

Leonard, Hugh

by Patrick Maume

Leonard, Hugh (1926–2009), dramatist and commentator, was born John Joseph Byrne in the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street, Dublin, on 9 November 1926, son of Annie Byrne and an unknown father. Aged twelve days, he was informally adopted by Margaret Keyes (née Doyle) of Dalkey, Co. Dublin, and her husband Nicholas Keyes, a gardener employed by the Jacob business dynasty (and an IRA veteran and Fianna Fáil supporter). Margaret had previously suffered several stillbirths. She frequently spoke of the boy's origins to him and to others, especially when he exasperated her, and this added to the social sensitivities he associated with the family's restricted and impoverished lifestyle in a cottage at Kalafat Lane, Dalkey, and later in a council house.

Leonard was known in boyhood as John Keyes, but never changed his surname and from adolescence called himself John Keyes Byrne. He was one of the first prominent Irish figures to proclaim publicly that he had been adopted, when his play 'Da' (1973) appeared. 'Hugh Leonard' was a professional name (see below); he insisted that friends address him as 'Jack' and was offended if called 'Hugh'. In later life he made sporadic attempts to locate his natural mother. Leonard explored his complex and frustrating relationship – 'love turned upside-down is love still' – with his foster parents in 'Da' and his memoirs *Home before night* (1979) and *Out after dark* (1989). Although their central focus is on his father (whom Leonard felt he only got to know by writing about him), his emotional relationship with his mother was far more intense, and Leonard felt his accounts of her were never quite adequate.

For most of Leonard's life he resided in Dalkey, which during his youth was too far from Dublin to be a suburb and too close to be an independent village. His memoirs emphasise Dalkey's village-like, often suffocating intimacy, the social and religious restrictions of his youth, and his developing awareness of the difference between its idealised self-image and its actual values and behaviour. From the age of 14, while continuing to attend mass from conformity, he ceased to frequent the catholic sacraments; this was related both to his developing (and generally frustrated) adolescent sexuality and to the way in which his questions about the catholic faith were met with anger and corporal punishment rather than explanations. For most of his adult life Leonard stated that he 'detested' catholicism and described himself as an agnostic (not an atheist, which implied certainty; he suspected the supernatural existed but lacked the moral order attributed to it by organised religion).

A major source of escape was the cinema, which fascinated his mother; the contrast between total absorption of the attitudes and conventions of 1930s American and British cinema and later disillusion was a formative experience in Leonard's sensibility. As an adult Leonard became one of Ireland's foremost film buffs, with an encyclopaedic knowledge of mid-century Hollywood; he frequently reviewed books on cinema for the *Irish Times*, contrasting the idealised and domesticated portrayal of life in Hollywood cinema of the censorship era (and of individual stars by the studio publicity machine) with the less pleasant realities, while acknowledging the frequent emotional and artistic power of the fantasies. This is also a theme of his late and undistinguished novel *Fillums* (2004), set during the second world war period in a Co. Dublin village resembling Dalkey.

Leonard attended primary school at the Loreto Convent, Dalkey, and Harold Boys' National School, Glasthule, before winning a scholarship which he chose to take up at the relatively high-class Presentation Brothers' College, Glasthule. His fantasy that it would be like the English public schools of fiction was rapidly dissipated by harsh school discipline and snobbery from staff and pupils alike; as a means of self-protection, Leonard developed a talent for vituperative insults. His three-year scholarship merely led to his sitting the intermediate certificate three times (failed, barely passed, third in Ireland); Leonard then turned down an offer by the Brothers to pay for his continued education, as he wished to begin earning and achieve adult independence.

Civil service and literary formation After a short-lived clerical job in the Dublin office of Columbia Pictures, Leonard joined the Land Commission in 1945 as a temporary employee. The staff officer in charge of his section, John T. Mulligan, was for some time an intimidating mentor and inspired the character of Desmond Drumm in Leonard's plays 'Da' and 'A life' (1979). Leonard rapidly came to detest his work (sending payment demands to small farmers in Co. Cork) as mindless and pointless, and to seek a means of escape. Since childhood, he had wanted to be a writer without quite knowing how to go about it (though the novels of L. A. G. Strong (qv) made him aware it was possible to write

about Dalkey and its people), and as a civil servant Leonard made sporadic attempts to write a satirical novel about Dalkey centred on Redemptorist missionaries' denunciations of sex.

Leonard developed the ambition of becoming a playwright after seeing F. J. McCormick (qv) in a 1945 production of 'The plough and the stars' by Sean O'Casey (qv); he acted and wrote for a civil-service amateur drama society, Lancos, which produced his first plays. For some time he fantasised that his natural father might have been Denis Johnston (qv). In 1955 Leonard married Paule Jacquet, a secretary at the Belgian embassy in Dublin, in her native village of Chaudfontaine near Liège; they had one daughter, Danielle (b. 1957). Leonard and his wife had a strong relationship marked by intense verbal sparring (possibly the inspiration for his 1983 farce 'Pizzazz'). In 1956 Leonard won a play contest with 'The Italian road'; the central character was a young man called Hughie Leonard, of psychopathic tendencies, who dreamed of going to live on the Bay of Naples. The winning play was supposed to be produced at the Abbey, but Leonard was told that his play was not good enough. He responded by submitting 'Nightingale in the branches' (staged by Lancos in the early 1950s) to the Abbey (which normally would not produce plays already performed by amateurs) under a new title and as 'Hugh Leonard' (he was also influenced by the fact that he had criticised Abbey productions under his own name in a civil-service journal). When the play was accepted, Leonard 'found myself lumbered with a name I did not really want' (Hickey and Smith, 192); it was eventually produced as 'The big birthday' (1956), and later adapted for film as *Broth of a boy* (1959).

By 1959 Leonard was established as a scriptwriter for the Radio Éireann soap opera *The Kennedys of Castleross*, earning more thereby than his civil service salary; he had enjoyed an Abbey success with his whimsical comedy 'Madigan's Lock' (1958), and Granada Television was expressing interest in his earlier Abbey play 'A leap in the dark' (1957). He therefore decided to leave the civil service and become a full-time professional writer. Faced with the responsibility of supporting a family as a freelance, he adopted a stringent – even compulsive – work regime (writing daily from 1.00 to 6.00 pm and 11.30 pm to 3.30 am), which he kept up for most of his life. ('Work is a habit I somehow fell into after leaving the civil service ... now I am afraid to retire' (*Sunday Independent*, 21 November 2004).) For a year he churned out five radio scripts a week while trying to write plays for the Dublin Theatre Festival.

1960s: move to Britain, Dublin Theatre Festival Leonard was recruited in 1961 as a script editor for Granada Television in Manchester, which paid for him to commute weekly between Manchester and London; when his contract was renewed for a second year, he moved his wife and daughter to Manchester, but resented being confined to editing others' scripts. In 1963 he moved to London as a full-time freelance writer, and developed a successful career as a scriptwriter and adaptor of literary texts for television. He contributed several one-off scripts to ITV's *Armchair theatre* series, some of which had Irish themes at a time when Irish subjects were associated with feyness and parochialism by the British arts world. His work for British television did much to promote the careers of Irish actors such as Milo O'Shea (1926–2013) and David Kelly (1929–2012), the latter being a particular friend. Leonard and his family lived in Barnes, in south-west London, where they acquired the first of a succession of dearly cherished cats, which featured in much of his later journalism and his 1992 memoir, *Rover and other cats*.

Major adaptations included a 1967 BBC production of Charles Dickens's *Great expectations* (a text whose evocation of the strains and betrayals of social climbing held lasting personal meaning for Leonard), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Wilkie Collins's *The moonstone*, Dostoevsky's *The possessed*, and stories by Arthur Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton, Georges Simenon and Saki. Leonard won the Prix Italia and a Writers' Guild of Great Britain award of merit for *Silent song*, his 1966 adaptation of a short story by Frank O'Connor (qv). He also contributed theatre criticism to the journal *Plays and Players*, and wrote film scripts, perhaps the nadir being *Percy* (1971), a comedy about a penis transplant.

He enjoyed particular success with the BBC situation comedy *Me Mammy* (twenty-one episodes in 1969–71), in which Milo O'Shea played a forty-year-old Irish bachelor whose attempts at self-fulfilment were regularly thwarted by his possessive and pietistic Mammy (Anna Manahan), assisted by a number of 'demonic priests' and the epicene Cousin Enda (David Kelly). The series' religious and sexual satire led RTÉ to refuse to show it, and Leonard was denounced as having insulted Ireland.

Despite his move to England, Leonard remained closely connected with the Dublin literary scene. From 1960 to 1973, he annually had a new play performed at the Dublin Theatre Festival, often in association with Phyllis Ryan (1920–2011) and her Gemini Productions, most of which were adaptations of existing texts. 'Stephen D.' (1962), Leonard's

bold-spirited festival adaptation of two texts by James Joyce (qv) – *A portrait of the artist as a young man* and *Stephen Hero* – aroused considerable interest because of its imaginative stagecraft and the resonances of Joyce's defiance in a changing Ireland; it is also notable for its use of the memory-play format with which Leonard was to be particularly associated. The playwright Thomas Kilroy described the production as heralding (with Brian Friel's 'Philadelphia, here I come!' (1964)) a new era in Irish theatre, and it gave Leonard his first West End success. Other adaptations included Joyce's *Dubliners* (as 'Dublin One' (1963)), *The Dalkey archive* by Flann O'Brien (qv) (as 'The saints go cycling in, (1965)), *The barracks* by John McGahern (qv) (same title, 1969), and the reimagining for Irish settings of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* ('The passion of Peter Ginty, (1961)) and Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* ('Liam Liar' (1976)). 'The au pair man', produced in Dublin in 1968 and later transferred to London and New York, satirised Anglo-Irish relations, the British class system and the persistence of British imperial pretensions despite post-Suez decline. Other original works staged in the theatre festival in this period included the dark comedy 'The poker session' (1963), in which the central character has been driven mad by the hypocrisy of his pietistic suburban family, and 'Mick and Mick' (1966). Somewhat ironically, in view of his intense hostility to physical-force nationalism, Leonard also scripted the eight-part RTÉ series *Insurrection* (1966), which portrayed the 1916 Easter rising as if it were taking place in a contemporary setting (complete with newscasters and outside broadcasts), thus making an extraordinary impression on Irish television audiences.

Return to Ireland; memory plays and social anatomist In 1970 Leonard returned to Ireland to take advantage of tax concessions for writers introduced in the 1969 budget by Minister for Finance Charles Haughey (qv); the remainder of his life was spent in Dalkey. Resenting his reputation as primarily a literary adaptor and verbal wit, he sought to write more substantial theatrical works and engage in deeper exploration both of his own experience and sensibility and of the newly prosperous Irish suburban middle classes. His reputation as a dramatist chiefly rests on the ensuing works of the 1970s and early 1980s, whose themes had already been touched on in such works as 'The poker session' and the short television plays 'A view from the obelisk' and 'The late arrival of the incoming aircraft'.

'The Patrick Pearse Motel' (1971) used the mechanics of the bedroom farce associated with Georges Feydeau to satirise the nouveaux riches of Irish suburbia and their superficial invocations of history and religion (the eponymous motel has a restaurant named the 'Great Famine'). A deeper note was struck with 'Da' (1973), a memory play written at the suggestion of the director of the Olney Theatre of Maryland after listening to Leonard's anecdotes about his father; it enjoyed long runs in London and New York, and won four Tony awards in 1979. The Chekhovian 'Summer' (1974), which Leonard attributed to sudden awareness of his own mortality, was a personal favourite; its portrayal of three middle-class couples in a changing Dalkey at two separate picnics in 1968 and 1974 included outspoken references to marriage breakdown, speculative development and political corruption along with more intimate fears and betrayals. 'A life' (1979) depicted the civil servant Drumm trying to come to terms with his frustrated life as he faces death from stomach cancer; as well as the real-life John T. Mulligan, the play is deeply influenced by Akira Kurosawa's 1952 film about a dying civil servant, *Ikiru* (To live), which Leonard described as one of the very few films to have deeply touched his life (*Sunday Independent*, 3 October 2004), and by Leonard's own imaginings of his life as it might have been had he remained in the Land Commission. He continued to write screenplays, his adaptation (1980) for RTÉ of the novel *Strumpet city* by James Plunkett (qv) being particularly memorable; his adaptation of *Da* was filmed in 1988 (dir. Matt Clark, starring Martin Sheen and Barnard Hughes). The 1991 television series (and novelisation by Leonard) *Parnell and the Englishwoman* reflected Leonard's longstanding interest in the figure of Charles Stewart Parnell (qv) and the theme of betrayal. From its publication in 1979, *Home before night* has been hailed as one of the great memoirs of Irish childhood.

Leonard was literary editor of the Abbey Theatre (1976–7) (resigning after a dispute with one of the directors), a member of the Irish Film Board (from which he resigned over a personal dispute), and director of the 1979 Dublin Arts Festival. In the 1970s and 1980s he was routinely referred to as one of the great figures of Irish theatre. Thereafter, although the popularity of his plays was credited with keeping the Abbey from going bankrupt in the 1980s and they remained a staple of amateur groups, his critical reputation declined, for reasons partly related to his public persona. He remarked sardonically (in his preface to the published text (1987) of his play 'The mask of Moriarty' (produced in 1985), a spoof of Sherlock Holmes) that he and Bernard Farrell were the only good Irish playwrights, all the others being 'geniuses'.

Columnist From the mid 1970s until c.2005 Leonard published a regular column, originally in the monthly magazine *Hibernia* but moving to the *Sunday Independent* for both financial and political reasons. Leonard attributed the move to a demand from the *Hibernia* management that he should confine himself to humour after he submitted a

column passionately denouncing the murder of the British ambassador Christopher Ewart-Biggs(qv). Much of the column was taken up with descriptions of Leonard's arts-world socialising, his family life – with Paule ('my present wife'), the cats, and his daughter sending messages from abroad – and pastimes such as voyages on cruise ships, sailing on the Shannon and later on French inland waterways, and eating in restaurants. (In the 1970s Leonard was noted for his fashionable garb and for rarely being seen without a Havana cigar in his mouth; for a time he drove a Rolls-Royce, replaced by a less conspicuous marque after it was repeatedly defaced.) Several selections of his journalism appeared in book form: *Leonard's last book*(1978), *A peculiar people and other foibles: Hugh Leonard's second last book* (1979), *Leonard's year* (1985),*Hugh Leonard's log* (1987), *Leonard's log – again* (1988). Over time, personal reminiscence became increasingly prominent in Leonard's column. These were not, however, the features for which it was best known. From the outbreak of the Northern Ireland troubles, Leonard passionately denounced the violence of the Provisional IRA, accusing successive governments, and Irish society generally, of combining hypocritical condemnation of violence with unwillingness to take effective action against terrorists because they were secretly regarded as 'our own'. He saw this attitude as particularly exemplified by the career of Charles Haughey, to whom he annually awarded the title 'gobshite of the year' (except in 1985, when the title was awarded to God for failing to drown Haughey when his yacht sank in September 1985). Leonard also savagely satirised Haughey in his 1982 play 'Kill', which ridiculed the Fianna Fáil leader's pretensions to statesmanship and patronage of the arts and his cultivation of business and the catholic church, and presented him as clandestine 'father' of the IRA (represented as a psychopathic foundling brought up on fantasies) and having a mistress called Therese (a transparent portrayal of Terry Keane (qv)). Leonard was also critical of interpretations of Irish literature that privileged the question of national identity; he claimed that this often amounted to treating the Irish as if they were 'a different species', encouraged parochialism and contributed to the continuance of political violence. His exclusion from the *Field Day anthology of Irish literature* (1991) aroused considerable comment; after it was pointed out that he had refused permission to include an extract from *Da*, Leonard replied that the extract did not adequately represent the play, that some other among his numerous works might have been included, and that, in view of the anthology's perceived nationalist and rural bias, exclusion did not greatly concern him.

The column also targeted defenders of conservative catholicism such as Cornelius Lucey (qv) and Oliver Flanagan (qv); fox hunters and hare coursers, who were denounced in language borrowed from the Redemptorist preachers of Leonard's youth (he was an active, long-term supporter of the Irish Council Against Blood Sports, serving as its president in the mid 1990s); the fecklessness of Irish administration, business and workers; Irish hypocrisy and provincialism in general; literary critics (such as the Irish Times columnist *Fintan O'Toole*) whose assessments privileged supposedly deeper psychological and sociological content over pure play and the business of giving audiences a good time; and various people inside and outside the artistic world, including former and often future friends, towards whom Leonard had developed feuds for unspecified reasons. For a long time the column was entitled 'The Curmudgeon' and in later years it bore the sub-heading 'Grumping for Ireland'. Leonard saw himself as surrounded by begrudgers, frequently recalling dismissive remarks by former youthful acquaintances who saw him as having got above his station, and recording hate mail he received. This sense was reinforced in 1984, when it was discovered that Leonard's recently deceased accountant, Russell Murphy (qv) – about whom Leonard had written an obituary tribute for the *Irish Times* – had embezzled IR£248,000 of Leonard's money; Leonard intensified his work schedule, and complained that media coverage of the affair implied that it was as disreputable for him to possess the money ('honestly earned over twenty-five years') as for Murphy to steal it.

Leonard's admirers maintained that this prickliness reflected a personal shyness and sensitivity derived from the struggles of his early life. They noted that he devoted considerable effort to humanitarian causes, such as the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, that he regularly read unsolicited scripts and offered literary advice, and that his references in print to continuing begrudgerly in Dalkey disguised the considerable respect that he received there, and the appreciation felt for his contribution to the village's cultural life. (On his death, he was described as 'a Dalkey monument'.)

Later life Leonard's productivity as a writer for the stage slackened in the 1980s and 1990s, partly for health reasons (he developed diabetes, and had a heart-bypass operation in the early 1990s). He also experienced declining critical favour, widely regarded as being too close in lifestyle and attitude to the middle classes whom he satirised; the increased distancing of Irish society in time and attitudes from the era of de Valera (qv), renewed interest in the themes of post-colonialism and personal trauma, and an economic boom dwarfing the prosperity of the era of Lemass (qv), all made Leonard's preoccupations appear dated (symbolised for some by his passionate, face-to-face denunciation of

Gerry Adams, the Sinn Féin president, on RTÉ's *Late late show* shortly after the 1994 IRA ceasefire, which was widely criticised as out of step with the developing Northern Ireland peace process). Two late plays, however, have attracted critical attention as continuing his experiments with time and interrogation of changes in Irish society and the attractions and dangers of nostalgic pretensions to innocence: 'Moving' (1994), influenced by Thornton Wilder's 'Our town' (1938), depicts an upwardly mobile Dalkey family as they (the same individuals at the same ages) would have been in 1957 and in 1987; 'Love in the title' (1999) depicts a mother, daughter and granddaughter living in 1932, 1964 and 1996 meeting each other beside a standing stone near Limerick and exploring their lives and circumstances.

Paule died suddenly on 13 April 2000 of asthma aggravated by a long-term smoking habit. Leonard was devastated, and for some months his *Sunday Independent* column took the form of letters to her recalling their life together and describing his mourning (collected as *Dear Paule* (2001)). On 1 June 2001, while voyaging on a cruise liner, Leonard met a twice-divorced American lawyer, Kathy Hayes (or Hughes, or Bateson). After an email correspondence, she moved to Dublin to live with him, and regularly featured in his column as 'my American friend'. They married (in a civil ceremony) on 14 June 2007; however, Kathy left him and returned to America in November 2008.

After Paule's death Leonard resumed an occasional and highly informal practice of catholicism (at intervals he confessed informally to a priest friend over dinner in a restaurant, and he made sporadic attempts, which he attributed both to religious motives and to Kathy's mellowing influence, to reconcile with some old opponents), and he received the last sacraments. This should certainly not be seen as recanting his previous criticisms of catholicism, and the extent to which it departed from his lifelong agnosticism should not be exaggerated.

Hugh Leonard died 12 February 2009 in the Blackrock Clinic, Dublin, after a month's illness. In 2005 he announced that he had nearly completed a third memoir in the vein of *Home before night* and *Out after dark*, provisionally entitled 'A devil for grandeur', but this was still unpublished in 2014 (though an extract appeared in the *Sunday Independent* of 20 August 2006). A final play, 'Magicality', about a fit-up touring company in the 1940s and 1950s, received a reading at a 2012 Dalkey festival but had not been produced or published by 2014.

Assessment Several of Leonard's obituarists argued that by the time of his death he was substantially undervalued, pointing out his concerns with themes of time, memory and identity which are central to postmodernity, and that the critical neglect suffered by his work reflected the fallacious view that Irish suburban middle class-experience is somehow less authentic than that of other classes and that farce and comedy are inferior to other genres. They noted that the corruption scandals revealed by the tribunals of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the economic malpractices which contributed to the economic crash beginning in 2008, reflected his preoccupations. Leonard is certainly indispensable to any account of Irish popular culture and changing attitudes in the second half of the twentieth century, but he should be seen as a sophisticated critic both of nostalgic fantasies of innocence and of optimistic belief in inevitable progress. In his work, the present, whatever its achievements, can never be completely disentangled from the past it seeks to escape, and stylisation – in both healthy and harmful forms – seeks to affirm life in a chaotic universe. It is highly relevant that his favourite dramatist was Samuel Beckett (qv). Leonard's papers are in the NLI.

Des Hickey and Gus Smith, *A paler shade of green* (1972), 191–201; Michael Billington and Hugh Leonard, 'Hugh Leonard' in James Vinson (ed.), *Contemporary dramatists* (1977 ed.), 478–82; Hugh Leonard, *Home before night* (1979); *Ir. Times*, 17 Oct. 1980; 31 July, 2, 10 Aug., 30 Nov. 1991; 4, 8 Feb., 20 Apr., 23 May, 26 Sept. 1992; 20 Feb., 11, 25 Sept., 15 Dec. 1993; 6 Jan., 11, 13 Feb., 1, 6, 8 Apr., 9 July, 23, 24 Aug., 7, 30 Sept., 29 Oct., 4 Nov. 1994; 5, 13 Apr., 30 Nov., 2 Dec. 1995; 8 June, 23 Nov., 13 Dec. 1996; 1 Apr., 7 May, 15 Nov. 1997; 9 Feb., 14 Aug., 28 Nov. 1998; 11, 13 Mar., 5 June 1999; 12 Feb., 15, 17 Apr. 2000; 6 Jan., 6 Oct., 21 Dec. 2001; 12 July, 9 Dec. 2002; 14 June, 24 Sept. 2003; 19 June, 30 Oct., 2, 11, 31 Dec. 2004, 5 Feb. 2005; 13 May, 13 Nov. 2006; 7, 24 Nov. 2007; 13, 14, 16, 17, 23 Feb., 7 Mar., 8 Aug. 2009; 29 Sept. 2010; 13 Apr., 19 May 2011; 2 Jan., 22 June 2012; Hugh Leonard, *Out after dark* (1989); id., *Rover and other cats* (1992); id., *Selected plays* (1992), ed. S. F. Gallagher (includes introduction and bibliography); Christopher Murray, 'Hugh Leonard' in Hogan (1996 ed.), i, 701–04; *Sunday Independent*, 14, 28 Dec. 2003; 11 Apr., 9, 16, 23 May, 6 June, 1, 8 Aug., 5 Sept., 3, 31 Oct., 14, 21, 28 Nov., 5, 19 Dec. 2004; 21 Aug. 2005; 20 Aug. 2006; 10 June 2007; 15, 22 Feb., 1 Mar., 11 Oct. 2009; Emilie Pine, 'Leonard's progress: Hugh Leonard at the Dublin Theatre Festival' in Nicholas Grene, Patrick Lonergan and Lilian Chambers (ed.), *Interactions: Dublin Theatre Festival 1957–2007* (2008); *Guardian*, 12 Feb. 2009; *Daily Telegraph*, 12 Feb. 2009; *Ir. News*, 13, 14, 17 Feb. 2009; *Ir. Independent*, 13, 21 Feb. 2009; hughleonardplaywright.com (tribute website maintained by Leonard's daughter Danielle; accessed Nov. 2014)

A new entry, added to the DIB online, December 2014

