

Behan, Kathleen

by Frances Clarke and Lawrence William White

Behan, Kathleen (1889–1984), republican, was born 18/19 September 1889 at 49 Capel St., Dublin, fifth child and youngest daughter among three daughters and four sons of John Kearney (1854–97), pork butcher and grocer, from Rosybrook, Co. Louth, and Kathleen Kearney (née McGuinness) (1860–1907), from Rathmaiden, Slane, Co. Meath. Both parents were from prosperous farming backgrounds. With capital from the family lands, her father entered business on Lower Dorset St., Dublin, where he owned a grocery, pub, and row of houses. His trade steadily declining owing to negligence and eccentricity – he took to daily attendance in the public galleries of the law courts, absorbed by the minutiae of proceedings – by Kathleen's birth he had moved to a more modest enterprise on Dolphin's Barn Lane. After his death in 1897, Kathleen and her sisters were placed by their mother in the Goldenbridge orphanage, Inchicore, where she became an avid reader (1898–1904); thereafter, she rejoined the family in a one-room tenement flat on Gloucester St.

Through her eldest sibling, Peadar Kearney (qv) – an ardent republican who composed the lyrics of 'The soldier's song' ('Amhrán na bhfiann', the Irish national anthem) – she met Jack Furlong, a printer's compositor and member of the Irish Volunteers, whom she married (1916). Active in Cumann na mBan, during the Easter 1916 rising she served as courier to the GPO and other outposts, while Furlong fought in the Jacob's factory garrison. They had two sons, Roger Casement ('Rory') Furlong (1917–87) and Sean Furlong, born March 1919, six months after her husband's death in the influenza epidemic. Kathleen worked briefly as a housekeeper for Maud Gonne MacBride (qv) on St Stephen's Green, where she met William Butler Yeats (qv) and Sarah Purser (qv); the latter painted a study of her ('The sad girl', now in the NGL). A clerk with Dublin corporation (1918–22), she was also caretaker in the Harcourt St. premises of the White Cross republican aid association. She married secondly (1922) Stephen Behan (1891–1967), foreman housepainter, trade unionist, and republican. Their four sons and one daughter included Brendan (qv) – born during Stephen's two years' imprisonment during the civil war – Seamus (b. 1925), Brian (qv), Dominic (qv), and Carmel (b. 1932). The family initially resided rent-free in a one-room basement flat at 14 Russell St. in the north city centre, one of three slum tenements owned by Stephen's mother. Called 'Lady Behan' by her neighbours because she disdained to sit for hours on the steps gossiping, in later years Kathleen lauded the residents' camaraderie and communal mutual aid.

After her mother-in-law's death (1936), the family moved to a newly constructed council estate at 70 Kildare Road, Crumlin, an environment they soon resented for its sterile bleakness, lack of community cohesiveness, and distance from work

and schools. Though often living in extreme poverty – especially during periods of unemployment, and during the nine-months' building strike of 1936, in which Stephen was prominent – the Behan household in both locations was a lively centre of music, books, conversation, and politics. The political radicalism of the Behan sons – Brendan gravitated to the IRA, Brian and Dominic to trade-union militancy – derived from Kathleen's republican socialism and Stephen's labour activism and anti-clericalism. A meeting place for radicals of all stripes, their Crumlin home was dubbed 'the Kremlin' by neighbours, and a 'madhouse' by the oft-beleaguered Stephen. Vivacious and strong-minded, with a self-confidence rare in working-class women of her generation, Kathleen despised prejudice and cruelty, and showered her children with love and acceptance. Branded a 'red' for her outspoken anti-Franco, pro-Stalin sympathies, during the Emergency (1939–45) she fought a one-woman battle against local shopkeepers who ignored price controls.

From the 1950s she shared in the international celebrity of her writer sons, Dominic and, especially, Brendan. She travelled to London productions of their plays, cavorted with prominent personalities of their acquaintance, and appeared on Irish and British television, charming audiences with her energy and wit, irreverent iconoclasm, and vast store of anecdote and song. Badly injured when knocked down by a motorcycle (on the day before her husband's death in 1967), she entered the Sacred Heart Residence of the Little Sisters of the Poor, Sybil Hill, Raheny, in 1970. She recorded an album of song and ballad, 'When all the world was young' (1981). Her taped reminiscences were composed by her son Brian into an 'autobiography', *Mother of all the Behans* (1984); a one-woman stage adaptation by Peter Sheridan, starring Rosaleen Linehan, won acclaim in Ireland, Britain, and North America. She died, aged 94, on 26 April 1984 in the Raheny nursing home, and was buried in Dean's Grange cemetery.

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GRO (birth cert.); Ulick O'Connor, *Brendan Behan* (1970); *Mother of all the Behans: the story of Kathleen Behan, as told to Brian Behan* (1984); *Ir. Times*, 30 Apr. 1984 (obit.); Brian Behan, *With breast expanded* (1991 ed.); Kit and Cyril Ó Céirín, *Women of Ireland: a biographic dictionary* (1996); Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: a life* (1997)