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Heinrich Böll-A biographical sketch

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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.