

IRISH TIMES
13th June 1988

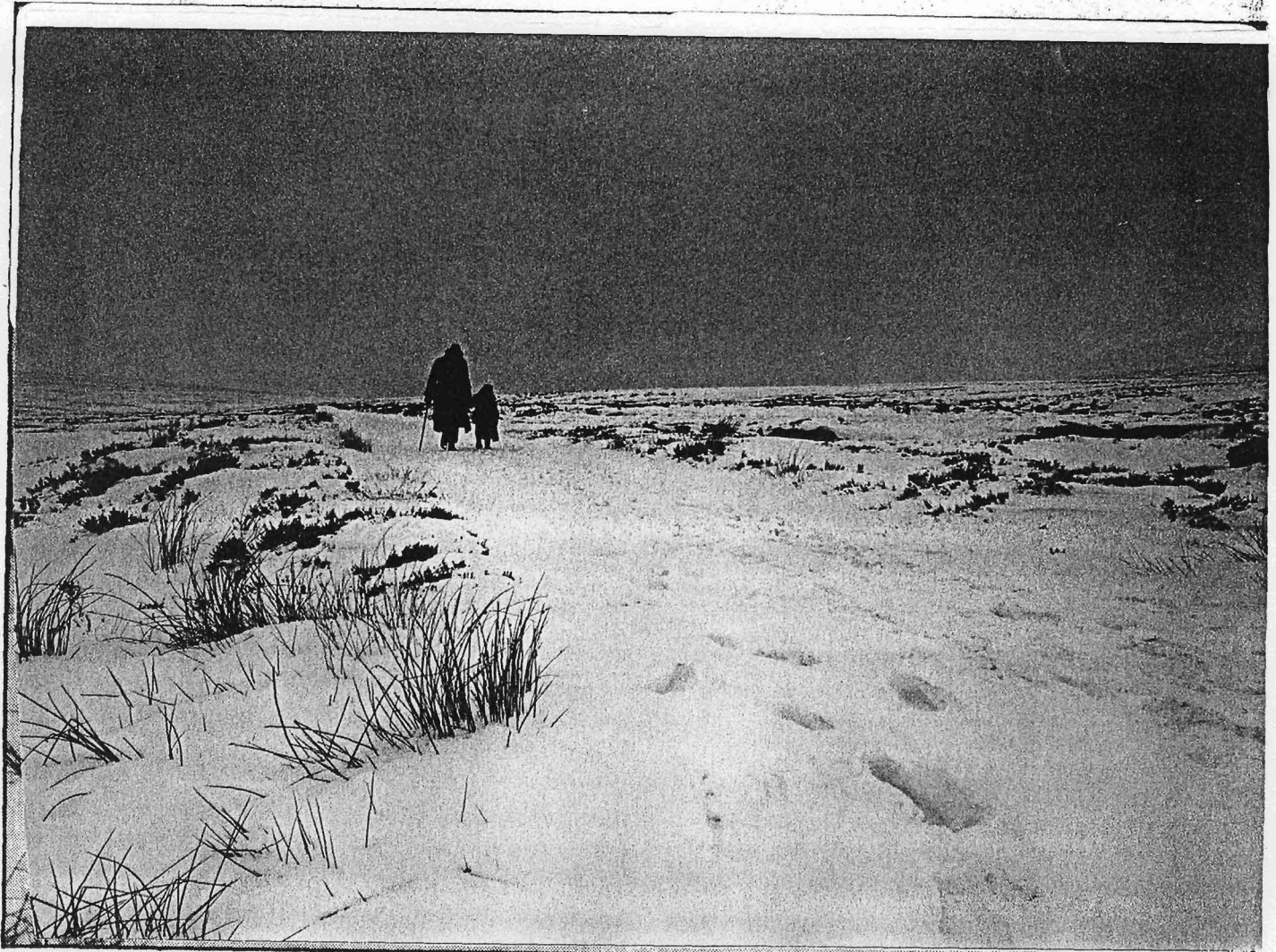
'The Beckett Country'
photographic exhibi-
tion, a selection of
photographs and text
from Eoin O'Brien's
book 'The Beckett
Country: Samuel
Beckett's Ireland,' has
now been displayed at
16 venues in eight
countries. On the eve
of its departure for the
First International
Festival of the Arts in
New York where it
will be on display in
the New York Public
Library from Friday
until August 31st,
EOIN O'BRIEN
retraces its travels and
makes some observa-
tions on sponsorship
of the arts.

The export of culture

READING Univesity houses the largest collection of Beckett manuscripts on this side of the Atlantic (the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin serves a similar need for Beckett scholars in America).

It was here at Reading that the suggestion was made to create a major exhibition based on my book to form the main attraction for an event to honour Beckett's 80th birthday at Reading. This seemed an excellent idea to which I readily agreed and David Davison set to work on specially printing the photographs; the Department of Typography and Graphic Communications at Reading Univerity (the only one of its kind in these islands) agreed to take on the design and construction of the exhibition. A team of dedicated students collated the 167 photographs and quotations from Beckett's writings in a tasteful, effective, and (as we know) sturdy design in 33 four-foot square framed panels.

The exhibition was opened in the University Library on Sunday, May 12th by Dame Peggy Ashcroft who honoured the occasion by joining Ronald Pickup in a selection of readings from Beckett's writings. This was followed the next day by Barry McGovern in Gerry Duker's melange of Beckett's trilogy "I'll



● "Father and Son on a Mountain Road to Nowhere" (Glencree Summit in Snow) one of the pictures by David H. Davison in "Beckett Country" exhibition.

go on." All in all a memorable occasion.

The exhibition has more than lived up to its original aim — namely, that by showing Beckett's writings to a wide general public, those unfamiliar with or daunted by his work may be attracted to a closer acquaintanceship. After Reading, the exhibition went to Scotland, and then to the Olivier Gallery at the National Theatre, London where it was on display for two months. It then came to Ireland and has been shown in Trinity College, the Royal Hospital, Kilmaham, Kenny's Bookshop in Galway, the Belltable in Limerick, the Town Halls of Castlebar and Dundalk, the Ardhowen in Enniskillen, the Ulster Museum in Belfast, and at that remarkable annual artistic happening (there is no other word to describe what Brendan Flynn shamanizes out of thin air) — the Clifden Arts Festival.

The exhibition received a warm welcome in the Théâtre du Rond-Point on the Champs-Élysées where it was opened by Beckett's old friends, Jean Louis Barrault and Madelaine Renaud with the Irish Ambassador to France, Tadhg O'Sullivan. A similar reception awaited it in the Irish College at Louvain, Aachen University in Bonn, and the Biblioteca Nazionale in Madrid.

Before departing on a tour of academic institutes in the United States, the exhibition will be on

display for two months (from Friday next to August 31st, 1988) in the New York Public Library, as one of three Irish contributions to the First International Festival of the Arts, an enormous razzle-dazzle of the arts, that could only be organised (and financed) in New York. The other Irish contributions to this event are "I'll go on" and the Gate production of "Juno and the Paycock".

So much for the tale of an exhibition — a necessary prologue to my purpose in writing this piece. The Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, who has in his time done much for the arts in this country, has stated, quite correctly in my view, that Ireland should export its culture. Cultural activities build bridges along which business, commerce and tourism can later travel, and the publicity from cultural endeavour abroad is out of all proportion to the modest cost of financing such events. *But there is a cost*, and it can be extremely difficult for cultural groups already existing from hand to mouth, to obtain the financial support needed to export their particular activity, even when an invitation from abroad is secured — and there is no shortage of interest in our culture in other countries.

Some practical points will serve to illustrate. I knew that if "The Beckett Country" exhibition was to be done properly it would cost a substantial sum of money and I was fortunate in finding an under-

standing sponsor in Aer Lingus, which saw the conjunction of its 50th anniversary with Beckett's 80th birthday, as an occasion worthy of support. What I did not know then was that additional costs (catalogue publication, advertising, the opening function, to name a few unforeseen expenses) can rapidly make original estimates for such a venture appear nonsensical.

In the case of the exhibition, it was soon apparent that the generous Aer Lingus sponsorship would need to be doubled. At this stage, the British Government came to our aid (Mr Haughey and other interested parties please copy) through its enlightened Business Sponsorship Incentive Scheme whereby the British Ministry for the Arts will match a financial contribution from private industry to a worthwhile artistic venture. "The Beckett Country" was honoured with such an award in 1986 and lived to see another day.

Many private companies and individuals sponsor the arts, and heaven knows where we would be without them, but all to often in the heady success of an occasion these sponsors are forgotten, and though many do not seek glaring acknowledgement, none likes to be denied discreet gratitude, the omission of which is, to say the least, discourteous. Of equal importance, however, is some acknowledgement from Govern-

ment for cultural sponsorship from the private sector. The British scheme of matching sponsorship for selected projects has some theoretical drawbacks but in a country such as ours, where the arts are starved of finance, any means of encouraging private funding can only be beneficial.

To return to the theme of exporting culture, had I obtained sponsorship from, for example, a distillery rather than an airline, the exhibition would, in all probability, be still languishing in its crates at Reading University. There is more to exporting culture than merely shifting it from Dublin to Paris or wherever. A network of contacts between artistic centres is needed so that suitable venues can be found, and appropriate publicity organised.

All of which costs money — not big money but money which is not available to the Department of Foreign Affairs, which through its embassies and staff abroad does all that it can (generally with commendable enthusiasm and showing an empathy with culture not often to be found in public servants at home) to encourage the export of cultural events. But without a stipulated budget, all the goodwill in the world from our foreign service staff cannot substitute for the funds that are needed to achieve the quality publicity which can be readily obtained abroad and which can do so much for the image of the country.