

## Brendan Behan

Alcoholic and diabetic, Brendan Behan collapsed in Dublin's Harbour Bar on March 20<sup>th</sup> 1964. He was transferred to the Meath hospital where he died aged forty-one. Thus ended the life of one of Ireland's greatest writers and most colorful characters. He once described himself as a drinker with a writing problem, but even such insightful personal analysis only scratches the surface.



The son of a house painter, Behan was born into a family steeped in Irish Republicanism. His father Stephen who had fought in the war of independence, read Zola, Maupassant, and other classics to the children as bedtime stories. His mother Kathleen (née Kearney) was a personal friend of Michael Collins. She would take the children on literary walking tours of Dublin. Kathleen had two sons from her first marriage and five children with Stephen Behan. His uncle Peadar Kearney wrote The Soldier's Song which would become the National Anthem of the Irish Republic. His brother Seán, also a writer penned the song The Patriot Game.

As a boy Brendan joined Fianna Eireann, the youth wing of the IRA founded by Constance Markievicz in 1909. He graduated to full IRA membership when he was sixteen. He immediately set off on an unauthorized mission to bomb the Liverpool docks. Apprehended with explosives he was sentenced to three years in a youth detention centre known as a borstal. He would not return to Ireland until 1941. He wrote of his time in this prison in what is arguably his best-known work "Borstal Boy." A year later he was arrested for conspiracy and sentenced to fourteen years. He was released under a general amnesty in 1946 after serving his time in Dublin's Mountjoy jail and the Curragh camp in Kildare. At age twenty-three his IRA career was over.

While in Mountjoy, Behan wrote his first play "The Landlady." He also wrote poetry and prose. One of his poems was published in a literary magazine called The Bell. He got his first immersion in the Irish language while incarcerated and upon his release spent time in the Gaeltacht areas of Galway and Kerry increasing his proficiency to the point where he could write poetry in Irish. He would later write "An Giall" which was made into a movie called "The Hostage."

Needing to get away from the provincialism of 1950's Ireland, Behan moved to Paris where he felt he could finally "release the artist within." He allegedly made a living there by writing pornography. Upon his return to Ireland, he wrote for the Irish Times. He wrote a serial for the paper based on his knowledge of the Dublin and Paris underworld that was later published as "The Scarperer"

He first found success and a modicum of notoriety with the publication and staging of "The Quare Fellow." There followed a drunken interview on English television which endeared him to the English public. He befriended a fellow guest on the show, Irish American actor Jackie Gleason. They would remain lifelong



friends. "The Quare Fellow" transferred to Broadway where it was a huge success. Behan's wit, talent and capacity for alcohol made him a star in New York.

Behan found fame difficult to deal with leading him to depend even more on alcohol. But his wit and imagination never left him. At a symposium in England exploring the differences between prose and poetry. He and the audience sat through an hour long discourse by an English academic. When Behan was asked to respond his answer was short and hilarious.

There was a young man named Rollocks,  
who worked for Farrier Pollocks.  
As he walked on the Strand.  
With his girl by the hand.  
The tide came up to his knees.

"Now that's prose," he continued. "If the tide had been in, it would have been poetry."

Behan was survived by his wife Beatrice, Née French Salkeld and his daughter Blanaid who was born several months before he died. His funeral which was described as the biggest since that Michael Collins featured an IRA guard of honor. He was buried in Glasnevin cemetery with full military honors.