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ANTHONY ROCHE

Introduction

Excepting Beckett (who remains a special case), Brian Friel is the most important Irish playwright in terms both of dramatic achievement and cultural importance to have emerged since the Abbey Theatre's heyday. For all of the Irish Theatre Movement's fame worldwide, the canon of its enduring works is small: J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and Sean O'Casey's Dublin trilogy. Brendan Behan promised much in the 1950s but the role of Stage Irishman took over and he died young; Samuel Beckett wrote his plays in French and in a context which denied any hint of the local. While other major contemporary Irish playwrights from Friel's generation have made a reputation in their own country (Tom Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, John B. Keane), almost without exception that success has not been replicated abroad. (The exception which proves the rule is Hugh Leonard's *Da*, which won a Tony Award in 1973.) But from Brian Friel's emergence in 1964 with the ground-breaking *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, which went on from its success at that year's Dublin Theatre Festival to a nine-month run on Broadway, each of the subsequent decades in his writing career has seen at least one of his works achieve critical and worldwide success, notably *Aristocrats* (1979), *Translations* (1980) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). He has done so with plays which remain resolutely set (for the most part) in the remoteness of County Donegal, in the fictional locale of Ballybeg (from the Gaelic *baile beag* or "small town").

Nor has that international success been achieved at the expense of his status in his own country. As Seamus Heaney puts it, Friel's constant renewal of his dramatic art is a profound record of "what it has been like to live through the second half of the twentieth century in Ireland."[1] The country has undergone a profound transformation in that time, from the economic deprivation of the 1950s through to the Celtic Tiger of the 1990s. The 1960s brought the promise of modernization to Ireland, with the government encouraging US investment; but even at that early stage Brian Friel regarded such "progress" as a mixed blessing, conscious as he is in all his plays of what is being lost

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alongside what is being gained. The material circumstances of his characters have improved immeasurably over the decades, from the humble fare served at meals in the early (or the history) plays to the point where Terry in 1993's *Wonderful Tennessee* can complain that none of the exotic foods supplied in their picnic hamper is actually edible.

Friel's Irishness is complicated by the fact that he is (as he has described himself) "a member of the [Catholic] minority living in the North."[2] Born in 1929 in Omagh in Northern Ireland, he moved at the age of 10 to a city where he was to grow up and become a teacher, like his father before him. That city bears two names – Derry to the nationalists, Londonderry to the unionists – and to live there is to be acutely aware of linguistic, cultural, religious and political divisions. Summers for Friel were spent in his mother's home county of Donegal, adjacent to and serving as a natural hinterland to Derry, but divided from it by a border established by the Boundary Commission in the 1920s. Over the course of his lifetime Friel (and his family) have gradually moved from Derry into Donegal, progressing along Lough Foyle to near the northernmost tip of the island in Greencastle, where he stares out every day at a scene of incomparable natural beauty and just across the lough to Magilligan, the largest prison for political internees. Brian Friel inhabits the borders of the two Irelands, casting a cold eye on both jurisdictions and their political shortcomings in his plays.

Even before political violence erupted in Northern Ireland in 1969, Friel's plays centered on an attachment to the local, to the small community, to the marginalized and border regions as opposed to the metropolitan center; it is one of the important ways in which he has come to be recognized as a postcolonial writer. His plays dramatize the politics of the tribe, and they do so most often through an obsessive focus on its microcosm, the family. There is always in Friel's small communities a sense of some lost or missing dimension, a context which would give meaning to the isolated and frequently despairing lives of his characters. Yet the plays are also filled with sun, with laughter, with music, with fun. It is this combination in Friel, of a surface gaiety compensating for a great deprivation which can scarcely be named or discussed, which gives his plays their characteristic tone.

Brian Friel is in his late seventies and still writing. In February 2005, a new play, *The Home Place*, premiered at Dublin's Gate Theatre and went on to a three-month run in London's Comedy Theatre. It is an important addition to an extraordinary oeuvre in which there is a good deal to assess. His short stories won him early distinction; many of them were individually published in the *New Yorker*, and two collections appeared in the 1960s. As he himself came to recognize, for all of their qualities, these short stories would never surpass those of a Frank O'Connor. Theatre is the medium

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on which Brian Friel has concentrated exclusively for the past forty years, the form through which he has realized an extraordinary achievement and secured worldwide recognition. His writing in drama will, accordingly, provide the focus of the *Companion*. What makes Friel a great dramatist is that he seeks (and, in his best plays, finds) a theatrical form adequate to the Irish condition, a form uniquely suited to represent the themes that concern him: the splitting of the protagonist Gar O'Donnell into a public and a private persona in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*; the use of the four monologues in *Faith Healer* to present conflicting versions of the same event; the conceit in *Translations* by which, even though the native characters speak English, the audience accepts that they are speaking Irish; the eruption of the dance of the five women in *Dancing at Lughnasa*; the image of the head-measuring in *The Home Place*. The tally (to date) is twenty-four original plays and seven translations/versions/adaptations (of the Russian writers Turgenev and Chekhov, mainly). Friel's own plays have been translated into many languages and are performed worldwide; they remain widely in print through Faber and Faber and Peter Fallon's Gallery Press, and feature in university courses on Irish, Postcolonial and Theatre Studies. At least half a dozen of them have been garlanded with awards in London and New York (including the Writers' Guild Award, the *Evening Standard* Best New Play Award three times, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award twice and a Tony Award).

Friel's plays should not be considered in terms of success only, however. When awarded a Tony for 1990's *Dancing at Lughnasa* as Best Play, he responded by quoting the late Graham Greene to the effect that success is only the postponement of failure. Friel went on to prove (and arguably test) this maxim with the failure of its successor, *Wonderful Tennessee*, which closed on Broadway after nine performances (where *Lughnasa* had run for over a year) in 1993. Friel could be said to encourage the zigzag pattern of his career by reacting against what he sees as a process of simplification when his plays achieve huge success, their deep-felt emotion sentimentalized, their political and historic ironies flattened or removed. The next play he writes is invariably a reaction against this process, often a retaliatory farce where the themes of the previous play are ruthlessly satirized – as in 1982's *The Communication Cord*, which reacted to the success of *Translations* two years earlier. Thomas Kilroy, in the opening essay of this volume, detects this tendency operating from the start in Friel's career, where *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*'s success with Irish America prompted the savage rejoinder of the returned émigré in 1966's *The Loves of Cass McGuire*. And *Wonderful Tennessee* was a more abstract and philosophical meditation on the themes which had so engrossed audiences in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. These subsequent

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plays may have failed at one level, but they enabled Friel to continue the necessary process of searching out new themes and approaches as a writer. The issues of success and failure are combined in arguably Friel's greatest play, *Faith Healer*, which failed on Broadway in 1979 but has gone on to be one of the most revived and theatrically haunting plays in his canon. This *Companion* looks, therefore, at the entire range of Friel's dramatic output, not just attending to the "successful" plays but wishing to establish the various contexts in which one plays speaks to another, sometimes over decades.

It is instructive in this regard that the first two essays – which examine Friel's plays up to 1971's *The Gentle Island* – are written by two major contemporary Irish playwrights, Thomas Kilroy and Frank McGuinness, both of whom were encouraged in their nascent writerly ambitions by the experience of seeing early Friel plays. McGuinness writes of the risk and amibition of the three plays he considers, of how they lay the groundwork for much of what is to come after. And yet these "early" plays – a term used to cover a prolific period of fifteen years in which Friel secured an international reputation – have not been well served in a number of ways. Faber's *Selected Plays* of 1984 retains only one of the first eight (1964's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*). This imbalance became even more pronounced in 1996, when *Selected Plays* was redubbed *Plays One* without being recast. Four volumes, not two, of Friel's collected plays are urgently needed for both students and theatrical practitioners: three covering the original plays, and one the versions. If *Selected Plays* has unintentionally narrowed the focus in relation to Friel's drama, Seamus Deane's influential introduction may also have contributed (whether he is responsible for the plays chosen or not). Discussing Friel's "early" career, Deane speaks of the "increasing sentimentality" of the plays written in the six years after 1965 and argues that Irish audiences "gratefully accepted" plays like 1967's *Crystal and Fox* and 1969's *The Mundy Scheme*.[3] The record simply does not bear this out, either in relation to the bleakly unforgiving nature of the plays themselves or their Dublin reception (as Frank McGuinness eloquently demonstrates). Nor is it clear that Friel from the early 1970s (in Deane's words) "cut[s] himself off from his early work."[4] 1971's *The Gentle Island* itself makes a fascinating comparison with *Translations* of almost a decade later. Both have a motherless family of father and sons (sharing some of the same names) and a fidelity to maintaining Gaelic culture which is fatally disrupted by the arrival of two men: in *Translations*, of two British soldiers; in *Gentle Island*, of two gay men from Dublin. His breakthrough play *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* is haunted by the spirit of the five sisters who finally emerge on to the stage twenty-six years later in *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

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The *Companion* accordingly looks at the entire range of Friel's dramatic output, mainly through groupings of two to four plays in ways which will enrich understanding of the more acknowledged plays and which chart the fascinating and complex trajectory of his career. The final four essays are designed to broaden the context by considering both the practical staging of the plays and the theoretical issues they raise; nor will these be seen as mutually exclusive but as interacting with and enriching each other. This volume is informed by a keen awareness of the fact that Brian Friel, fron his eyrie in North Donegal, has kept one eye on Ireland and one eye on the world. I am pleased that his signature play, *Translations*, adorns the cover. The two photos are taken from a touring Royal National Theatre production seen throughout the UK in 2005 by packed audiences, many of them young people studying the play for their A level courses. The key term in Friel's theatrical career is "translation" and in particular his plays' ability, while remaining true to the local, to provide a set of dramatic, philosophical and political contexts by which they have been translated worldwide into a rich variety of languages and cultures. His contribution has been one of the most necessary and profound by a living writer in the English language.

NOTES

1. Seamus Heaney, *Friel Festival Programme* (April–August 1999), p. 23.
2. Brian Friel in the TV documentary *Brian Friel* (Ferndale Films, 2000).
3. Seamus Deane, "Introduction," in Brian Friel, *Plays One*, (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 15.
4. Ibid.

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THOMAS KILROY

The early plays

The early work of a playwright may display surprising misdirection. But, even then, there may be signals towards the mature work to follow. A playwright of substance creates an alternative world on stage, a world with its own population, its own modes of behavior, its own style and, in particular, its own characteristic stage speech. All of this is constructed with the actor in mind. It is extremely unlikely that such a world will already be in place in the first written plays. There is also the endearing fact that young writers tend to find their own personal experiences of consuming interest and hence the echoes in early work of personal journeys. There is a danger here for the playwright, since plays depend upon an effacement of the personal, a projection of the personal into multiple roles or, as in the case of Shaw or Brecht, upon the assertive expression of personality through a subjective control of the material.

Stephen Greenblatt remarks how Shakespeare, in his first attempt at writing an historical trilogy with *Henry VI* in the 1590s, creates a gang of lower-class rebels from the countryside, led by Jack Cade, who attempt a proletarian revolution.[1] Greenblatt's point is that Shakespeare himself had just recently moved to London from the provinces. He is offering his metropolitan audience a personal version of terror, of the quaking instability beneath the façade of Elizabethan order. Certainly, Cade and his men have the immediacy of closely observed life, of overheard speech, which is not true of the aristocratic characters in those three early plays. There is a comparable reflection of journeying in the first play of another non-metropolitan playwright in George Farquhar's *Love and a Bottle* (1698). Farquhar's journey from Ireland to London was one from the periphery to the center, the typical journey of the outsider from the colony to the center of power and social definition, typical, that is to say, of the journey made by most Anglo-Irish playwrights of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. All of this is reflected in the adventures of the young Irish rake Roebuck in this first play.

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In contrast, Brian Friel's two early, unpublished but staged plays, *The Francophile* or *A Doubtful Paradise* (1960) and *The Blind Mice* (1963), are firmly located within that northwest corner of the island of Ireland where most of his work is set. In time he was to name this fictionalized locality, with its detailed mirroring of a real place, Ballybeg, thereby absorbing locality into a personal vision. There is, indeed, journeying in Friel's drama, most notably in *Faith Healer* (1979), but the essential image throughout is one of rootedness. Journeys are only made to test the possibilities, or impossibilities, of a return to the home place, which also happens to be the title of his most recent play at the time of writing.

The Francophile is set in Derry and *The Blind Mice* in an unnamed town in the north of Ireland. This specificity is further compounded by the fact that these are family plays. The Logues in the first play and the Carrolls in the second belong to that long line of provincial or rural families which populated the Irish stage through the preceding three decades. The plays, too, are naturalistic, like many Irish plays before them, with just a hint of that poetic movement, the graceful sleights and shifts with which Friel was to break through the naturalistic mode in his later work. What is new in these two plays, compared to other Irish plays of the 1950s, is the quality of the writing and the sharpness of the intelligence. This is clearly a writer who has already a highly developed sense of comedy and characterization, particularly of characters struggling desperately within their given situations in life. One has to remember that Friel's apprenticeship as a writer had ended by the time he came to write plays. As a novice playwright he had already a considerable reputation as a writer of short stories and was to retain the techniques of direct storytelling in many of his plays. These two early plays, despite occasional awkwardness in exposition, also show how skillful he was even then in constructing conventional plays.

Both plays are personal in that they reflect the immediate interests of the young writer, a trained teacher and former seminarian. They are plays about the first generation of fully educated young Irish people in the young Irish state, with parents who never had the same opportunity. In this respect they reflect an important shift in Irish society for someone of Friel's generation, where education became an avenue of moving up in the world. What is interesting is Friel's response to this opportunity. Here is his description of the family in *The Blind Mice*:

> The Carrolls are publicans. The father and mother have no formal education, but because of their money and especially because of their family (Chris is a priest and John is a doctor) they are highly thought of.[2]

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Rather like the power of imagination in the mature plays, education is here a very mixed blessing, something transformative but also carrying within it the seeds of bitterness and failure. This is the beginning of a major thematic paradox in Friel, the way that the higher human faculties can yield destruction, how something uplifting can betray the individual even at the very moment of achievement. What is distinctive is that this heavy theme is portrayed through comedy, although, as always with Friel's comedy, there is that cool, unblinking eye observing everything. Specifically, both mothers in the plays, Maggie in *The Francophile* and Lily in *The Blind Mice*, are the carriers of this comedy, innocents from an older generation trying to manage in a new world of new knowledge, new jobs and new social status. There is satire here of social ambition but it is an affectionate kind. Friel likes these two women.

The two sons, Kevin Logue, a barrister, and John Carroll, a doctor, may both be new professionals but their achievement has turned to dust for both of them. Once again this anticipates a certain kind of recurring male figure in the later plays. Logue and Carroll are early examples of those intelligent, articulate, imaginative, antagonistic figures in Friel's work, who help drive the action with a nagging, questioning restlessness. Compared to the two sons, the two fathers are ineffective, one of them dangerously so. Willie Logue, the francophile of the title in the first play, is a wonderful, farcical creation who epitomizes this ambivalent attitude to education. A perennial autodidact, with his mish-mash of learning (at this point in his life a pursuit of all things cultural and French) he is destructive of everyone around him. The hunger for education in this buffoon is like a malignant flowering that envelops everything and everyone. His self-education, it turns out, is but a front for snobbery and social pretension, far more serious defects in the Friel scheme of things. These all-too-human failings violate what is natural. In the complex order of values in Friel's work this is one of the base lines: nature and the natural as a kind of yardstick, a way of measuring human behavior. It is behind the cry of the son Kevin, near to tears, to his parents, at the end of the play, "Why did you not let us grow naturally?"[3]

The Blind Mice is also a Priest Play, one of the reliable genres of Irish theatre which would have been familiar to Friel in the work of Paul Vincent Carroll or Joseph Tomelty. A more interesting comparison might be made, however, between *The Blind Mice* and Bridget Boland's *The Prisoner* (1954). This latter play was based upon the case of Cardinal Mindszenty who was imprisoned by the Hungarian Communist government in 1948. The London production came to Dublin with Alec Guinness in a bravura soutane and cape-swirling performance. Both the Mindszenty case and the Boland play had an impact upon Catholic Ireland of the 1950s, preoccupied as it was

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with stories of the mission fields, of Communist torture and brainwashing. The prisoner in the Friel play is Chris Carroll, a young Irish missionary priest returned after five years of solitary confinement in Communist China. The predictable communal hysteria which follows his return home, and the bitter twist which, in turn, follows when the young priest shows human weakness, make up the plot of the play. It is a play which finally has too much happening in it but is still a crucial part of the writer's lifelong treatment of the nature of spirituality. The image of Chris "praying" by singing "Three Blind Mice" in his utterly silent cell is not far removed from the "miracle-working" of Frank Hardy in *Faith Healer*. Conventional piety for Friel was and is an irrelevance. The life of the spirit is to be found in other, far less orthodox places, in the singing of a child's nursery rhyme or the patter of an apparent charlatan.

In between these two unpublished plays, Friel wrote another about sanctity and its uncertain place in the world, *The Enemy Within* (1962). This features the famous sixth-century Ulster saint, Columba, and his voluntary exile on the island of Iona. It is worth remarking upon why, of the three early plays, this is the only one Friel has chosen to publish. The setting is a monk's austere cell on the Scottish island, the atmosphere one of the pervasive presence of the elements, of sea and wind, of hard, manual work. It features a group of monks "cut off from the refining influence of women."[4] The men are dressed in natural-colored robes with the charismatic figure of the Abbot in white. This is a setting of great physicality: "the flight of the sail, the swing of the axe, the warm breadth of a horse" (46). It is intensely physical because it is the arena in which the playwright stages the cost of spirituality in a highly physical man, Columba. The external material detail is perfectly set against the interior struggle. All of this was beautifully realized in Ria Mooney's first production of the play for the Abbey in the old Queen's Theatre in 1962 with Ray McAnally, brimming with animality, as the saint. Important Friel themes are set down here for the first time, to be fleshed out in different ways in later plays. The monks' journeying across the Irish Sea and Britain are brighter versions of pilgrimage than the dark journeys of *Faith Healer* but, oddly, the questors and the quests are undeniably connected. Place-names and place-naming, too, have the same currency here as in *Translations* (1980), as signposts of great political significance. Above all, the important subsidiary theme of *The Enemy Within* is the magnetism of the home place and the anguish of exile which would appear and reappear in the body of work in the future, most immediately in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*

You can see why Friel has preferred this play to the other two early works. Technically, *The Enemy Within* is the first demonstration of his command of form. Each element of the play, with an exactitude of timing, connects with

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the next, in perfect unity. The twin engines which drive the play to its final moments are Columba's relationships with the young English novice, Oswald, and with two visitors from Ireland, his brother Eoghan and nephew Aedh. These two strands are welded together. Eoghan and Aedh have come to enlist Columba as a military leader in an inter-tribal conflict back home. We have already seen Columba succumb to this temptation in another episode earlier in the play. We have seen him strike Oswald. The anguish which followed this now allows him to break this cycle forever and in doing so he is heartily cursed by brother and nephew. The seductive, corrupting call they brought with them is clearly identified in Columba's words as having come from Ireland herself, significantly a feminine Ireland, the Ireland of *aisling* poetry, a dream woman with a siren call to violent sacrifice. At the very moment when Columba has driven out his own kin, forever, the missing Oswald turns up, a lost child found, a child of the surrogate family of the monastic community. The blow struck by Columba has clearly been absolved. In abandoning blood relationships for those of the spirit, Columba, in the final moments of the play, offers a simple dramatic expression of the priestly vocation.

To turn to the more established plays, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1966) and *Lovers: Winners and Losers* (1967), is to enter fully the characteristic stage world of this playwright. Richard Pine has described them as "Plays of Love," in two senses: the intimate, private love between individuals, and the more public ties which bind people to their native place and the bonds of the tribe.[5] This is literally true, as the titles of two of the works demonstrate. Pine is also following the line of the playwright himself, who once described these early plays as attempted analysis of "different kinds of love."[6] There is, however, another overarching concern here which gives the treatment of love its sense of fragility and evanescence. This is the power of the imagination, more specifically the performative, histrionic imagination and how it operates in calling up an alternative, alluring reality. The flight of imagination is built upon the available bits and scraps of everyday experience. But such is its power that this material reality loses its factuality, its stubborn firmness, when the imagination flows over it. It is this disconnectedness that is potentially so destructive in Friel's plays. A boy talks to himself because he cannot talk to his father; a woman sits in a chair and invents a false perfection; a man looks at nothing through binoculars and dreams of escape. These are heart-rending images of role-playing, of theatre itself; but they serve real human needs, give some hope before human inadequacy, even if the hope is unreal. When the imagination plays upon the material of memory, its potency is even more destructive because the remembered elements already have an inbuilt instability and tendency

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