

# Receptions Of An Irish Rebel: Brendan Behan in New York City, 1960–64

BY STEPHEN BUTLER, Ph.D.



*Photo:*  
President Kennedy greets well-wishers in Cork during his visit to Ireland in June, 1963. Photograph by Cecil Stoughton. Courtesy of John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum.

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At the end of June 1963, as America's first Irish-Catholic president returned to the land of his great-grandfather's birth to speak before a joint sitting of the Dail, the latest in a long line of Irish literary émigrés to the new world was winding down his final voyage across the Atlantic and preparing to sail home from New York. Thirty months earlier, in appreciation for making it known to the American press that he was a staunch Kennedy man during the 1960 campaign, that writer had received an invitation to Kennedy's inauguration (O'Sullivan 263). Brendan Behan could not attend the January 1961 festivities, but if he did, perhaps he would have had a chance to read, with appro-

bation, the advice Robert Frost inscribed inside the book of poetry he gave Kennedy as a gift: "Be more Irish than Harvard" (Maier 363).

Behan, of course, had spent his formative years not as a student at Harvard or Oxbridge or Trinity or even University College, but as a prisoner of the British crown, an experience described vividly in his autobiography, *The Borstal Boy*, which had been published to great acclaim, first in London by Hutchinson in 1958, and then in New York by Knopf in 1959. The thoroughly Irish voice who narrates that book suggests that while James Joyce may rightly be described by Thomas Kinsella as the first modern Irish author to speak for the sham-

rock *lumpenproletariat* (64-65), Behan was the first to achieve acclaim for work that communicated almost entirely via the idiom of that raggedy class. This only adds to the irony of the observation made less than three years after Kennedy's inauguration by Daniel Patrick Moynihan—a Harvard Professor by way of New York's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood—the observation that Behan was “Irish indeed” and hence shunned by America's middle class Irish-Catholics (253).

#### BANNED FROM ONE PARADE

To prove his point, Moynihan noted that Behan had been banned from marching in the 1961 St. Patrick's Day Parade. Behan was invited to participate by the Fordham University Gaelic Society, but in announcing the decision, the chairman of the parade's formation committee, the Honorable James J. Comerford of the Court of Special Sessions, explained to the New York *Daily News* that “we have a semi-religious, almost sacred feeling about this parade and it's not the place for a man seeking publicity... We don't want a personality in the parade that has been advertised extensively as a common drunk” (March 15, 1961). The *Daily News* reported that Behan responded to the ban with two of his classic bon-mots. The first offered a new theory on what happened to the snakes of Ireland following their expulsion by St. Patrick: “They all came to New York and became judges.” The second chastised what Behan called “the professional Irishmen” of New York, who were in the playwright's view “terribly anxious to pass as middle-class Englishmen” (March 15, 1961).

The latter of Behan's retorts, and indeed, Moynihan's analysis of the ban, both imply that at the root of the problem was a class issue: that Behan was simply too rough, too rowdy, and too ribald to be allowed anywhere near the respectable proceedings on Fifth Avenue. This interpretation was the same one suggested by Edward J. Casey, chairman of the Jersey City St. Patrick's Day Committee, who, after the New York snub, invited Behan across the Hudson to Jersey City. Casey told

the *Daily News*: “We are sure he will be very much at home and welcomed in the spirit of true, down-to-earth Irishmen... This is no lace curtain Irish celebration. His appearance will enhance our St. Patrick's Day affair rather than degrade it” (16 March 1960). Behan gladly accepted Casey's invitation and after arriving in Jersey City on March 17 proclaimed: “At one end of the Holland Tunnel lies liberty. I chose freedom” (*Daily News*, March 18, 1960).

The hypothesis that Behan was banished to Jersey City because he was “Irish indeed” is a popular one. It is employed by Ulick O'Connor in his biography of Behan. Describing “the respectable New York Irish,” who made up the County Associations—a group he dubs the “Communion Breakfast crew”—O'Connor writes:

*Often their parents and grandparents had been immigrants from the old country. They had a sense of insecurity. Brendan reminded them of an image they were trying to live down. The Ireland they had learned of through their parents was largely rural. They missed a lot of Brendan's Dublin wit while reacting against his fairground hurly-burly (267).*

In March 1961, it is not hard to imagine how certain upwardly mobile but insecure members of the New York Irish community could have viewed Behan this way, especially in contrast to the other Irishman who was so prominent in the public consciousness—John Fitzgerald Kennedy. In such a scenario, the newly inaugurated president obviously represented the success, suaveness, and sophistication of the American Irish, shining as a beacon of a bright future; whereas the playwright reminded them of the drunken antics of the stage Irishman, lurking like a specter from the past, haunting Irish America at its moment of greatest triumph. The physical essence of each man could have only reinforced such impressions: despite the similar heads of dark, wavy hair framing light eyes, in Brendan Gill's description of Behan, one



**Illustration:**  
This caricature of  
Brendan Behan  
appeared in the  
*Advocate* newspaper  
published on  
September 17, 1960.  
When he arrived in  
New York earlier that  
month, Behan had  
already achieved  
critical acclaim.  
Courtesy of Stephen  
Butler, Ph.D.,

can see the antithesis of the thin, fit and always tanned president: “a roly-poly, aggressively unathletic-looking young man, with... a skin of uncanny pale whiteness” (Gill 106). This ghostly pallor was attributable “to the fact that it was [Behan’s] habit to collide as little as possible with broad daylight—he bloomed at night, in bars where the stink of sweat, smoke, and spilled beer was perfume to him” (Gill 106). And so the story goes, bourgeois Irish-Americans trembled behind their crucifixes, shunning this vampiric spawn of the night.

But there is a problem with this narrative: it is both reductive and inaccurate. Consider, for example, Judge Comerford, that seeming embodiment of middle-class Catholic philistinism and lace-curtain snobbery, that English-imitating snake of Behan’s imagination. The truth is that the judge had much more in common with the writer than Behan, his biographer, or the judge himself, could have imagined or would have cared to

admit. Like Behan, Comerford was born and bred in Ireland; like Behan, Comerford had spent his youth in the I.R.A.; like Behan he had spent his manhood struggling to become a working class intellectual: Comerford had put himself through Columbia University and Fordham Law School toiling as a ticket agent for the I.R.T. subway at night while attending classes during the day (“Comerford Papers”). At Columbia, his masters theses had even focused on the Transport Workers Union (Shea 10). The implication made by O’Connor that a man like Comerford, a man incidentally, who had arrived in New York in 1925 at the height of the Jazz Age, could not grasp Behan’s wit is delusional. What Comerford objected to, was not Behan’s Dublin-tenement substance, but his self-promoting style. In a similar way, the reaction Behan inspired among the New York Irish seems to have had less to do with class and was related instead, to a variety of factors, factors that can all be recognized in the reception of Behan’s first Broadway play, *The Hostage*, a reception that took place six months before the St. Patrick’s Day imbroglio.

#### AN ACCLAIMED LITERARY PHENOMENON

When Behan stepped foot in America for the first time, arriving at Idlewild Airport on September 2, 1960, he was already a successful and critically acclaimed literary phenomenon. *Borstal Boy*, his autobiography chronicling his youth in British penal institutions, *The Quare Fellow*, a play about the last hours of a man condemned to death-by-hanging, and *The Hostage*, the English-language version of a play originally written in Irish about an I.R.A. captive being held in a Dublin brothel, had all been hailed in London as the brilliant work of a new and genuinely Irish talent. Kenneth Tynan, the influential drama critic for the London *Observer* offered this famous estimation of Behan’s genius and the tradition from which that genius sprang: “It is Ireland’s sacred duty to send over every few years a playwright who will save the English theatre

from inarticulate dumbness” (quoted in O’Connor 183).

But by 1960, in addition to his literary fame, Behan had also earned a reputation as a brawler and boozier of legendary proportions. After spending most of his teen years and early twenties incarcerated for I.R.A. activities, he had burst into the transatlantic consciousness through a combination of pen, pint, and pug. A dissertation on the reception of Irish drama in New York that was approved the same year Behan arrived on Broadway stated: “One of the most promising of the new Irish dramatists is Brendan Behan, a gargantuan-featured, high living, uncompromising young man who resides in Dublin when he is not in prison” (Lyman 684). Events that had contributed to this reputation include the following: in 1954 he had physically attacked the poet Anthony Cronin following a dispute related to a libel case brought by another poet, Patrick Kavanagh; in May 1956 he had appeared drunk out of his mind on Malcom Muggeridge’s BBC program *Panorama*; in the summer of 1959 he had been roughed-up by the doorman at the Wyndham Theatre when he tried to disrupt a performance of his own play; and in November 1959 he had been linked-in from Dublin on Ed Morrow’s CBS show *Small World*—afterwards, Jackie Gleason, the other guest that evening, described Behan’s incoherent performance as “not an act of God, but of Guinness” (quoted in O’Connor 231).

Reading through the Irish-American weekly newspapers from the fall of 1960, one senses a definite awareness of both aspects of Behan’s reputation as profligate playwright par excellence. Brief notices about the impending opening of *The Hostage* appeared from week-to-week in the *Irish Echo* as well as in other Irish papers. Positive headlines and puffs included: “*The Hostage* was produced at Stratford East, London, with such success that it was chosen for the International Theatre Festival in Paris last year. It was also staged in Sweden” (*IE* 27 August 1960); “*The Hostage* was a roaring hit in London for two years”

(*Advocate* September 10, 1960); “Miss Celia Salkeld [is] the only member of the original cast of Brendan Behan’s *An Giall*, which received its first performance in Gael-Linn’s Damer Theatre in 1958, who is going to New York to play in the Broadway production of its translation, *The Hostage* (*IE* August 27, 1960); and “*The Hostage* First Was Written, Played in Irish” (*IE* September 10, 1960). All these positive notices obviously focus on Behan’s reputation as an international literary celebrity as well as his Gaelic bonafides.

But in regards to the notorious man himself, the papers did not gloss over his reputation, though many columnists did try to soften it a bit. A good example can be found in the *Irish Echo* published just a week before Brendan’s arrival in New York. In that issue, columnist Sean Maxwell wrote:

*The hilarious Behan, rollicking, fun-loving Brendan, Behan, who betimes is a world away from himself and the rest of the world when challenged can scowl and wear the expression of a world’s champ getting in for a K.O. Then there is another Behan, who smiles and laughs and sets the world aglow with his wit, good humor, his razor edged sarcasm.... But whether he is a world away from or at home it must be accredited to Behan that he is one of the world’s great playwrights and might well become the greatest as his pen flows rapidly on, producing a series of new plays* (August 27, 1960).

In the pages of the *Irish World*, Michael Sheehan presented an even more subdued portrait in two brief notes that appeared in consecutive weeks:

*I met Brendan Behan and his wife some days ago on Third Ave. The well known Dublin born playwright... enquired for Clarke’s on Third Ave. I told him who I was and I regret that I hadn’t the chance of speaking longer with him and his gracious wife who are visiting New York* (September 17, 1960);

*I met Brendan Behan at The Jager House and rarely have I heard a better Irish Speaker. Brendan has no apologies*



*for speaking the language of Ireland...I am glad the versatile Brendan Behan speaks our ancient language (September 24, 1960).*

In the *Advocate* of September 17, columnist Pete Lee likewise depicted a Behan who appeared to be in almost direct opposition to the man readers would have expected:

*The Behans,<sup>1</sup> complete with entourage, had a captive audience at Costello's, world famous Bar on Third Ave., NY last Thursday evening. There was a time when the playwright would have held his audience spellbound with a different type of show, but those wild, rip-roaring days are gone. For the Behan of today is an astute, though somewhat subdued man who seems to have an ear for everybody, even writers and newspapermen....Mr. Behan intends to spend considerable time in the dollar zone, especially if his play *The Hostage*...is successful.... When I next see this gentleman from Ireland, it will be from the Mezz seat on opening night.*

Two weeks later, Lee did indeed write about opening night of the play. Lee's judgment was that *The Hostage* tho [sic] at times inclined to be indecent, is nevertheless a very entertaining play." Lee advised his readers:

*If you are the proper Bostonian type and still live in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, do not come to see *The Hostage* for enjoyment, but come to get the shock of your life. If, on the other hand, you like to see something unusually funny, unusually crazy, and unusually indecent, then by all means see *The Hostage* (October 1, 1960).*

But not all the New York Irish were as welcoming of Brendan as Sheehan and as accepting of *The Hostage* as Lee. In *My Life with Brendan*, Beatrice Behan recalled the following scene:

*One Irishman stopped us in the street and said to Brendan, "I saw your play. It's a disgrace and slander on the Irish people."*

*Brendan never liked to hear his work criticised.*

*"I hope you paid for your seat," he said.*

*"I certainly did."*

*"Well, that cheers me up a bit."*

*"You had no right to put prostitutes in your play. Everybody knows there's not a prostitute in Ireland."*

*"And what part of Ireland do you come from?"*

*"I come from Drumsna."*

*"Drumsna?" echoed Brendan.*

*"You're so fucking poor in Drumsna*

**Illustration:**  
*This headline ran in the Advocate for September 3, 1960, the day after Behan's arrival in Idlewild Airport. In addition to Behan's literary acclaim, a reputation as a heavy drinker and brawler preceded him to New York. Courtesy of Stephen Butler.*

*you couldn't keep a snipe, never mind a prostitute" (26).*

#### NEGATIVES IN FOUR CATEGORIES

Though their critiques were not quite as naïve as the complaint made by the man from Drumsna, some of the very same journals that were puffing and praising Behan also reproved both his play and his persona. This negative material can be grouped into four broad and sometimes over-lapping categories of which Behan stood accused: obscenity, blasphemy, traitorousness, and public drunkenness. The first three transgressions he shared with O'Casey, Joyce, Synge, and Yeats; but the last was his own unique contribution to the perceived vices of Irish writers.

The day after Behan arrived, the *Advocate* published a striking front page headline alluding to a speech by the then-Taoiseach: "IRISH NOT HEAVY DRINKERS SAYS LE MASS." The article went on to quote the prime minister as lamenting that "there are Irish journalists, playwrights and novelists who seem to think that the surest way to extract royalties from British publishers is to depict the Irish not as they really are but as the British public have been led to imagine them." The same issue of the *Advocate* published Behan's reply to these comments:

*"It is not the business of Irish playwrights to give publicity to Irish politicians.... You can say this however. They... should not collect income tax off books that they have banned in Ireland" (September 3, 1960).*

A week later, when Brendan was firmly situated in New York, the *Advocate* published a terse editorial scolding Behan for encouraging the worst prejudices through his behavior:

*Brendan Behan goes to great lengths to get laughs for himself. This is his method of publicising [sic] his plays. He doesn't stop to reflect that pictures of his clowning tend to put all Irish in his class. Behan has talent but is being*

*channeled into anti-Irish propaganda rather than into an effort to strengthen her prestige and position in the eyes of the English speaking public (September 10, 1960).*

A related view of Behan was expressed by Bill Slocum, a columnist for the *New York Journal American*. The unique observation Slocum made about Behan however, was that in New York at least, he was not truly getting drunk and disorderly, but even worse—just playing the part of the sloshed Celt:

*Mr. Behan is a caricature of the drunken Irishman. I would happily accept his problem as none of my affair if he would just once get a good spontaneous load on and forget to play "Paddy the Mick" who hates the English and roars "up the I.R.A." I am as Irish as Mr. Behan and I resent his contrived and profitable playing of an old Irish stereotype (quoted in O'Connor 267).*

After *The Hostage* had debuted, a review in the *Echo* focused not on the playwright's public persona, but on the text's offenses against religion. After describing the plot and setting of the play, Mary Jane Grimes wrote:

*Granted, one would not expect the language spewing forth from the inhabitants of such a place to be that of a convent; nevertheless, one is not prepared for the rawness of many of the lines, and certainly not braced for the blatant blasphemy. And here is where the iconoclastic Behan loses all sense of what can be tolerated and what is completely offensive. Several times throughout the play he brings in lines and situations which are so out of order in their mockery of the beliefs and traditions of the Catholic Church as to make the playgoer shake his head in disbelief. Artistically, there is no justification for the inclusion of these incidents. They are deliberately inserted to shock, and in this they succeed.*

Following this harangue, Grimes actually complimented the acting, the staging and the set. But she closed her review by again lamenting the performance of the playwright:

*That Behan should fail to curb his desire to offend is unfortunate, for the man obviously can be very humorous. Some of the lines are extremely funny. There is no doubt Behan could have given us a wonderful evening had he even tried to distinguish between good humor and outbursts of bawdiness and blasphemy in the poorest possible taste. As it is, The Hostage is not fit fare for the stage, and certainly not fit fare for the Irish (October 1, 1960).*

The negative judgment of the *Irish Echo* piece is reiterated in the *Catholic World's* November 1960 issue. In a review written by Professor Stephen P. Ryan of the University of Scranton, the play was described as “a wildly riotous affair which ranges from a few moments of lyrical tenderness through some well-aimed shafts of satire, down to an inexcusable amount of absolute obscenity and blasphemy.” In its discussion of obscenity, the review is fascinating in the way it contrasted Behan to James Joyce:

*Many who see The Hostage will be reminded of the “Nightown” episodes in Ulysses....It must be said, however, that Behan lacks the artistic integrity of his more famous predecessor; the bawdy, obscene elements in The Hostage, for example, unlike the more notorious passages in Ulysses, are only too obviously dirt for dirt's sake.*

But despite the charge of obscenity, it was blasphemy that Ryan described as “the most objectionable feature” of the play. While Ryan did grant that Behan possessed “a mastery of the rich, racy argot of the Dublin slum-dweller,” that he was “a satirist of no mean proportions,” that “the play is always alive, always vibrant, always demanding a response from the audience and getting it,”

and that “serious students of the theatre will find an interest in [the play] for its dialogue, its use of certain technical devices and dramatic tricks,” Ryan concluded by insisting that “the play simply cannot be recommended for the general public.”

#### BEHAN RESPONDS

Behan was offended enough by the accusations of anti-Catholic sentiment that he fired off letters to the editors of the Irish-American press in New York. Behan's letters appeared in the October 29 *Advocate* and the November 5 *Irish World*. The gist of the two letters is the same, but they have slightly different introductions. It is not entirely clear if the letter printed in the *Advocate* was actually intended to castigate that paper, because that journal had, after all, published a rather positive note on *The Hostage* written by Pete Lee. Mary Jane Grimes or Frank O'Connor from the *Echo* would have been the more obvious target for Behan, but nevertheless, the letter opened by attacking an unnamed critic's dramatic credentials and accusing him of Puritan bias:

*References in your paper to my play, The Hostage, have not been confined to criticism of my plays on artistic grounds. Your critic has attacked the play on religious grounds as well.*

*Your critic did very well for himself here. He had not seen many plays of any kind, I would think and such “Irish” plays as he has seen, would be for foreign consumption. The sort of Pat and Molly epics that would move a Dublin audience to hysterical laughter.*

*He is, however, pretty well learned in the language of Billy Graham, and accuses me of insulting the Catholic Church, in which I was bred, born, reared and hope to die, (but not before the run of The Hostage is over).*

*Therefore for the benefit of this theological theatergoer, I append an extract...*

In the letter to the *Irish World*, Behan managed to pay small homage to the long, illustrious history of that paper while simultaneously slighting the other weeklies by writing:

*The Irish-American press (of whose existence I was not aware except for the Irish World and the Gaelic American), has been uniformly condemnatory of my play The Hostage.*

*It is not my custom to reply or make public comment on criticisms of my work.*

*As they have seen fit however, to accuse me of insulting the Catholic Church, in which I was born, bred, married, and hope to die, I append the following extract...*

Both letters included an excerpt from an article that appeared in the October 22 issue of the Jesuit magazine, *America*. That article observed:

*Behan has been publicized as an eccentric, a clown and a lush. That image, which he has helped to promote, is deceiving. He is actually an angry playwright in the manner of Duerrenmatt and Osborne, without the former's cynicism and the latter's churlish vehemence. While Duerrenmatt expresses his scorn for modern hypocrisies, moral clichés and spiritual aridity in invective, Behan employs ribaldry. Behan's American audience, however, is likely to mistake the obscenity for drama.*

*While Behan is angry with modern causes and ideas, he loves people. Without love he could not have created a gallery of such vital characters. They are not the sort of people one would choose for associates or want for neighbors. Their morals, manners and profanity are deplorable. But we have to live in the same world with them, and their degradation is an indictment of civilization and a challenge to religion.*

Behan's defense of his own religiosity



inspired the *Advocate's* Pete Lee to pen a column in the playwright's defense:

*To get back to the scribes, I will be quite honest and say outright, that they have done their utmost to discredit Mr. Behan. However, their efforts have backfired, insofar as many of them just displayed their own ignorance of plays in general. Of course, the Puritan came to the fore, but here again, the result is the same.*

*For further proof, one need only look up a copy of America which Mr. Behan quoted in his recent letters to the Irish papers of New York. For my part, I can only say that I thoroughly enjoyed The Hostage as directed by Joan Littlewood. In fact, I expect to see it again at the Barrymore Theatre.*

*It is true, that certain passages of the play may be a little saucy, but the saucy bits make it all the more entertaining, and after all, we invariably expect some entertainment when we visit the theatre, otherwise what is the point in going at all? In making these statements, I am aware that I am practically alone, as far as New York Irish newspaper reporters are concerned, in having a good word for The Hostage.*

**Illustration:**

*During his time in New York, Behan was accused of playing the "old Irish stereotype" or "stage Irishman," an image that grew popular in America during the 1800s. Along with other ethnic stereotypes, variations on the Irish stereotype appeared in advertisements for musical and comedy revues. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*





*Illustration:*  
Set in Dublin's Mountjoy prison, Behan's play *The Quare Fellow* was first produced in Dublin in 1954 and in London in 1956. It was significant in creating his reputation. Its appearance preceded production of *The Hostage* by four years. Courtesy of Working Class Movement Library.

*However, I feel that too many of our scribes present the ideas of segments and small-small segments at that, of our overseas population. I also think that many of them speak from Ivory Towers. It is quite true that I am neither a Puritan nor a member of any Temperance Organization. But, I can boast, that I am not swayed in any way, by any group, for any reason, either social, religious or athletic (November 19, 1960).*

But Behan's missive also provoked two pointed responses in the letters-to-the-editor section of the *Advocate*. In one, published 3 December 1960, an Edward F.X. Hughes patronized Behan—"the toothless scribe" for "rally[ing] to the Church for intellectual aid." Hughes sent in an excerpt of his own that he claimed displayed "a more typical American Catholic viewpoint" than the one expressed in *America*. The excerpt was from

the November 1960 issue of *The Sign*, a journal published by the Passionist Fathers; it read:

*There is not a dull moment in Brendan Behan's overly-publicized riot, The Hostage, nor a decent one, either. Though it must be conceded that the eccentric exhibitionist has mastered the art of play-writing, his material is nauseating and his philosophy a mishmash...his manner is a blend of the coarse and the obscene. Undisciplined and completely lacking in good taste, this waste of an obvious talent communicates nothing beyond blasphemy, confusion, and the image of a small boy writing dirty words on a back fence.*

The other letter, published November 12, 1960, was signed P. O. Murcada and was written by a man who identified himself as someone "who did a small bit of fighting in

the cause of Irish freedom.” In the letter-writer’s opinion, Behan was doing an injustice to those who fought for the cause of liberty in Ireland:

*I felt very sorry for all those great Irishmen who died fighting that Ireland may take her place among the nations of the world. They left behind a man who by his antics is bringing our little country and all that love it down to a very low level in the eyes of the world. This man last week just to boost his play and his book that was banned in Ireland went into a restaurant and supposedly drank seven bottles and then started to try and sing some ballad of the Irish Republic. He then went on stage in a supposed state of intoxication to boost up a play that we Irish people would not tolerate, a play that should not be supported.*

*The men that went out in 1916 to free their country were true Irishmen and all that mattered to them was the love of country and not to go into some beer joint and get drunk and start singing some Republican songs to let the public know what great heroes they were. In the words of Padraig Pearse, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace. But to my mind, as long as Ireland has men who have the cheek to write cheap books and produce bad plays about her, she shall never take her place amongst the nations of the world.*

The letter writer’s outrage at the way Behan boozily utilized Republican songs and slogans to burnish his own public image resonates in a column written by Sean Maxwell for the *Irish Echo* shortly after Behan had arrived in New York. At that time, Maxwell complained of Behan and his brother Dominic:

*While on their way up the ladder of literary fame they created a halo of I.R.A.-ism around their names. Upon getting there, they openly condemned the folly of their affiliations and the*

*affiliations of others with such a movement. At the same time they go on singing Rebel songs on the stage, in the streets, and in Britain’s pubs.*

Maxwell went on to speculate:

*Behan here [in New York] may well come under a barrage of criticism...the simple reason being that thousands of Irishmen and Irish mothers have lost their sons in the cause of justice and freedom, and while they have regretted their loss they never regarded it as futile, the way Behan has (September 24, 1960).*

P.O. Murcada and Sean Maxwell were obviously not the first to criticize Behan in this way; the playwright had actually written such criticism into the text of *The Hostage*. In Act Two, the manager of the brothel, Meg, sings a republican ballad, “Who Fears to Speak of Easter Week.” This exchange follows:

*MEG: The author should have sung that one.*

*PAT: That’s if the thing has an author.*

*SOLDIER: Brendan Behan, he’s too anti-British.*

*OFFICER: Too anti-Irish, you mean. Bejusus, wait till we get him back home. We’ll give him what-for for making fun of the Movement.*

*SOLDIER [to audience]: He doesn’t mind coming over here and taking your money.*

*PAT: He’d sell his country for a pint. (Complete Plays 203-204)*

Behan was clearly demonstrating here an awareness of his reputation among some of his former comrades in arms. Before he came over to New York for the debut of *The Hostage*, he even told his publicity manager Rae Jeffs that “he had heard that there was some doubt in the minds of the American branch of the I.R.A. as to whether they would accept a charity performance of *The Hostage*, or bomb the theatre instead” (Jeffs

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### DAVIS PLAYERS REPEAT "THE COUNTRY BOY" THIS WEEK-END

On this Saturday evening, November 26th, and on Sunday evening, November 27th, the Thomas Davis Irish Players will resume their current production of John Murphy's famous new three-act Irish play, "The Country Boy", at the Master Institute Theatre, 103rd Street and Riverside Drive. Curtain will be at 8:30 P. M.



**PATRICK WALSH**

Last week-end enthusiastic audiences greeted this delightful play—a play which has been well described as the most notable in the field of Irish drama for many years.

The Davis Players feel honored to be the first to present it to a New York audience, and feel sure that the box office response will justify their selection. Its vivid portrayal of one aspect of Irish-American life makes it a must on your social calendar.

For advance reservations call Betty Gallagher. OLYMPIA 8-4638. Tickets will also be available at the box office.

CO. CLAREMONT

143). The criticism Behan received from Irish America because of his reformed Republican views never quite became the literal barrage that Behan joked about or the figurative one that Maxwell predicted. But it was certainly a bigger cause of consternation directed toward the playwright than the division between so-called lace-curtain and down-to-earth Irishmen.

Another potential reason for Behan's rejection by a large swath of the New York Irish in 1960 was articulated by the *Echo's* Frank O'Connor in a brief response to Behan's defensive letter. O'Connor succinctly rephrased his earlier criticism about Behan's irrelevance in terms of the *America* article: "I wish Ireland did produce a John Osborne; the Irish playwrights are either up in the clouds looking for Ossian in *Tire na n-Og*, or down in nighttown" (December 17, 1960). While the nighttown reference alluded to Behan's carousing persona as well as the setting of *The Hostage*, O'Connor avoided the charges of blasphemy and political heresy leveled against Behan by others; but O'Connor's reference to Osborne did imply that unlike the angry young man of English theatre, Behan's dramas were unrelated to the social realities of Irish life. Literary critics have, of course, interpreted both *The Hostage* and *The Quare Fellow* as Behan's bleak assessment of the first four decades of Irish independence. Declan Kiberd, for example, has written: "His shabby boarding-house-turned brothel setting is a fitting metaphor for the decayed ideals of a free Ireland" (525). But the commentary Behan inspired in New York's Irish-American weeklies does not indicate that his drama was understood in this kind of allegorical way.

#### COVERAGE OF BEHAN IN COMPARISON

As such, O'Connor's idea provides a starting point for understanding a great irony one discovers reading New York's Irish-American newspapers during the months surrounding the premiere of *The Hostage*. And that irony concerns the fact that while Behan did elicit

both occasional comment and condemnation in the pages of the Irish-American newspapers, the coverage of Behan paled in comparison to the weekly publicity granted the amateur actors of the Thomas Davis Irish Players who announced for their twenty-seventh season that they would stage John Murphy's *The Country Boy* at the Master Institute Theatre on 103rd Street and Riverside Drive during two weekends in November 1960 and one weekend in March 1961.

Murphy's play concerns a young Irish farmer still living at home with his parents who dreams of following his older brother to America in pursuit of success. But when the older brother, along with his obnoxious American wife, return home on holiday for the first time, the pain, privation, and remorse that result from leaving Ireland are revealed. Instead of a ticket to America, the younger lad stays behind on the farm and buys his Irish sweetheart a ring. Certainly, this was material with which Irish-American immigrants and their progeny could much more easily relate than an IRA kidnapping farce set in a Dublin whorehouse. Not surprisingly, the press notices stressed the topical subject matter of *The Country Boy* as well as the critical acclaim it had received in Ireland:

*Prize winner at the 1960 All-Ireland Drama Festival, this play has been described by Ernest Blythe, director of the Abbey Theatre<sup>2</sup>, as the most notable play to come to the Abbey Theatre for a considerable time. Conceived out of the problems created by emigration, the author, who himself lived in America for some time, has fashioned his material into a straightforward play which is quite out of the ordinary, one which will have particular appeal to an American audience (Irish World November 19, 1960).*

*Rated by critics and audiences alike as the most notable play in the field of Irish drama, it has been a sensational*

*success in Ireland the past two years and is currently playing in many towns and cities throughout the country. Conceived out of the problems created by emigration, its story is close to the heart of every Irish immigrant. You will laugh, and you will shed a tear, because you too have experienced the same thoughts and feelings (Advocate February 25, 1961).*

After the play had been performed, the December 17, 1960 *Advocate* ran a review, signed C.B.Q. The review opened by noting that the play's "success was due to the humor, sparkling dialogue and vivid characterization as well as to the skill with which the dramatist exploited a theme very pertinent to Irish people—emigration." The reviewer admitted that "[i]t may seem that the play proposed an over-simplified melodramatic solution to a very complex problem" but C.B.Q. nevertheless praised Murphy for his ability to dramatize this issue:

*The dramatist's understanding of the emigration problem is deep, and those who know the Irish rural scene will admit the keenness of Murphy's insights into the minds of the old, stubborn, possessive Irish farmer and of the impatient, frustrated son who wishes to marry and settle down at home.*

C.B.Q. also praised the Davis Players for delivering "a spirited and sympathetic performance" and claimed "[i]t was remarkable how the director and players covered up certain deficiencies in the weak, dramatic structure of the play." In concluding the review, C.B.Q. delineated those dramatic flaws:

*A dramatist who sets out to write a comedy and who introduces tragic overtones and who finally resolves all difficulties by means of sentimental melodrama makes impossible demands on the audience's emotions. Much of the viewer's dissatisfaction rose from the confusion of moods—comic, tragic and melodramatic. Playwright Murphy should also remember that while vulgarity of language and frequent recourse to*

**Illustration:**

*(Opposite page) This news item describing production of John Murphy's *The Country Boy* by the Thomas Davis Irish Players appeared in November, 1960 in the Irish World and American Liberator and Gaelic American. Courtesy of Stephen Butler.*

*the whisky bottle may...be indications of emotional struggle, a gratuitous over-emphasis can only leave a feeling of bewilderment and distaste with the audience.*

Reading this review, one begins to realize that while the resonance of the play's theme was certainly something that would have made it more accessible and attractive to Irish-American audiences than *The Hostage*, there exists another, much more important reason why this amateur production was promoted and puffed week after week in the *Advocate*, the *Irish World*, and the *Irish Echo* while Behan and his Broadway hit were discussed only sporadically. That more important explanation is that the Thomas Davis Irish Players were a long-established institution within the Irish-American community. The company had been founded in 1933 by Daniel Danaher, John Duffy, Joseph O'Reilly, Mary Kelly, Thomas McDermott, Martin Walsh, and John Hughes—a group of immigrant Irish students enrolled in evening high schools in New York City (Murphy 231). Therefore this group had been performing Irish plays in locations around New York City for more than a quarter century by the time Behan arrived in town. Furthermore, the group's actors and directors and stagehands were members of other social, patriotic, cultural, and athletic associations within the community. Take for example, Patrick Walsh, who was, one notice informed readers, a "Davis Players regular...president of the Kilkenny Men's Asso[ciation] and...a player member of the Kilkenny Hurling Club." Reading these newspapers, it is therefore obvious that these amateur players were part of a wide web of organizations that made up the fabric of New York Irish life, and that is why they were so strenuously supported. Of course, this may reflect poorly on the literary and aesthetic standards of the community, but it certainly reflects well on their ability to help and support one another in disparate endeavors.

#### PART OF AN INCLUSIVE TRADITION

Three years and two weeks after the Thomas Davis Irish Players performed *The Country Boy* on the stage of the Master Institute Theatre for the final time, Brendan Behan finally succumbed to his demons and succeeded in drinking himself to death in Dublin. He was just forty-one years of age. Behan's passing on March 20, 1964 followed of course, a mere four months behind John F. Kennedy's assassination, an event that prompted Daniel Patrick Moynihan's memorable phrase: "I don't think there's any point in being Irish if you don't know that the world is going to break your heart eventually" (quoted in Duff 87). Subsequent to their heart-breaking deaths, both Kennedy and Behan would be embraced as part of the inclusive tradition of "Irishness" that the American President's address to the Irish Parliament had suggested—the tradition of Henry Grattan, John Boyle O'Reilly, William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw and James Joyce—the tradition of patriots, poets, and playwrights capable of expressing "that quality of the Irish, the remarkable combination of hope, confidence and imagination" (*Joint Sitting* 15). Kennedy's induction into this pantheon of remarkable Irishmen was immediate on both sides of the Atlantic, and amazingly, Behan's was almost as rapid on the American side of the western ocean. The consternation with which he was viewed by many Irish-Americans during his visits in 1960 and 1961—though not nearly as many as Daniel Patrick Moynihan or Ulick O'Connor would lead readers to believe—did not prevent his almost immediate absolution and canonization.

In the *Irish Echo*, the publication that was generally most hostile to Behan during the run of *The Hostage*, the weeks following his death included a number of respectful notices. In the March 28 issue, columnist Hugh Hardy contributed the most lukewarm note:

*The inevitable though sad news last Friday of the death of playwright Brendan Behan was sorrowing to a great many people around the world.*

*Though Behan's boisterous, alcoholic sprees were harmful to the Irish image and something we cannot condone, yet many of his plays...are regarded by drama critics as masterful dramatic works. Like many of us he had his good and his bad points, the latter may be soon forgotten but, I'm sure, he will be known for decades to come as Brendan Behan the brilliant Irish playwright.*

In the next week's edition, the "Carbery Calling" column had two paragraphs under the heading "Funeral of Brendan Behan":

*One of the biggest civic funerals of many years, passed through Dublin streets for Glasnevin cemetery on March 23rd. A real Dubliner was laid to rest. This was Brendan Behan, patriot, playwright, poet, playboy, translator, novelist, and short story writer of great skill.*

*This remarkable man, a house painter by trade, was self-educated. He spent many years in jail because he was an uncompromising Republican. He drank hard and lived hard. His plays were bold, rough and soul-stirring. They were translated into many tongues. For all this, he was kindly and charitable. The poor of Dublin loved him. (R.I.P.) (April 4, 1964).*

But the most touching and surprising tribute featured in the *Echo* came from Sean Maxwell who had acclaimed and criticized Behan with equal measure in the Fall of 1960. Maxwell began the eulogy by discussing his personal relationship with Behan: "we spent some time together behind 'Barbed Wire' twenty years ago. It is often we laughed and chatted together, and so often did we disagree on matters pertinent to Republican ideas." Maxwell went on to describe Behan as "very liberal with his ideas and also with his words" and suggested that "if his life and writings lacked tidiness, it was because of its exuberance." Maxwell castigated those who bemoaned this untidy life:

*"[i]t is pathetic that so many of his critics have indulged in criticizing the author rather than his works" – and offered further justification in the artistic personality: It is very difficult for those of us endowed with no imaginative powers to understand those that have. Behan, like Joyce, O'Casey and other of our writers, has been greatly misunderstood. You cannot walk a straight line and have genius, there's a curve somewhere, or perhaps a failing if you wish to call it so. Brendan had his.*

The piece closed with these words: "It is sad to think that Brendan Behan at such an early age has passed on. The Literary world has lost a genius and we are more poor because of it. *Ar Dheis De go raibh a anam*"<sup>3</sup> (April 11, 1964).

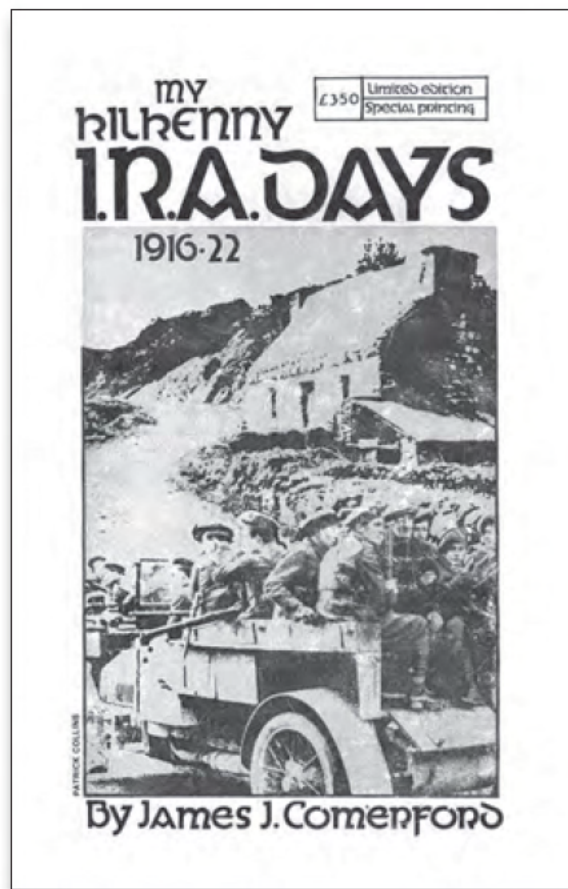
The other New York Irish papers offered similar memorials. In the March 28 *Advocate*, Pete Lee, Behan's great defender amongst the New York Irish journalists, wrote the following obituary:

#### A MAN CALLED BEHAN

*What will future generations say about the man called Behan, or better still: what will the Irish say about this controversial playwright when they fully grasp the true greatness of that headstrong man. Will they condemn him or will they bemoan the fact that in life, they sought at times to ridicule him. These are questions that should haunt some Irishmen at home and overseas.*

*Many will recall that our beloved Brendan sought permission to march with his fellow countrymen on Fifth Ave, on St. Patrick's Day a few years ago. Many will recall that he was turned down, and many will also recall that the Irish per se, did not turn Behan down. In fact, if the Irish had their way, Behan would have marched with them up Fifth Avenue.*

*We saw his controversial play—The Hostage, enjoy a successful run*



**Illustration:**  
 Judge James Comerford's memoir of his time in the I.R.A. was published in 1978. The judge, who banned the writer from the St. Patrick's Day Parade in 1961, had much in common with Behan—including service in the Irish Republican Army. Courtesy of Irish Volunteers.org.

in New York and we saw critics who tried to show their knowledge of the Theatre, backtrack sharply when the fury of Behan was unleashed upon them. One critic felt so furious about the play that he left after the second act; another felt that it was an outrage. However, when we take each of these critics apart, we find that the Theatre played an extremely small part in their lives.

It was my good fortune to know the late Brendan Behan. I knew him in peaceful sobriety and I also met him when the bottle had taken its toll. In both cases I met a man of character. I met a man who had come up the hard way, and who owed it to no one. Yet, I met a man who was a real, true Irishman. He was a man with a deep sense of duty towards his fellowman. He felt the pangs of the needy as if he were one of them, and his love for the

idle rich could not be described as intense. Yet he tolerated the latter, and in fact, had the years been a little kinder to him, he would one day become one of them. But that was not the dream of Behan. His dream was to become another O Casey, Shaw, Joyce, Yeats or Synge. Had he lived long enough, I feel sure he would have made it. Now that death has claimed him—future generations must judge his works and even his way of life. I sincerely hope that while they may praise his works, they will look with compassion on Behan the man, who made his own breaks and perhaps failed to capitalize fully on them. Let us not forget that Behan was a true Irishman, whether on or off the stage.

The April 4 *Advocate* ran this note, which certainly demonstrates what his former I.R.A. colleagues thought of him:

*BRENDAN BEHAN MEMORIAL MASS MAY 2 IN ST. JOHN'S*

*Brendan Behan has gone from this earthly scene leaving to his friends the image of a brave intelligent and genuine human being. His sensitive nature revolted at the national servitude of his country and the social oppression of his class. To the end he remained a true rebel, loyal to his principles. During his stay in New York he supported the then existing I.R.A. Prisoners Aid Committee of New York, Inc. spending many pleasant hours with old friends.*

*His many friends and admirers will have the opportunity to pay homage to this great Irishman by attending a memorial mass in St John's Church, 210 West 31st St. N.Y.C. at 9 a.m. Saturday, May 2.*

*At the regular meeting of the Irish Freedom Committee, a motion of sympathy was passed unanimously to Mrs. Brendan Behan, his parents and other relatives; the said motion to be sent to the Irish American press and the leading newspapers in Ireland. The meeting then adjourned as a token of respect to the dead patriot.*

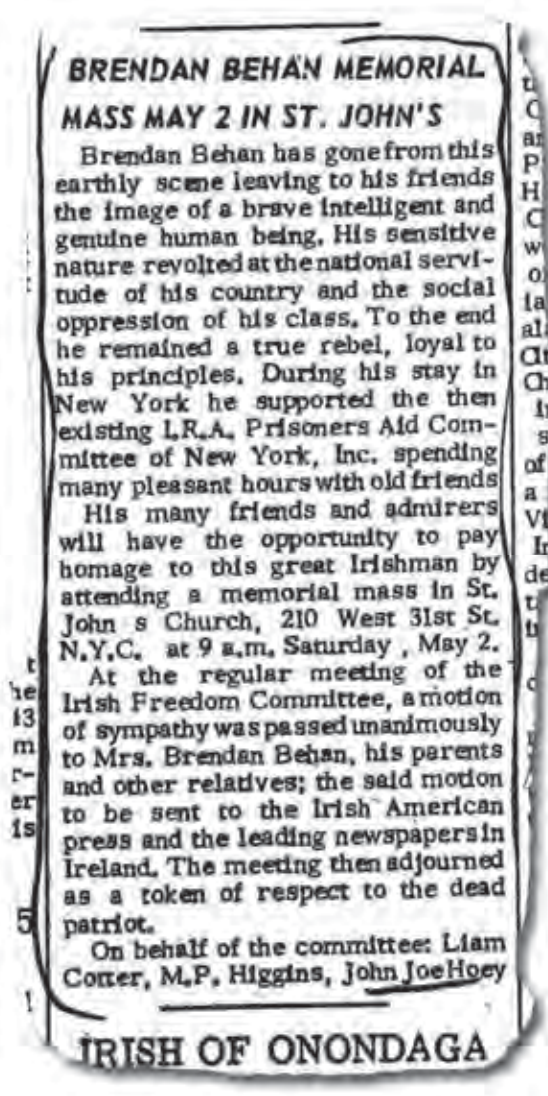
*On behalf of the committee: Liam Cotter, M.P. Higgins, John Joe Hoey.*

That same week, the *Irish World* included this remembrance written by Maureen Patricia Ford:

*BRENDAN BEHAN—THE REBEL*

*Much has been written, and will continue to be written about Brendan Behan, and his untimely death. Some will take issue with him, others will eulogize him, but none will IGNORE him. For in the person of Brendan Behan the fame of genius lit up the Irish literary skies.*

*Time is a great healer, and the years will draw their gossamer veil over the foibles and idiosyncrasies of this man of brilliant intellect. He was a sort of*



*Clarence Mangan, Dylan Thomas and Francis Thompson all rolled into one. Mangan, the Irishman roaming the streets of Dublin in his long cloak and witch's hat. Thomas, the Welshman, shortening his span of existence in the dissolution of Greenwich Village. And Thompson, the Englishman tramping the streets of London in total oblivion to the world around him.*

*Brendan Behan had human frailty, but he had princely humanity too. He was quick to condemn those who only gave lip service to a cause.*

*He was equally quick to voice approval when approval was merited. During his last visit to New York, he*

**Illustration:**  
*(Above) This notice of sympathy in connection with Behan's death appeared in the Advocate on April 4, 1964. Courtesy of Stephen Butler.*



*visited the offices of THE IRISH WORLD and GAELIC AMERICAN...He spoke of the great work [it] had done for the past 90 odd years, to further the Cause of Ireland . . .*

*Brendan Behan was a REBEL And the son of a REBEL. The condition under which he spent his formative years formed his character. At heart he was just a big, generous, happy-go-lucky, overgrown boy. He was not vindictive, and the charm he radiated seemed to induce people to look on him with sympathetic understanding. His fierce love for Ireland, and his contempt for snobbery...were perhaps the motivating forces of his life ...*

*No matter what barrier may have been put upon Brendan in this life we feel sure that at the end, as he lay dying after receiving the last rites of the Church, Saint Peter flung wide the golden gates for him (April 4, 1964).*

#### STRENGTH AND SELF-CONFIDENCE

In a remarkable coincidence, the *Irish World* placed in the column next to its warm tribute to Behan the following announcement:

*On Sunday, April 26th, the 11th annual Communion Mass and breakfast of the Co. Sligo Ladies S & B Association and the Co. Sligo Men's S & B Association will be held with Mass at the Church of Our Savior, 59 Park Ave. at 38th St. Manhattan at 10 a.m. and breakfast afterwards at the Hotel Shelburne, Lexington Ave and 37th St. New York City...Judge James J. Comerford will be the guest speaker (April 4, 1964).*

Obviously, after there was Brendan Behan, there was still Judge Comerford. This recalls Calvin Trillin's superb line that opens an article he originally wrote in 1988 for the *New Yorker*: "Before there was democracy, there was Judge James J. Comerford" (535).

Trillin's piece was basically an exposé of the inner workings of the St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee in which the journalist presented the selection of Grand Marshal as the last example of an efficient, old-school style of Boss-rule politics whose main principal, to once again repeat Senator Moynihan, "was not tyranny, but order" (quoted in Trillin 535). Nevertheless, Trillin's article is often cited instead, for its observation that while the Italians of New York had in recent years selected Frank Sinatra, Luciano Pavarotti and Sophia Lauren to lead the Columbus Day Parade, the Irish, during the same period, had chosen nonentities like John Sweeney, William Burke and Al O'Hagen (539). Such evidence is typically used to buttress claims about Irish-American parochialism and philistinism. In her work *Irish America: Coming Into Clover*, for example, Maureen Dezell quotes the Trillin passage before commenting: "Relentlessly anachronistic, the New York pageant remains pious, proper, dour, defensive while Irish culture on both sides of the Atlantic goes through remarkable flux" (216).

But Dezell's is not the only possible interpretation. The conduct of Comerford's parade committee in the 1980s, and by analogy, the New York Irish press in the 1960s, can also be viewed as evidence of the strength and self-confidence of the community the Irish established in the new world. To honor a Transit Authority employee who volunteered his time to the parade committee for many years like William Burke had, rather than rewarding a rich and famous international music or film star is not after all, much different than championing an amateur play put on by a local theatre group rather than drawing attention to an outrageous and notorious playwright. Both decisions illustrate a community that took care of its own regardless of outside opinion, a community that rewarded involvement and service, a community that did not need to trade on the cultural capital of its celebrities in order to bolster an ethnic identity. Such an interpretation can even be reconciled with Behan's posthumous

rehabilitation. For when he died, those who lionized and memorialized Behan did so because the playwright had shared his talent for conversation and song with them over drinks and/or had supported their local Irish causes with his time and treasure. In other words, Brendan had become one of the New York Irish.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Lee’s column is unintentionally hilarious in its portrait of Brendan’s wife, Beatrice Behan, whose maiden name was French-Salkeld. Ms. French-Salkeld was from a family of prominent Dublin artists and intellectuals but Lee obviously thought the woman was of Gallic descent, hence his description: “His wife, who is one of the few Gaelic-speaking Parisians, is not what one would call a typical petite French lady.”
- 2 Blythe passed on *The Quare Fellow*. Subsequently, Behan is alleged by Seamus De Burca to have quipped: “The only thing I ever had in common with Ernest Blythe was that I could tell him to fuck off in Irish.”
- 3 The sentence translates “May his soul be on God’s right side.”