



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Brendan Kennelly: Behind the Smile by Sandrine Brisset

Review by: John McDonagh

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Brendan Kennelly: Behind the Smile, by Sandrine Brisset (Dublin: Raglan Books, 2013), 240 pages.

When it comes to authorised biography, there is a fine line to tread for both the subject and the author. The latter has to retain a degree of editorial independence, if the book is to have any integrity, while the former has to be prepared for the less savoury and difficult aspects of their lives to be reviewed and explored. Consequently, a couple of key questions arise when someone agrees to cooperate with the biographer. Should the subject see the final text before publication and does the subject have the right to veto whatever details they feel are inappropriate?

Sandrine Brisset's book on the life and work of Brendan Kennelly has garnered an unusual level of public interest, largely due to the controversy around these questions, which arose shortly after its publication and show no sign of abating. On the back cover blurb, there is a hint about the impending furore: '*Behind the Smile* fulfils his wish that she should write a book about his private self'. The impression that the book has Kennelly's imprimatur is reinforced by a quote from the poet himself: 'I feel she knows more about me than I do about myself'. Early in the book, Brisset refers tantalisingly to 'Kennelly's personal papers' (p.56), which suggests that access has been had to the 'holy grail' desired by all biographers, in this case the vast collection of papers that Brendan Kennelly has gathered over his long and productive career. Here, then, should be a book by someone in the know that explores the poet's complex private life, a privacy that he has always closely guarded despite his high public profile.

Shortly after its publication, the book was attacked by his only child, Kristen, also known as Doodle, who publicly berated Brisset for what she described as an intrusion into the private lives of herself and her children. This prompted Kennelly to distance himself from Brisset and the two engaged in a brief but very public disagreement about the inclusion of more personal material in the book, dealing with events and aspects that he clearly felt were not within her remit, despite many of the details being already in the public sphere. Brisset has passionately maintained the veracity of her account. The Press Ombudsman upheld her claims in March 2014, when it stated that 'the office is satisfied that the information about the writer of the article included in Dr Brisset's book, while obviously deeply unwelcome to the writer, was already in the public domain and available to Dr Brisset and

others before the book was published'. (The full text is available at www.pressombudsman.ie).

If Kennelly was genuinely prepared for a book about his private self to be written, then surely he should have expected such details to emerge? It can only be conjectured that what has really rankled with both Kennelly and his daughter is not the revelations that were already public knowledge, but the manner in which these events have been treated. The book's blurb clearly highlights his endorsement, but he was evidently unprepared for the controversy that was to follow. His disapproval proved so strong that it led to the book being withdrawn from the Trinity College bookshop on the instruction of the college authorities. An October 2013 editorial from *Trinity News*, the student newspaper, notes that it was also withdrawn from Hodges, Figgis bookshop in Dublin, as a personal favour to Kennelly. The editorial adds: 'In a letter sent to Brisset since the book's launch, Kennelly's solicitors requested that she cease describing herself as a "close friend". The letter also called on her to "refrain from further advertising, describing or otherwise referring, or encouraging others to so refer, to your book as being authorised or endorsed [by Kennelly]"' (available at www.trinitynews.ie). The dispute with Brisset went to the point where she was banned from giving a lecture from the Long Hub on Trinity's campus in the same month, on foot of a complaint from Kennelly's solicitors. The spat between author and subject has once again brought Kennelly's complex relationship with his only child into the public domain and, whatever Doodle's reaction, the book does have a right to be read.

Kennelly's *volte-face* has, to a large extent, overshadowed the critical reception of the book itself. As such an important figure in the development of contemporary Irish poetry, he has suffered inappropriately from a large degree of critical neglect. Unfortunately, Brisset makes little reference to secondary critical writing on his work. Her impressive list of acknowledgements, includes members of Kennelly's immediate family, his long-time publisher Neil Astley of Bloodaxe Books, and Ake Persson, an acknowledged Kennelly expert. However, her desire to develop her central thesis, the tension between the public and private selves of the poet, which is given repetitive and somewhat unsubtle analysis in this book, has led to the elision to some of the important collections in which he explores many aspects of the Irish psyche.

His extraordinary output extends to over forty collections of poetry alone. Brisset's list of abbreviations references a mere nine of these, although earlier work does get brief mention in the body of the text. But seminal texts such

as *Cromwell* receive little or no analysis, although it is really on his epic sequences that Kennelly's reputation reposes. Seamus Heaney spoke of 'a sense of an outbreak' on *Cromwell*'s publication by the Beaver Row Press in 1983, yet Brisset merely uses it *passim*. This sequence was a very important contribution to the emergence of an Irish post-colonial literary identity, challenging, as it did, hegemonic interpretations of Irish history, exemplified in the vilification of Oliver Cromwell. *The Book of Judas*, another highly significant epic collection published by Bloodaxe in 1991, is used largely as a sub-text for Brisset's over-arching 'scapegoat' thesis, despite the vibrant social, cultural and religious critique offered by the poems. Brisset is much more at home with the third of Kennelly's sequences, *Poetry My Arse*, also published by Bloodaxe in 1995, and her analysis of the connections between its protagonist, Ace de Horner, and Oliver Cromwell in chapter one is well made.

The first chapter of *Brendan Kennelly: Behind the Smile*, entitled 'Poet and Visionary', is an engaging study of the complexities inherent in any exploration of such a large corpus as Kennelly's and Brisset, writes with an openness and breadth that unfortunately deserts her later in the book. Kennelly deserves a far more serious depiction than merely that of the troubled jester and there are hints in the opening chapters that Brisset will do him justice in this regard. She perceptively explores the often visionary poems in which he blends the ordinary with the extraordinary and she makes credible connections between the poet and the Celtic bardic tradition. Unfortunately, the opening line of the second chapter sets in train the narrow parameters that her study follows from then on: 'Just like the Romantics, Kennelly chose to serve the Savage Muse' (p.25). The tone of the book changes noticeably; a sense begins to emerge that a mono-focal reading of Kennelly is to dominate what follows, and this proves sadly accurate.

The confident and apparently unquestioning conflation of aspects of the poet's life with his work is one of the book's most problematic features. Indeed, the balanced, nuanced reading of the poems that characterises the first chapter is quickly replaced by Brisset's determination to hammer home her view of much of Kennelly's work as driven by personal guilt relating to his broken marriage, his alcoholism, and the domineering influence of his daughter. But what is particularly noticeable at this stage is the absence of the poet himself. Despite his initial support for the book, there are no original interviews between the author and Kennelly. While this is not essential in a work of literary criticism, it is a glaring omission in a book that purports to

be an insider's view of the subject's private life.

Is it not odd that a book that self-styles its author as 'an outsider who has become an insider' should rely on newspaper interviews, largely from the *Sunday Independent*, and a variety of sources readily available to even the most mildly interested observer? If Sandrine Brisset is, as she claims, a genuine insider, would she not have considered it prudent and worthwhile to confront Kennelly with her central thesis? There is a handful of notes where she cites 'conversations' with Kennelly, but these turn out to concern his poetry, not his private life. Tellingly, perhaps, the most recent of these 'conversations' was in June 2008, which might suggest a tailing-off in the relationship between them since that time. *Brendan Kennelly: Behind the Smile* claims to fulfill its subject's wish 'that she should write a work about his private self'. But it is one of its central failings that Kennelly himself remains silent in it, prepared to discuss his poetry but, at best, reticent to talk about his private life. Given that Brisset has made her claim to private access such a central advertisement for the book, Kennelly's silence is deafening.

In his 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author', Roland Barthes argues persuasively that 'the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination' (*Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath [London: Fontana, 1977], p.148). He warns against the pigeon-holing of complex texts in a context where their 'meaning' is firmly inscribed in the life of the author. There is a tendency in Brisset's analysis of Kennelly's poems to do precisely this, especially in the chapters where she dissects the public and private aspects of his life, using the twin guises of 'the scapegoat' and 'the mask', words which appear in the titles of four of the nine chapters. Barthes proceeds to argue that a text can only be 'disentangled, not deciphered' (p.147). In her chapter entitled 'Scapegoat', Brisset is unrelenting in her effort to conflate the poet with his poems, to the extent of smothering alternative interpretations of key works. Thus, in relation to his guilt about the breakup of his marriage, she writes:

The poet was caught in a cycle of blame and retribution in which father and daughter became trapped in victims' roles. Beyond the private sphere of the family circle, the process took the form of a sadomasochistic act fuelled by the complicity of the media. His daughter's spoken and written narrative became an instrument with which to pressure her

father into feeling even more guilt (p.175).

Her reductive analyses of Kennelly's appearances on television are similarly loaded in favour of her scapegoat thesis. She describes him looking 'extremely uncomfortable' during an appearance with Doodle on the *Seoige* programme on RTE in November 2008, and writes that, any time his daughter 'started to speak, fear and anxiety showed on his face' (p.179). This highly subjective hermeneutic is employed throughout the book, with Brisset claiming that the 'mask', whatever that was, was slipping. The difficulty is that the author feels that there is only one conclusion to be drawn from a whole variety of literary, social and media situations. This is yet another example of the regular demonisation of Doodle for the sake of the book's suffocating agenda. Ignored are small details like the dedication to Doodle of his important 1990 selected poems, *A Time for Voices*, and Doodle's regular and insistent support for her father in the media. If Brisset wishes to argue that this is all a sham, then she must provide some supporting evidence, but she fails to do that.

Chapters seven and eight both use the word 'scapegoat' in their titles and Brisset is soon into her stride, selecting poems that she feels are, indirectly, personal reminiscences about the various crises of Kennelly's life. Her approach to these poems places her firmly in the New Historicist school of literary criticism, where the work is approached as an extension of the known details of the personal life and social context of the author. She allows little room for alternative interpretations of poems she clearly feels are Kennelly's attempts to come to terms with pressure, responsibility for which she lays firmly at the feet of his daughter. Again, in these chapters, her thesis is not based on any original research and the absence of Doodle Kennelly's perspective, other than through a re-hash of her own contributions to the *Sunday Independent*, allows Brisset room to fill in the gaps with her own version of precisely the popular psychology which she accuses Doodle of indulging in. The idea of the tragic lurking behind the comic is one of the oldest literary tropes: Brisset deploys it as if it is the only explanation of Kennelly's work.

The analysis of the relationship between Kennelly and his daughter is largely unrelenting, the poet being portrayed as riven by guilt over his poor parenting, and the daughter as an opportunistic parasite, emotionally and financially draining her father. Her evidence for this is largely based on a series of articles by Doodle herself in the *Sunday Independent* in the 2000s,

pieces where she described with frankness her own marriage breakdown and battles with mental illness. No doubt these articles were difficult for him to read. But Brisset is too quick to see them as a direct attack on him as a father. The following blunt, cliché-ridden sentence is typical: 'With guilt gnawing at his heart, because of the time when he was drinking and a sense of parental responsibility – arguably exaggerated – for his adult daughter's problems, the poet evokes a slow crucifixion'. Brisset's more multi-faceted interpretation of earlier chapters is abandoned in favour of a reductionist mantra. Kennelly's financial support of his daughter, rather than being seen as the action of a supportive father, is supposedly the behaviour of a man 'whose kindness and generosity can be viewed as attempts to achieve redemption' (p.156). This may be correct or it may not – as elsewhere, there is no supporting evidence, just the author's own viewpoint.

The author is so protective of Kennelly that his daughter becomes the lauded savage muse, an anti-hero whose actions are, and she puts it quite simply, 'emotional blackmail' (p.181). Doodle's 'alleged psychiatric ailments' are trivialised to the extent that they 'offer another parallel with James Joyce, whose daughter Lucia, was diagnosed with severe schizophrenia' (p.181). This bizarre tangent, one of many such, makes for uncomfortable reading and the entire chapter, entitled 'Scapegoat in a Mirror', deviates so far from literary criticism as to border on the very sensationalist journalism that Brisset is quick to condemn. It is ironic that at one stage Brisset calls Doodle 'an aggressive caricature' (p.185), precisely the image of her that she seems to be trying to recreate herself.

Perhaps the most damning criticism of the book comes from someone who can claim to know Kennelly better than most. Neil Astley, the editor of Bloodaxe Books for over thirty years and Kennelly's publisher since the late 1980s, reviewed it for the *Irish Times* on 3 August 2013. He describes Brisset's perspective as 'partial and skewed' and he describes her interpretation of Kennelly's private life as 'nothing short of deluded'. The portrayal of Kennelly's relationship with his daughter is, in Astley's words, both 'preposterous' and 'distorted', the account largely based on a 'media-invented relationship'. Her account of his life is 'unbalanced, to put it mildly'. He continues:

What is contrived here is not Kennelly's persona – one aspect of this complex man's many-faceted, authentic personality –

but Brisset's invention of this "public mask" central to her dotty thesis. Apparently we aren't seeing the real Brendan Kennelly on television or at a reading but Kennelly playing the part of an archetypal Irish bard like an actor. His family and true friends know what nonsense this is.

In a letter to his close friend John Hamilton Reynolds, dated 3 February 1818, John Keats wrote: 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us, and, if we do not agree, seems to put its hand into its breeches pocket' (*Letters of John Keats to his Family and Friends*, edited by Sidney Colvin). Sandrine Brisset's *Brendan Kennelly – Behind the Smile* misses a golden opportunity to shed light on the life and work of one of the most important of contemporary Irish poets by setting its design far too narrowly upon the reader. Kennelly's poem 'Proof', published in *A Time for Voices – Selected Poems 1960–1990* in 1990, appositely warns against such narrow perspectives:

I would like all things to be free of me,
Never to murder the days with presupposition,
Never to feel they suffer the imposition
Of having to be this or that. How easy
It is to maim the moment
With expectation, to force it to define
Itself. Beyond all that I am, the sun
Scatters its light as though by accident.

The fox eats its own leg in the trap
To go free. As it limps through the grass
The earth itself appears to bleed.
When the morning light comes up
Who knows what suffering midnight was?
Proof is what I do not need.

Dr John McDonagh teaches in Mary Immaculate College in the University of Limerick. He is the author of *Brendan Kennelly: A Host of Ghosts* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2004).