

# IRONY, TRAUMA, AND COMPASSION: BRENDAN BEHAN'S AND MAEVE BRENNAN'S MID-CENTURY SHORT PROSE

Klára Witzany Hutková

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2024.67.7>

**Abstract:** Born only a few years apart, Brendan Behan (1923) and Maeve Brennan (1917) were children of independent Ireland, raised by Republican families on the opposite banks of the Liffey. Although they probably never met – in Dublin or New York – there are fascinating parallels, as well as contrasts, in their biographies and in their writing. This article compares Behan's and Brennan's life-writing short prose, published predominantly in *The Irish Press* (1951-1957) and *The New Yorker* (c. 1950s-1960s), respectively. Brennan's contributions to the "Talk of the Town" column under the pseudonym The Long-Winded Lady, as well as a few other autobiographical pieces, are analysed as a counterpart to Behan's *Irish Press* column. The essay focuses on three common areas in the selected writing: irony as Brennan's and Behan's response to their positions of a female and working-class writer, respectively, their revisiting of personal and collective memories of traumatic moments in modern Irish history, and a socially aware and compassionate chronicling of the lives of ordinary people.

**Keywords:** life writing, working-class writing, women's writing, Maeve Brennan, *The New Yorker*, The Long-Winded Lady, flâneuse, Brendan Behan, travel writing, *The Irish Press*, modern Irish history

## Introduction

Brendan Behan and Maeve Brennan both had interesting family backgrounds with some shared aspects, as well as many crucial differences. While Brennan was raised in middle- to upper-middle-class conditions, Behan proudly identified with his working-class roots. Where Brennan's childhood memories bring her back to the suburban area of South Dublin, Behan describes tenement housing on the opposite bank of the Liffey. In her late teens, Brennan moved with her family to Washington, D.C. as the daughter of the first envoy of the Irish Free State to the

United States. She completed her high school and university education there, and by the 1950s was a writer-in-residence for *The New Yorker* magazine. An elegant and sophisticated urbanite, Brennan became a New York *flâneuse*, as well as a keeper of memories of the turbulent times that she had experienced in Ireland as a child. Six years younger, Behan lived in Dublin until 1939, when he was arrested on a mission for the IRA and sentenced to a borstal in England. This began a longer series of incarcerations outside of as well as in Ireland, during which time he would gather inspiration, read, write, and make useful acquaintances in the literary circles. In the 1950s, Behan established himself as a writer, playwright, poet, as well as a journalist in Dublin and abroad; the start of his literary career can be traced to his time in Paris in the late 1940s, where he was exposed to an artistically fruitful combination of contemporary intellectuals' company, higher freedom of the press, but also material poverty.<sup>1</sup>

These different social contexts (and possibly also their gender) are reflected in the way that the writing of Brennan and Behan has been marketed. While the book covers for Behan's published novels and plays would often make direct references to his alcoholism and bohemian reputation, bordering on stage Irishness, Brennan's collected prose has been consistently published with references to elegance and sophistication. Especially the more recent covers often show her posing in a lavishly furnished living room on one of a several photographs taken by the photographer Karl Bissinger in 1948. The fact that Brennan, too, struggled with alcohol, as well as with keeping a balanced budget, is not thematised. Of course, she never became the celebrity that Behan was, and her public conduct was immeasurably more controlled. As Brennan's biographer Angela Bourke explains, Bissinger himself thought of her as "watchful and disdainful."<sup>2</sup> There is also sadness about her on most of the publicly available photographs, including those taken by Bissinger.

In different ways, both types of book covers emphasise the less positive elements in Behan's and Brennan's lives. However, the writing analysed in this article comes from a promising time of prolific activity and success for both (the 1950s for Behan and the 1950s-1960s for Brennan). Next to being commissioned to write a column in *The Irish Press* in 1954, Behan's plays *The Quare Fellow* (1954, Dublin) and *The Hostage* (1958, London) were produced for the first time, and his autobiographical novel *Borstal Boy* (1958) was published. Over in the US, Brennan

<sup>1</sup> For details, see Deirdre McMahon's work on the subject, including her essay in the present volume.

<sup>2</sup> Angela Bourke, *Maeve Brennan: Wit, Style and Tragedy. An Irish Writer in New York* (London: Pimlico, 2005), 147.

became a valued member of *The New Yorker's* staff. Both also got married – Brennan in 1954 and Behan in 1955. Despite her marital unhappiness, which soon led to a divorce, Brennan wrote actively until the early 1970s, when her life became increasingly erratic. She started suffering from mental breakdowns, moving “in and out of reality,”<sup>3</sup> as her life-long editor and friend William Maxwell phrased it. When she died in a mental institution in 1993, she had been largely forgotten (although the writer herself seems to have hallucinated that she had become a regular *Irish Press* contributor towards the end of her life).<sup>4</sup> Behan’s alcoholism and the related health issues ended his career a decade earlier than Brennan’s. Since 1962, he was no longer able to physically write, taping his work – later prepared for publication by his friend and editor Rae Jeffs – instead. Suffering from severe diabetes which brought him to hospital several times, Behan died from liver failure in 1964. According to John Brannigan, “celebrity killed him.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite their tragic ends, Brennan’s and Behan’s writing is characterised by wit, humour, and compassion with which they observe people around them. Transgressing various boundaries, especially those of gender and class, both also return to difficult memories of turbulent times in modern Irish history. Finally, their writing consistently questions the current state of society and subtly criticises social injustice. This essay examines these themes in Behan’s and Brennan’s selected life-writing prose. Unlike Behan, who is mostly famous for his plays and for *Borstal Boy*, Brennan’s almost entire oeuvre consists of her *New Yorker* contributions – a posthumously discovered novella, *The Visitor* (2000), and her early pieces for *Harper’s Bazaar* magazine are the only exceptions. Brennan’s short prose has been collected and published several times in her lifetime and after. This article draws on two volumes of the selected writing: *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from the New Yorker* (1969) and, to a lesser extent, *The Springs of Affection* (1997). While the former is a selection of Brennan’s brief essays published in *The New Yorker's* “Talk of the Town” column under her pseudonym The Long-Winded Lady, the latter contains short stories, including brief autobiographical sketches of her childhood in Ireland. Brannigan’s newly published collection of Behan’s newspaper contributions, *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan’s Collected Short Prose* (2023), is made use of as the counterpart. Unlike the assorted volume *The Long-Winded Lady*, this is a larger, chronologically organised book. It presents Behan’s

<sup>3</sup> William Maxwell, “Introduction,” in Maeve Brennan, *The Springs of Affection: Stories of Dublin* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 275.

<sup>5</sup> John Brannigan, “Introduction,” in *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan’s Collected Short Prose*, ed. John Brannigan (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023), xvii.

column and other occasional pieces, predominantly published in *The Irish Press*, from the period between 1951 and 1957. As such, *A Bit of a Writer* represents a more unified corpus than the various existing volumes of Brennan's work do (while also containing significantly more material than Jeffs's earlier selection of Behan's *Irish Press* pieces published as *Hold Your Hour and Have Another* in 1963). Brennan's writing for *The New Yorker* is more varied than Behan's journalistic output, including a large number of short stories, and it is generally not organised in chronological order in published collections.

Behan's *Irish Press* contributions follow a standardised pattern in terms of style and length. Only a few pages long and containing subheadings, they can be described as brief life-writing essays as well as social commentaries and, in many cases, travel writing. A suitable counterpart to these are Brennan's Long-Winded pieces. They too were intended for a specific column, and signed by a persona created for the purpose. A distinct style and length are carried over from one piece to another. These contributions span a slightly longer period – the 1950s to the early 1970s. Additionally, *The New Yorker* also published a few life-writing pieces by Brennan in the early 1950s, where she returns to her childhood in Ireland. These are brief, written from a first-person perspective, and signed by her (as opposed to the Long-Winded writing), which makes them another suitable counterpart to Behan's *Irish Press* prose.

## Serious Writers

Brennan and Behan both came from Irish Republican families where much value was placed on literature. Behan's father Stephen was "a passionate reader of literature,"<sup>6</sup> as Brannigan has phrased it, while his wife Kathleen introduced Brendan and his siblings to a variety of Irish folk songs. Behan quotes from some of the songs from the family repertoire in his articles, as well as bringing attention to the fact that his uncle, Kathleen's brother Peadar Kearney, was the author of the Irish national anthem. Working in domestic service for Maude Gonne MacBride, Kathleen was also acquainted with people of importance in the arts and in politics, especially from the revolutionary circles.<sup>7</sup> In both families, writing was also intertwined with politics. Maeve's mother Úna Brennan, *née* Anastasia Bolger, had been an active member of the non-sectarian feminist organisation Inghinidhe na hÉireann before becoming a housewife, and it is likely that she had been contributing to the "Women Ways" column of the newspaper *Echo*.<sup>8</sup> Robert was

<sup>6</sup> Brannigan, "Introduction," xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Brannigan, "Introduction," xiv. It is thus possible that she had met Brennan's parents, although no evidence of this seems to have been preserved.

<sup>8</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 11, 17-20.

a journalist, writer, playwright, and diplomat. He was also one of the founding members and the general manager of *The Irish Press*, which he left in 1933 when Éamon de Valera appointed him Secretary of the Irish Legation in Washington, D.C.<sup>9</sup> However, he contributed to Irish newspapers throughout his life, including *The Irish Press*.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these family backgrounds, Brennan's and Behan's prose expresses self-doubt as far as their own identity as writers is concerned, mostly in connection to their gender and social class, respectively. In her biography of Behan, Jeffs remembers suddenly discerning insecurity behind his boisterous demeanour as they were about to publish *Borstal Boy*: "I had not realised, until this moment, how real was his lack of confidence in himself as a writer, or how much it mattered to him what people thought of his work."<sup>11</sup> Both Brennan and Behan treat the issue with irony and by way of subtle, witty remarks, as this section of the article will illustrate.

In the 1950s, both established themselves as respected writers. Each had written and published some work already in the 1940s and talent, as well as acquaintances, played a role in the building of their careers. In 1951, Behan started contributing to *The Irish Press*, and he was offered a regular column two years later. Brannigan points out that Jim McGuinness, the editor behind this decision, knew Behan from the Curragh camp, where both had been interred in the 1940s for their IRA activities. However, Brannigan also highlights the young man's previous success: "It is evidence of the impact that Behan had already had as a young writer that McGuinness chose to ask him alongside more established writers such as Lennox Robinson and Francis MacManus."<sup>12</sup> Over the Atlantic, Brennan's career had followed a not too different trajectory. The writer was headhunted by *The New Yorker* in 1949, where she remained for the rest of her career. Brennan had previously written for the female-led fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar*, a position that might have been offered to her due to family connections.<sup>13</sup> *The New Yorker* was a prestigious weekly magazine, focusing on a variety of topics and genres, including new fiction.

Brennan's period of prolific writing – the 1950s and 1960s – partly overlaps with that of Behan who, as Brannigan has phrased it, "was at his most confident and conscientious as a writer"<sup>14</sup> in the former decade. However, Ireland was extremely conservative at the time, which manifested itself, among else, in

<sup>9</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 111-14.

<sup>10</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 105, 198.

<sup>11</sup> Rae Jeffs, *Brendan Behan: Man and Showman* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1966), 59.

<sup>12</sup> Brannigan, "Introduction," xi-xii.

<sup>13</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 138.

<sup>14</sup> Brannigan, "Introduction," xii.

vigorous censorship of literature. Despite being based primarily in Dublin, he felt that “Dubliners were slow to recognize his talents,”<sup>15</sup> according to Brannigan. Behan became a celebrated author and playwright internationally, and he would travel abroad to France, Britain, and the US to see his plays staged or to negotiate writing contracts.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Brennan’s fiction was primarily intended for and read by an American audience. Her short prose would first have been published in the US, and it was only occasionally republished in Ireland during her lifetime,<sup>17</sup> the country fully claiming the writer as its own only after her death. In the US, however, she was considered an Irish writer, despite spending her entire adult life in and around New York City and travelling abroad only sporadically.

Rather than their nationality, it was Brennan’s gender and Behan’s working-class background that placed them in somewhat insecure positions in terms of identity as writers, especially at the beginning of their careers. Despite her social privilege, Brennan was a woman in a male profession. While she was lucky to have a supportive office atmosphere, *The New Yorker’s* “subscribers and editors were mostly men, although women read it and wrote for it,”<sup>18</sup> as Bourke summarises. She was employed there when the magazine came under attack from the critics Tom Wolfe and Ben Yagoda in the mid-1960s, who had accused it of catering to the suburban middle-class, expressing strong reservations about the quality of its female staff.<sup>19</sup>

In 1954 (the year when Behan started publishing his *Irish Press* column), Brennan invented the persona of the Long-Winded Lady. According to Bourke, she might have chosen the pseudonym “to draw ironic attention to the prevailing feeling that women talk too much,”<sup>20</sup> thus responding to gendered stereotypes that could be used to diminish her work. In contrast to Behan, she also positioned herself as an upper-middle-class urbanite by referring to herself as a “lady,” as well as through the style and content of her writing more generally. The Lady frequents elegant Manhattan cafés, she knows fashion and dresses with taste, and her language is highly elegant. The readers learn very little about her as a person, besides the fact that she loves to read, write, and people-watch. Behan, on the other hand, shares many biographical and personal details about himself in his prose.

<sup>15</sup> Brannigan, “Introduction,” xii.

<sup>16</sup> Although it is unlikely that he met Brennan when staying in New York, they were almost certainly located in the same city for at least some time.

<sup>17</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 198, 267.

<sup>18</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 163.

<sup>19</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 190-91; Ann Peters, “A Traveler in Residence: Maeve Brennan and the Last Days of New York,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3/4 (2005): 66-67.

<sup>20</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 191.

He also commonly engages with people, reporting his interactions with friends and strangers alike.

In contrast, the Lady observes those around her from a distance, becoming a new generation of the *flâneuse*. Next to referring to such feminine consumerist activities as clothes shopping, she demonstrates her good education and cultural capital (such as by referring to canonical writers and works of literature), which strengthens her position as a narrator. Finally, a specific sense of irony and self-irony is a typical feature of the Long-Winded writing. It is soft, in-between-the-lines, yet subversive. Doubling down on the stereotype that women not only speak too much, but what they say is also of little consequence, some of the pieces cleverly push the boundaries of how much personal musing the readers will tolerate. For instance, in “A Young Lady with a Lap” (1966), we encounter the narrator closely observing a young girl in a “fluffy white mink stole around her shoulders and bosom.”<sup>21</sup> The Lady wonders about the girl’s transparent handbag, containing “nothing except a gold lipstick” (66):

She must have had a pocket in the stole, where she kept her money. In that case, why not put the lipstick in the pocket and leave the handbag at home? She must have had a very well considered reason for carrying the handbag, and it would have to be a better reason than that the handbag matched the shoes. I wish I knew what her reason was. And then, of course, there may not have been a pocket in the stole.

(68)

Presenting herself as somewhat ridiculous by sharing thoughts that many of her readers will consider too trivial, the Lady also demonstrates her skill with language. She describes the girl’s “tight white crepe dress” as “much whiter than flesh,” while in the handbag, her lipstick “roll[s] around like dice” (66). In her introduction to *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from the New Yorker*, Belinda McKeon talks about an “act of rebellion” in this context:

She made no apologies for her nosiness, and she made no apologies for the defiantly quotidian detail of her errands, of her routes on foot, of the random thoughts and wonderings and memories which popped into her head and back out again.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Maeve Brennan, “A Young Lady with a Lap,” in *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from the New Yorker* (Dublin: The Stinging Fly, 2017), 66. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>22</sup> Belinda McKeon, “Introduction,” in Maeve Brennan, *The Long-Winded Lady*, xiii.

Navigating her insecure position as a professional writer for a well-established, primarily male magazine, Brennan engaged with gendered stereotypes about women in a creative and subversive way, bringing attention to them while also proudly claiming her femininity.

In contrast, Behan's somewhat precarious position as a writer was tied to his working-class background, and his work thematises a double identity, in his case that of a trained housepainter and a talented young writer. Sometimes, Behan searches for a validation that writing is a legitimate and worth-while activity for an adult man. He receives such reassurance when visiting the Aran Islands: "Nowhere else have I found it so easy to sit down at the typewriter, and work away, without feeling that I was in any way regarded as a criminal lunatic of idle tendencies."<sup>23</sup> In this 1953 piece titled "These Fishermen Publicise Gaelic at Its Best," Behan feels encouraged in his writing by the value that people on the islands place on storytelling, and by extension, literature. In other situations, writing is also seen as a respectable activity, but people doubt that Behan himself engages in it in a serious manner. In "Journey to the Jewel of Wicklow" (1952), he explains to a fellow passenger the purpose of his trip to the country: "I'm going to – er – write."<sup>24</sup> Both he and his interlocutor express uncertainty about this, and the latter starts questioning him:

"Write what? Do you mean you will write today? Tomorrow?"

Oh, any day, now. "Tomorrow, probably."

"What sort of thing will you write?"

"An article for a magazine in Paris."

"Paris, hey?"

"Oh, and a Ballad Maker's Saturday Night."

His face improved. "Really." But then suspicious. "You mean the radio programme. Are you sure?"

"Oh, honest, sir. I have a contract form here in my pocket. I do it often, sir. Really, I do, sir."<sup>25</sup>

Except on the Aran Islands, a writer is presumably someone from a higher social stratum, and Behan here implicitly thematises this prejudice. His reaction at the end seems exaggerated, and the triple use of "sir" reads as a joke at the fellow passenger's expense.

<sup>23</sup> Brendan Behan, "These Fishermen Publicise Gaelic at Its Best," in *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023), 31.

<sup>24</sup> Brendan Behan, "Journey to the Jewel of Wicklow," in *A Bit of a Writer*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Behan, "Journey to the Jewel of Wicklow," 17.



As in Brennan's writing, the writer responds to any potential disrespect with irony. Not by accident does Brannigan's collection take into its title a part of the dialogue in "To the Mountains Bound" (1951). Commencing a new job as a house painter, Behan is called by his boss "a bit of a writer."<sup>26</sup> In his head, the former begins to cite a positive review of his previously published work, word by word: "Mr Behan handles a delicate subject with sensitivity and taste [...] above all he has inherited the virtue of his race of writing as he talks and talking as he sings in word arrangements, sensuous, syntactical."<sup>27</sup> He has even memorised the full bibliographic information of the review. If this makes the young writer seem a little ridiculous, his Irish audience might consider the reviewer's description of their "race" even more so. The multi-layered irony permeating this section results in ambiguity where Behan is able to complain about the lack of appreciation that Ireland has for his talent, praise his own writing, and amuse his readers at the same time.

In Brennan's case, even a decidedly positive response to her work provoked a playful, yet dismissive response. When an enthusiastic reader, Mr. Boyce, wrote to *The New Yorker* in 1959 asking for more stories by this writer, she deflected the implied homage. Informing him that "poor Miss Brennan died,"<sup>28</sup> she wrote a full letter in response, signing it "William (Bill) Maxwell." Poking fun at both her gender and nationality, she reports having "shot herself in the back with the aid of a small hand mirror at the foot of the main altar of St Patrick's Cathedral on Shrove Tuesday." (5-6) After adding more details, "Maxwell" makes an offer:

I have a lot of live authors, Mr. Boyce, if you would like to ask about any of them, if there is anything you would like to know about any of them, I'll be happy to oblige. Most of them have studio portraits, ready for framing, some life size, some even en famille, as we say around here [...].

(6)

Here, Brennan demonstrates what Bourke refers to as "a finely tuned sense of the ridiculous,"<sup>29</sup> while also constantly diminishing herself and her (allegedly posthumous) achievement. Will there be life-size portraits of Brennan when she actually dies? 1959 was also the year of her divorce. With no children and the majority of relatives living in Ireland, Brennan may have felt it unlikely that any of *her* portraits would be "en famille." Considering how she will be recalled, her

<sup>26</sup> Brendan Behan, "To the Mountains Bound," in *A Bit of a Writer*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Behan, "To the Mountains Bound," 3.

<sup>28</sup> Maxwell, "Introduction," 5. Further references are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>29</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 25.

Irish nationality becomes prominent, while everything else is somewhat diminished by being described as minuscule. Killed with the aid of the *small* hand mirror, her corpse is also “very small” (6), while people remember her as “smiling right and left and drinking water out of her own *little* paper cup” (5; emphasis added). Most importantly, she is not remembered as sitting in her office writing (which is, on the other hand, how Bourke portrays the author in her biography) but as more of an office decoration, as friendly and polite, yet without a distinct voice or achievement. The fact that this letter was never sent and only posthumously found by Maxwell only underlines how deeply personal the view of herself as a writer was to Brennan.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to Brennan, Behan appears more confident as he begins to contribute to the *Irish Press* column on a regular basis from 1954 onwards. However, his status of a writer is still occasionally taken into question, for instance as the result of stereotypes that he encounters when visiting England in the mid-1950s. In “How Sorry They Are to Return” (1954), Behan finds it impossible to convince his landlord that, as an Irishman, he is not a manual labourer: “I was wakened at six o’clock on two occasions ‘to go to work,’”<sup>31</sup> he complains.

### Returning to the Past

While Behan’s and Brennan’s experience as writers differed in many ways due to their respective geographical locations, as well as gender and social class, they shared the experience of a Republican upbringing. The values of their parents exercised a profound influence on their childhood and on how both related to Ireland, and some of their work addresses key moments in modern Irish history, with special focus on traumatic experiences. Maeve’s parents took part in the 1916 Easter Rising, which led to Robert’s year-long imprisonment in Britain, during which time Úna gave birth to Maeve on 6 January 1917.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, when Brendan was born on 9 February 1923, his trade-union activist father was serving time in Kilmainham Jail for his opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty.<sup>33</sup> The War of Independence, as well as the Civil War, were extremely turbulent times for little Maeve, as her family home would be searched by the infamous Black and Tans and, later, by the agents of the Irish Free State. In the story “The Day We Got Our Own Back,” published in 1953,<sup>34</sup> she describes one such raid – as well as explaining her family situation at that time to her American audience:

<sup>30</sup> Maxwell, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>31</sup> Brendan Behan, “How Sorry They Are to Return,” in *A Bit of a Writer*, 160.

<sup>32</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 39-44.

<sup>33</sup> Brannigan, “Introduction,” xiv.

<sup>34</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 92.

The treaty with England, turning Ireland into the Irish Free State, had just been signed. Those Irish who were in favour of the treaty, the Free Staters, were governing the country. Those who had held out for the republic, like my father, were in revolt. My father was wanted by the new government, and so he had gone into hiding. He was on the run, sleeping one night in one house and the next night in another and sometimes stealing home to see us.<sup>35</sup>

In the story, “some unfriendly men dressed in civilian clothes and carrying revolvers came” (27) into their home, looking for Robert. “There was not an inch of the house they did not touch” (30), Brennan remembers. They were harsh, refusing to let Úna go upstairs where a small child was sleeping, leaving the place in complete disarray. The story’s somewhat funny ending, as “one of them, a very keen fellow” (30) decides to check the chimney and is showered with soot, only partially mitigates the sense of harm done by this intrusion.

Six years younger than Brennan, Behan would have only second-hand knowledge of the early 1920s, as well as the earlier times. In “The Family Was in the Rising” from 1955, he jokingly admits regarding the Easter Rising: “In my childhood I could remember the whole week a damn sight better than I can now, for I have learnt enough arithmetic to know that I could not possibly have taken part in the Rising, which happened seven years before I was born.”<sup>36</sup> In an early piece, “Over the Northside I Was a Chisler” – included in Brannigan’s collection although it was originally broadcast on Raidió Éireann (1951) and then published anonymously in the *Kerry Champion*, rather than *The Irish Press* – he remembers swapping stories with friends as a child, outside in the streets: “If the night was fine, we’d stand round the lamp till after twelve singing songs or telling stories we’d hear our fathers tell about the Big War or about the Black and Tans.”<sup>37</sup> Those could be gruesome, such as accounts of the Bloody Sunday of 1920, when the British army opened fire at civilians during a match at Croke Park: “The country fellows at the match ran into the houses and the people hid them under beds or anywhere they could. The Tans and the British Tommies slaughtered all round them [...]”<sup>38</sup> The continued transmission of stories from the revolutionary period shows the importance attached to it in the community where Behan grew up, as

<sup>35</sup> Maeve Brennan, “The Day We Got Our Own Back,” in *The Springs of Affection*, 25. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>36</sup> Brendan Behan, “The Family Was in the Rising,” in *A Bit of a Writer*, 234.

<sup>37</sup> Brendan Behan, “Over the Northside I Was a Chisler,” in *A Bit of a Writer*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Behan, “Over the Northside I Was a Chisler,” 23.

well as by the writer himself later in his life. Moreover, this account illustrates how Northern Dubliners united to help those in need, which is something that Behan repeatedly returns to in his press contributions, especially when advocating for his birthplace. Raised in 14 Russell Street, a tenement house in North Dublin, he later moved with his family to the suburban area in Crumlin, 70 Kildare Street.<sup>39</sup> Behan remembers his first home as a place that factory girls would not want to admit to living in but where children enjoyed a freedom to play together in the streets<sup>40</sup> – in stark contrast to Brennan’s memories of seclusion inside her house or its garden. In Behan’s writing generally, there is express pride in his Northside origins, and people described as “Northside men”<sup>41</sup> are automatically considered reliable based on this origin.

Brennan’s parents came from County Wexford, and she grew up in the Dublin area of Rathmines, 10 Belgrave Road, and later in 48 Cherryfield Avenue, Ranelagh.<sup>42</sup> A publicly active woman in her youth, Úna became a suburban housewife in the new, conservative era that came with Irish independence. Maeve’s writing about childhood is often set inside the family house, where her mother navigates difficult social situations mostly on her own, surrounded by (up to) four children. Unexpected visitors disturb them from time to time, and even buying apples can become a torturous trap, as reflected in “The Old Man of the Sea” (1955). Feeling sorry for an old man that none of her neighbours want to buy apples from, Úna slowly descends into a vicious cycle of guilt and shame, manipulated by the apple-seller into buying his overpriced goods. The old man becomes a lecherous presence as the story develops, with the implication that his venture is a scam. At the same time, Southern Dublin appears unfriendly, comprised of family units alienated one from another and uninterested in others.<sup>43</sup>

Both “The Day We Got Our Own Back” and “The Old Man of the Sea” are among several life-writing pieces that Brennan published in *The New Yorker* in the 1950s. They differ from her other Dublin-based prose by first-person narration, absence of fictitious names (compared to her Bagot and Derdon short stories), and they are very brief. In her discussion of the autobiographical nature of these pieces, Bourke asks “[h]ow much of what Maeve wrote is true?” and provides some context: “indeed [*The New Yorker*] had pioneered various kinds of writing that lay between fiction and fact, and often published reminiscence or memoir at the back, just before the film and theatre reviews. ‘The Day We Got Our Own Back’ [...] was

<sup>39</sup> Brannigan, “Introduction,” xiv-xv.

<sup>40</sup> Behan, “Over the Northside I Was a Chisler,” 21, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Behan, “Journey to the Jewel of Wicklow,” 18.

<sup>42</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 7-77.

<sup>43</sup> Maeve Brennan, “The Old Man of the Sea,” in *The Springs of Affection*, 9-17.

one such piece."<sup>44</sup> Two years later, "The Old Man of the Sea" was published in this section of the magazine as well. Complete veracity is unlikely, as Maeve was a small child when these events occurred, and Bourke further adds that these contributions "are not so much a true account of what happened in the past as an expression of what she needed to or wanted to say at the time she wrote."<sup>45</sup>

Where Behan freely jumps between his childhood memories and his present self in the *Irish Press* contributions, Brennan adheres to a strict division of the present and the past. While the life-writing pieces discussed so far only feature her as a child in Ireland, her Long-Winded writing, on the other hand, never makes allusions to her origins – with one exception discussed below. This compartmentalisation of Brennan's Irish-set and New-York-set writing has been linked by Bourke to the writer's move to the US as a teenager, "by far the biggest upheaval" in Brennan's life, and one that created a "hinge between the self she was as a child in Ireland and the woman she became."<sup>46</sup> However, Brennan's traumatic memories of Irish religious institutions bridge this gap. Her parents could afford to send their children to a boarding school, and Brennan's writing thus also captures the fact that such institutions were primarily run by the Catholic Church at the time. While the writer seems to have liked the nuns she knew in Dublin, her memories of the Cross and Passion College in County Kildare are of a similar quality as those of the house raids. In the story "The Devil in Us" (1954), she remembers the strong experience of shame and guilt that she was made to feel in the convent school, and how randomly children would be singled out as "sinners." Enrolling at the age of twelve,<sup>47</sup> Maeve left the school before the end of her second year there, according to Bourke<sup>48</sup> (while Brennan herself refers to "years"<sup>49</sup> spent in the institution).

In a rare case of stitching together her New York persona of the Long-Winded Lady and her Irish childhood self, Brennan describes the haunting memories of the boarding school in "Lessons and Lessons and Then More Lessons" from 1979 (one of only a few pieces published after the 1960s). We find the Lady sitting comfortably in her favourite restaurant: "I was such a faithful customer that a martini usually appeared on the table while I was still arranging my books in the order in which I would look at them." (177) Suddenly, she notices nuns in the

<sup>44</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 92.

<sup>45</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 92.

<sup>46</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 115.

<sup>47</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 96.

<sup>48</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Maeve Brennan, "Lessons and Lessons and Then More Lessons," in *The Long-Winded Lady*, 178. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

street outside – a common sight in Dublin, but a rarity in the streets of New York, she explains, adding:

There was a time, during the years I spent in a convent boarding school and for many years afterwards, when the sight of a nun would fill me with apprehensiveness and dislike, and I was glad then, sitting by that restaurant window, to know those years were gone.

(178)

However, she is proven wrong as soon as the women decide to enter the restaurant. Watching them closely, the Lady makes a startling realisation: “The menu was still in my left hand, tilted up, as I had been holding it, but my right hand, with the empty martini glass in it, had somehow gone under the table and was hiding there behind the tablecloth.” (180)

Although Behan was also taught at school by the clergy, none of his writing thematises such lingering of bad memories. We might link this to censorship in Ireland, but Behan’s attitude seems overall positive, as “The School by the Canal” (1955) is entirely devoted to fond reminiscences of St Vincent’s School in North William Street, which he attended as a child. What is more, Behan signs off on this December piece with a request for money donations for the adjacent orphanage.<sup>50</sup>

### Chroniclers of Ordinary Life

The last large theme that can be productively analysed in the press prose of both writers is their tendency to observe and chronicle various human interactions, with special attention to the mundane and marginal(ised). In 1960, two years after *Borstal Boy* had been published and immediately banned in Ireland, Behan spoke of his countrymen as “not my audience” but rather the “raw material”<sup>51</sup> for his work. The latter is certainly true in a very general sense, and this section will provide many examples; however, there is also no doubt that with the *Irish Press* pieces, Behan had primarily an Irish readership in mind. In “The Road to Lyon” from 1954, for instance, the writer goes as far as to mock an American man’s poor knowledge of Dublin geography. First, Behan volunteers the information that his “mother had cooked a meal for W. B. Yeats in Madame Mac Bride’s [*sic*] house in Stephen’s Green, and that the poet turned up his nose to the parsnips.”<sup>52</sup> The

<sup>50</sup> Brendan Behan, “The School by the Canal,” in *A Bit of a Writer*, 325-28.

<sup>51</sup> Brannigan, “Introduction,” xii.

<sup>52</sup> Brendan Behan, “The Road to Lyon,” in *A Bit of a Writer*, 118-19.

American writes down "*Parsnips, attitude of Yeats to,*" and asks: "And you say he didn't like Stephen's Greens, either. Now, what sort of vegetable are they?"<sup>53</sup>

Enjoying Behan's column often presupposes a decent knowledge of Irish history and culture that goes beyond the basics of geography, as well as a significant interest in it. This is in tune with the overall style of *The Irish Press*. Founded by Republicans in 1931, including Éamon de Valera,<sup>54</sup> with the aid of funds collected among Irish citizens,<sup>55</sup> the newspaper was a daily periodical focused on contemporary Irish politics and culture. In his column, Behan's pride in the country is difficult to doubt, despite his many criticisms, and the contributions show the many facets of Ireland that the writer has encountered, from Belfast to the Aran Islands. He also writes about France or Britain from time to time, in both cases focusing on the places and the people he meets and the conversations he has. As a bilingual speaker, Behan had access to the Anglophone world as well as the Gaeltacht. While Brennan had the same language capacity, as she had become fluent in Irish before moving to the US,<sup>56</sup> she would have had little opportunity to use it in the States. In contrast, Behan converses with Irish speakers on his travels, translating most of what has been said to his readers. This made his column a source of information and anecdotes that many would not otherwise be able to access because of the language barrier. At the same time, Behan rarely wrote a piece where a few words or sentences in Irish would not slip in – usually without a translation. When describing his travels in France, the same is the case with French.<sup>57</sup>

Cultural and language exchange is thematised in "Travelling Folk Meet a Language Problem in the West" from 1953, where two English-speaking "tinkers" (Travellers) try to communicate with Bartle, an Irish speaker on the Aran Islands:

He [Bartle] went to the tinker at the gate, and having greeted him with goodbye, they set to business.

Bartle looked down at the tinker's raw materials. "I see you've plenty leather."

"Tass so," said the tinker, "you wants a pat?"

Bartle said he did not want a pot.

The tinker held one up. "This wan?"

Bartle shook his head. "Too big. I want a young one."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Behan, "The Road to Lyon," 119.

<sup>54</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 111-14.

<sup>55</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 95.

<sup>56</sup> Bourke, *Maeve Brennan*, 106.

<sup>57</sup> For a detailed discussion of the role of Irish in Behan's newspaper writings, as well as Behan's multilingualism, see the article by Radvan Markus in the present volume.

<sup>58</sup> Brendan Behan, "Travelling Folk Meet a Language Problem in the West," in *A Bit of a Writer*, 34.

Amused, Behan admires both sides' determined effort to bridge the language gap. The piece also documents in vivid colours the meeting of two minority cultures that have by now been largely transformed, that of the rural Gaeltacht with that of the Irish Travellers.

In stories with an urban setting, Behan devotes much space to reports of conversations between himself and the characters Bard, Crippen, Mrs Brenning,<sup>59</sup> and Maria Concepta. Meeting in pubs, these are veterans and their widows, and Behan is a listener to a larger extent than elsewhere. As Brannigan observes, "[t]here is a prevailing sense of nostalgia for the receding generations and communities of the early twentieth century – the rebels of 1916, the veterans of the Boer War and the First World War,"<sup>60</sup> in his writing. Told with many interruptions from those around the table, key historical events are recalled through short personal anecdotes and reminiscences. Left out of the textbooks, such stories and perspectives would have been lost when this generation was gone, save for the writing of those like Behan. Jeffs remembers: "He was always passionately interested in people and would remember how they acted, talked, looked and smelt down to the very last detail; and his memory was far more accurate than any camera."<sup>61</sup> Both Behan and the Long-Winded Lady often turn their gaze to the mundane, marginal, and overlooked, which they describe with meticulous attention to detail. As Brannigan explains with respect to the former, he was "a collector and teller of stories," valuing those about famous people to the same extent as those about his family and neighbours.<sup>62</sup> This is even more true about Brennan, who seemed genuinely disinterested in the celebrities that she occasionally met in Manhattan. "I like seeing movie stars as I go on my way around the city,"<sup>63</sup> she explains in "Movie Stars at Large" (1960). But to her, their value is in casting a long shadow: "I like recognising them and knowing who they are and knowing that just by being where I am they make me invisible – a face in the crowd, another pair of staring eyes."<sup>64</sup> Hiding in the glow of a film star, the Lady can carry on with her *flânerie* unobserved. Unlike Behan, who interacts with people in a deliberate manner, often and with enjoyment, Brennan's *flâneuse* strives to remain out of sight.

<sup>59</sup> This is Behan's nickname for a Mrs Brennan, who seems to be a soldier's widow and bears no resemblance to Maeve Brennan, her mother, or her sisters Emer and Derry. A different woman with this surname, a Mrs John Brennan, also appears briefly in "Advice from an Emigrant" (1955), in *A Bit of a Writer*, 277-79, but there is no connection to Maeve Brennan's family either.

<sup>60</sup> Brannigan, "Introduction," xiii.

<sup>61</sup> Jeffs, *Brendan Behan*, 17.

<sup>62</sup> Brannigan, "Introduction," xiii-iv.

<sup>63</sup> Maeve Brennan, "Movie Stars at Large," in *The Long-Winded Lady*, 88.

<sup>64</sup> Brennan, "Movie Stars at Large," 88.



Both Behan and Brennan also commented on the rebuilding of their respective cities, once more with attention to people and their lives. Brennan conscientiously mapped the tearing down of old buildings in New York, expressing distrust and fear concerning the city's ongoing metamorphosis. A constant threat that one of the Lady's favourite cafés or restaurants will be forced to close down, due to the whole street being demolished, keeps hanging in the air in many pieces. She also worries about the people currently living in the city, drawing attention to the lonely and the poor. There is often a stark contrast between the fashionable establishments the Lady frequents and the surrounding New York streets. She keeps her distance from beggars and strange individuals walking by, but she often writes about them, thematising guilt over the social gap between herself and the less fortunate. In "Giving Money in the Street" (1960), she passionately argues against those who withhold money for fear of being deceived:

I say that I would rather give the quarter and walk on free than not give it and pay out the rest of the day, or even an hour or ten minutes of the day, in doubt: should I have given it after all, the chances are surely fifty percent against the person's being a fraud, and so on.<sup>65</sup>

In Behan's column, much less attention is paid to beggars and people without a home. However, injustice is thematised throughout, especially as regards the working class. In "A Word for the Brave Conductor" (1955), the writer takes a stance in favour of bus drivers and dustmen: "I'm sorry to say that all of us are inclined to be unreasonable with public servants who are, after all, not paid to be public doormats."<sup>66</sup> Behan also saw the modernisation of Dublin, especially the slum areas, in a positive light and as a necessity. In "Dublin Is Grand in the Sun" from 1955, he explains:

The new houses at St Anne's Estate in Clontarf made me feel so proud that when a foreign newspaperman asked me what he should see I wanted to bring him here. (He wasn't having any; it wasn't what he came for.)<sup>67</sup>

The fact that visitors rather prefer the status quo is also mentioned in "What Are They at with the Rotunda?" (1954), where Behan counters: "Let them tear the whole lot down and build new modern flats for the people."<sup>68</sup> Arguing that the

<sup>65</sup> Maeve Brennan, "Giving Money in the Street," in *The Long-Winded Lady*, 142.

<sup>66</sup> Brendan Behan, "A Word for the Brave Conductor," in *A Bit of a Writer*, 312.

<sup>67</sup> Brendan Behan, "Dublin Is Grand in the Sun," in *A Bit of a Writer*, 242.

<sup>68</sup> Brendan Behan, "What Are They at with the Rotunda?" in *A Bit of a Writer*, 134.

Dubliners' welfare should be reason enough not to conserve the city as a history museum, Behan also brings attention to the social inequality that is present in its current architecture:

The Wide Streets Commissioners built well in their day for a class that only allowed the ancestors of the later inhabitants into their beautiful homes as servants. But let Ireland, building for its own people, do the best that modern technique can do for them.<sup>69</sup>

Different delineations appear in Brennan's and Behan's writing about people and urban architecture. While the former is usually separated from the less fortunate by an invisible wall, the latter doesn't hesitate to engage in conversation with anybody he meets. However, both writers share a focus on the mundane and also on the unjust, and although expressed in different ways, their sense of compassion is comparable.

## **Conclusion**

Just as their parents may have known each other from the Dublin Republican circles (although there is no evidence of this as yet), Behan theoretically could have met Brennan when he visited New York in the 1960s. While such an encounter probably never took place, this essay has attempted to create a conversation between their writing, similar yet different in a variety of aspects. Through their use of irony, Brennan and Behan both subtly thematise their insecure positions as writers – the former as a woman, albeit socially privileged, in a predominantly male profession, and the latter as a working-class Irishman. Both grew up in Republican families, which partly shaped their experience of Ireland, especially as children. Some of the writing addresses personal and collective memories of traumatic events in modern Irish history, especially relating to the revolutionary period (personal particularly in Brennan's case, and collective in Behan's). Brennan's prose also comments with disapproval on the Catholic educational system in Ireland. Most significantly, the two writers share a deep interest in other people and their lives, with special attention to ordinary and marginalised groups and individuals. While Behan would chronicle interactions between Dubliners, including war veterans and those he met during his travels around Ireland and Europe, Brennan focused on New Yorkers, reporting mostly from a distance, yet meticulously and with compassion.

<sup>69</sup> Behan, "What Are They at with the Rotunda?" 134.

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Mike Stoddart for bringing my attention to Maeve Brennan and for providing invaluable insights into her writing.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Behan, Brendan. "Dublin Is Grand in the Sun." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 241-42. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "The Family Was in the Rising." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 234-37. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "How Sorry They Are to Return." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 158-61. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "Journey to the Jewel of Wicklow." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 16-19. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "Over the Northside I Was a Chisler." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 20-25. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "The Road to Lyon." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 118-21. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "The School by the Canal." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 325-28. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "These Fishermen Publicise Gaelic at Its Best." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 29-31. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "To the Mountains Bound." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 3-6. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "Travelling Folk Meet a Language Problem in the West." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 32-34. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "What Are They at with the Rotunda?" In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 133-36. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Behan, Brendan. "A Word for the Brave Conductor." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, 311-13. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.

- Bourke, Angela. *Maeve Brennan: Wit, Style and Tragedy. An Irish Writer in New York*. London: Pimlico, 2005.
- Brannigan, John. "Introduction." In *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan, xi-xx. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023.
- Brennan, Maeve. "The Day We Got Our Own Back." In Maeve Brennan, *The Springs of Affection: Stories of Dublin*, 27-32. London: Flamingo, 2000.
- Brennan, Maeve. "Giving Money in the Street." In Maeve Brennan, *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from the New Yorker*, 142-43. Dublin: The Stinging Fly, 2017.
- Brennan, Maeve. "Lessons and Lessons and Then More Lessons." In Maeve Brennan, *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from the New Yorker*, 177-80. Dublin: The Stinging Fly, 2017.
- Brennan, Maeve. "Movie Stars at Large." In Maeve Brennan, *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from the New Yorker*, 87-92. Dublin: The Stinging Fly, 2017.
- Brennan, Maeve. "The Old Man of the Sea." In Maeve Brennan, *The Springs of Affection: Stories of Dublin*, 9-17. London: Flamingo, 2000.
- Brennan, Maeve. "A Young Lady with a Lap." In Maeve Brennan, *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from the New Yorker*, 65-68. Dublin: The Stinging Fly, 2017.
- Jeffs, Rae. *Brendan Behan: Man and Showman*. London: Hutchinson & Co, 1966.
- Maxwell, William. "Introduction." In Maeve Brennan, *The Springs of Affection: Stories of Dublin*, 1-14. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- McKeon, Belinda. "Introduction." In Maeve Brennan, *The Long-Winded Lady: Notes from the New Yorker*, xi-xviii. Dublin: The Stinging Fly, 2017.
- Peters, Ann. "A Traveler in Residence: Maeve Brennan and the Last Days of New York." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3/4 (2005): 66-89.