

## INTRODUCTION: BRENDAN BEHAN AT 100

Nathalie Lamprecht and Ondřej Pilný

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The year 2023 marked the centenary of playwright, prose writer, poet, and rebel Brendan Behan's birth. In celebration of this occasion, numerous events were held all year round, once again reaffirming Behan's status as a cult figure. These included a series of radio and television programmes by the Irish national broadcaster RTÉ, as well as the establishment of an online index by RTÉ featuring earlier Behan-related material; "100 Years of Brendan Behan," an evening of songs, readings, and conversations about the man's life, work, and legacy at the International Literature Festival Dublin, curated by Donal Fallon, historian and host of the popular podcast *Three Castles Burning*; an extensive online exhibition by the Centre Culturel Irlandais focusing on Behan's time and connections in Paris; a production of *Mother of All the Behans*, adapted from Brian Behan's book of the same name by Peter Sheridan, at the Mermaid County Wicklow Arts Centre, starring Imelda May; an episode of the EFACIS Irish Itinerary Podcast in which film maker and theatre director Alan Gilsenan discussed his documentary *An Buachaill Gealgháireach (The Laughing Boy)*, as well as Behan's legacy in Greece and Ireland; and a number of articles in the press published around Behan's birthday, comprising retrospectives of his life and art. Notably, most of the commemorative acts performed throughout the centenary year attempted to redress the imbalance between Behan's public image and his status as a writer. After all, it has often been lamented that the writer Behan, highly skilled and insightful as he was, has been overshadowed by the drinker and pop culture icon Behan.

Three contributions to the centenary celebrations have played a particular role in shedding new light on Behan's public perception. From 10 March to 15 October 2023, the Museum of Literature Ireland hosted an installation titled "The Holy Hour: A Requiem for Brendan Behan," curated by author Pat McCabe, a long-time admirer of Behan's writing. Evoking Roman Catholic liturgy, the installation

comprised an immersive audio-visual experience, inviting its visitors to sit on a set of church pews. One of these sported a memorial plaque for Charlie Millwall, a character in Behan's autobiographical novel *Borstal Boy*, where he features as the main character Brendan's closest confidante and love interest. When seated in the pews, the audience looked directly at an altar piece, designed by Irish illustrator Lucy Smyth, which featured a central image of Behan, flanked on both sides by Charlie Millwall and his wife Beatrice. To both sides of the altar, a looping video featuring text and imagery was screened, accompanied by a dramatic reading of the script of "The Holy Hour" written by McCabe. This script – published in the exhibition booklet – offered multiple perspectives, including Beatrice Behan's: "I never saw him happier than he was in those days that we spent down the west. There was no drink – just art."<sup>1</sup> A few pages on, the text continues: "There was only one thing I ever truly cared about, Charlie. Beatrice knew it – and maybe so did you. Young as we were, maybe so did you."<sup>2</sup> While the entire installation thus highlighted the importance of the two great romantic relationships of Behan's life, it brought forth most strongly his true dedication: writing. Through the combination of text, sound, and imagery, it achieved its principal goal, "to celebrate the writer Brendan Behan, and to explore his life as an artist and a sensitive thinker, beyond the media depictions and showmanship of his success."<sup>3</sup>

In April 2023, The Lilliput Press published *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, edited by John Brannigan. Aiming "to show Behan's devotion to writing and his passion for people,"<sup>4</sup> the collection brought together, for the first time, all of Behan's articles written for *The Irish Press*, as well as a few published elsewhere. Expertly introduced by Brannigan, the volume exceeds in size all others published under the name Brendan Behan and forms an important extension of the Behan oeuvre. As the editor notes, the fact that Behan was asked to write a regular column for a major newspaper such as *The Irish Press* early in his career "is evidence of the impact that Behan had already had as a young writer."<sup>5</sup> This column sustained him, both creatively and financially, while he refined his

1 Pat McCabe, *The Holy Hour: A Requiem for Brendan Behan* (Dublin: Museum of Literature Ireland, 2023), 18.

2 McCabe, *The Holy Hour*, 24.

3 Simon O'Connor, Director of MoLI, in a speech at the exhibition launch, quoted in Melissa Carton, "MoLI Celebrates Brendan Behan's Centenary with New Exhibition," *Only Massive*, 10 February 2023, <https://onlymassive.ie/2023/02/10/moli-celebrates-brendan-behan-centenary-with-new-exhibition/>.

4 John Brannigan, "Acknowledgements," in *A Bit of a Writer: Brendan Behan's Collected Short Prose*, ed. John Brannigan (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2023), ix.

5 John Brannigan, "Introduction," in *A Bit of a Writer*, xi.

three main works, *The Quare Fellow* (1956), *The Hostage* (1958), and *Borstal Boy* (1958). The period of time during which the column was published (1953-1956) in fact began what was to be Behan's most sustained stretch of writing. The articles themselves, Brannigan indicates, are an homage to the working-class community of Behan's childhood, to Dublin and its people, to Ireland, Paris, and the times in which the author lived. They give insight as well into his own development as a writer, or his views on the changes made to Dublin's cityscape in the mid-century and their impact on its ordinary inhabitants. Indeed, Brannigan goes so far as to reframe Behan's writing for the newspaper as folk writing, calling him "a collector and teller of stories."<sup>6</sup> By recovering a hitherto neglected section of Behan's oeuvre, Brannigan's collection has done much to open up new avenues for scholarship.

Finally, from 24 November 2023 to 27 January 2024, Dublin's Abbey Theatre staged a rendition of *The Quare Fellow*, under the direction of Tom Creed. To some, this felt like a belated attempt of the national theatre to acknowledge Behan's contribution to the canon of Irish drama, since the production had not been announced until late in the centenary year. Be that as it may, its scheduling made it reach into the seventieth anniversary year of the play's premiere at the Pike Theatre in 1954. Initially rejected by the Abbey and staged there only after its resounding success in Joan Littlewood's production in London (1956), Behan's treatise against capital punishment now appeared at the national theatre almost forty years from its last presentation there in 1984. In this most recent production however, the all-male cast of characters was played exclusively by female and non-binary actors. Delivering an excellent rendition of *The Quare Fellow* and "continuing Behan's legacy of subversion,"<sup>7</sup> this cast showed the relevance the play holds to this day. While capital punishment, at least in most of Europe including Ireland, has long been abolished, the heterogenous cast of actors exemplified the diversity of Irish society today. Sporting different accents and body shapes, the cast spanned several generations, ethnicities, genders, and acting backgrounds, reflecting on the fact that anyone could end up in prison as a result of just one bad decision. The impact such a decision could have on someone's life, to this day, is highly dependent on their social class, as Behan pointed out seventy years ago, as well as race. The inhumanity of the prison and police systems are issues as pressing now as they were in the 1950s. The play's already strong *Verfremdungseffekt* was further enhanced by the actors' brilliantly styled drag

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

<sup>7</sup> Brendan Behan, *The Quare Fellow*, dir. Tom Creed, Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 24 November 2023 – 27 January 2024, accessed 17 June 2024, <https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/whats-on/the-quare-fellow/>.

costumes, carefully put together by costume designer Catherine Fay and hair and makeup artist Val Sherlock, reminding the audience of their role as voyeurs on the one hand, and further underlining the diversity of the confined characters on the other. Moreover, in the context of the equality campaign set in motion by *Waking the Feminists* in 2015, staging a gender-bent version of a play that features no female characters at the national theatre bore a vital message as well. As Gina Moxley, the actor portraying Neighbour, remarks in the production's programme: "It's an unexpected privilege to be with this gorgeous company squirreling our way into the sacred canon, getting to the heart of this play."<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, Behan's work has always tethered along the edges of that "sacred canon," not least because of his use of queer themes as well as his own queer identity – as appropriately highlighted in Tom Creed's challenging take on *The Quare Fellow*, which brought the centenary year to a poignant end.

What all three of these contributions to the memorialisation of Behan have shown is that now, more than ever, it is important to remember Brendan Behan for his work, which is insightful, funny, heartbreaking, and honest throughout. After all, being a writer was his lifelong ambition. He wrote from early childhood until he could no longer physically do so; in 1977, Colbert Kearney argued that Behan "had always had literary ambitions and, like many other prisoners, he found that the discipline of life in jail afforded the time and the concentration necessary for composition."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, during his four years in Mountjoy Prison, Arbour Hill, and the Curragh Camp the author fought ferociously to gain the right to have his work published,<sup>10</sup> even promising not to touch upon "controversial matters (politics, Irish prisoners, etc.)."<sup>11</sup> It would, however, take his release under general amnesty and his departure for Paris for his writing to truly flourish, which might be because he did in fact touch upon these contentious subjects. The desire to become a serious writer, however, entailed a change of approach to politics; as Behan reported to his close friend, editor, and collaborator Rae Jeffs:

I stopped trying to find political solutions and began seriously to write. I don't argue the political issues involved between England and Ireland any more. In my work, I try to mirror what happens to the people involved and leave it to the literary intelligentsia to expound their own theories afterwards.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Gina Moxley, "Performing *The Quare Fellow*," in Brendan Behan, *The Quare Fellow*, Abbey Theatre programme (Dublin: Abbey Theatre, 2023), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Colbert Kearney, *The Writings of Brendan Behan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1997), 86-120.

<sup>11</sup> O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 107.

<sup>12</sup> Rae Jeffs, *Brendan Behan: Man and Showman* (London: Corgi, 1968), 33.

Despite Behan's relative visibility in the public space, the attention of the "literary intelligentsia" to his work has been marginal at best during the centenary year. The situation has continued a regrettable trend of the last decades: while a few notable academic publications on Behan have appeared, particularly John Brannigan's *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer* (2002) and John McCourt's edited collection *Reading Brendan Behan* (2019), scholars have mostly stayed away from the innovative, challenging author who ranked among the most celebrated playwrights in global terms in the 1950s and 1960s. Behan's popularity has been amply attested in studies of his life: in *A Bit of a Writer*, Brannigan lists sixteen biographies under "Further Reading."<sup>13</sup> However, the same list includes only ten works of criticism; apart from a special issue of the *Irish University Review* edited by Brannigan himself in 2014 and the two monographs mentioned above, most other major critical sources on Behan date from the 1960s-1980s. With only two full-length plays, one autobiographical novel, and a handful of short stories to bolster Behan's claim to fame, scholars have perhaps tacitly assumed that there was little to add to existing research.

Believing that this indeed was not the case, the Centre for Irish Studies at Charles University, Prague hosted the international conference "Brendan Behan at 100: Legacy and New Directions" in June 2023, bringing together scholars from Ireland, France, Austria, the USA, and the Czech Republic. The articles gathered in the present issue of *Litteraria Pragensia* were prompted by the conference. Some initiate new approaches to the oeuvre and indicate their potential, such as genetic readings of Behan's manuscripts or comparative studies with contemporaries. Other contributions focus on those of his writings that historically did not manage to draw the same attention as *The Quare Fellow*, *The Hostage*, and *Borstal Boy* – the newspaper writings, short stories, or Behan's elaborations of songs and his singing – while often demonstrating that much of importance may still be added to what we know about Behan's life.

In the first essay, John Brannigan argues for the significance of Behan's newspaper writings as an integral part of his oeuvre, discussing in how far they are part of a late modernist negotiation between the status of the writer as artist, social commentator, and person in need of an income. Questioning the dichotomy between art and the ephemeral nature of the daily press, Brannigan traces critical attitudes towards newspaper writing, concluding that the newspaper itself was a modernist work, bringing together texts and images concerning all matter of things in one place, exemplifying in its apparent chaos the simultaneity of modernity. Analysing a number of the articles collected in *A Bit of a Writer*,

<sup>13</sup> John Brannigan, "Further Reading," in *A Bit of a Writer*, xxi-xxii.

Brannigan shows that Behan in these short prose texts characterises himself both as a serious literary author, albeit always in a self-deprecating manner, and a working-class labourer, dependent on precarious employment as a housepainter. He further argues that for Behan, turning to newspaper writing was not only an economic decision, but also one importantly grounded in his own quandary concerning the place of the artist in postwar society.

Also examining Behan's journalistic output, Radvan Markus focuses on his articles in the Irish language, as well as the role of Irish in Behan's English-language contributions to *The Irish Press*. Markus argues the case for Behan as a "fundamentally multilingual writer" whose work is characterised by heteroglossia; as he demonstrates, the Irish language in particular served Behan as a "hybrid interface" that enabled him to reach across various cultural and social divides, building bridges between Ireland and France, Irish Catholics and Protestants, and ultimately also between Ireland and England.

Brian Ó Conchubhair brings to the fore new research on Behan's relationship to and skills in the Irish language. Instead of reinforcing the myth that Behan acquired his Irish when incarcerated in Ireland in the 1940s, Ó Conchubhair traces the author's proficiency in the language back to his school days in North Dublin. Dismissing the idea that Irish was not part of the inner-city, working-class community, he brings forth evidence that Behan had attained considerable competence in the language by the time he ever got to prison, due to his immersion in Irish at school as well as his innate talent for language and devotion to self-study. The essay further discusses how this new knowledge challenges stereotypes regarding the culture and diversity of Dublin's inner city on the one hand, and those pertaining to Irish speakers on the other. As an urban, working-class speaker of Irish, Behan continued to poke fun at the elitist image of Irish speakers as coming exclusively from the West of Ireland or the middle class.

Developing her research on Behan's time in Paris in the late 1940s and 1950s, Deirdre McMahon details the strong ties he forged with several well-known writers and thinkers based there at the time, as well as emphasising the influence of French literary trends on his writing, particularly the then current discussions of existentialism. To Behan, Paris offered the freedom to express himself openly and explore themes such as homosexuality, social justice, imprisonment, and Republican violence in his work. Where Dublin had left him disillusioned, the reality of the Republican movement in post-independence Ireland simply not living up to his socialist ideals, Paris not only promised revolutionary and Resistance spirit, but also the opportunity to hone his craft and get published. Apart from examining the relationships Behan built with Sindbad Vail, Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, and other members of the Paris intelligentsia, McMahon

offers new insights into Behan's short stories "After the Wake" and "Bridewell Revisited," first published by Vail in his *Points* magazine but censored in their later versions, as well as "The Execution," a short story manuscript written in Paris which foreshadows Behan's discussion of structural and systemic violence in his later work.

Nathalie Lamprecht also focuses on Behan's short stories in her contribution, showing that despite the popular preconception, his oeuvre is not one devoid of female characters. Rather, she argues, the women of Behan, as portrayed in his short stories "The Last of Mrs. Murphy," "The Confirmation Suit," "After the Wake," and "A Woman of No Standing" may be viewed as representative of the wider mid-century working-class community, reflecting both its positive and negative aspects. In the first two stories, Behan depicts women as boisterous, unconventional, yet surprisingly caring. He creates in them powerful rulers over urban home and hearth, while never forgetting that they are far removed from the idealised image of rural Irish womanhood promoted by the Irish state. In the latter two stories, Behan depicts women in harmful situations, caused by the repressive systems of their time and place. Generally, he shows that these women fall outside any established gender norms, but he does so in a non-judgemental, empathetic way. This, the essay indicates, is the strength of Behan's short fiction.

Klára Witzany Hutková pioneers a comparative study of Behan with a female prose writer of the same era. Maeve Brennan – another sadly neglected author – shared a Republican upbringing with Behan, although she eventually moved to the United States in her late teens and spent the rest of her life mostly in New York City. Like Behan, Brennan dedicated much of her career to writing a regular column. Analysing their periodical publications, the article focuses, in particular, on short life-writing pieces published by Behan in *The Irish Press* and by Brennan in *The New Yorker* in the 1950s-1960s, discussing the authors' use of irony in response to their marginal position as writers (working-class and female respectively) and their reflections on traumatic moments in modern Irish history. As Witzany Hutková argues, Behan and Brennan both come across strongly as socially aware and compassionate chroniclers of ordinary people's lives.

Performing a genetic analysis of Behan's *The Quare Fellow*, James Little emphasises the collaborative nature of Behan's dramatic writing. Examining Carolyn Swift's papers and other archival sources, Little demonstrates why credit is due to Swift, who greatly influenced the final version of the play, and indicates that her role would nowadays be that of a dramaturge helping an inexperienced dramatist achieve efficiency. He then scrutinises several sections of the play's prompt copy, highlighting how the edits introduced by Swift made the play stageable in the restrictive atmosphere of Ireland. As the article shows, however,

censoring some of its violent scenes and gory descriptions has also mellowed the play's message regarding the abolishment of capital punishment. Little concludes his essay by asserting the need for a new edition of Behan's collected plays that would be based on rigorous textual scholarship, contextualising the plays' geneses, as well as acknowledging the significant changes made to the texts between their conception, their staging, and their publication.

Finally, David Livingstone turns his attention to Behan and music. That Behan was an accomplished singer with a wide repertoire, who was prone to burst into song at social gatherings, is well known. However, scholars have rarely examined the songs that he wrote or those he performed and often elaborated upon. Focusing, in particular, on material featured in *The Hostage*, Livingstone examines the 1960 recording *Brendan Behan Sings Irish Folk Songs and Ballads* made by Arthur and Luce Klein for their label Spoken Arts Inc. Detailing the alterations made by Behan on the occasion and unpicking his accompanying commentary, the article shows that the recording not only provides additional insight into the songs' inclusion in the play, but also sees Behan take a bold position on colonialism, racism, and homophobia. As Livingstone argues, "[t]here is a great deal of seriousness and wisdom behind the superficial buffoonery."

The editors hope that the present collection assists in rekindling critical interest in one of Ireland's finest twentieth-century writers, indicating new directions for research that significantly transcend the ceaselessly perpetuated image of Behan as the boisterous, permanently inebriated raconteur who somehow happened to pen a couple of dramatic masterpieces.

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