

[SUBSCRIBE \(/SUBSCRIBE\)](#)[\(/ACCOUNT\)](#)[\(/\)](#)

## Features

[Features \(/features\)](#) > Digging deep in sacred caverns

22 August 2018 | by Michael W. Higgins ([/author/234/michael-w-higgins](#))

# Digging deep in sacred caverns

[Like](#)[Share](#)

Be the first of your friends to like this.



John Moriarty pictured at his home in Coolies, Muckross, Killarney

## John Moriarty

He curled himself up, egg-shaped, so that he could lay in a swan's nest longing for his own re-hatching; he faced the pure white-out of a Manitoba blizzard like a buffalo in order to survive; he spent his life trying to recover from the calamity of falling out of the Christian story. John Moriarty was, in the words of philosopher Brendan O'Donoghue (quoting his doctoral supervisor), "like Dostoevsky, in that he was not only not understood in his lifetime, he was not even misunderstood".

Given his eccentric behaviour, hermitic life, and disregard for celebrity, it is not all that surprising that he remains even now – more than a decade since his death in June 2007 – a darling for his cult following, an amusement for the curious, a distraction for the

Top

serious intellectual, a Celtic epiphenomenon, and one of the treasures of the RTE archives.

But Moriarty is much more than that. Not a paid-up member of the academy – although he lectured at MIT in Boston and at the University of Galway as well as being a member of the Department of English at the University of Manitoba for six years in the 1960s – he eschewed academic discourse, delighted in transdisciplinarity, imploded traditional categories of thought, and provoked his rapt listeners at stunning length, and with a near manic ferocity.

Despite this, for most of his life Moriarty remained a neglected treasure. In part that may have been attributable to the considerable popular success of his immediate contemporary, the former priest, poet, and Celtic spirituality superstar, John O'Donohue. The acclaim that accompanied O'Donohue's best-selling primer, *Anam Cara*, easily eclipsed Moriarty's more esoteric writings, *Invoking Ireland – Ailiu lath n-hErend* for instance, in terms of both accessibility and popularity. They wrote at the same time; they wrote in the same region of Ireland; they wrote on similar subjects; they wrote with a poet's touch; and they died within months of each other.

While O'Donohue's place in the Catholic pantheon remains secure, Moriarty is only now beginning to come into his own. His singular genius is cleverly captured by the Irish poet and public broadcaster Aidan Mathews: "He may live in a caravan, a migrant among his settled readership, but he's not Sister Wendy whose toothy quaintness in a pantomime habit reassures a mass audience that spirituality is really rather charming, and he isn't Brother Ass either, awash with watercress and Paternosters in the easy ecofeminism beloved of Sunday supplements ... there is something magnificent about his single-minded oppositional stance in our deconsecrated world."

But who was this peripatetic searcher, part academic, part gardener, part poet and part philosopher – a veritable bridge builder among civilisations ancient and new? Born in Moyvane, County Kerry, in 1938, he was educated locally at St Michael's College, Listowel, and then at University College in Dublin, where he took a degree in philosophy. Shaken by a close reading of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in his adolescent years, he was haunted, as he recounts in his autobiography *Nostos*, by the knowledge that he had fallen into a "universe that seemed infinitely indifferent, even hostile, to my purposes and yearnings".

Top

Moriarty's reading of Kepler, Pascal, Coleridge, Melville, Arnold and Nietzsche underscored the common terror of humanity for him: the awe-inducing horror that "we are wide awake in a universe that has neither centre nor circumference". His studies in philosophy did little to ameliorate his own "menacing inwardness" and he took to literature to find balm for his soul and enlightenment for his mind. He substituted the crushing cerebration of Descartes' Meditations with the Welsh collection of folk tales and myths, *The Mabinogion*. While teaching briefly at Leeds University and at a Catholic boys' boarding school in Staffordshire, he broke away from the curriculum and denounced the Cartesian Cogito ("I think, therefore I am"), announcing with pontifical certitude that "it blinds us to as much of what is out there as it lets in".

Moriarty concluded that it was time for a new epistemology, a time for new or fresh seeing. It was during his tenure at the University of Manitoba that he consolidated his view that disengaged from our primal instincts, our companions in creation, and our humble if noble birthing as a species, we are solely heirs to the constrictive reasoning of Bacon, Locke, Newton and their Enlightenment spawn.

A true disciple of William Blake, Moriarty saw in the English mystic, painter and poet, a thinker and visionary who understood the dread consequences of a dehumanising Reason, the curse of Urizen or Single Vision: "Blake is surely right when he insists that our modern, materialist cosmologies have their sources in the poverties and impoverishments of single vision."

It was time, Moriarty felt, to discover his "bush soul". It was time to slough off the encrustations of culture, the intellectual tyranny of the academy, the confinement of urban living. It was time to leave Winnipeg and seek the freedom of Connemara. It was time to find an antidote to his "somatically sensuous deprivation", to insert himself into the "sensuousness of sitting for hours under a waterfall, of walking in high heather, of climbing a hill, of listening to a sheep-farmer talking in Irish about winters past and to come". He returned to Ireland and set up home in Connemara; in the mid 1990s, he moved back to Kerry, living at the foot of Mangerton Mountain, near Killarney.

Moriarty's comprehensive rejection of the consolations of the bourgeois world, his repudiation of the ordered rhythms of Western thought, and the radical jettisoning of inherited religious "truths" would exact a terrible cost. He would experience a dark night of the soul, a levelling emotional void that would bring him to the cusp of disintegration. It happened while walking down from the mountain near Lough Inagh, County Galway, p

when he found himself “ruined beyond remedy and repair”, swimming in a vortex of the self’s unwinding, directionless, vacant, no still point, desperate for help. And it was at this point, in the heart of this maelstrom, that he discovered that “Christianity was my mother tongue”. His transfiguration on the mountain shattered him into a new seeing, into the realisation that he was a “Christian for the first time”.

Through this emotionally and intellectually enervating moment, Moriarty sought to make sense of the experience, suffered through dreams “nightmaring” him without respite, took spiritual counsel from a wise Carmelite friar in Oxford, warred with the “dark virulent infestation from within my own nature”, wrestled with the troubling prospect of facing madness, and came to the conclusion that something both conceptual and intuitive was going on.

Moriarty was engaged in a larger task than simply recovering from a breakdown – he was rethinking dogma, constructing a creative alignment of creation and redemption, finding an answer to the legacy of Darwin’s Origins that had unsettled his universe when a teenager. This new alignment would be centred in the mystery and power of Tenebrae (“darkness”), the traditional Holy Week ritual involving the chanting of the psalms of lamentation, the slow extinguishing of the 14 antiphonally arranged candles until only the apex candle remains, to be carried into the crypt still lit, all now remaining in darkness. The sacred darkness of Holy Saturday.

Moriarty envisaged Tenebrae as the way of reconnection with our evolutionary path, a harrowing of hell pioneered by Jesus for all things, “for stegosaurus and rhinoceros, as well as for mollusc and Moses”. He understood that this immersion in our geological past, this trail to the subterranean pulse of our species, must be reconfigured into ritual, “into sacred things sacredly said, and sacred things sacredly done”. With a brazen creativity, Moriarty takes the original Tenebrae ritual and baptises it anew: “The ritual of our further and final evolution.”

In rewriting the Tenebrae ritual for a new age, Moriarty had no less an ambition than to unite the mythologies of the ancients, the theologies of diverse faiths, the histories of animate and inanimate matter, in a grand strategy of redress. To recognise that in reclaiming evolution as a divine trajectory, and restoring the “whole psyche to sanctity”, Jesus redeems as he harrows.

As the Canadian Catholic political philosopher, Charles Taylor, says in *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*: “It is through story that we find or devise ways of living bearably in time.” Moriarty knew that “only a great story can shelter us” and by the time he died he had provided a new vision, a dreamtime, that is a creative commingling of the immanent and the transcendent, the geological and the mystical, in a post-binary quest for a universal integration of matter with spirit, a pan-Christian labour that incorporates the wisdom tradition of all faiths.

Moriarty is Ireland’s shaper in the visionary tradition of David Jones, Thomas Merton, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a poet-mystic, scientist-manqué, and storyteller who relished orality, a modern St Patrick, digging deep into the sacred caverns of prehistoric times, exercising his bardic role, calling us to a new epistemology.

**Michael W. Higgins is distinguished professor of Catholic thought, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut. His forthcoming book, co-authored with Kevin Burns, is *Impressively Free: Henri Nouwen as a Model for the Contemporary Priesthood*.**

Tags:

**[The Catholic Church \(/tag/the catholic church\)](/tag/the-catholic-church)**

**Share this story**

Twitter

Facebook

Google+

Pinterest

More

**[Article List \(/features\)](/features)**

---

**USER COMMENTS (0)**

Top