

Heinrich Böll and Ireland

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By

Gisela Holfter

With a Foreword by Hugo Hamilton

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P U B L I S H I N G

Heinrich Böll and Ireland,
by Gisela Holfter

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For Glenn

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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For most of my academic career I have been interested in Heinrich Böll and Ireland. This interest is shared worldwide: invitations for lectures or requests for publications have come from academics and journals in countries ranging from China, South Korea, Italy and Sweden not to mention Germany and Ireland. Specifically in Ireland a number of people have asked about a comprehensive publication on Heinrich Böll and Ireland and his influential *Irish Journal*. This volume will hopefully at least provide an introduction. Given that in 2007 it was fifty years since *Irishes Tagebuch* and forty years since the English translation *Irish Journal* were published, it seems somewhat overdue.

The basis of this study is informed by a number of my own earlier writings, specifically parts of a study of German travel descriptions of Ireland in the 20th century, and numerous articles and lectures. Of great importance for any research on Böll is the new complete edition of Böll's works, the *Kölner Ausgabe* ('Cologne edition') that has been published since 2002 in 27 volumes. It has brought to light many new aspects of Böll's work and it is of immense value to have the well written and informative commentaries. Of interest here is particularly volume 10 which contains *Irishes Tagebuch* and to which the Centre for Irish-German Studies in Limerick was able to contribute some aspects. Also, the 2007 publication of *Irishes Tagebuch*, edited by René Böll and Jochen Schubert, contains a lot of background material.

As always, the co-operation from the Heinrich Böll Archive in Cologne and the Heinrich Böll Foundation has been excellent, especially the support and interest of Markus Schäfer and Jochen Schubert. Heinrich Böll's son René Böll has patiently encouraged me with this undertaking and supported me throughout its development, I am especially indebted to him and his daughter Samay regarding the tracing of and permission to use photographic material. Hugo Hamilton immediately agreed to write a foreword when I approached him.

Of great inspiration was a stay in the Heinrich Böll Cottage on Achill Island as writer in residence in the late summer of 2006 which enabled me

to write a good part of this book in a truly magical place. No one could ask for a more congenial work environment! The people in Achill contributed greatly to this endeavour, especially the Heinrich Böll Committee and everyone connected with it. I want to thank especially Elizabeth & John Barrett, Sean and Margaret Cannon, John F. Deane, Edward King, John McHugh, Sheila McHugh, also Elisabeth Sweeney, the late Vi McDowell, Michael O'Malley and Mary Colohan. I am grateful to Jean Tansey for her permission to use interviews she conducted on Achill Island in the early 1990s and I want to thank Aidan O'Beirne, Dublin, Peter Williams, Limerick, and everyone else who helped with information and support. This means, as always and foremost, Glenn, but also everyone else who read parts of this book at different draft stages and contributed with suggestions and constructive criticism, especially Sophia Kingshill, Hermann Rasche, Amelie Dohna, Horst Dickel, Bill O'Keefe, Rose Little, Susan Tebbutt, John McHugh, René Böll, Eda Sagarra, Ian Wallace and especially to Alison McConnell, who kept at me to keep going. Any errors are my own.

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FOREWORD

HUGO HAMILTON

There has never been a better time to examine what the Germans think of the Irish and what the Irish think of the Germans. At times it seems like the people at the centre of Europe and the people on the periphery of Europe gazing at each other with a mixture of astonishment and admiration. The attraction is mutual, full of love and misunderstanding.

At times Germany and Ireland seem more like continents apart, glancing over the shoulder at each other with envy and baffled interest. Different in the way that we are shaped by history, different in the character of the landscape and the expression of the imagination, different in our optimism and our melancholia, different in many of the essential ways in which we deal with reality, with truth, with money. Profound differences which have inspired such ongoing fascination between these two places. Perhaps it is this continued attempt to understand each other which makes us so close.

In this timely book, Dr. Gisela Holfter investigates one of the most important literary events to engage both Ireland and Germany directly over the past half century. Since the publication of Heinrich Böll's collection of personal sketches in the fifties, *Irishes Tagebuch* (Irish Journal) has claimed an extraordinary place for itself in Irish-German relations. It has acted like one of those clustered signposts on the Irish landscape, pointing the way for many Germans to an idyllic place of rescue on the edge of Europe. At the same time it also points back to Germany and to the historical reasons for this great swell of enthusiasm for Ireland. In describing the waves of German visitors who came here on the strength of reading Böll's book, Holfter refers to the fact that former president Mary Robinson once suggested that Ireland should claim Böll as a national saint.

The details which have been stacked up in this new book allow us to form great insight into the perception of this country from the outside over the years. Holfter compares Böll's impressions of Ireland with the pre-existing

view and asks if England had acted as a screen hiding Ireland away from Germans until Böll's book appeared to such widespread acclaim. She examines the contents of *Irishes Tagebuch*, what interested the outsider and what, for example, had been ignored by the German writer. Why did Heinrich Böll not speak about Irish music? Why did he ignore his own early fascination with Irish folk tales and turn to the description of realities in front of his eyes on arrival. Why did he avoid Northern Ireland and why did he not touch on the troubled historical anxieties between Britain and Ireland?

By focussing on Böll's literary impressions of Ireland, we learn so much about this country through German eyes. There is a kind of outsider politeness which may have prevented the German writer from being more critical. Heinrich Böll was well aware of the grip of the Catholic church on Ireland. His entire work became a lifetime engagement with Catholic morality and the emergence of a new social and political awareness in Germany. But his writing on Ireland seems to have avoided any substantial commentary on these matters apart from describing the Irish people as being 'closer to heaven' because of their extraordinary spiritual life.

It becomes clear now from this incisive study of his work how Böll's legendary critical faculties became inhibited in his encounter with Ireland. Perhaps, as Holfter points out, he was here as a guest and could only allow himself to see Ireland with great affection. His intellectual preoccupations were more concerned with the creation of a 'piece of art' rather than with social reform, something for which he needed all his energies to deal with back home in Germany.

Böll's controversial views on Irish poverty are examined here with forensic precision in a chapter which seems to have a long echo. One of the first meetings in Dublin is with a beggar outside St Patrick's Cathedral. He discusses Limerick poverty long before it was acknowledged even in Ireland. Emigration is a recurring theme in *Irishes Tagebuch*, but the description of the desperate economic conditions in the 1950s is something the Irish were not particularly keen to hear about from the point of view of the outside.

There is also a kind of 'dignity' in poverty which the German writer comes to admire and which, in Holfter's perceptive assessment of the text and its critical response, may have emerged from Böll's own Catholic influences such as Chesterton and Bloy. Holfter draws attention to the fact

that Böll was strongly marked by the destitution he saw unfolding across Europe during the war, by his own experiences of poverty in post-war Germany and also by the rush of material adjustment which followed during the German economic miracle.

Böll's observation of the absence of any obvious obsession with money in Ireland in the 1950s is something which will continue to intrigue us in present times. It seemed rude and un-catholic to talk about money here up to a particular point. As Böll puts it in his own words, Ireland seemed to be 'outside the European social order.' The slow emergence of material aspirations makes this such an interesting investigation both from a literary and social, as well as intercultural aspect.

It is the lack of money that seemed to characterize Ireland. The episode in which Böll describes the woman in a fish and chip shop in Limerick chiding a young customer for freely using too much vinegar and potentially causing her financial ruin, seems to demonstrate perfectly the predicament in which the country existed. A man present in the chip shop at the same moment then pays over the odds for the extra drops of squandered vinegar. The man is quite probably the German visitor, Böll himself, though these frequent acts of generosity throughout his life remained mostly hidden.

The economic stagnation of the country is connected by Holfter to another piece of writing by Böll in which he explores the prevailing attitudes towards employment at the time. Work was something that was switched on and off like a tap, whenever it was needed. Something which the German writer perceives, in contrast to his own country, as the Irish way of keeping a perfect balance with the enjoyment of life.

With her background expertise in German-Irish studies, Holfter has placed Heinrich Böll's writing on Ireland in the context of its time, showing us the diverging reception and also its ongoing impact. It is sometimes hard to believe that Böll was so fashionable at one time that he was mentioned twice by Woody Allen in his film *Manhattan*. In the intervening years, his literary reputation has become eclipsed a little, perhaps on account his gentle but unflinching political engagement. But Holfter is among many others who increasingly see his enormous relevance to the contemporary world and point to his importance as an international writer returning to a prominent place.

Heinrich Böll's writings about Ireland have never been out of the public eye. Compiled here are the most telling reactions to the *Irishes Tagebuch* and also to the film *Children of Eire* which followed the book and which caused great controversy at a time of high sensitivity in Ireland's self-image in the 1960s. It caused great offence and opened a heated debate, demonstrating how far apart we were from Europe. The film was not screened again until recently and shows us, as Holfter explains, how we deal with the views of the outsider.

To all German visitors, of course, Ireland is green, an emblematic attachment which has formed in the imagination over the years, not for any ecological reasons but from the reputation of the landscape and the sheer abundance of green growth. Holfter, above all, gives us the expanding legacy of this German writer's literary interest in this green island and locates some of the most enduring reasons why the Germans and the Irish are so well matched in their differences.

As Heinrich Böll saw it, in spite of all our troubles, the Irish people were always happier than they knew it themselves. Perhaps this is a natural faculty which the Germans wanted to learn and which we may need to relearn ourselves at some point. Böll repeatedly found an easy fluency of poetry here, a natural spring of creativity which Holfter refers back to Ireland's historical inheritance, a kind of 'poetry of unhappiness' in the words of Böll, which inspired him and which continues to fuel the fascination between the Germans and the Irish.

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PART I:
BACKGROUND

CHAPTER ONE

WRITERS AND PLACES— AN INTRODUCTION TO IRISH-GERMAN RELATIONS

A relationship with a specific country can play a significant role in a writer's work and its reception. The writer's view may, in turn, influence the perception of that country among the reading public. Writers can become champions of their own land, their names becoming synonymous with that land. Their portrayal of a nation other than their own becomes a basis for discussion both in the place described and in their homeland. Madame de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* was a case in point in the nineteenth century. More recently Peter Mayle's account of his new life in France, *A Year in Provence*, inspired millions of English-speaking readers to dream about a similar move – and influenced tens of thousands to buy their own place in France. Bruce Chatwin wrote notably about Patagonia and Australia; Elias Canetti's *The Voices of Marrakesh* created a vivid image of a seemingly timeless encounter with Morocco, while several decades earlier Somerset Maugham's *On a Chinese Screen* brought the country which many had imagined to be a fiction perpetrated by Marco Polo, closer to European readers. That travel literature could be viewed as fiction, whether commended as such or condemned, underlines its hybrid nature.

James Joyce portrayed his own country, especially its capital, from a distance. That such distance – in some extreme cases, exile – can be necessary to capture the essence of a place has been widely acknowledged. Robert Lloyd Praeger's *The Way that I Went*, Dervla Murphy's *A Place Apart* and Pete McCarthy's *McCarthy's Bar* capture important aspects of (Northern) Irish twentieth century life, and though very different in tone and style, all bring both familiarity and distance to the task.

What about the perspective of complete outsiders such as Heinrich Böll? Is a portrayal of another place merely a clandestine sketch of their own

home? It has always annoyed me to read comments such as that of the influential critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, that the *Irishes Tagebuch* (*Irish Journal*) is really only ‘a hidden book on Germany’.¹ Was that not a somewhat trite comment? Which traveller is able to observe another, foreign place completely outside the framework of his or her own experience, his or her own background? Is not the real question whether he or she achieved something more, brought another place closer, contributed to that often postulated but equally elusive idea of intercultural understanding? Could a literary portrayal of a distant place give the readers a better understanding of their own home country? Problems arise from that as well, of course, if a book creates a utopian place for the readers (possibly not intended or even described) – a place to dream about and to escape to, but one that meets their own needs rather than giving an appreciation of the actual destination. Arguably Ireland has become such a place for many German readers and tourists thanks to Heinrich Böll. How was it possible – intentionally or unintentionally – to create this phenomenon? What was it about the readers’ minds or needs that contributed to it? What explains its tremendous immediate and ongoing success? And what was the personal background as well as the literary development of the man behind it?

Böll always championed a concept of ‘Fortschreibung’, continuous and constantly developing writing in which the sequence is of great importance. Where, then, is the place of the *Irish Journal* in his literary oeuvre? In what way are his own experiences or his own imaginings described – and does it really matter, given that this is a literary travel description? And what about the third element in this triangular relationship of author, home country and country visited? Is not the portrayal of one’s own place by an outsider always viewed with slight suspicion unless infused with delight and praise? What if a description meant entirely positively conflicts with one’s own ideas about what is positive and what might be derogatory and hurtful? What kind of power relationship is behind this? In what way can the passage of time come into the equation? After all, more than fifty years have passed since the *Irishes Tagebuch* appeared for the first time, and both Ireland and Germany have changed almost beyond recognition.

¹ Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Der Poet der unbewältigten Gegenwart*, in: *Deutsche Literatur in West und Ost*, Munich: Piper 1963, pp. 120-142; see also Rolf Becker’s earlier (though less influential) review of the *Irishes Tagebuch*: *Irland hat, was uns abhanden kam, Sonntagsblatt*, 5 May 1957.

In the case of Heinrich Böll and Ireland, these questions must concern more than one book, regardless of how influential that book might have been. There is far more to Heinrich Böll and Ireland than the *Irish Journal*. The relationship between man and country is more controversial and more complex than most people suspect. In Böll's case we have not only the *Irish Journal*, but also the many German translations of Irish literature published by him and his wife Annemarie, including works by Brendan Behan, Flann O'Brien, Tomás O'Crohan, Eilis Dillon and George Bernard Shaw.

Then there is his film, *Irland und seine Kinder (Children of Eire)*, which was received very favourably in the Federal Republic of Germany, but caused great controversy in Ireland in 1965, resulting in one critic demanding an apology from the German government. Despite the controversy, the film had been long forgotten, both in Germany and in Ireland, until it was re-broadcast some forty years later on Christmas Day 2006 on Irish national television. This time the reception was entirely different, raising again the question of how perceptions change over time, and what factors contribute to the change. Finally, how can one creatively use a legacy of so many facets, one which has had such a unique impact, as Böll's relationship with Ireland?

To begin answering these questions this book will start with some background on Heinrich Böll, particularly for readers who might not be familiar with his life and impact in Germany. This is the backdrop to his encounter with Ireland, and helps to explain how and why it could function as a second home or at least a refuge for Böll. The background would be incomplete without some information on Böll's wife Annemarie, neé Cech. Böll's relationship with Ireland was both shared and enhanced by her.

This is followed by an analysis of Heinrich and Annemarie Böll's existing links with Ireland and Irish literature before they set foot on Irish soil. The question of Böll's preconceptions about Ireland and specific Irish characteristics, his first encounters with Irish literature and authors and their significance for him as a young writer are at the core of this section. Böll's visits to Ireland are examined next, concentrating especially on his first trips in 1954 and 1955 and his time on Achill Island where he stayed regularly throughout the sixties and seventies and where he bought a holiday cottage.

The literary creation of Böll's *Irish Journal*, a distillation of comings and goings to Ireland over a period of years, needs to be examined as much for what it leaves out as for what it says and contains. Chapter three therefore attempts to plot overlapping charts of the real and fictional peregrinations. Prior to the book's publication most of the eighteen chapters had already appeared in newspapers or been broadcast on the radio, contributing significantly to the book's immediate popularity. The unusual structure, the title and the main themes are explored. This chapter also includes an examination of the differences between the German *Irishes Tagebuch* and the English language version *Irish Journal*, particularly the addition of the chapter 'Thirteen years later'. The different responses to *Irishes Tagebuch* and *Irish Journal* are analysed next, contrasting the overwhelmingly positive reception in Germany with the relative lack of interest for a long time in Ireland.

A short overview of Irish-German (literary) relations

The uniqueness of Böll's portrayal of Ireland can best be understood by considering it alongside other contemporary publications about Ireland by authors from Germany and from other foreign countries. Also, we need to bear in mind that the *Irish Journal* was not created out of a vacuum – Ireland had been attracting varying degrees of interest over the ages. The following is a very short summary of the German literary view and an overview of the different approaches and agendas.²

Following encounters with Irish monks on the continent, medieval Europe began to imagine Ireland as 'the island of the saints', the home of St. Brendan and later of Isolde, fatefully in love with Tristan. Yet up to the nineteenth century, very little attention was paid to Ireland in Germany. While early travel descriptions about Ireland by German travellers can be traced from the sixteenth century onwards, it was only at the end of the eighteenth century that a number of English travel accounts were translated into German and the first relatively comprehensive German view of Ireland based on personal experience was published. Ireland was mostly seen as a colonial appendix to Great Britain, a very minor and insignificant player. Images and concepts which were based on the English

² For more details see John Hennig, Irish-German Literary Relations, in: *German Life and Letters*, No. 3, 1950, pp. 102-110; Patrick O'Neill, *Ireland and Germany — A Study in Literary Relations*, New York: Peter Lang 1985; Doris Dohmen, *Das deutsche Irlandbild*, Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi 1994 and Gisela Holfter, *Erlebnis Irland*, Trier: WVT 1996.

perspective in turn determined the German perception, in some instances well into the nineteenth century.

The English view itself was based in part on classical texts, often denouncing Ireland's wildness and lack of civilisation, which had been taken up by writers such as Giraldus Cambrensis in the twelfth century who had a colonial mission at hand.³ A clear shift in the German perception took place in the nineteenth century when three more or less distinct phases, especially as far as German-speaking travellers are concerned, can be discerned:

Firstly, the orientation towards England up to about 1830. Secondly, the period between 1830–1850, marking a pronounced increase in the attention paid to Ireland, influenced by ideas of Romanticism, a fascination with Irish fairy tales, and political circumstances, personified in the charismatic figure of Daniel O'Connell. Besides numerous travel descriptions (more in these twenty years than during the rest of the century added together, the most influential being Hermann von Pückler-Muskau's *Briefe eines Verstorbenen*, published in English translation only a year later in 1831/1832 as *Tour of a German Prince*), the translations of Irish fairy tales by the Grimm Brothers, first published in 1825, generated much enthusiasm. However, in the third phase, from the 1850s, following the famine and O'Connell's death, until the end of the century, there was a noticeable waning of German interest in Ireland as a travel destination, with Julius Rodenberg and Friedrich Engels providing exceptions from the rule.

At the same time, in the context of a growing fascination with other languages, Irish received much scholarly attention. Indeed a great deal of the groundwork of Irish language studies was laid by German-speaking academics such as Johann Caspar Zeuss, Rudolf Thurneysen and Kuno Meyer. The awareness of Ireland in the first decades of the twentieth century was often politically motivated: Ireland was noticed again thanks to its close connection with England, particularly in the periods leading up to each of the two World Wars. Still, despite all interest in Ireland, the era when 'everyone always mistakes Ireland for Iceland', as Richard Bermann wrote in 1914, lasted for a long time: Joachim Gerstenberg repeated the phrase in 1940. Similarly Karl Surenhöfener called Ireland 'the country we

³ For more details see Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish & Fíor Gael: studies in the idea of Irish nationality, its development and literary expression prior to the nineteenth century*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins 1986.

hardly know' in 1948. Not least thanks to Böll's *Irish Journal* Ireland has since become a familiar concept, a seeming proof that a different life-style, values and mindframe exist. This became a decisive part of the ongoing attraction of Ireland as a tourist destination, one which includes the traditional image of the 'Emerald Isle', the forty shades of green as well as Irish literature and music. Of these traditional attractions some proved more stimulating for Böll than others as we will see when analysing the *Irish Journal* and also his other works on and references to Ireland, including his own and his wife's translations. Of particular importance here is the examination of his film *Children of Eire* and its widely differing reception in Germany and Ireland. But maybe of even greater significance today is the question of the ongoing impact of the *Irish Journal* as well as Böll's personal legacy in Ireland. This will form the last part of this book.

CHAPTER TWO

HEINRICH BÖLL— A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

*It is my firm belief that the period in which an author
lived is of crucial importance*¹

Heinrich Böll was born in Cologne on 21 December 1917, the youngest of six children. The German Kaiser was still in power, the First World War was raging and Konrad Adenauer, later to become German Chancellor, was mayor of Cologne. The Bölls were a lower middle-class family. According to family tradition their ancestors had emigrated from England several centuries previously, preferring emigration to Henry VIII's state religion.² Heinrich's father, Viktor Böll, was born in 1870 in Essen as one of nine children. After the early death of his first wife Katharina, he married Maria Hermanns in 1906. Among Viktor's brothers were a successful architect and a priest; Viktor himself followed in the footsteps of his father Heinrich Böll, who was a master-joiner, and specialised in wood-carvings for churches. He had a great appreciation of art history and shared this with his children, while teaching them 'to honour God and not to fear earthly rulers'.³

Maria Böll was by all accounts a very generous and intelligent person. Her son would write about her that she was a great and wonderful woman,

¹ [Ich glaube folgendes: daß man sehr genau unterscheiden muß, aus welcher Zeitbiographie ein Autor stammt.] 'Ich habe nichts über den Krieg aufgeschrieben' – Ein Gespräch mit Heinrich Böll und Hermann Lenz, in: Nicolas Born, Jürgen Manthey (eds), *Literaturmagazin 7 – Nachkriegsliteratur*, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1977, pp. 30-74, 31. All translations by the writer unless otherwise stated. At least in the case of texts by Heinrich Böll, the original German might be of interest especially for students of literature. It will therefore be provided in the footnotes in square brackets.

² Heinrich Böll, Über mich selbst. (Autobiographische Notiz) I, in: *Der Mann mit den Messern*, Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun. 1959, pp. 76-78.

³ Alfred Böll, *Die Bölls. Bilder einer deutschen Familie*, Bergisch Gladbach: Lübbe 1981, p. 239.

always helping others, even if her own family was struggling. The family was a close-knit unit, which helped when the economic situation took a turn for the worse. Viktor Böll had invested in a small bank for craftsmen that collapsed during the Great Depression in 1929. The family had to sell their house in Cologne-Raderthal and move; it was the first of many changes of address at short intervals. Unemployment, visits to pawnbrokers and scarcity of food were the common lot. The young Heinrich Böll was clearly affected by these experiences: together with the trauma of the Nazi rise to power they formed the source of a lifelong anxiety.⁴ Böll's own assessment of the family's situation following their reduced circumstances was that they were 'neither proper petit bourgeois nor conscious proletarians, but with a strong Bohemian streak.'⁵

After attending the elementary school in Cologne-Raderthal Böll went to the prestigious Kaiser Wilhelm Gymnasium, a grammar school where the curriculum included Latin and Greek, subjects he found interesting. He obtained his Abitur (Leaving Certificate) in 1937.

Any discussion of Heinrich Böll's family background must include the specific form of Catholicism in which he was reared, which influenced his later life and had a surprising amount in common with the faith he was to encounter in Ireland. The Böll family was Catholic, in an almost puritan fashion, which led to a contempt for 'bourgeois' society displayed in many of Böll's early texts, and a sceptical outlook regarding Church institutions.⁶ While the latter aspect would not have been a strong feature of religion in Ireland, where the Church authorities were revered, temporal authorities were viewed with much greater mistrust, doubtless engendered by Ireland's colonial past. Scepticism towards Church authorities is strongly reflected in Böll's early writing, which contains a strong religious element, a love for the marginalised such as the poor and prostitutes, and passionate outbursts against hypocrisy.

⁴ Heinrich Böll, Christian Linder, *Drei Tage im März*, Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch 1975, p. 39.

⁵ [Wir waren weder rechte Kleinbürger noch bewußte Proleten, hatten einen starken Einschlag von Bohème] Heinrich Böll, *Was soll aus dem Jungen bloß werden*, in: *Werke 1979-1981*, Kölner Ausgabe volume 21, edited by Jochen Schubert, Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 2006, p. 398. In the following abbreviated as *KA 21*.

⁶ See Böll, *Werke 1936-1945*, Kölner Ausgabe volume 1, edited by J.H. Reid, Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 2004, pp. 470f. In the following abbreviated as *KA 1*.

Böll's religious thinking was influenced by his reading of the French writer Léon Bloy, whose essay *Le Sang du Pauvre* (*Blood of the Poor*) was published in German in 1936. Indeed, Böll describes Dostoyevsky and Bloy as being for him literary 'bombs', and Chesterton a 'firecracker'.⁷ Bloy was a part of the 'Renouveau catholique', a movement for religious renewal which advocated spiritual revival through poverty and suffering; his writings led to animated discussions among Heinrich Böll, his siblings and their friends, a group of young people trying to escape the growing pressure from Nazi ideology. These early experiences and his family background were instrumental in forming what J.H. Reid calls the 'strong existentialist or anarchist element in Böll's outlook which made him suspicious of all rigidities in social life, whether structures of authority in Church or State'.⁸ The more mature post-war Böll was later able to turn all this youthful passion into bitingly humorous satire with a strong visual element, as in his description of the pompously pious, bishop-led church procession in Cologne,⁹ the centre of powerful Rhenish Catholicism, where State and Church authorities were strongly interlinked.

Following his 'Abitur', the German Leaving Certificate which showed that Böll was by no means an 'A' student, he had a brief stint as an apprentice with the bookseller M. Lempertz in Bonn. Heinrich Böll was then enlisted for labour service in 1938, compulsory work experience introduced by the National Socialists which included everyone who wanted to study at university. He enrolled at the University of Cologne before being called up for military service in the autumn of 1939. During the war he was first at a training camp in Osnabrück, then after two months in Poland in May and June 1940 he was transferred to France for four months and then back to Germany until May 1942. During this time he got married to Annemarie Cech.

Annemarie Cech was the daughter of Eduard Cech, who worked for the Austrian Railway Company, and his wife, Stefanie Cech, neé Hagen. She was born in 1910 in Pilsen, Bohemia, now in the Czech Republic, and for

⁷ Böll, *Was soll aus dem Jungen bloß werden*, Munich: dtv 1983, p. 90.

⁸ J.H. Reid, *Heinrich Böll: A German for His Time*, Oxford: Berg 1988, p. 6.

⁹ Böll, *Und sagte kein einziges Wort*, Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1953, chapter 5. First translated as *Acquainted with the Night* in 1954 by Richard Graves, using the title of a Robert Frost poem. Nearly 25 years later, Leila Vennewitz, who also translated the *Irishes Tagebuch* and had by then become the main translator of Böll's work into English, reinstated the original title in her new translation *And Never Said a Word*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978.



Heinrich and Annemarie Böll on their wedding day, 6 March 1942. © Samay Böll.

the first few years of her life she spoke German and Czech bilingually. After the early death of both her parents Annemarie moved to Cologne, where she lived with her grandparents and later attended the St Ursula School, run by nuns. In 1933 she met Heinrich Böll's elder sister Mechthild at the University of Cologne, where, like Mechthild (called 'Tilla' or 'Tilde'), she studied German and English literature, and trained to become a teacher. The house of the Böll family became a second home for Annemarie.¹⁰

Due to the high rate of unemployment she had great difficulty in finding a job. She worked for a while as an administrator in a business firm and then tried to get an au pair position (for which no work permit was required) in an English school, with the help of contacts provided by her old school.

¹⁰ See Dieter Kühn, *Auf dem Weg zu Annemarie Böll*, Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2000, p. 23.

Eventually she was offered a place in Upton Hall in the Wirral, near Liverpool, a private Catholic boarding school run by the Society of the Sisters Faithful Companions of Jesus (SFJ). Annemarie went there in 1935 and taught mathematics and Latin and prepared students for the entry examinations to tertiary level. Sometimes she accompanied students when they had to go to medical or dental appointments in Liverpool – something she preferred to teaching, as she found it difficult to keep strict discipline.

At Upton Hall she met and became friends with an Irish woman, one of many at the school. This contact with Mary Kelleher, later Daly after her marriage to Robin Daly, was to have a profound impact regarding the connection with Ireland; Annemarie argued that her own and Heinrich's relationship with the country was rooted in this friendship.¹¹ Annemarie greatly enjoyed her time in Upton Hall and would have liked to stay, but felt she had to return to Cologne after one year in order to be with her grandmother, who had supported her in England with a monthly grant. The employment situation in Germany was still very difficult but as the war started and an ever growing number of men were needed to serve in the army, women were suddenly in demand to fill the ensuing gaps. Annemarie obtained a position at the Mittelschule Rothgerberbach, a secondary school in Cologne. Here she taught German, English and gymnastics, having gained experience of the latter at Upton Hall, where she had assisted her friend Mary Kelleher, who was sports teacher there.

Not long after his wedding in 1942, Böll returned to France as part of the occupation force and remained there until October 1943 before being posted to Russia, to the Crimea and to Odessa. Despite the possibility of being promoted to officer, Böll decided against it. While tempted by the advantages he felt it would be a betrayal, he did not want to join the 'caste' of the officers.¹² From March 1944 he was at various places on German territory until he was taken prisoner of war in April 1945. Following his release from an American prisoner-of-war camp in September 1945, he worked in his brother's carpentry shop, on building sites and in administrative jobs. From 1948 onwards he tried to make ends meet through his writing and giving private tuition: the family was, however, dependent on the steadier income of Annemarie, who went back to

¹¹ Ibid., p. 24: 'That's where our relationships with Ireland have their roots.' [Da haben auch unsere Beziehungen zu Irland ihre Wurzeln.]

¹² Cf. his letter of 19 July 1942 to his mother from France, in: Heinrich Böll, *Briefe aus dem Krieg 1939-1945*, edited by Jochen Schubert, Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 2001, vol 1, pp. 398-399.

teaching at a secondary school. She was also to be the first reader of all her husband's works, helping with editing and doing most of the translations.

Heinrich Böll's writing career started with the publication of *Der Zug war pünktlich* (*The train was on time*) in 1949, followed in 1950 by a collection of short stories about war experiences, *Wanderer, kommst Du nach Spa ...* (*Stranger, Bear Word to the Spartans we ...*). In 1951 *Wo warst Du, Adam?* (*Where Art Thou, Adam?*) appeared, and Böll received the Gruppe (Group) 47 Prize for his story 'Black Sheep'. In the immediate post-war era Gruppe 47 was an influential association of writers and critics of contemporary German literature who met regularly at the invitation of Hans Werner Richter. The prize was designed to promote new writing and was very prestigious – later prize-winners were Ilse Aichinger (1952), Ingeborg Bachmann (1953) and Günter Grass (1958). For Heinrich Böll it was the long-hoped-for break that allowed him to concentrate on writing full time. Two years later, with his new publisher Kiepenheuer & Witsch, he achieved his first commercial success with *Und sagte kein einziges Wort* (*And never said a word*). This was followed in 1954 by *Haus ohne Hüter* (*Tomorrow and Yesterday*), in 1955 *Das Brot der frühen Jahre* (*The Bread of Those Early Years*), in 1959 *Billard um halbzehn* (*Billiards at Half-past Nine*), in 1963 *Ansichten eines Clowns* (*The Clown*), in 1971 *Gruppenbild mit Dame* (*Group Portrait with Lady*), and in 1974 *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (*The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*) – to name only his most important works. Shortly after his death in 1985, *Frauen vor Flusslandschaft* (*Women in a River Landscape*) was published. His books are generally set around the time of writing, and deal with current social, political, and (in the earlier novels) religious issues: J.H. Reid points out that Böll's 'point of departure was always the particular, the today, even if this meant that his work did not take on the appearance of having been written for eternity – later readers may well be puzzled by allusions to events or people long since forgotten'.¹³ The exception is the *Irish Journal*, published in 1957 – the only one of his works not set in Germany.

Böll also wrote many essays and satires and was increasingly viewed as a moral authority. He was known as 'the good man from Cologne' or 'the moral conscience' of the Federal Republic of Germany. He did not appreciate such labels, maintaining that expressions such as 'the conscience of the nation' were fatal: the real conscience of a nation was to

¹³ Reid, *Heinrich Böll*, p. 8.

be found in its parliament, code of law and judicial system, roles that neither could nor should be replaced by authors.¹⁴

His relationship with Germany became fraught, particularly in the aftermath of an article he published in the context of the debate on terrorism and the general unease in Germany in the early 1970s. While Böll never approved or supported the violent means adopted by the Red Army Faction in their fight against the system and the institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany, he was outspoken against the prejudices of the gutter press. His attempts to break down frontiers and reduce tensions were ignored by the terrorists but led to a smear campaign by the conservative media and political commentators in which Böll was denounced as one of the spiritual fathers of terrorism. Böll's public standing became controversial, his increasingly political engagement, as well as his criticism of the Catholic Church making him the target of numerous conservative critics. However, his fame as a writer continued to grow, both in Germany and abroad, especially after 1972 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. By 1977 over 17 million copies of his books had been printed worldwide; by 1987 this had more than doubled,¹⁵ and today one could estimate at least 36 million.¹⁶ When Heinrich Böll died on 16 July 1985 in Langenbroich (about 55km southwest from Cologne) he had become one of the most important German writers of the 20th century, as demonstrated not only by his Nobel Prize but also by his pre-eminent position among his colleagues in Germany in the decades after the war.

For many people outside his home country he embodied 'the other Germany', one that people could trust again after Fascism. He was seen as someone for whom morality and aesthetics were congruent. This, however, had also its downside in that his writing was often regarded – and dismissed – as political literature. In this respect an examination of the *Irisches Tagebuch* can be particularly enlightening: it can be categorised in a number of ways – as travel literature, personal reflections, a collection of

¹⁴ [Das halte ich für lebensgefährlichen Wahnsinn, das G.d.N ist eigentlich ihr Parlament, ihr Gesetzbuch, ihre Gesetzgebung und ihre Rechtsprechung, das können wir nicht ersetzen und das maßen wir uns auch gar nicht an.] Interview with Hans-Peter Riese, Schriftsteller in dieser Republik. Gespräch über Selbstverständlichkeiten, in: *L'76*, 1977, No. 6. pp. 5-37, 7.

¹⁵ Bernd Balzer, *Heinrich Bölls Werke*, Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1977, p. 16.

¹⁶ Thanks for this information to Markus Schäfer, Böll Foundation, and Iris Brandt, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Cologne, 20 January 2011.

poetic impressions, – but most people would agree that it scores low on political content, both in the German and in the Irish context. Given this example it might become easier to assess his abilities in his other novels, especially today when the immediate political and socio-historical context has changed so greatly. Thus Böll's literary qualities may be rediscovered. The new critical edition of his complete works will help furnish fresh insights into his thought. There is hope that a new generation of literary scholars will be able to work towards a new appreciation of Heinrich Böll and his legacy: this book, dealing with a very specific area of his life and work, hopes to contribute to that understanding.

