

Beckett, Samuel Barclay

by J. C. C. Mays

Beckett, Samuel Barclay (1906–89), writer, was born on Good Friday, 13 April 1906, at 'Cooldrinagh', Foxrock, Co. Dublin, younger of two sons of William Beckett (1871–1933), quantity surveyor, of Dublin, and Maria ('May') Beckett (née Roe; 1871–1950), originally of Leixlip, Co. Kildare.

Early life The contrasting characters of his parents – his father's outgoing nature and his mother's austerity – left their signatures on his career, and memories of the Foxrock house and environs, extending to the Dublin mountains, revive strongly in his middle-period writing. From 1911 to 1915 Beckett attended the Misses Elsners' Academy on the Leopardstown Road. From 1915 to 1919 he travelled on the Harcourt Street railway line to Earlsfort House School (headmaster Monsieur Alfred Le Peton). In 1919, at the age of 13, he joined his brother Frank as a boarder at Portora Royal School, Enniskillen (headmaster the Rev. Ernest Seale). At school Beckett left memories of a reserved personality, but he was successful at competitive games (cricket, rugby, boxing, swimming).

Beckett left Portora in 1923 and enrolled as an arts student at TCD. During his four-year course, he represented the college at golf, cricket, chess, and motor-racing; but the professor of romance languages, Thomas Rudmose-Brown, and a private tutor in Italian, Bianca Esposito, also inspired an interest in French and Italian as subjects for honours. During his third year (1926), he won a college scholarship, after which he toured France by bicycle, moved into rooms in college, and emerged top of his year in the autumn examinations. In the summer of 1927 he visited Florence, and subsequently graduated gold-medallist in modern literature in the final moderatorship (BA) examinations.

Rudmose-Brown had nominated Beckett as exchange lecturer at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris for the academic year 1927–8 but, due to an administrative misunderstanding, the taking-up of the appointment was postponed. Beckett therefore spent the autumn term of 1927 working on a research essay on the *Unanimistes* and the following two terms teaching French and English at Campbell College, Belfast – an experience he found unrewarding. During the summer of 1928 he fell in love with his 17-year-old cousin, Peggy Sinclair, who was on holiday in Ireland from Kassel in Germany, much to his parents' consternation.

Travels 1928–37 Beckett settled into the *École Normale* in November 1928. He already knew Alfred Péron who had been an exchange lecturer at TCD, and was warmly welcomed by Thomas MacGreevy (qv), who had taken up residence as Irish exchange lecturer the year before. MacGreevy in turn introduced Beckett to a range of writers and artists, including James Joyce (qv). Joyce quickly recognised

Beckett's abilities and, within a month, invited him to contribute to a book of essays on the emergent *Finnegans wake* which was published as *Our exagmination round his factification for incamination of work in progress* in May 1929. Beckett assisted Joyce with his writing in other ways and was in his company to an extent that Lucia Joyce fell in love with him – a misunderstanding which, when Beckett took steps to rectify it in May 1930, interrupted his friendship with the father for two further years. It was during the time after his arrival in Paris, inspired by MacGreevy and Joyce, that Beckett's career as a writer began. 'Assumption', a story, was published in *transition* (June 1929); *Whoroscope*, a separately published poem, won a prize from Richard Aldington and Nancy Cunard in midsummer 1930; this in turn led to a book-length essay on Marcel Proust, published by Chatto & Windus in March 1931. He also published a number of poems and translations in expatriate little magazines.

Beckett returned from Paris in September 1930 to take up an appointment as lecturer in French at TCD. He lectured on Racine and the symbolists, among other topics, and transcriptions by several undergraduates have been preserved; he also participated in college events, notably a Modern Languages drama production at the Peacock; he developed a friendship with Jack B. Yeats (qv), to whom he had been introduced by MacGreevy; but he was also obviously troubled and unhappy. He was divided in his affections towards his cousin Peggy and a Trinity contemporary, Ethna MacCarthy (qv); he was dubious about his commitment to an academic career; he was uncertain about his ability as a writer; his mother was outraged by samples of his writing which she accidentally came across at 'Cooldrinagh'; he had begun to drink too much. After four terms of teaching, in December 1931 he decided to resign.

The following few years comprise a particularly muddled and painful period in Beckett's personal life. The affair with Peggy Sinclair broke up over Christmas 1929 but, when Beckett travelled to Kassel two years later, he found the Sinclair family in a sorry state, their finances in disarray and Peggy showing signs of the tuberculosis that caused her death a year later (May 1933). He had little money, and translations and reviews were hard to find. He was oppressed with a sense of having betrayed his family and those, like Rudmose-Brown, who had believed in him. He was plagued by unexplained and sometimes awkward as well as painful ailments. He found it difficult to write. A novel, *Dream of fair to middling women*, was written in Paris in the first half of 1932, but was so full of thinly disguised biographical references and other defects that he quickly relinquished attempts to have it published. He was compelled to leave Paris for London for lack of a valid *carte de séjour*, and then forced home by lack of funds, where he continued to be plagued by illness as he continued to try to write stories. Then, devastatingly, his father collapsed without warning and died from a heart attack in June 1933.

Though a collection of short stories, in part derived from his unpublished novel *More pricks than kicks*, was accepted for publication in September 1933, Beckett continued in a low state. He inherited a small income from his father and, with further assistance from his mother, resolved to move to London and embark on a course of

psychotherapy. On the advice of Dr Geoffrey Thompson, a friend from Portora days, Beckett attended the Tavistock Clinic where he was assigned to Dr Wilfrid Bion. Shortly after Christmas 1933 he began to attend Bion for consultations three times a week – a treatment that lasted, with short breaks for visits home, for the next two years. *More pricks* was published in May 1934 and Beckett began to add to his small income by reviews and essays. He also began writing a novel, *Murphy*, in London in August 1935 and completed it the following June at 'Cooldrinagh'. A collection of poems, *Echo's bones*, was meanwhile published by George Reavey's (qv) Europa Press in December 1935.

Beckett returned home at Christmas 1935 where he remained till September 1936, restless and unhappy. He made some effort to pick up with former Dublin friends and, at the end of the summer, had a brief affair with a neighbour he had known since childhood, Mary Manning (qv). However, he had been studying German on his own for some years past and in September 1936, again with financial assistance from his mother, he removed to Germany for an artistic excursion which was originally intended to extend as far as Florence. Beginning with a call on his aunt Cissie and her husband, William 'Boss' Sinclair, who was an art-dealer, it continued as a tour of picture-galleries and artists and buildings in Hamburg, Berlin, Dresden, and Munich, and points in between. Beckett's detailed journal-entries testify to his increased understanding of painting and also, differently, to his intensifying hatred of fascism. He was at the same time in touch with George Reavey, who was attempting unsuccessfully to place *Murphy* with a publisher on his behalf.

Beckett returned to Cooldrinagh in April 1937 to circumstances that oppressed him no less than on previous occasions. Willie Sinclair died in May and his aunt Cissie grew more ill. He continued to deflect opportunities for regular employment, despite his mother's strongly expressed disapproval; in August, his brother Frank was married, which left him feeling the more responsible for looking after his mother. With assistance from Mary Manning, he worked on a play about Dr Johnson and Mrs Thrale entitled 'Human wishes', but completed only part of one scene. He fell prey to illnesses and was often drunk. He was brought to court for a careless car accident and was involved as a witness in an unsavoury libel case brought by Willie Sinclair's brother, Morris, against Oliver St John Gogarty (qv). All his mother's fears were confirmed – he was cruelly traduced by both the defending counsel and the presiding judge – and mother and son quarrelled bitterly. Beckett resolved he could not live in Ireland, and in mid October finally left to settle in Paris. He would not stay with his mother thereafter except for month-long visits, which were interrupted by the war.

France 1937–45 Beckett received the news from George Reavey that Routledge would publish *Murphy* in December 1937; it had been hawked round a large number of publishers and the news was sweet. A month later, in January 1938, he was stabbed on a Paris street by a pimp. The wound was serious and put Beckett into hospital for several weeks, where he was visited by Brian Coffey (qv), Joyce,

members of his family, and many others. Among them was Peggy Guggenheim, the American heiress and art-collector, with whom he had been eccentrically involved for the previous twelve months, and Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, a pianist six years older than himself, with whom he had begun a more durable relationship. They were eventually to marry in England on 25 March 1961 and remained together, despite other relationships on Beckett's part, till her death in July 1989.

It was at this time (April 1938) that Beckett moved into the modest Paris apartment at 6 Rue des Favorites which he was to occupy for the next twenty years. His circle of friends now included painters and artists such as Geer van Velde and Stanley William Hayter. Alfred Péron, the exchange *lecteur* he first met in Dublin during his third undergraduate year, undertook to translate *Murphy* into French with Beckett's help, and Beckett himself began to write poems in French in a new, less complicated style.

Beckett was in Ireland visiting his mother when war was declared on Germany (3 September 1939) and returned to France the next day. He and Suzanne joined the general exodus from Paris in June 1940, travelling through Vichy, where Beckett saw Joyce for the last time. After three months at Arcachon on the Atlantic coast where, at Mary Reynolds' house, he spent hours playing chess with Marcel Duchamp, he and Suzanne returned to Paris. There, Beckett continued to work with Péron on the French translation of *Murphy* and he and Suzanne joined Péron in the resistance movement as members of a cell that contributed to the British information network. The cell was betrayed and broke down in August–September 1942; Péron was arrested and imprisoned along with many others, and died in 1945; Beckett and Suzanne fled and, after six weeks of wandering, escaped to Roussillon (Vaucluse) in the unoccupied zone. Beckett was later to be awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de la Reconnaissance Française in recognition of his services.

Beckett's years in Roussillon were spent working in the fields for local farmers. He made friends with other refugees, notably the painter Henri Hayden, and associated with the local Maquis in the last months of the war. He had begun a new English novel, *Watt*, in Paris in February 1941 which he completed between March 1943 and December 1944. He and Suzanne returned to Paris early in 1945 to find their apartment virtually intact and Beckett travelled on to Ireland to visit his mother. In order to contrive reentry to France, he joined the Irish Red Cross unit which set up a hospital in the Normandy town of Saint-Lô, and returned to Paris in December 1945 when his contract terminated. Beckett afterwards wrote a talk for Radio Éireann about his experiences at Saint-Lô, which sums up his feelings about the suffering caused by war.

Post-war writings The immediate post-war years were among the most financially impoverished in Beckett's life. The value of his small inheritance had dwindled; he took on routine, often unsigned translation work; Suzanne did dressmaking and gave music lessons. But when he visited his mother in 1945, he underwent an almost

visionary realisation of his task as a writer, so long delayed by personal and political circumstances, and between 1946 and 1950 he became immersed in what he later described as 'a frenzy of writing'. This is for the most part in French and in a more immediate style than his earlier (English) writing, often in the first person, almost as if dictated. There are essays and dialogues in art criticism, four extended short stories, four novels, two full-length plays. The novel *Mercier et Camier* was written between July and October 1946; the trilogy of *Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, and *L'innommable* was written in the two and a half years between May 1947 and January 1950; the plays 'Eleutheria' and 'En attendant Godot' were written in two and four months respectively (January–February 1947, October 1948–January 1949), the latter between the second and third of the trilogy of novels. He visited his mother every summer and was in Ireland when she died on 25 August 1950.

Bordas published the French *Murphy* in 1947 but were dissatisfied with sales. However, thanks to Suzanne's efforts, Beckett's new trilogy was eventually published by Jérôme Lindon of Editions de Minuit (*Molloy* and *Malone meurt*, 1951; *L'innommable*, 1953). The reception by influential French critics such as Georges Bataille and Maurice Nadeau was encouraging, but the crucial event was Roger Blin's production of 'En attendant Godot' at the 230-seat Théâtre de Babylone which opened on 3 January 1953 (it had been published by Minuit in October 1952). The play quickly became a sell-out, with prestigious admirers such as Jean Anouilh and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and in the space of a few weeks Beckett's name became very well known indeed. A German version was staged in Berlin in September 1953.

It was at this point that Beckett built a small house with money inherited from his mother at Ussy, about thirty miles from Paris, which became a retreat where most of his subsequent writing was done. He entered into an arrangement with a group of young expatriate writers to publish *Watt* and an English version of *Molloy* (Merlin Press, 1953 and 1955 respectively) and with an American publisher, Barney Rosset, who worked for Grove Press, which proved altogether more fruitful. He translated 'Godot' and also *Malone meurt* and *L'innommable* into English, but three and a half miserable months were spent in Ireland during the summer of 1954 attending his dying brother. Productions of 'Godot' in London (August 1955) and New York (April 1956) proved successful in ways that, though theatrically different from the Paris production, left Beckett at last financially secure but simultaneously harassed, elated, and distracted.

Beckett began writing the play that became 'Fin de partie' in 1954, after his brother's death, but it proved extremely difficult to develop and revise and was not published till 1957. At the same time, Grove Press began to republish earlier writing (*Proust* and *Murphy*, 1957) and John Calder his current writing in England (*Malone dies*, 1958). The beginning of an avalanche of academic dissertations also began to appear (Niklaus Gessner, University of Zurich, 1957; Luís Maciel, University of Rio Grande do Sul, 1959; Huguette Delye, University of Aix-en-Provence, 1960; Ruby Cohn, Washington University, St Louis, 1960) and the first book-length study

in English, by Hugh Kenner, was published in 1961. The narrative of Beckett's public life henceforward became an increasingly tangled sequence of meetings with publishers, producers, and admirers, with concomitant deadlines and commitments.

Beckett wrote a radio play in English, 'All that fall', immediately following the completion of 'Fin de partie' during the summer of 1956, at the invitation of the BBC. He was inspired by the voice of the actor Patrick Magee, whom he heard read on BBC radio, to write a monologue that became the short play 'Krapp's last tape' (written quickly in February 1958; published 1958). At the same time he began a friendship with the BBC producer and translator Barbara Bray, which developed rapidly during 1959 into a relationship that continued to the end of his life. Beckett received an honorary D.Litt. from TCD in July 1959. Soon afterwards he received the RAI prize in the 1959 Prix Italia for his radio play 'Embers', which enabled him to buy a Citroën 2CV. He was also joint winner with Jorge Luis Borges of the 1960 Prix Fermentor. At the beginning of 1961, a few months before he and Suzanne were married, they moved to a larger, seventh-floor apartment at 38 Boulevard Saint-Jacques.

Beckett's life after the success of 'Godot' became increasingly divided between writing at his retreat at Ussy and a round of engagements in Paris and elsewhere. His friend Con Leventhal (qv) moved to Paris in 1963, after the death in 1959 of Ethna MacCarthy, whom he had married, and after his retirement from Trinity. He became a kind of unofficial secretary and, equally important, the centre of a group of Irish companions (the journalist Peter Lennon, the poet John Montague, and various others) whom Beckett met at the Falstaff Bar throughout the decade. Old friends and young relations (Tom MacGreevy (qv) and H. O. White, Edward and Caroline Beckett, among many others) were scrupulously attended to as they passed through Paris. Researchers and journalists were given interviews, usually at the Hôtel Saint-Jacques, afterwards the PLM, more or less opposite the Paris apartment. Beckett's courtesy and availability were at odds with his continuing reputation for silence and seclusion.

Theatrical and musical productions The activity that undoubtedly put most strain on his writing life was his involvement in theatrical productions. He had been a close observer at the Babylone production of 'En attendant Godot' in 1953; he conscientiously attended rehearsals for the Royal Court production of 'Krapp's last tape' in October 1958. His status shifted almost imperceptibly in the course of the 1960s from official advisor (e.g. for the Royal Court productions of 'Happy days' in November 1962 and 'Godot' in December 1964) and assistant director (e.g. to the Schiller-Theater 'Warten auf Godot' in February 1965 and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs 'Comédie' ('Happy days') in June 1964) to become, eventually and inevitably, official sole director. The first plays he directed in his own name were 'Eh Joe' for Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR), Stuttgart, in April 1966 and 'Krapp' for the Schiller-Theater Werkstatt, Berlin, in October 1969, both in their German versions. The meticulous preparations he made for the 1969 and later Schiller-

Theater productions of other titles are recorded in his posthumously published theatrical notebooks, which frequently contain improvements not yet incorporated into standard versions of the texts. His relation to SDR continued into the early 1980s with a remarkable series of productions of 'Quad, Nacht und Traüme', ' . . . but the clouds. . .', 'Ghost trio', and 'What where'. He also, of course, directed in French and English (e.g. 'La dernière bande' ('Krapp') at the Théâtre Récamier in May 1970 and 'Endgame' at the Riverside Studios in May 1980).

Beckett's mature understanding of theatre was much affected by his close relation to a number of directors with whom he struck up deep friendships. They include Roger Blin in France, Alan Schneider in America (Beckett even travelled to New York to advise on the production of 'Film' in July–August 1964), Donald McWhinnie and George Devine in England, Deryk Mendel and the SDR cameraman Jim Lewis in Germany. Similarly among actors: Jean Martin, Patrick Magee and Jack MacGowran (qv), Billie Whitelaw, Martin Held, David Warrilow. Their memoirs and correspondence are an invaluable source of information about Beckett the man and about how he saw his work. A friendship with Ric Cluchey, an American who became enthusiastic about 'Godot' when in a penitentiary on a charge of murder, is specially notable. Beckett befriended him on his release and came to direct him in 'Krapp' and 'Godot'. Their friendship embraces the opposite kinds of commitment – technical and compassionate – which occupied Beckett's non-writing time.

In the world of his writing, the trilogy of novels followed by 'Fin de partie' ('Endgame') had constructed a kind of impasse. Translation was difficult enough and Beckett was able to continue writing in the same vein only with great difficulty. *Comment c'est* took eighteen months to write and almost two more years to translate as *How it is*. The way forward proved to be through theatre, which he compared to fiction for Alec Reid as like emerging from darkness into light. During the 1960s he wrote a number of fiction-texts which are theatrical in the sense that they attempt to show, not pursue; they are based in different ways on unchanging tableau-situations which the writing explores and makes resonate. We see that nothing changes, but the writing changes our apprehension of what we must concede. A number of these texts are related to one another through a shared image (*All strange away, Imagination dead imagine, Ping, Lessness, The lost ones*); others are constructed independently (*Enough, Still*). They were written in English and French, as were Beckett's plays alternately during this period; then fairly quickly translated into the other language (and sometimes simultaneously into German, as Beckett assisted his translators Elmar and Erika Tophoven), the different texts being subject to revision in a process of mutual clarification. *Come and go* provides a good example of the kind of patterned play-text that emerged alongside the fictions. Written in English in early 1965, it was first performed as 'Kommen und gehen' at Ulm in January 1966, first published as *Va et vient* in 1966, and not published in English till 1967.

The supreme statements in this later mode are the three fictional texts collected under the title *Nohow on* in 1989 – namely, *Company, Ill seen ill said*, and

Worstward ho. They overlap theatrical texts such as 'Not I' and 'Footfalls' from the previous decade and the contemporaneous 'Ohio impromptu' and 'What where', and they make a striking contrast with the fiction and drama of Beckett's middle years. They draw on memories of childhood at Cooldrinagh and thereby construct fictions in which memory becomes a function of language. A new range of emotions enters Beckett's writing, comprised of regrets and fragile comforts. Plays and fiction alike are written in an extraordinary syntax which is unadorned but highly mannered, constructed and colloquial. They did not make the same direct impression on the consciousness of their time as Beckett's writing did during the 1950s and 1960s, somewhat accidentally, but they may turn out to be as influential in the longer term.

Beckett's long-standing interest in music – he was a gifted pianist – can be noted at this point, an interest that is mirrored in the number of composers who turned to provide settings for his writing (Philip Glass, Heinz Holliger, and Earl Kim among them). He himself assisted Marcel Mihalovici with the libretto for an opera based on the French 'Krapp' ('La dernière bande') and Mihalovici in turn wrote the music for 'Cascando'. Beckett collaborated with his composer-nephew, John Beckett, on 'Words and music' and wrote words for Morton Feldman to score ('Neither'). Likewise, his long-standing interest in the visual arts is mirrored in a number of distinguished illustrated editions. Among artists with whom he collaborated in different ways are Avigdor Arikha, H. M. Erhardt, Max Ernst, Edward Gorey, William Hayter, Jasper Johns, Charles Kabunde, and Louis le Brocqy.

Nobel prize winner Beckett was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1969, which he famously regretted as a disaster and accepted on behalf of the dead James Joyce (who, he said, should have received it) and the living Jérôme Lindon, who had so bravely supported his writing; Beckett characteristically gave most of the prize money away. As he passed into literary history, comprehensively bibliographed by Raymond Federman and John Fletcher in 1970, biographed by Deirdre Bair in 1978, explicated, theorised, and assimilated by critical studies in many languages, his direct influence on writers perhaps counted for less – the exception being Ireland, where the populace at last embraced him as a native son. His later generalised fame made less of a difference than the interruption of his life after the popular reception of 'Godot', which he told several interlocutors was based on misunderstanding. The balance between writing and other commitments thereafter changed in degree but not in kind.

Fresh trials rose to plague him. For instance, several unlicensed productions and adaptations took liberties with texts which he tried to prohibit: Kenneth Tynan's liberties with 'Breath' in the erotic review 'Oh! Calcutta!' in 1969 was among the first. His working life was more extensively interrupted by a series of illnesses which in turn necessitated instrumental vacations – this at the same time that the retreat at Ussy was proving too close to Paris to avoid urgent claims by people who wanted to see him. Suzanne had long disliked staying in the cottage, and both needed warmth. Thus, Beckett first underwent a series of dental extractions; then

(November 1965–July 1966) the removal of an intra-osseous cyst on his upper jaw. He underwent treatment for an abscess on the lung during the seven months which covered *les événements* of 1968, and operations for cataracts on both eyes (October 1970–March 1971). Suzanne was also unwell and they went together to out-of-season destinations (Sardinia, Madeira, Tunisia, Malta, Morocco), sometimes for months at a stretch or more than once a year, to recuperate without distraction. Despite Beckett's continuing relation with Barbara Bray, and indeed others, the unconventional but profound relation with Suzanne preserved the conditions of his writing.

Failing health Beckett began the 1980s with an enlarged prostate and a stiffening of the tendons in his hand (Dupuytren's contracture). Neither condition was malignant but they together made life no easier and writing came no more easily, too. His last work for the stage was 'What where' in 1983; the last production in which he was heavily involved was the Walter Asmus/San Quentin Workshop production of 'Waiting for Godot' in 1984. Three prose fragments which were written with enormous difficulty after the completion of *Worstward ho* in 1983 (which, to the last, he failed to translate into French) were collected as *Stirrings still* in 1988. His last original poem, 'Comment dire' ('What is the word') was begun in hospital and completed in a medical home, 'Le Tiers Temps', not far from the Boulevard Saint-Jacques apartment in 1988.

Beckett's health began seriously to fail in 1986. He suffered from emphysema, but continued smoking; he simply shifted to cigarillos and, in the medical home, had recourse to an oxygenator to help him breathe more easily. He also suffered from loss of balance, which might be related to the Parkinson's disease from which his mother died, though Beckett had none of the characteristic tremor. Suzanne died after an illness lasting several months on 17 July 1989. One of Beckett's last acts was to copy his early poem 'Da tagte es' onto a sheet of parchment to be bound into *The great book of Ireland* which was brought to him in 'Tiers Temps' by John Montague, a director of Poetry Ireland and fellow member of Aosdána. Beckett died a month later, on 22 December 1989. He was buried beside Suzanne in the Cimetière de Montparnasse at a private funeral on the day following Christmas.

Archives and bibliographies The principal archive of Beckett papers is at Reading University Library (catalogue by Mary Bryden, Julian Garforth and Peter Mills, 1998). Other substantial collections are at TCD; Washington University, St Louis, Missouri (illustrated guide by Sharon Bangert, 1986); Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin (selective but full illustrated catalogue by Carlton Lake, 1984); and Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. Useful bibliographies include Richard L. Admussen, *The Samuel Beckett manuscripts: a study* (1979); Raymond Federman and John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett: his work and his critics* (1970); Robin J. Davis, *Samuel Beckett: checklist and index of his published works 1967–1976* (University of Stirling Library, 1979); P. J. Murphy, Werner Huber, Rolf Breuer, and Konrad Schoell, *Critique of Beckett*

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