**Encyclopedia of Modernism: Entry on Brian Coffey**

**Coffey, Brian (1905-1995)**

Brian Coffey was an Irish modernist poet whose life and work are closely associated with fellow Irishmen Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Denis Devlin (1908-1959), and George Reavey (1907-1976). Sometimes called the 1930s Irish Modernists, these poets published their early work in the 1930s, mainly from Paris. However, Brian Coffey’s reputation as a poet rests primarily on work published after World War Two. His early volume *Third Person* (1938) was followed by a period of poetic silence broken by the publication of his best-known poem, “Missouri Sequence”, in 1962. This was followed by the long poems *Advent* (1975) – regarded by some as his masterpiece – and *Death of Hektor* (1979), and the late volume of lyrics *Chanterelles* (1985). The most complete selection of Coffey’s poetry appeared in 1991 as *Poems and Versions 1929-1990*.

Brian Coffey was born in Dublin in 1905. He studied scientific subjects at University College Dublin where his father, Denis Coffey, was the first President. Here Coffey met fellow poet Denis Devlin and together they would publish *Poems* (1930). A fluent French speaker, Coffey moved to Paris, where his interests gravitated towards philosophy – which he studied under the famous neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973). In 1938 Coffey married Bridget Baynes, with whom he would have nine children. Following the war, in 1947 Coffey defended his PhD thesis on Thomas Aquinas and took up a lecturing position in philosophy at St. Louis University, Missouri, USA. Coffey resigned this position in 1952, and the family returned to London. There Coffey taught sixth-form mathematics until his retirement in 1973, when he moved to Southampton. He died aged 89 on 14 April 1995.

Coffey has an uneven reputation. Identified by Samuel Beckett as part of the “living nucleus” of Irish poetic experiment in his 1934 review of “Recent Irish Poetry”, Coffey’s early poems show the influence of Eliot and Pound and also his immersion in French poetry, including Paul Éluard and Stéphane Mallarmé (whom he translated extensively). Beckett’s now-famous review set up a cultural distinction between “antiquarians” (Gaelic and traditional, following Yeats) and “others” (Continental and experimental, following Joyce). This bifurcation strongly influenced the reception of Coffey’s poetry. More recent criticism, however, has emphasised the distinctiveness of the aesthetic pursued by Beckett, Devlin and Coffey, challenging Beckett’s paradigm.

Coffey’s modernism is paradoxical. A lifelong Catholic, he admired the “surrealistic reliance on the free flow of imagery from the dark within.” An Irishman who never lost his affection for home, he was obliged to live his life in exile. Sometimes seen as solipsistic (exploring “the breakdown of the object”) he wrote some beautifully inter-subjective love poetry while also tackling social issues (war, environmental damage, invasive bureaucracy). Rejecting Yeats, he nonetheless absorbed the earlier poet’s influence. Formally, Coffey uses ellipsis and unconventional spacing to give his poems an indeterminate feel. His poetry can be densely allusive, approaching an Eliotic “mythical method” in *Death of Hektor*, which has earned him his reputation as both a difficult and a neglected poet.

**List of Works**

(Note: All of Coffey’s published poetry is currently out of print)

Coffey, Brian (1991) *Poems and Versions 1929-1990*, Dublin: Dedalus Press.

The most inclusive extant selection of Coffey’s poetry, but by no means complete.

Coffey, Brian (1982) *Death of Hektor*, London: Menard Press

Trade edition of Coffey’s *Death of Hektor* which first appeared in a limited edition in 1979 from Circle Press.

Coffey, Brian (1972) *Selected Poems*, Dublin: New Writers’ Press.

A selection which contains ‘Missouri Sequence’, ‘How Far From Daybreak’, ‘Mindful of You’, selections from *Third Person*, plus other shorter poems.

Coffey, Brian (1938) *Third Person*, London: Europa Press.

Now rare edition of Coffey’s early poetry published by George Reavey’s Europa Press imprint.

Mays, J.C.C., ed, (1975) *Irish University Review: Brian Coffey Special Issue* 5 (1).

Contains Coffey’s long poem *Advent* and his satirical poem *LEO* with introduction by J.C.C. Mays and biographical note.

**References and further reading**

Beake, Fred (1996) ‘The Poetry of Brian Coffey’, *The Poet’s Voice*, 2nd series 3 (1): 79-82.

Also available online: <http://www.dgdclynx.plus.com/lynx/lynx14.html>

Beckett, Samuel (1983) ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder): 70-76.

Davis, Alex (1995) ‘ “Poetry is Ontology”: Brian Coffey’s Poetics’, *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s*, ed. Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis, Cork: Cork University Press, 150-172.

Keatinge, Benjamin and Aengus Woods (2010) *Other Edens: The Life and Work of Brian Coffey*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press.

Moriarty, Dónal (2000) *The Art of Brian Coffey*, Dublin: University College Dublin Press.