

Creative Influences –
Selected Irish-German Biographies

Joachim Fischer, Gisela Holfter (eds.)

IRISH-GERMAN STUDIES
DEUTSCH-IRISCHE STUDIEN
LÉANN NA GEARMÁINE AGUS NA hÉIREANN

4

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Joachim Fischer
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Irish-German Biographies and Irish-German Studies

Joachim Fischer and Gisela Holfter

This volume represents a less travelled road to the complex history of Irish-German relations. It acknowledges the simple truth that connections between two countries are made first and foremost by people. The present collection outlines the biographies of a number of individuals for whom their encounter with the other culture has been a crucial and seminal event in their professional, artistic or scholarly life and work; in turn they themselves have had a profound impact on the course of Irish-German relations.

When we reflect on biographical links between the two countries in question, some names will immediately spring to mind: German Hibernophiles will think first and foremost of Heinrich Böll, or of the founder of academic Celtic Studies Johann Caspar Zeuss, others again will remember Sligo (or Limerick)-born Dolores Gilbert, alias Lola Montez, whose affair with Ludwig I cost the Bavarian monarch his throne in 1848. In Ireland, those interested in the German dimension of Irish cultural and political history will recall the literary careers of Charles Lever, James Clarence Mangan or Thomas Davis, just to mention three names from the nineteenth century. The approach the editors of this volume have taken was guided by a number of principles. Firstly, the focus was to be on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to provide a less diffuse historical context and allow for a certain degree of cross-referencing. Secondly, it was decided that the emphasis of this volume (the first of what will hopefully develop into a series of Irish-German biographies) was to be on Ireland. The personalities represented in this volume predominantly have made their impact on Irish life; in the case of William T. Mulvany who has been more influential in Germany the sketch pays particular attention to his life in Ireland. Thirdly, our particular interest was in lesser-known figures. Neither John Kelly nor Margaret Leischner will immediately spring to mind when Irish-German connections are discussed, not even to experts in the field. And lastly, from its inception, the project was intended as an interdisciplinary study: it was to include figures from a large variety of fields in order to illustrate the multiplicity of social contexts in which the German dimension has had an impact on Irish life. Some of the literary figures mentioned above were thus excluded on two counts: firstly their biographies are already readily available, and secondly we wanted to put the literary element into its proper perspective. Arguably, it has been those active in other fields who have had the most profound impact on the development of Irish culture, understood in a broad sense. The individuals

represented here are politicians, entrepreneurs, translators, literary figures, musicians, artists, academics. It should also be mentioned that in some cases inclusion was due to the particular personal interest on the part of individual contributors.

The backgrounds of the authors of our biographical sketches are equally varied, which results in noticeably different emphases, interests and approaches. Patricia Conlan's portrait of John Kelly reveals her background as a law lecturer while Rüdiger Imhof's presentation of the German influences on John Banville reflects his background as a professor of Anglo-Irish literature; Catherine Adley is a lecturer in Chemistry while Jason Begley is a professional historian. It is perhaps no coincidence that not a few among our contributors have themselves Irish-German biographies and have spent their academic lives ferrying to and fro between the two countries. These personal experiences were in fact often the origin of their interest in the project and may also have guided their interest in the chosen biographical representation to a significant degree. Rather than attempting to unify their different takes on the figures portrayed here, we have left them to speak for themselves, except for the necessary editorial changes. A certain unevenness detectable in the contributions thus reflects the complexity and multifarious nature of contemporary and historical Irish-German relations.

The biographies illustrate the very significant German dimension within nineteenth and twentieth century Irish society. Quite a few of the figures presented here have had a very significant impact on the course of Irish political and cultural history, though they may not always have been given credit for it. The extraordinary seminal role of Thomas McLaughlin and his brainchild, the Shannon Scheme, in the modernisation of Irish Society is not always acknowledged. Equally one feels the importance of John Kelly in the Irish legal world and his contribution as a politician in the movement towards full membership in the European Union might also be given more prominence. Gareth Cox and Joseph Ryan highlight not only the dominant role Fritz Brase had in Irish musical life in the first two decades of the Irish Free State, they also acknowledge the role he played in improving the image of the Irish army, thereby helping to heal the deep divisions which marred post-Civil War Ireland, a task that proved to be beyond the capabilities of many Irish politicians.

We are reminded that the transfer of knowledge has taken place in both directions. The brief sketch of William T. Mulvany illustrates that Irish entrepreneurs operating beyond Irish shores and beyond the English-speaking area, as we encounter them increasingly frequently in Celtic Tiger and post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, have had their historical predecessors. Given the considerable impact Mulvany had on the course of German industrial development in the