shank's mare) and, above all, a man of great good humour and wit in spite of many hardships in life. He must have been wonderful company. I once proposed a series of programmes entitled 'In O'Donovan's Footsteps' but it never got made.

*There's time yet maybe.....*