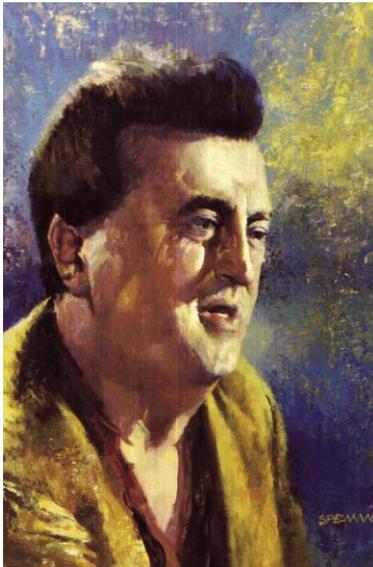


Brendan Behan

Brendan Behan took America by storm in the late 1950's, early 1960's. Here was a young man thought to be from a working class background, an I.R.A. man, a man who was imprisoned for his politics, a gifted writer, a legendary drinker, a wit and a "character" who might just say the wrong thing on live television. Here was the quintessential Irishman never at a loss for words: TV host: "Do you hate policemen?" Behan: "I don't hate anybody, but I have never seen a situation so dismal that a policeman couldn't make it worse." But here too was a young man who died a young man.



It is true that Behan's father Stephen was a housepainter, but he was also a housepainter who spoke French and Latin and one who had studied for the Catholic priesthood. It was Stephen Behan's practice to read to his sons and step sons from Dickens, Zola, and Galsworthy. Literacy, language and music were a rich inheritance Brendan received from his father. His mother, Kathleen Kearney, came from a family of shop and land owners. In fact the family resided in a flat in a row of flats in Dublin owned by Kathleen's mother. His mother and grandmother brought Irish history, song and ballad into Brendan's formation along with socialism and rebel ideals. Brendan's grandmother displayed pictures of the Bishop of Dublin and Karl Marx on her wall, harbored rebels on the run, and, in fact, was arrested in England and served three years on an explosives charge.

Behan was a product of his environment. Before he was ten years old he had joined the I.R.A. youth group, the Fianna. He attended rallies and wrote for rebel publications like "Wolf Tonal" and "The United Irishman." At age sixteen, Behan was trained in explosives by the I.R.A. and soon after began a prison career which put him behind bars - prison bars - for five and a half of his next six years, from age sixteen to twenty-two. Recklessly acting on his own, Behan traveled to Liverpool and was promptly arrested at age sixteen in the possession of explosives. His trial was an opportunity to proclaim his Irishness: "It is my proud privilege and honour to stand in an English court to testify to the unyielding determination of the Irish people to regain every inch of our national territory." And his three years in a Borstal prison (reform school) became the stuff of one of Behan's most successful books, [The Borstal Boy](#).

Not long out of Borstal in England, Behan was arrested after a shoot out with detectives about to arrest an I.R.A. man in Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin. Convicted of attempted murder, Behan was sentenced to fourteen years and sent to Mountjoy Prison. Again prison served Behan well; through the governor's invitation, Behan met Sean O'Faolain who encouraged Behan as a writer. Indeed, his first published work paralleled Behan's time in Mountjoy. He also acquired the material for his play *The Quare Fellow*, and he learned Irish from Sean O'Brian, a fellow inmate and teacher from Kerry.

Irish became an obsession with Brendan. He spent a great deal of his free time in Dingle, Connemara and other Irish speaking areas. He was so fluent that he wrote his plays *An Giall* (The Hostage) and *A Fine Day in the Graveyard* in Gaelic and wrote all of his poetry in Gaelic. Here is a stanza from his poem about the Blasket Islands:

*Silent save for bird's wings clipping the foam,
Heads on breast, they rest content, grateful to be home.
The wind lifts lightly, setting the half-door aslope
On a famished hearth without heat, without protection,
without hope.*

Fortunately, Behan was included in a Christmas amnesty which freed him from prison in 1943. Thereafter, Brendan's literary life began to take shape. He was a familiar of the Dublin based writers, such as J.P. Donleavy and Patrick Kavanaugh. No doubt they, like the Americans years later, enjoyed Brendan's talents as a raconteur, singer, and mime. But it was not until a year in Paris in the late 1940's under the influence of Jean Paul Sartre, Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett and Albert Camus that Behan learned the disciplined habits of the writer. When he returned to Ireland, he was a disciplined writer able to write on a regular basis radio scripts, newspaper serials, and hold a job on the Irish Times as a feature writer.

In 1954, *The Quare Fellow* opened very successfully in Dublin, but its 1956 production in London by Joan Littlewood, a prestigious director, was Behan's springboard into the mainstream theater. *An Giall* played in Ireland in 1958, but again it was a Joan Littlewood production of its English language version, *The Hostage*, which polished Behan's star. From this production, Behan received this accolade from one of the most influential critics of the time, Kenneth Tynan: "It seems to be Ireland's function every twenty years or so to provide a playwright who will kick English drama from the past into the present."

Brendan Behan was now a comet in the firmament of the theater, all too soon to burn out. 1958 also saw the publication of [The Borstal Boy](#) an

instant success in Ireland, England and America and [The Quare Fellow](#) opened in New York City. Brendan Behan's Ireland followed and Behan was the lovable Irish character who entertained millions on American television shows like the David Susskind Show and the Ed Paar Show.

Diabetes silenced Brendan Behan. It was a diabetes that could have been controlled by diet and a more disciplined use of alcohol. Brendan also had drink in his formation by his family, getting jars of beer for his aunts and being fed whiskey ("good for the worms") by his maternal grandmother before ten years of age. Behan's first, but not his last, non-political arrest was for drunk and disorderly conduct in 1948. From 1955 he knew of his diabetes and of how to manage his sickness, but the image of the hard drinking, witty Irishman was all too true. He was yanked from his first American TV appearance with Edward R. Murrow for being drunk. BBC-TV viewers also saw him drunk. In the 1960's in New York City, anyone could have a drink with Behan in McSorley's or any of the popular Irish bars. [Sean O'Casey](#) appealed to Brendan's brother Dominic: "Ireland is not so well off for writers that she can afford to do without Brendan. Can you do nothing about his drinking?" Brendan Behan collapsed in the Harbour Lights Bar in March 1964 and died a few days later.

Brendan Behan lives through his timeless literature.

(Written by John Walsh & originally printed in 1993)

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