Brendan Behan Papers, 1943-1983: Finding Aid

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Brendan Behan (1923-1964) was an acclaimed 20th-century Irish poet, short story writer, novelist, and playwright, who wrote in both English and Irish.

A good portion of Behan's later adolescence and early adulthood was spent in English or Irish institutions, initially borstals and then prisons, due to his involvement in the Irish Republican Army. It was during this time that he took it upon himself to study and become fluent in the Irish language. Behan gained international notoriety by the late 1950's, with the production of two plays, The Quare Fellow (1954) and An Giall / The Hostage (1958), and with the publication of his autobiographical novel, Borstal Boy (1958), which became a worldwide best-seller. Behan continued to write until his death in 1964.

This collection consists primarily of selected manuscripts and notebooks of 20th-century Irish writer Brendan Behan's most important literary and autobiographical works, covering the vast majority of his writing career, including the years he was imprisoned. In addition, the collection includes a substantial proportion of the writer's slender surviving correspondence as well as some personal ephemera.

There are a significant number of literary drafts, comprising either preliminary notes and drafts or completed manuscripts, including those for The Quare Fellow, An Giall / The Hostage, Borstal Boy, and Confessions of an Irish Rebel, as well as Behan's first play, The Landlady, among others. The typescripts that are represented in the collection, including many embryonic typed fragments of works which were subsequently abandoned, are of particular interest: typing appears to have been, for Behan, a direct extension of the creative thought process. In addition to more developed drafts, unpublished notebooks and loose notes offer significant insight into Behan's writing method. These materials are complemented by manuscripts and typescripts for various articles and essays as well as for a few poems and songs.

Behan's correspondence makes up a relatively minor part of the collection, reflecting the author's professed distaste for letter-writing. Many of the letters in the collection are represented in E.H. Mikhail's The Letters of Brendan Behan (London, 1992).

Much of the description of materials in the collection comes from information provided by the auction house at which the collection was purchased.

As no original order was discernible, materials were arranged by type/genre.

Access
Open for research.

Restrictions on Use and Copyright Information

Single photocopies may be made for research purposes. No further photoduplication of copies of material in the collection can be made when Princeton University Library does not own the original. Inquiries regarding publishing material from the collection should be directed to RBSC Public Services staff at rbsc@princeton.edu. The library has no information on the status of literary rights in the collection and researchers are responsible for determining any questions of copyright.

Acquisition and Appraisal

Custodial History

According to the auction house at which the collection was purchased, the papers are comprised of everything that passed into the possession of Brendan Behan's widow, Beatrice Behan, upon his death.

Provenance and Acquisition

Purchase, 2017 (AM 2018-80).

Appraisal

No materials were removed from the collection during 2018 processing beyond routine appraisal practices.

Processing and Other Information

Encoding

This finding aid was produced using the Archivists' Toolkit 2018-05-24T17:17-0400

Descriptive Rules Used

Finding aid content adheres to that prescribed by Describing Archives: A Content Standard.

Subject Headings

- Authors, Irish--20th century--Sources.
- Novelists, Irish--20th century--Sources.
- Irish literature--20th century--Sources.
- English literature—Irish authors--20th century--Sources.
- Manuscripts.
- Typescripts.
- Legal history
· Literature
Contents List

Writings, 1943-1963

Description: Includes handwritten and typed drafts of and notes relating to various works, including books, scripts, short stories, music, articles and essays, and poetry, several of which Behan drafted during his time in Mountjoy Prison and Curragh Camp. Of special note are three manuscripts for Borstal Boy, including two substantial annotated typescripts and a copybook containing what appears to be the earliest preparatory draft written in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, in 1948, as well as notes in Irish relating to the work. (Note that the different versions of Borstal Boy are located within several of the genre types listed here (Books, Scripts, and Miscellaneous Notes). There are 10 autograph manuscript drafts for individual works, 16 annotated typescripts, 21 unannotated typescripts, 5 autograph notebooks containing literary drafts, notes, and memoranda, and approximately 131 pages of fragmentary autograph and typed notes and drafts. Some items include related correspondence.

Books, 1956-1963

Borstal Boy, 1956-1957

Borstal Boy: Typescript Draft, 1956-1957

Description: Comprising approximately 2/3 of the edition [to page 206], light annotations and emendations, 127 pages numbered 1–131 (pages occasionally missing or in duplicate, significantly tattered condition); with a typed letter to Brendan Behan signed in pencil from Maurice Kennedy with comments on typing Brendan’s manuscript.

Box: B-001194
Folder: 1

Borstal Boy: Irish Notes, undated

Description: Autograph notes in Irish, on pages extracted from a ruled notebook. Pages might be from the notebook that contains an autobiographical essay (possibly a draft beginning for Borstal Boy) and the poem Scriosad na mblascaod.

Box: B-001194
Folder: 2

Confessions of an Irish Rebel, circa 1963

Description: Typescript draft of the first five chapters, with annotations and emendations not in Behan’s hand but apparently made under authorial supervision, 62 pages, stapled in chapters.

Box: B-001194
Folder: 3

Scripts, 1943-1961

For Stage, 1943-1961

The Hostage/ An Giall, 1957

The Hostage/ An Giall: Typescript, circa 1957

Description: In Irish, light annotations and emendations, 55 pages.

Box: B-001194
Folder: 4
The Hostage/ An Giall: Typescript of Act III, undated
Box: B-001194
Folder: 5
Description: Typescript of Act 3 of the play, as revised by D. MacDiarmid and with a note in his hand to Brendan on the final page, 6 pages.

The Hostage/ An Giall: Typescript Draft and Notes, circa 1957
Box: B-001194
Folder: 6
Description: Typescript in Irish with annotations and emendations, 20 pages, loose, folio along with autograph notes relating to the play in English.

The Hostage/ An Giall: Song Drafts, undated
Box: B-001194
Folder: 7
Description: Fragments for songs for the stage adaptation of The Hostage, 13 pages.

The Landlady/ An bhean ciosa, 1943-1946

The Landlady/ An bhean ciosa: Loose Pages, 1943
Box: B-001194
Folder: 8
Description: About 90 pages of An bhean ciosa in Irish, written while in Mountjoy Prison; with one page of what appears to be set directions for a different play.

The Landlady/ An bhean ciosa: Manuscript Draft, 1943
Box: B-001194
Folder: 9
Description: Autograph manuscript in English, [Mountjoy]; title page inscribed "For Fred May", 46 pages in a ruled notebook.

The Landlady/ An bhean ciosa: Manuscript Draft, 1946
Box: B-001194
Folder: 10
Description: Autograph manuscript draft, [Mountjoy], in Irish, 31 pages; stapled with two letters in Irish to Ernest Blythe, the Managing Director of the Abbey Theatre, one dated Mountjoy, May 18, 1946, the other Cell 8, the Curragh [Camp], June 6, 1946, 2 pages each.

The Landlady/ An bhean ciosa: Typescript of Act I, undated
Box: B-001194
Folder: 11
Description: Very lightly emended, 22 pages.

The Quare Fellow/ Casad an tsugain eile, 1946

The Quare Fellow/ Casad an tsugain eile: Manuscript Draft of Act I, circa 1946
Box: B-001194
Folder: 12
Description: Autograph manuscript draft for the first act of the play, in Irish, 15 pages.

The Quare Fellow/ Casad an tsugain eile: Typed Playscript, undated
Box: B-001194
Folder: 13
Description: Stamped "Theatre Workshop Theatre Royal Stratford", 53 pages; with another script bearing annotations in an unidentified hand (incomplete).

Richard's Cork Leg, 1961
Richard's Cork Leg: Typescript of Scenes I and II, 1961
Description: 7 pages of typescript along with a typed letter signed to Brendan from Gerald Raffles, manager of the Theatre Royal, noting that the scenes have been taken from a recording made by Brendan.

Box: B-001194
Folder: 14

Richard's Cork Leg: Notes, circa 1961
Description: Autograph notes and drafts, 16 pages.

Box: B-001194
Folder: 15

Richard's Cork Leg: Typescript Draft of a Song, circa 1961
Description: Typescript draft of a song beginning "Oh, I met my love in a graveyard", one page.

Box: B-001194
Folder: 16

Borstal Boy: Draft of Act I, undated
Description: Early typescript draft for Act I of the play produced in 1967, annotated, and one page of autograph notes, 7 pages in total.

Box: B-001194
Folder: 17

Untitled Script Fragment, undated
Description: 2 pages of story with the character "Mr. Bumblefoot."

Box: B-001194
Folder: 18

For Radio, 1957
The Ballad Makers Saturday Night, undated
Description: Typescript for a radio programme on Dublin street ballads to be presented by Sean O'Faolain, 15 pages (incomplete); with 4 pages of related notes, autograph and typed.

Box: B-001194
Folder: 19

The Big House or Nineteen-Twenty-Three, A Radio Script by Brendan Behan, 1957
Description: Typescript, lightly amended and inscribed and signed by Brendan to "David", 18 pages;

Box: B-001194
Folder: 20

The Big House: Typescript Fragment, circa 1957
Description: One page lightly annotated.

Box: B-001194
Folder: 21

A Garden Party, undated
Description: Typescript for a radio comedy, 28 pages.

Box: B-001195
Folder: 1

Moving Out, undated
Description: Typescript for a radio play, inscribed "Nessa" in an unidentified hand.

Box: B-001195
Folder: 2

Short Stories, 1957
The Catacombs, 1957
The Catacombs: Typescript Draft, circa 1957
Description: Lightly amended in an unidentified hand, 52 pages.

Box: B-001195
Folder: 3
The Catacombs: Typescript Draft of Chapter I, circa 1957
Description: Lightly annotated, 28 pages.
Box: B-001195
Folder: 4

The Catacombs: Typescript Draft of Chapter I, undated
Description: 25 pages
Box: B-001195
Folder: 5

The Catacombs: Typescript Draft of Chapter I, undated
Description: 33 pages
Box: B-001195
Folder: 6

The Last of Mrs. D’Arcy, undated
Description: Typescript short story, annotations and emendations.
Box: B-001195
Folder: 7

A Place in the Sun, undated
Description: Two typescript chapters of a pseudo-autobiographical work, together 13 pages.
Box: B-001195
Folder: 8

Untitled Manuscript Draft, undated
Description: Draft for a short story, in Irish, the first page numbered "10", 15 pages.
Box: B-001195
Folder: 9

Music, undated
Brian O’Linn, undated
Description: Typescript ditty in 10 verses, 11/2 pages.
Box: B-001195
Folder: 10

The Trombone Song, undated
Description: Typescript ditty in 6 verses, one page, slightly annotated.
Box: B-001195
Folder: 11

Articles, Essays, and Speeches, 1952-1957 October 4
The Big Hitch: A Series of Talks by Brendan Behan No. II., 1952
Description: Typescript, first page only
Box: B-001195
Folder: 12

Brendan Behan on Ireland, undated
Description: Typescript essay, annotations and emendations chiefly to the first two pages, 18 pages (incomplete).
Box: B-001195
Folder: 13

Dogmen and Bogmen, 1957 October 4
Description: Typescript proof of essay on Irish politics with annotations and emendations, 9 pages (15 Hebert Street, Dublin).
Box: B-001195
Folder: 14

Indeed Nil, undated
Description: Autograph fragment in Irish and English, 3 pages, loose, 4to
Box: B-001195
Folder: 15

Irish Coffee, undated
Description: Typed review of a radio programme, one page.
Box: B-001195
Folder: 16
Review of The Black and Tans by Richard Bennett, undated
Description: Typescript draft of a book review for Richard Bennett’s The Black and Tans, lightly annotated, 4 pages.

On The Northside, undated
On the Northside. A Dublin Picture by Brendan Behan: Lecture, undated
Description: Typescript signed ("Brendan Behan, 70 Kildare Road") lecture based on his childhood, annotations and emendations, 10 pages.

On the Northside: Essay, undated
Description: On The Northside / Out of the Depths; the story of a slum rearing, typed notes for an autobiographical essay signed ("Brendan Behan, 70 Kildare Road"), 3 pages (incomplete).

"An oiche De haoine seo...", undated
Description: Typescript of an article in Irish, emendations, 3 pages.

"I visit an old Kerry confederate in a sanitorium...", undated
Description: Typescript 3 pages.

"The whores that's going nowadays is not worth the name of whores", undated
Description: Typescript, 5 pages.

"The first duty of a writer is to let his country down...", undated
Description: Typescript of a short essay touching on patriotism, literature and religion, 3 pages.

Essay on Ireland, undated
Description: Typescript, 159 pages (missing title page).

Notes for an Autobiographical Essay, undated
Description: Typed notes with autograph additions, 7 pages.

Untitled Article on His Time in Mountjoy Prison, undated
Description: Includes annotations, 4 pages. The first page includes a summary of six articles.

Poetry, 1955 September 23
To Beatrice, 1955 September 23
Description: Autograph poem signed, 24 lines on 2 pages.

To Beatrice: Notes, undated
Description: Autograph notes for the poem To Beatrice, 3 pages.

Poem Beginning "Is fuath le daoine bheith ag briseadh an dli...", undated

Description: Typescript draft of a poem, in English and Irish, 1 page.

Miscellaneous Notes, 1948

Possible Early Draft for Borstal Boy, and a Poem, "Scriosad na mblascaod", 1948

Description: Contains an autobiographical essay (possibly a draft beginning for Borstal Boy), in English, 19 pages (incomplete); and "Scriosad na mblascaod", an autograph poem signed and initialled, in Irish, with numerous cancellations and emendations that Behan drafted while in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin. The name and address of Behan’s brother, Dominic, is inscribed on the front cover. May be related to the loose autograph notes in Irish for Borstal Boy.

Notebook in English and Spanish, undated

Description: Contains notes in English and a little Spanish, apparently relating to his writing, character development, and other wide-ranging topics, in very brief, fragmented format, about 50 pages

Notebook in English, undated

Description: Memorandum book containing notes in English, 8 written pages

Notes for an Essay on the Irish, undated

Description: Notebook containing notes for an essay on the Irish, in English, 8 pages, and notes in Irish, 6 pages

Notebook, undated

Description: Great Northern Brewery Dundalk notebook, 22 pages.

Notebook in Irish, undated

Description: Notes in Irish in a fragment of a ruled notebook, 6 pages.

Notebook in Irish, undated

Description: Notes in Irish in a ruled notebook apparently used previously for schoolwork, 3 pages.

Loose Notes and Fragments, undated

Correspondence, 1954 August 8-1983

Description: Mostly consists of single letters. Various correspondents, including some Fianna Fáil politicians and newspaper and magazine editors, are represented.
Many of the letters were published in E.H. Mikhail’s The Letters of Brendan Behan (London, 1992).
Some items relate to Beatrice Behan.

Letters from Behan, 1955-1962

Behan, Beatrice, 1955-1962
Description: Includes 2 letters from Behan to his wife, Beatrice Behan, as well as a letter from Celia Salkeld to Beatrice Behan.

Box: B-001196
Folder: 2

Dwyer, Liam (Newspaper Editor), undated
Description: Draft of a letter to Liam Dwyer, with autograph emendations, 1/2 page

Box: B-001196
Folder: 3

Editor of The Spectator, 1957 January 6
Description: Typed draft of a letter to the editor of The Spectator, 15 Herbert Street, Dublin 1/2 page,

Box: B-001196
Folder: 4

Freeman, John (Editor of The New Statesman), circa 1962 November
Description: Autograph letter to John Freeman, 5 Anglesea Road, Dublin, on Irish history, 48 pages, missing final page.

Box: B-001196
Folder: 5

Kiely, Mary, circa 1958
Bibliography: Published in the following:

Box: B-001196
Folder: 6

Lusty, Robert, 1957 February 21
Description: Letter to Robert Lusty, 15 Herbert Street, Dublin, on publication rights, 1/2 page

Box: B-001196
Folder: 7

Maher(?), A. P., undated

Box: B-001196
Folder: 8

Newspaper Editor, 1955 August 12
Description: Autograph letter signed, 18 Waterloo Road, Ballsbridge about a just sentence passed [possibly relating to IV.5], 2 pages, with the first page of another letter.

Box: B-001196
Folder: 9

Newspaper Editor, 1955 November 22
Description: Typed letter signed to a newspaper editor, 18 Waterloo Road, Dublin, with autograph emendations, 1 page

Box: B-001196
Folder: 10

O'Congaile, Maire, undated
Description: Autograph letter signed to Maire O'Congaile, Galway, one page.

Box: B-001196
Folder: 11

O'Kelly, Sean Thomas, 1957 April 18

Box: B-001196
Folder: 12
Description: Typed letter signed to Sean Thomas O'Kelly, 15 Herbert Street, Dublin, with autograph emendations, complaining of rough treatment at the hands of the Civic Guards, 11/4 pages.

Salkeld, Irma, 1958 December 18
Description: Autograph note signed to Irma Salkeld, his mother-in-law, about cigars, 1 page.

About a Just Sentence Passed, undated
Description: Autograph letter signed, 18 Waterloo Road, Ballsbridge, 2 pages, missing first page.

Birthday Greeting, undated
Description: Autograph note of birthday wishes signed, in English and Irish, 1/4 page.

Christmas Card with a Photograph of Brendan and Beatrice Behan, circa 1960

Autograph Envelope Addressed to Penelope Gilliat, Editor of Vogue, undated

Letters to Behan, 1954 August 8-1963 January 9

Astor, David, 1960 May 27
Description: Typed letter signed by David Astor, London, suggesting the services of the "Freudian psych-analyst" Dr Willi Hoffer, 1 page.

Cockburn, Claud, 1960 January 20
Description: Autograph letter signed by Claud Cockburn, Dublin, on his financial difficulties resulting from troubles with his publisher, asking to borrow money from Brendan, 4 pages.

Collins, Mrs. E. ("Grannie Collins"), 1961 February 14
Description: Letter to Brendan and Beatrice Behan from "Grannie Collins", Donnybrook, 14 February 1961, 4 pages

de Brún, Pádraig, 1954 August 11

Fox, Dick, 1959 February 28
Description: Also Includes an incomplete letter from an unknown sender enclosing a poem titled "Tolka Tour" and a typed letter signed by H.E.F. Donohue, New York, 11 May 1962, on the beauty of his writing, 1 page.

Freeman, John, 1963 January 9
Description: Typed letter signed by John Freeman, editor at the New Statesman, London, expressing regret that his letter will not be published, 1 page.
Irish Times Editor, undated
Box: B-001196
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Jordan, Fred, 1961 February 8
Box: B-001196
Folder: 25
Description: Typed letter signed by Fred Jordan, editor of the Evergreen Review, New York, on publishing an article, one page

Kennedy, Maurice, 1954 September 25
Box: B-001196
Folder: 26
Description: Autograph letter signed by Maurice Kennedy, Dublin, 1 page.

O'Keefe, Patrick, 1961 March 15
Box: B-001196
Folder: 27
Description: Telegram of invitation from Pat O'Keefe to Brendan Behan, New York, 1 page.

Ó Maoláin, Tomás, 1954 October 2
Box: B-001196
Folder: 28

Sheehy-Skeffington, Owen, 1954 August 8
Box: B-001196
Folder: 29

"The Duke of Gurrier's Court", undated
Box: B-001196
Folder: 30
Description: Concerning the Dalcassian Legation, Crumlin "gurriers," and other matters.

Williams, Tennessee, 1961 April 7
Box: B-001196
Folder: 31
Description: Telegram by Tennessee Williams, New York.

Postcard from Joan to Beatrice Behan, circa 1983
Box: B-001196
Folder: 32
Description: Asking Quidnut to convey congratulations to Behan.

Telegram from "Ernie" to Seamus Kelly Quidnut, 1959 June 12
Box: B-001196
Folder: 33
Description: Asking Quidnut to convey congratulations to Behan.

Unidentified Correspondence, circa 1960
Box: B-001196
Folder: 34
Description: Includes a card, fragments, and envelopes.

Ephemera and Documents, 1952-1974
Box: B-001196
Folder: 35

Release from Hutchinson's Publishers, 1960 September 15
Box: B-001196
Folder: 36
Description: Typed statement signed (by Brendan Behan and two witnesses), with autograph emendation, stating that Hutchinson’s Publishers release Brendan from any obligations regarding his future work.

Grand National '56, Pen Sketch, 1956
Box: B-001196
Folder: 36
Description: A humorous pen sketch signed "Be Be Been."

Check from Behan to Rory Furlong, 1961
Box: B-001196
Folder: 37
Description: Check for £50 signed by Brendan Behan for [his half-brother] Rory Furlong.
Miscellaneous Ephemera, 1952-1960

Box: B-001196
Folder: 38

Description: Among other items, includes: a race book from the Leopardstown Club meet, 1 August 1959, annotated; a program from the staging of The Hostage at the Cort Theatre; a photocopy of Brendan Behan's passport; 2 copies of the Dublin Unemployed Association newsletter, Torch with "An Open Letter to Mr. Gerard Boland" and the poem "Home are the Heroes" by Dominic Behan (October 1953).

Newspaper Clippings, 1955-1974

Box: B-001196
Folder: 39

Empty Folders and Envelopes, undated

Box: B-001196
Folder: 40

Description: Several manila envelopes and folders with various notes in multiple hands regarding their former content, which primarily included manuscripts, correspondence, and ephemera.