

# BRENDAN BEHAN AND THE IRISH LANGUAGE: A RECONSIDERATION<sup>1</sup>

Brian Ó Conchubhair

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**Abstract:** Brendan Behan played a crucial role in challenging the prevailing rural aesthetic that dominated Irish letters in the 1940s and 1950s. Like Máirtín Ó Cadhain and Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen, Behan maintained a vexed, and complicated relationship with the Irish language, Irish-language institutions and pressure groups. This essay reconsiders Behan's relationship with the Irish language and explores some common assumptions to argue that in his life and writing, he successfully and repeatedly challenges and contradicts facile stereotypes and binary opposites about Irish life, culture, and people.

**Keywords:** Brendan Behan, nationalism, Irish Republicanism, social class, stereotypes, prison, language acquisition

No, I always wanted to be a writer... The idea that I became a writer in jail is fallacious. Nobody becomes a writer in prison. The only kind of writer you become in prison is a bad writer.<sup>2</sup>

A reconsideration of when, where, and how Brendan Behan acquired Irish is overdue. To present him as literary Ireland's 'bit of rough,' as an inner-city urchin with little or no Irish that came, accidentally or fortuitously, under Máirtín Ó Cadhain's spell

<sup>1</sup> The author is greatly indebted to Nathalie Lamprecht and Ondřej Pilný in particular, as well as the peer reviewer who made several telling suggestions. This essay builds and draws on important work pertaining to Behan and the Irish language by several scholars, not least of whom include Riona Ní Fhrighil, Declan Kiberd, Cliona Ní Ríordáin, and Micheál Mac Craith.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvère Lotringer, "The Thin Man: An Interview with Brendan Behan," *Field Day Review* 1 (2005): 11.

in prison denies not only Behan's heritage and upbringing, but Dublin's inner city's cultural richness and diversity. The most important state institutions in Brendan Behan's formation were less state prisons, such as Arbor Hill, Mountjoy, and the Curragh, but rather the schools of North inner-city Dublin. As attractive as it may appear to present Behan as the product of prison radicalization – the romantic idea of the young prisoner discovering a new tradition in prison – the reality is more complicated and nuanced. Perhaps just as the 2023 production of *The Quare Fellow* by the Abbey Theatre explored the codes and hierarchies of life behind bars, we might explore the codes and hierarchies that colour our understanding of Behan's childhood, youth, and upbringing. Behan's life experience, no more than his texts, offers an opportunity to deconstruct closely-observed stereotypes and lends itself well to an irreverent, de-familiarized take on Irish society and history.

In his life and writing, he successfully and repeatedly challenges and contradicts facile stereotypes and binary opposites about Irish life, culture, and people. Behan is the inner-city slum boy who grew up to have

hilarious encounters with the Marx Brothers and Jackie Gleason. A young Bob Dylan chased him through Greenwich Village just to say hello, and Steve McQueen pursued him across Hollywood, intent on beating him up. He was invited to President Kennedy's inauguration – the address on the envelope simply read, 'Brendan Behan, Dublin' – but banned from taking part in the New York St Patrick's Day Parade for presenting the United States with a negative image of Irishness.<sup>3</sup>

Yet as a bi-sexual, multi-lingual, ex-political prisoner, North-side Dubliner, BBC and CBS TV celebrity, and West End and Broadway playwright, Behan – “the first Irish victim of the cult of celebrity”<sup>4</sup> – destabilizes monochromatic sterile depictions of Ireland and Irish culture in the 1940s and 1950s. His life story raises questions about common assumptions that present an Ireland paralyzed by religious traditionalism and material deprivation and beset with censorship, conservative Catholicism, and, inward thinking. To such an Ireland Behan offers a more nuanced and sophisticated image. His lived experience and written work challenge the image of a working-class boy from inner-city Dublin who underwent a transformative change in prison under the influence of a charismatic

<sup>3</sup> Paul Howard, “Brendan's Tragic Voyage: Behan in the USA: The Rise and Fall of the Most Famous Irishman in New York,” *Irish Times*, 17 May 2014, B11.

<sup>4</sup> Howard, “Brendan's Tragic Voyage,” B11.

figure. While Behan is often viewed as a case of Irish exceptionalism and the subject of critical intervention by elite cultural figures while in captivity, he in fact challenges many common assumptions and generalizations about mid-twentieth-century Ireland. Rather than force Behan's life into the standard national narrative, such assumptions should be revisited. This essay explores Behan's relationship with the Irish language and Irish-language literature, and questions various recurring tropes regarding his acquisition of the language. The role of the Irish language in his life and work is often, and mistakenly, coarsened into a binary opposition of Irish/English, Irish Republican/British Unionist, whereas in Behan's case, when more amply understood, it reveals much that is central to his work. Behan's life and work offer a lens through which to view the complexity of layered Irishness. Behan highlights the problems of such oversimplification, reductionism, and simplistic critique.<sup>5</sup>

A certain standard narrative persists that equates Behan's social origins and the young age at which he left formal education with a lack of knowledge and cultural awareness. Numerous 'received wisdoms' and 'factual givens' attend many discussions of Behan's life and his involvement with the Irish-language movement and the Gaeltacht. Even Richard Rankin Russell's implication that it was "natural" for an IRA prisoner such as Behan to engage with the Irish language and literary tradition although "his knowledge of both was not a mere veneer adopted to legitimize his political outlook at the time, as it was for some IRA prisoners" but born "of a real interest, and partly because of his temperament," is problematic.<sup>6</sup> Here, interest in the Irish language still equates with support of and involvement in violence directed against the State. These are two different things – which sometimes but not always – intersect. As with many aspects of human activity, there are degrees and shades to Irishness, while the "tyranny of the discontinuous mind," as Richard Dawkins phrases it, seeks a gratuitously manufactured discontinuity in a continuous reality or a continuous variable.<sup>7</sup> In this case, it conflates nationalism/Republicanism and the Irish language and draws on an underlying assumption that equates all IRA/political prisoners with language speakers or language learners, thus conflating the political struggle with

<sup>5</sup> Wei H. Kao, "Can Minorities Speak in Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*?" *Postcolonial Text* 13, no. 2 (2018): 5.

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Rankin Russell, "Brendan Behan's Lament for Gaelic Ireland: *The Quare Fellow*," *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 73-93.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Dawkins, "The Tyranny of the Discontinuous Mind," *The New Statesman*, 9 December 2011.

the language struggle.<sup>8</sup> Raymond J. Porter, among many, attributes Behan's Irish-language ability to study during "his sojourn in Irish prisons,"<sup>9</sup> while Colbert Kearney observes the fortuity that Behan's time in Mountjoy and the Curragh connected him with a number of learned Irish speakers and also coincided with a renewed impetus in Irish-language literature.<sup>10</sup> These tropes, to a greater or lesser degree, appear in a wide variety of essays focusing on Behan (including Russell's excellent essay, as quoted above); they correlate Behan's interest in and usage of the Irish language to his Republican beliefs and attribute its causation to the latter.<sup>11</sup>

In Arbour Hill prison, the story goes, he encounters Sean Ó Briain, a native Irish speaker from Kerry with whom he shared a cell,<sup>12</sup> who either teaches or improves Behan's command of Irish to native-speaker level.<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, once transferred to Cell/Hut 8 at the Curragh Camp, Behan meets fellow prisoner and native speaker Máirtín Ó Cadhain who again either teaches or improves his Irish and/or introduces him to Irish-language literature, including *The Midnight Court*, a text frequently cited in connection with Behan. Shortly after leaving the Curragh Camp in July 1943, Behan wrote some poetry, as well as a one-act radio play called *Casadh Súgáin Eile* (The Twisting of Another Rope). Inspired by Tommy Williams's state execution, the title punned on Douglas Hyde's well-known one-act play *Casadh an tSúgáin*. Subsequently, Gael Linn – a non-governmental national organization founded in 1953 to promote Irish – sponsored his famous trip to the Aran Islands, where Irish served as the vernacular, and a location long associated with high-profile students and scholars. He ultimately, so it goes, becomes disillusioned and moves away from the language and writing in Irish.

While most accounts follow this narrative trajectory, some discrepancies exist. Ted E. Boyle states that Behan "largely on his own [...] gained an encyclopaedic knowledge of Irish history and of English and Irish literature. He also taught himself Irish so that he could read Gaelic literature," and while his "Gaelic was so good that he would write plays in it," his "spoken Irish may not have been as pure as that which he wrote, yet the fact that he could handle the language at all was

<sup>8</sup> Were this thesis accurate, the majority of War of Independence and Civil War combatants (i.e., Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil) would be Irish speakers. Such was not the case.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond J. Porter, *Brendan Behan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Colbert Kearney, "Filíocht Bhreandáin Uí Bheacháin," *Scríobh 3* (1978): 47.

<sup>11</sup> What is critical, but often glossed over, is that his family aligned themselves with the socialist wing of the Irish Republican movement.

<sup>12</sup> Ulick O'Connor, *Brendan Behan* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970), 115.

<sup>13</sup> Ó Briain is depicted as "a walking repository of the Munster Gaelic tradition, Ó Bruadair, Merriman, Ó Súilleabháin and others. He had a copy of Merriman's *Midnight Court* with him in prison." O'Connor, *Brendan Behan*, 79.

exceptional for a man of his background.”<sup>14</sup> Ulick O’Connor reports that in the Curragh Camp “he was almost indistinguishable from a native speaker.”<sup>15</sup>

When the imagined native speaker from the West of Ireland, immersed in the oral and vernacular traditions, a devout Catholic and nationalist, represented the ideal and the iconic, Behan offered an alternative. Like Flann O’Brien/Myles na gCopaleen, he was an urban Irish-language speaker, but unlike O’Brien, he hailed from the working-class inner city. Highly intelligent and largely self-educated, Behan possessed an innate proficiency for language; not only in English, or rather Hiberno-English, his native language, but also in Irish and French. Indeed, *The Irish Times* remarked that “he talks vigorous and idiomatic French”<sup>16</sup> and the 1962 LP record *Brendan Behan Sings Irish Folksongs and Ballads* contains two songs in Irish that reveal a perfect command of the *r caol* (the slender *r*) that serves as a shibboleth for membership of elite Irish speakers.

If Behan’s command and knowledge of the Irish language and its literary tradition does not originate from Mountjoy Prison or the Curragh Camp, where might its origins lie? His childhood exposed him to music and a vast repertoire of songs. His uncle Peadar Kearney and his brother Dominic – regardless of Bob Dylan’s opinion<sup>17</sup> – achieved fame as renowned song writers and singers. Behan’s mother, Kathleen, was a noted collector of songs and stories, while Stephen Behan also sang. The correlation between language-learning skills and musical aptitude is well attested. A significant correlation exists between grades in ‘foreign’ languages and music; learning skills based on rhythm, singing, and musical perception, as well as musical training enhance the phonological skills required for language acquisition.<sup>18</sup> Music and song formed part and parcel of the generational cultural capital the young Behan inherited from his family and its neighbourhood. As Kearney argues, “the gifts which people noticed in the young Brendan were those which would have facilitated language-learning: a fine ear, a prodigious memory and a talent for mimicry.”<sup>19</sup> Class-based images and

<sup>14</sup> Ted E. Boyle, *Brendan Behan* (New York: Twayne, 1969), 51.

<sup>15</sup> O’Connor, *Brendan Behan*, 82.

<sup>16</sup> “An Irishman’s Diary,” *The Irish Times*, 19 February 1955, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 213. See also D.A. Pennebaker’s documentary *Dont Look Back* (1967) and Roland Ellis, “May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1965: Dylan & Donovan,” *Gaslight Records*, <https://gaslightrecords.com/articles/dylan-donovan>.

<sup>18</sup> See P.M. Picciotti et al., “Correlation between Musical Aptitude and Learning Foreign Languages: An Epidemiological Study in Secondary School Italian Students,” *Acta Otorhinolaryngol Ital.* 38, no. 1 (2018): 51-55. DOI: 10.14639/0392-100X-1103.

<sup>19</sup> Colbert Kearney, *The Writings of Brendan Behan* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977), 47. Kearney also argues that Behan “was probably being falsely modest when he alluded to ‘the bit of Irish’ he knew as a result of his formal schooling.”

presumptions of the incongruity of positive cultural capital emerging from the economically depressed and culturally deprived Northern inner city need to be overcome.<sup>20</sup> Behan's parents, according to Kearney, knew but "a few words of Irish but they used them with pride, teaching their children to respect the language as an aspect of that national independence to which they were committed."<sup>21</sup> The folklore preserved in the Behan home parallels the rich oral tradition found among oral intellectuals in various cultures and it served not only as a conduit for Republican, nationalist and socialist history and ideologies, but as the foundation for a multilingual ability that – once cultivated – later flowered in Behan's poetry, dramatic writing, radio scripts and *Irish Press* articles.

In 1928, Behan – aged five – attended primary school, the first of many state institutions he frequented during his lifetime. Here, he encountered Sister Monica, among other nuns of whom he spoke fondly in later years. In 1934, aged eleven, he graduated to St. Canice's Secondary School on North Circular Road, and, in 1937, aged fourteen, his father enrolled him in an apprenticeship at Bolton Street Technical College. Behan attended these schools at the height of the nation-building project, including the so-called "gaelicization" of the educational system.<sup>22</sup> As the educational system had played a critical role in the nineteenth-century language shift, the new independent state sought to reverse-engineer the process by also availing of the same means. Infants were initially taught exclusively through Irish; later, after Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) protests, instruction in and through the medium of Irish occurred at least one hour

<sup>20</sup> See Irving Wardle, "The Sad Death of Brendan Behan," *The Observer*, 22 March 1964: "Behan was ill-equipped by upbringing to take care of his talent. His working-class childhood, with its motto of 'If you've got it, spend it,' followed by his war-time imprisonment for IRA activities, left him without any habit of self-discipline as a writer [...]." See also Ulick O'Connor who writes regarding the similarities between a Behan poem and an eighth-century text that despite the striking resemblances of alliteration and assonance, "[i]t is unlikely that Brendan could have read 'The Questing of Aitherne' as it was published in an obscure scholarly magazine. Much more probably he had absorbed the essence of Gaelic so thoroughly that he created Gaelic poetry in its original idiom without being conscious of it." O'Connor, *Brendan Behan*, 120. However, as Behan had recourse to Ludwig Christian Stern's German translation of Merriman's *Cúirt an mheadhóin oidhche*, published in the *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* (1905), it is not unreasonable to speculate that he may have had access to another Celtic studies journal.

<sup>21</sup> Kearney, *The Writings of Brendan Behan*, 46-47.

<sup>22</sup> See Séamas Ó Buachalla, "Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831 to 1981," *European Journal of Education* 19, no. 1 (1984): 75-92; John O'Callaghan, "Politics, Policy and History: History Teaching in Irish Secondary Schools 1922-1970," *Études irlandaises* 36, no. 1 (2011): 25-41.

daily. The same educational ethos prevailed in St. Canice's, the Christian Brothers' secondary school which Behan attended, where Brother Creed presided.<sup>23</sup> This school, Wall writes, was "conducted by the Irish Christian Brothers, an order that placed great emphasis on the teaching of the Irish language and history."<sup>24</sup> School teachers later recalled his ability to "'roar out' endless torrents in the Irish language."<sup>25</sup>

In December 1935, *The Irish Independent* reported of "Fithcheallacht Tré Ghaedhilg" (Chess Through Irish) in St. Canice's where

Members of Clann-na-hÉireann, use Irish exclusively in the game, and they will receive all their instruction from first-class players through the medium of their native tongue. The O'Nolan brothers of Blackrock have interested themselves keenly in the scheme. Schools wishing to avail of instruction in the game through the Irish language should communicate with Mr. G. O'Nolan, 4 Avoca-Tce., Blackrock, Co. Dublin."<sup>26</sup>

In 1936, Tomás Ó Deirg (Minister for Education) along with M.V. O'Nolan (Flann O'Brien's father) – attended St. Canice's to present Clann na hÉireann badges to 100 boys in the school which boasted 150 members in total. This after-school club ran activities through Irish. Bolton Street, where Behan served his apprenticeship, trained vocational school teachers with a similar stress on Irish and the ability to teach through Irish.

At the primary, secondary, and post-secondary level, then, Behan was exposed to a considerable amount of Irish-language material. Additionally, this area was home to O'Toole's GAA. This club, formed in 1901 at 100 Seville Place, emerged from the Gaelic League branch founded that same year and retained a strong language ethos. Playwright Sean O'Casey, from the same area, joined the Drumcondra Gaelic League in 1906 and became its secretary.<sup>27</sup> Closely associated with the Gaelic League branch was the St. Laurence O'Toole Pipe Band, founded in 1910, that elected Tom Clarke as president, and O'Casey, again, as secretary.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For Christian Brothers and the Irish language, see Micheál Ó Cearúil, ed., *Gníomhartha na mBráithre Aistí Comórtha ar Ghaelachas na mBráithre Chiostaí* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Brendan Behan, *An Giall*, ed. Richard Wall (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), vii.

<sup>25</sup> Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1999), 24.

<sup>26</sup> "Fithcheallacht Tré Ghaedhilg," *Irish Independent*, 12 December 1935, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Robert G. Lowrey, "Sean O'Casey," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, <https://www.dib.ie/biography/ocasey-sean-a6553>.

<sup>28</sup> See "History of the Band," *St. Laurence O'Toole Pipe Band*, <https://slotpb.com/about.html>.

Behan alluded to the Irish-language aspect of his childhood in an *Irish Press* article – written in Irish – on St. Patrick’s Day 1955 when he refers to encountering Irish at school:

Chuir mise aithne uirthi, is mé ag dul ar scoil. Duine des na Gaeilgeoirí éigeantacha mé. In aon rang amháin liom bhí an Coimisinéir Síochána is óige in Éirinn—níor choimisinéir an uair sin é, ar ndóigh. Agus ball eile den rang, imríonn sé outside left do Brighton and Hove i Sasana, agus deirtear go bhfuil cúpla bliain eile peileadóireachta fágtha ann, go fóill. Bhí an t-oidreachas, lán-Ghaelach fé sheol agus spleodar in uair sin [...].

[I came to know it while I was going to school. I’m one of the Compulsory Gaeilgeoirí. In one class with me was the youngest Peace Commissioner in Ireland – he wasn’t a commissioner back then, of course. Another member of the class plays outside left for Brighton and Hove in England and they say he has a few years left in him yet. Irish-language education was in full flow and energy at that time (...)]<sup>29</sup>

Sean Kavanagh, the Mountjoy Governor and former Gaelic League teacher and *timire*/community organizer,<sup>30</sup> recalled meeting Behan in Mountjoy, where Kavanagh taught Irish language classes to prisoners including, apparently, Behan:

When I first knew him Brendan had a good grasp of Irish from his schooldays. He must have worked hard at it in the different prisons for on his release he could write and speak it as fluently as English. Irish classes were carried out on D wing but Brendan was not one for classroom discipline and was just as likely to disturb or distract a class as to be part of it. However he improved his knowledge of it in various ways, and he must have benefitted considerably from the help he got from a fellow prisoner, Sean O’Briain [*sic*], a teacher and native speaker from Ballyferriter. He had a prodigious memory and even in Mountjoy would recite long passages of poetry and prose from his favourite Irish authors.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Breandán Ó Beacháin [Brendan Behan], “Oighreacht an Ghaeil sa Litríocht,” *Irish Press*, 17 March 1955, 2. The translation is by the present author.

<sup>30</sup> Witness Statement 524, Bureau of Military History 1913-1921.

<sup>31</sup> Sean Kavanagh, “In Prison,” in *Brendan Behan: Interviews and Recollections*, vol. 1, ed. E.H. Mikhail (Toronto: Barnes and Noble, 1982), 14, reprinted from *The World of Brendan Behan*, ed. Sean McCann (London: New English Library, 1965), 67-70.



When CID Detectives in the opening section of *Borstal Boy* – “in some ways [...] *The Hostage* in reverse”<sup>32</sup> – search the sixteen-year-old would-be bomber<sup>33</sup> at his lodgings (17 Aubrey Street, Liverpool 6, now waste ground adjacent to the Everton Water Tower), they extract from an inside pocket:

my money, a forged travel permit, and a letter which happened to be written in Irish.

It was from a boy in Dublin who was sick in bed and wanted me to come and see him. He was a dreary bastard in any language, and I, a good-natured and affectionate boy, found him distressing to meet and embarrassing to avoid. I would have a good excuse for not meeting him for some time to come.

The blonde studied the Gaelic writing over Vereker’s shoulder.<sup>34</sup>

In the subsequent interview in Liverpool’s Lime Street CID station, Behan discourses on the Irish-language origin of names, referring to the Rev. Patrick Woulfe’s 1923 book *Sloinnte Gael agus Gall: Irish Names and Surnames*, and decides against correcting his Cork-born interrogator regarding grammatical differences between Irish and Scots-Gaelic as spoken in Nova Scotia.<sup>35</sup> Tellingly, however, Behan is communicating in Irish before ever stepping foot inside a prison – British or Irish. At the memoir’s conclusion, it is in Irish he converses with the Immigration Officer as he returns home and re-enters Ireland. In both instances, Irish serves as a marker.

Behan exists as a product of the Free State’s Irish language programme and he is a success story – a rarity as is true of him in so many ways. He grew up in North inner-city Dublin, in a diverse community: World War I veterans, Protestants and Republicans. This urban area shared much with Manchester and Liverpool, but it was also an area in which the Irish language was available and present. The religious

<sup>32</sup> Fintan O’Toole, “Culture Shock: Brendan Behan – Playwright, Novelist, Terrorist,” *Irish Times*, 6 September 2014, B8.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Jim Sheridan in “Opinion: Brendan Behan at 100,” *Hot Press*, 9 February 2023: “When he went to England with the bomb in ‘39, and he was caught and it didn’t go off. About a week after he arrived in England, a woman was killed in Coventry with her kid, at a post-box, while she was posting a letter. And Brendan was haunted by this for years, he had severe nightmares about it. Even though it wasn’t his bomb. I remember his wife Beatrice telling me that for years, he was haunted by the mental picture of the woman and the child being blown to bits, and he felt guilty by association.”

<sup>34</sup> Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982), 4.

<sup>35</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 23-24.

and political diversity that Behan experienced as a child shaped him, while his exposure to Irish, and the presence of Irish in this area, is critical to his persistent efforts to decouple the language from the image of the middle-class speaker, the Western native speaker, and the fáinne-wearing civil servants.<sup>36</sup> Keenly aware of the stereotypical image attached to Irish-language speakers, Behan challenges that image and distinguishes himself from it by re-enforcing his urban identity in *Borstal Boy*:

I was no country Paddy from the middle of the Bog of Allen to be frightened to death by a lot of Liverpool seldom-fed bastards, nor was I one of your wrap-the-green-flag-around-me junior Civil Servants that came into the I.R.A. from the Gaelic League, and well ready to die for their country any day of the week, purity in their hearts, truth on their lips, for the glory of God and the honour of Ireland. No, be Jesus, I was from Russell Street, North Circular Road, Dublin, from the Northside [...].<sup>37</sup>

Behan's Northside Dublin was a heterogenous city, where he played soccer, cricket, hurling; where his Russell Street gang bullied Catholic and Protestant school boys alike on the basis of class rather than religion: "We persecuted them without distinction of religion."<sup>38</sup> His Ireland was an Ireland of "the Irish Workers' and Small Farmers' Republic."<sup>39</sup> Behan constantly destabilizes simplistic categories and oppositional binary modes of human identity.<sup>40</sup> The impetus to include the sexually provocative black gay Princess Grace, Rio Rita's boyfriend in *The Hostage*, stems from the same urge to challenge simplistic binaries and lazy thinking such as those that linked nationalism, Catholicism, the Irish language, and rural Ireland.

Behan further undermined these stereotypes in an *Irish Times* letter on the occasion of Rev. Wylie Blue's death on 15 July 1956. In the aftermath of the famous 1942 shooting, Behan received a fourteen-year sentence for the attempted murder of Detective Garda Martin Hanrahan and Patrick Kirwan at De Courcy Square

<sup>36</sup> In this regard he may have found common ground with Flann O'Brien, with whom he socialized regularly; both men were urban Irish speakers estranged from the official state view of Irish speakers.

<sup>37</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 77.

<sup>38</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 246.

<sup>39</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Kao, "Can Minorities Speak," 4.

on the Finglas Road.<sup>41</sup> Behan escaped the scene of the shooting and evaded arrest that night (9 April) when spotted in Parnell Square. As detectives approached, he drew a revolver and a shoot-out seemed imminent. The presence of children playing on the street prevented the detectives from opening fire and Behan slipped away. The following day, the detectives apprehended him – unarmed – in nearby Blessington Street. At the same time, the Northern State executed Tommy Williams in Belfast for shooting a West Cork Catholic RUC man. Among those who wrote seeking clemency for Williams was Rev. Wylie Blue. When Wylie Blue died, Behan wrote to *The Irish Times*:

Sir, – I can add to your obituary notice of the Rev. Wylie Blue. You state – I have no doubt, quite truly – that he went to the U.S. in 1918 to counter de Valera’s propaganda on behalf of the Irish Republic. If he did, he was well handled, I am sure, by de Valera’s Protestant right arm, the Rev. Dr. Irwin. But I can tell you something else about the Rev. Wylie Blue, and it’s this: – On Easter Sunday, 1942, there were shooting incidents in Belfast and Dublin. I was involved in the Dublin one and got 14 years’ penal servitude (which, to tell the truth, was not as bad as it sounds). Tommy Williams was arrested in the Falls area of Belfast and subsequently hanged for the shooting of an R.U.C. man (a Catholic from West Cork). The Rev. Wylie Blue was good enough and brave enough to circulate a form calling for young Williams’s reprieve. I may say that the Belfast I.R.A. internees in Tintown held him in the highest regard, and I heard them saying that he ran Irish classes at his Sunday school. Before we sink for all time into a political slum island, divided into Salazars in the South and Crawfies in the North, let us remember the days when there were such men in the country.<sup>42</sup>

He again challenged such binary thinking in 1956 when Seán Ó Searbháin took issue with the MP Hugh Delargy’s article “Is Eire Rushing to Disaster?” published in the left-leaning English newspaper the *Reynolds News*. Ó Searbháin, writing in *The Irish Press* about the article, concluded by posing the question: “Which Ireland is Mr. Delargy a friend of?”<sup>43</sup> Behan responded:

<sup>41</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the possible connection between Behan’s actions in the attempted shooting and his father’s alleged membership of Michael Collins’s Squad that assassinated several members of the infamous Cairo Gang – British undercover agents operating in Dublin during the War of Independence. Was Behan re-enacting his father’s deeds in the service of the State?

<sup>42</sup> Brendan Behan, Letter to the *Irish Times*, 18 July 1956, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Seán Ó Searbháin, Letter to the *Irish Press*, 19 September 1956, 4. Delargy challenged Ó Searbháin in turn in a letter to the *Irish Press* dated 20 September 1956.

For your columnist's information Hugh Delargy, the son of Antrim people, has been an active worker for this country, for its language, its political freedom and for its people, since prewar days, to my own personal knowledge. He was active in the Craobh Ruadh Branch of the Gaelic League in Manchester, and worked very hard for imprisoned Irish Republicans, at a time when it was not too popular in Dublin, and not profitable in England. Maybe it's the fact that he is a Bevanite Labour man in English politics that Seán Ó Searbháin objects to.

He continued to describe Delargy's record in the House of Commons as "one of uncompromising opposition to the Partitionists" and while "not convinced that the House of Commons is the best place to fight Ireland's battle," Behan assumes that Ó Searbháin "would permit, also, the constitutional method, and I know that Hugh Delargy would fight Ireland's battle anywhere he got the chance." He concluded as follows:

I do not set up as an issuer of patriotic certificates but men, older and longer experienced in the movement than I are living in Manchester and do not see the *Irish Press* every day, though there is one old associate of his resident here—Stephen Lally, hero of the Connaught Rangers' mutiny, and his wife, who is a sister of the late Jim Daly executed for his part in it. Another, who was associated with Delargy about the same time as myself is lying in Glasnevin these thirteen years.<sup>44</sup>

The previous year, 1955, Behan had questioned the common assumptions that linked Catholicism with support for the Irish language and viewed Protestants as opposed to it. Writing of the Protestant translation of the Bible, he stated:

I think it would be a narrow-hearted Irish-speaking Catholic who could forget the glorious language of the Protestant Old Testament [...]. Surely, if the Duke of Norfolk in England is allowed and encouraged to take part in the Protestant Service of the Coronation, Irish Catholics may be permitted to remember lovingly the work of O'Donnell, Carswell and Bedel in the old tongue.<sup>45</sup>

Behan's early exposure to Irish is also key to his relationship with *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* (*The Midnight Court*), the eighteenth-century poem by Brian Merriman.

<sup>44</sup> Brendan Behan, Letter to the *Irish Press*, 25 September 1956, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Brendan Behan, "The Bible in Irish," *Irish Times*, 18 July 1955, 5.

*The Midnight Court* appears persistently in discussions about Behan as a benchmark for his linguistic proficiency. Various studies repeatedly declare that in prison Behan learned “by heart [...] the whole of Brian Merriman’s epic *The Midnight Court*”<sup>46</sup> and translated part or all of it. Cathal Goulding proffers that not alone was it “his masterpiece,” but was superior to Frank O’Connor’s controversial translation:

When Behan was in the ‘glasshouse.’ That’s the military detention barracks, he did a translation of the *Cúirt an Mheán-Oidhche* there and I think it was one of the best translations I ever read. It is certainly better than O’Connor’s, because O’Connor wrote his translation to be published and therefore it wasn’t as bawdy or as earthy as the original Gaelic poem.<sup>47</sup>

The translation is then lost – either confiscated in the camp, smuggled out and lost, or lost by Behan in a bout of fisticuffs in the Conservative Club, according to Ulick O’Connor: “At least, he recited a full version he had made, one night in McDaid’s pub in Harry Street in 1952. Three days after, he lost the manuscript in a fight in the Conservative Club in York Street. No copy survives, only a fragment quoted in *Borstal Boy*.”<sup>48</sup> As Fergus Whelan has recently explained, it appears to have been his father, rather than Behan, who mislaid the text on his way home and had embarrassingly to admit as much to Behan later.<sup>49</sup>

A totem of Irish literary culture, the poem is associated with Éamon de Valera, who learned it in prison and could recite all 1 261 lines of it. Again, as with Behan’s own work, the poem’s content – sexual relations involving clergy – distorts simplistic notions of a pious Catholic Ireland. This poem, famously banned in Frank O’Connor’s English translation in the 1940s, appears in *Borstal Boy*, but Behan himself gives the lie to the notion that he learned it in prison. It is particularly in his St. Patrick’s Day article in *The Irish Press* that he outs himself:

Bhí an t-oideachas, lán-Ghaelach fé sheol agus spleodar in uair sin, agus chuile sheachtain, gheibhimís cáipéisí móra fada, agus bhearsaí filíochta le

<sup>46</sup> O’Connor, *Brendan Behan*, 82.

<sup>47</sup> Cathal Goulding, “My Friend Brendan Behan,” *Brendan Behan: Interviews and Recollections*, vol. 2, ed. E.H. Mikhail (Toronto: Barnes and Noble, 1982), 276-77.

<sup>48</sup> O’Connor, *Brendan Behan*, 122. Behan recites a section in an interview – see Lotringer, “The Thin Man,” 15.

<sup>49</sup> Fergus Whelan, “Battlefields of the Poor,” unpublished paper delivered at the “Brendan Behan at 100: Legacy and New Directions” conference, Charles University, Prague, 23 June 2023.

ghabhail de ghlan-mheabhair. Cé nár thaithnigh an scoilíocht go ró-mhaith liom riamh, agus chur chuma liom Siomhadh Mór an Atlantaigh Thuaidh agus gur mór an rúndiamhair dhom in Triantán Cothrom go dtí an lá atá inniu ann, ba gheal liom filíocht An bhfeadfadh buachaill ar bith a tógadh i gceartlár an limistéir ar deineadh slad agus scrios ar a mhuintir Domhnach na Fola gan múscailt croí a aireachtáil ag éisteacht le mian na sean-Ghael? [...] Nó an magadh tarcaisneach, nimhneach bhí taobh thiar de chur síos Dháibhí Uí Bhruadair ar na “huaisle nua Cromailleach.” Bhí píosa tosaigh sin an as *Cúirt an Mheadhoin Oídhche* [...] go dtí gur chuala mé cáil an mhéid eile de’n chúirt a chuir chuig an Leabharlann Náisiúnta mé ar a lorg, agus an bród a bhí orm nuair a leigheas an t-aistriúchán Germans taobh leis an nGaeilge.

[The full-Irish immersive education was at its height that time and every week, we used to get huge long documents and verses of poetry to memorize by heart. While never a fan of schooling and I couldn’t care less for the North Atlantic Drift and to this very day the equilateral triangle, I loved poetry. Could any boy be raised in the heart of the district whose people were assaulted and destroyed on Bloody Sunday not feel his heart rise listening to the wishes of the old-Irish? (...) Or the pernicious insulting humour behind Dáibhí Ó Bruadair’s description of the new Cromwellian ‘nobles.’ That opening piece of *The Midnight Court* (...) until I heard tell of the rest of the *Court* that sent me to the National Library to find it; and my pride on reading the German translation alongside the Irish text.]<sup>50</sup>

Behan was indeed well-versed in the literature of the Irish language and in the language itself prior to entering the British Borstal prison system in November 1939.<sup>51</sup> References to Irish-language literature appear throughout *Borstal Boy* – a text banned in Ireland and allegedly Australia and New Zealand: he recalls *The Midnight Court* as the poem “we learned at school”<sup>52</sup> as well as the opening lines of “Anois Teach an Earraigh,” the poem so often erroneously attributed to Antoine Ó Raifteirí (1779-1835).<sup>53</sup> In return for “a slug out of a whiskey flask,” from a Highland Light

<sup>50</sup> Ó Beacháin, “Oighreacht an Ghaeil sa Litríocht.”

<sup>51</sup> He had also read and understood Daniel Corkery’s *The Hidden Ireland* by that stage. See O’Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 24.

<sup>52</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 303. Behan, on the same page, also uses the phrase “uaigneas gan ciúnas” (loneliness without silence) to describe solitary confinement.

<sup>53</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 223.

Infantry sergeant, he sings “some Gaelic songs and right rebel ones at that, and some of them bi-lingual, and the more insulting at that; the more traysinable [*sic*] they got the better this bloke liked them.”<sup>54</sup> During a debate about religion, he cites a traditional Jacobite verse: “Ná trácht ar an mhinistéar Ghallda, / Ná ar a chreideamh gan bheann, gan bhí, / Mar níl mar bhuan-chloch dá theampaill, / Ach magairle Annraoi Rí.”<sup>55</sup> When he etches his name on his cell wall along with other inscriptions, he identifies himself as: “Breandán Ó Beacháin, Óglach, / 2adh Cath., Briogáid Átha Cliath, I.R.A. An Phoblacht Abú!”<sup>56</sup>

Behan, in an *Irish Press* column, reveals how Máirtín Ó Cadhain, in the course of a lecture to Fianna Éireann – an oft-prescribed organization that Behan joined at eight years of age and was expelled from for drunkenness in 1934<sup>57</sup> – first revealed in socialist and Marxist terms the similarities including official neglect and abandonment that linked the Gaeltacht and Behan’s North inner-city Dublin, two communities from which Behan drew literary succour. Both the Gaeltacht and Behan’s North inner-city Dublin are artificial constructs – akin to Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities – but their connection is deeper and more political. Similar in several ways – marginalized, under-resourced and underfunded – these two communities proved central to the production of the national myth: the Gaeltacht in cultural terms, the North inner city in mythological terms – Bloody Sunday, the 1913 Lockout, and so on.<sup>58</sup> Behan also acknowledges Ó Cadhain’s role in recruiting him as an IRA member.<sup>59</sup> If, as most sources agree, Behan joined the IRA aged fourteen (1937), having already left school, and two years later, aged sixteen (1939), undertook his unauthorized solo bombing mission in England, he and Ó Cadhain, apparently, already knew one another. If Behan is to be believed, they certainly enjoyed a familiarity and intimacy that Ó Cadhain felt comfortable administering to Behan an oath to join an illegal organization.

The correspondence between the inner city and the Gaeltacht fused both areas in his political imagination. Thus, as John McCourt has correctly observed, Behan’s engagement with the Irish language and the poetic tradition in Irish as well as with contemporary writers in Irish, expand when read within these varied contexts.

<sup>54</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 349.

<sup>55</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 314. Spelling amended by the present author.

<sup>56</sup> Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 135. Spelling amended by the present author. “I wrote ‘I.R.A.’ in English so as they would understand it that read it,” he adds. Behan, *Borstal Boy*, 136.

<sup>57</sup> O’Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, 27.

<sup>58</sup> See O’Connor, *Brendan Behan*, 116.

<sup>59</sup> See Allan Preston, “Ban on Using Term ‘Óglaigh na hÉireann’ to Refer to Provisional IRA Members,” *Irish News*, 8 January 2024.

Behan, McCourt continues, never ceased to be a working-class Dublin writer who played a crucial role in challenging the prevailing rural aesthetic that dominated Irish letters in the 1940s and 1950s; that role mirrored the role of Ó Cadhain in complaining that cultural activity in Irish was equally false in that it was folkloric.<sup>60</sup> This undermining of national narratives resonated with the work of Flann O'Brien/Myles na gCopaleen and others, who like Ó Cadhain argued that the dominant aesthetic in Irish-language literature misrepresented the lived Gaeltacht reality. John Brannigan sees Behan's use, or sometimes "counter-use,"<sup>61</sup> of the Irish language, "as a space in which to experiment with the relationship between style and contemporary themes, between the apparent solidity of traditional forms and the 'shocking' or disorientating effects of new experiences and materials."<sup>62</sup> Behan – like Ó Cadhain and Flann O'Brien – maintained a mixed, vexed, and complicated relationship with the Irish language and Irish-language institutions and pressure groups. In 1956, the UCD Irish language society banned Behan from speaking, but Queen's University Belfast welcomed him. We see his sense of class loyalty in a 1961 rebuke of John B. Keane, a founding member of the LFM (Language Freedom Movement), who wrote of the Irish language as a threat to the Irish theatre and all things truly Irish. Behan responded in a letter – loaded with fraught references – in *The Irish Times*:

The Irish language is a bloody great land-mine, containing all sorts of explosive material from *The Midnight Court* to Pádraig Pearse's essay on censors and craw-thumpers. "An Fear Meathta" or "The Rotted Man" Keane should remember that the only Kerry writers known to the outside world are two who thought, spoke and wrote in Irish – in Kerry Irish, at that. They are Tomás Ó Criomhthain and Muiris Ó Suileabháin. *Fiche Bliain ag Fás* is in the World's Classics and was reprinted for about the twentieth time only a few weeks ago. *An tOileánach* was read to Maxim Gorki far away in Red Russia.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> See John McCourt, "'Not Exactly Patterned in the Same Mould': Behan's Joyce," in *Reading Brendan Behan*, ed. John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019), 143-62. See, also, Nathalie Lamprecht, "Class, Sexuality and Nationalism: Identity Building in the Prose Writings of Brendan Behan," MA thesis, Charles University, Prague, 14-16, <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/128107>.

<sup>61</sup> Jean-Philippe Hentz's phrase: see Jean-Philippe Hentz, "Brendan Behan's France. Encounters in Saint-Germain-des-Prés," *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 54.

<sup>62</sup> John Brannigan, *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 65.

<sup>63</sup> Brendan Behan, "The Language," *Irish Times*, 17 January 1961, 5.



Here, the ‘uneducated,’ ‘uncultured,’ ‘lower-class’ peasants – like Behan – have achieved international success, while the respectable middle-class provincial pub owner complains about his lack of success.

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*Brian Ó Conchubhair*

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