

Interview with René Böll Thursday 4th September 2020 14.00 hrs

Held on Zoom. Audio file downloaded 4th September 2020.

Part 1: First memories Of Achill **0019.30 - 03.37**

Angela: Hi René. I'm Angela Maye-Banbury. I'm an oral historian and the founder of Achill Oral Histories. And I have the great pleasure of meeting today face to face for the first time the artist René Böll, the son of Heinrich Böll. The Böll family are, of course, deeply connected with Achill Island. Today's date is September 4th (2020) and the time is 14.00 hrs GMT. And I'm talking to René from his home in Germany. Good afternoon, René. Thank you for finding time to talk to me today. I wonder if we could just maybe begin by your telling me about your memories of Achill as a boy in the 1950s.

René: When we first came in '55, I was six years old. So my seventh birthday was on Achill. I remember the journey. The journey was quite long. It was three days in those times. We came by ship, by train and by train again. Sleeping in hotels or sleeping on the ship. We came in June, I think June 24th, I'm not sure, we came to Achill. It was in '54, we were in Ireland, he (Heinrich) was invited. We spent about a month in Ireland. We travelled throughout the country. But it wasn't in Achill Island at that time. When he met a journalist in Dublin from the radio station. he told him about Achill Island. He said "This is the right place for you." And it was the right place. We also made a connection to the Bervie Hotel, the Bervie Guest House. And we rented a house from them, they rented us a house in Keel. The house is beside the Beehive.

Angela: What did you think of Achill, René, when you first arrived? You'd travelled from Dublin across Ireland heading west. What did you think of Achill when you first saw the island when you went you the bridge?

René: Oh, I don't remember coming over the bridge coming to Achill but coming to Keel. It was a very different place. Because we'd come from the still quite destroyed city of Cologne, living in a house built in ruins so it was a totally different surrounding. And I was never at the sea, never at the countryside. So it was all totally different.

Angela: An entirely different experience.

René: Yes.

Angela: How often did you come to Achill when you were a child, René?

René: We came from 1955 for about 10 years, 12 years every year. The first years we came over for four months. Later on it was difficult when you were at the higher school, the Gymnasium. But the first time we didn't go to school for four months.

Angela: Oh right. You didn't go to school for four months?

René: My mother was a teacher. My father was (too)

Angela: So you were able to be home schooled.

René: Home schooled, yes.

Angela: That sounds idyllic. So you could have your summers where you weren't attached to a school but you could have your living experience, experiencing travel, experiencing Ireland and particularly Achill.

René: It was very, very nice. It was not strict. It was very good.

03.37 Where the Böll Family Stayed in Achill And Everyday Life

Angela: And where did you stay? You mentioned Keel. Did you always stay in Keel or did you stay elsewhere?

René: We stayed in Keel between 1955 - and '58. And from '59 ongoing, we stayed in Dugort in the Böll Cottage.

Angela: What was your daily routine? How did you spend your time on Achill on an everyday basis?

René: We stayed outside all the time, by the sea. At that time, the people weren't so afraid. We came back hours late and nobody would care about it. Today, it would be very difficult. But at the time, it was easy to go out. My parents knew, they were sure.

Angela: Was there a great sense of freedom doing that time? Is that how you felt during that time?

René: A great sense of freedom, of course. We weren't rich. My father got money from Germany so he didn't need to work when we were in Achill. He didn't need to earn money directly. So we were quite privileged. And Achill was very cheap at that time. Much cheaper than Germany,

Angela: Oh yes. And much cheaper than today as prices have gone up. Achill is so interesting. So much of Achill life was self-sustaining. People grew, as far as they could do, their own crops. There was very little food coming from outside the island. Maybe some. But it was very self-contained in that sense.

René: There were quite a lot of tourists, especially in the '60s. It was quite a busy place with people coming to Achill. I think we were the only foreigners.

Angela: You must have felt like a pioneer. Achill is like a miniature world, I think. It's not even like Ireland necessarily. It has its own distinctive sense of place. It's very international now. You and your family must have been pioneers of international travel because that wasn't very common in those days to have people from Germany or other European countries come to such a remote part of Ireland. That was quite a rare thing that your family did.

René: Because my father wrote about it, so many people, so many Germans, came to Achill because of his writing.

06.15 René Böll Talks About His Experiences In Achill Inspired His Art Work Featuring the Cillíní

Angela: Can I ask you about your art? Because the experiences you had in Achill have clearly been instrumental in supporting your art, particularly around the cillíní where the unbaptised children were buried. Could you maybe just talk to me a little bit about that, René?

René: We were some of the few children, I think - we knew of the cillíní when we were children. So in the early '60s or even later, we saw some new graves there. It was in Dookinella, the only one we knew. Now I know about 25 on Achill and Currane. There are even more. The one in Dookinella was the only one I knew. There is one near Bervie, about 50 metres from Bervie. There are very many in

Achill. I make a search for many years about it, to find some places to speak to people. To get there sometimes, it's difficult. Some are on private ground so they very close, they don't want to touch it. But I make information about it and I make photos, sketches and paintings and poetry about it.

Angela: Your work is stunning. It's very powerful and very captivating work. There's a sense of - as you yourself said in one of your interviews - that it was making the invisible visible. A sensitive subject for people in Ireland, particularly devout Catholics, the sense of having children stranded in Purgatory, neither hell nor heaven with no prospect of getting to heaven was a very distressing thought for many parents and many relatives of those unfortunate children.

René: It was indeed a very sad point for the families. They are not only children. There were seamen and women who died a short time after birth. In the church, they were known as the cillíní also because they weren't (being) buried in the normal graveyard.

Angela: It's a very sensitive theme and may they rest in peace the people who are there. You're continuing your work on the cillíní theme - you want to develop it further?

René: Yes, I want to develop it further. I got funding just yesterday. I would like very much like to go on to the island. I was in Iniskea South. But I'd like to go to Iniskea North. Duvillaun because Duvillaun has a cillín also. Because Duvillaun was empty around 1900. Because on the archaeological map there it says that there was a cillín.

Angela: How interesting? Are there any on Inisboffin, do you know? There's an island called Inisboffin.

René: There is a cillín on Inisboffin. Yes. I was on Clare Island. People have told me there's no cillíní there but I'm not sure about it. I don't think so. One or two on Achillbeg. One I've found but the other one I will look.

Angela: And you've been to Achillbeg?

René: We were there when we were children when people still lived there. It was very strange. It was like medieval. We went with a man from Scotland there, a friend of ours.

Angela: I don't know if it's possible these days to walk across...

René: Yes, it is. I know the island quite well. It's very nice.

Angela: It's very special. Achill is an immensely special place to so many different people on so many different levels: emotional, spiritual, artistically, creatively it speaks to people in a range of different ways. It's not like anywhere else I've ever known in the world.

René: For me also, the same.

Angela: Why do you think Achill is such a special place for creative people, René? What is it about Achill that makes to speak to the creative side of us?

René: I suppose it is the sea and the landscape. It is the combination of the sea, seas, lakes, mountains and sea air. I don't know Ireland so well, I just know Achill, and parts of Kerry and a little bit of Dublin. There are very special remote places on Achill where we have to go along quite a way from the roads. It's lucky. So nobody will be there. No-one is there. On the north side of Croghaun, there are very nice places. For a painter, the light is always changing. The light, the colours are changing. The same lake you saw in green an hour later could be in violet. It could be purple. It could be black.

Angela: As an artist, it must be fantastic to have that changing light, that every changing landscape, constantly (changing) in front of your very eyes.

René: And I think for me, it's very nice as there are no trees. So you are not in the forest. I like it very much.

Angela: Can you tell me about the work you are doing at the moment, your art work?

René: I am working with Chinese ink a lot. I am one of the few painters in Europe painting with Chinese ink. I was invited to a big exhibition in China this year. But of course, because of corona, it wasn't possible. But I will do some classes in Chinese

ink. I am a specialist in pigments. I know a lot about pigments and painting techniques.

Angela: I was just going to ask what sort of brushes you use.

René: Big Chinese brushes I bought in China with Chinese paper. Chinese inks. You need to these materials to paint with.

Angela: Have you been to China much? Have you travelled round China?

René: I've been to China for some weeks in the north, in the Gobi and **Taklamakan** desert. I've had some exhibitions in China and classes also.

Angela: It's a stunning country. I did some teaching in Yangzhou, Hangzhou, Shanghai...

René: It's incredible.

Angela: It's fascinating. Extraordinary country. I've done some teaching in Yangzhou, Shanghai. Very different to Achill (laughs).

René: I was with a Chinese painter - I came to Achill twenty years ago. He was at Knock. He came to the airport at Knock. He was astonished. It was a lot smaller at that time. Today, it's quite big. In the '80s, it was very small. The Chinese painter was fascinated by Achill. He was astonished - in the middle of the bog with nobody there. So he made some paintings there.

Angela: What did you paint, from your experiences in China?

René: I learnt the Chinese painting (inaudible). I don't do calligraphy but I use the techniques of calligraphy. I hope to come to Achill next year to go on with my studio with my work, the studies about the cillíní.

13.45 René Böll Talks About The Work Heinrich Böll Foundation

Angela: Fantastic. I wanted to ask you about the work of the Heinrich Böll Foundation which is obviously a very important not just for the people of Achill but internationally making your father's work speak to a wider audience. How important do you think the work of the Heinrich Böll Foundation is internationally? It has a large international presence.

René: It's a very big foundation. We founded it about 30 years ago, more than 30 years ago - 34, I think. Only with one half time employee. Now there are about 500 with 30 offices all over the world - China, Africa, South America, Brussels, Paris, Moscow, The most important part, I think, is international work, all countries where there are difficulties with democracy and persecution, especially for women. But now they are supporting the Böll Cottage on Achill Island.

Angela: It's a very special spot your family chose to have their location on Achill. It's very popular and very well used - extensively by such a diverse group of people.

René: It was very difficult for us to sell it. But we're not coming so much to Achill.

Angela: Absolutely. And I'm very grateful to John McHugh for putting us in touch. That was very kind of him. I will send him a thank you note.

René: The Böll Foundation is also supporting the literary work of my father. They made a fund available - two employees only working with my father's work. So it's very, very good, important.

Angela: You know, the Böll family have made such an important contribution to culture - in your case with your art and in your father's case, his literature, that it's very important that that's embedded into society for future generations to enjoy and be inspired by - that very, very important. What would you like to see from Achill in the future, René? If you could help shape the Achill of the future, is there anything you would like Achill to (be)?

16.39 On how Achill has changed over the years

René: There are too many holiday homes now in Achill, especially in Dugort. Dugort's changed a lot - and other places, also Keel. Many of the old houses were destroyed - it's a pity. The old village of Dugort is still quite intact. But on the other side - too much. Many, many buildings.

Angela: It really has changed. Only this morning, for our Twitter feed, the Achill Orla Histories Twitter feed, I put together a montage of Achill Bridge in 1887 when it was opened by Michael Davitt, the founder of the Land League. Well, in fact, I got a photograph before the bridge and when the Michael Davitt bridge was opened on this day in 1887 and then again from 1953 so that would have been when your family

first came to Achill and then a more recent one and the bridge how it is today. And yes, you can see the surrounding landscape and even how much of that small spot, how much has changed. They still had Sweeneys in most of the photographs. So that was really good to see that that hadn't changed very much.

René: You can see the changes in Keem Bay. In the 1950s when they were still hunting - the shark fishing - we saw the shark fishing. It was a very remote place. The road was very narrow - it was difficult to go there. Today, it is internationally known - one of the nicest strands in the world. One of the most beautiful places in the world.

Angela: I totally agreed. It's one of the nicest places on the planet. We've been there in storms, in the summer, at the beginning of spring time. It's just stunningly beautiful - the perfect bay, just the way it's situated.

René: Incredible, isn't it?

Angela: It's mesmerising. It's wonderful.

René: The booley village in Keem Bay, when you go to the north. There were round huts, old huts.

Eds (discussion about mountain climbing on Achill)/.

René: My mother broke a leg on Slievemore. We tried to climb it in 1956 but we didn't get to the top. There was a big wide stone and she broke her leg coming down. It was very difficult at that time. Of course, there was no phone.

Angela: How did you get her down safely?

There was a shepherd so he came and helped and he got people to bring her down to Castlebar to the hospital.

Angela: Your poor mother.

René: It was difficult, yes.

Angela: It's a dangerous terrain. Did she recover well?

René: I always go on my own. I know it's dangerous in bog and rain. But I don't bother.

Angela: Yes. It's bene lovely to meet you face to face, René. Thank you so much. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your memories of life in Achill or your relationship with Achill?

René: For us, it was a very free time. People don't remember so much. I remember when. I remember when we were learning to light the fire. It was fuel, like diesel or something. it was just sold in squash bottles. Some things were very, very easy at that time.

Angela: What kind of food did you eat there as a family? Did you eat local produce?

René: We loved the salmon, of course. It was the wild salmon. It was not like the salmon you get today. And sometimes lamb. We were the only people to eat liver.

Angela: It's popular these days so you were a trail blazer then perhaps.

René: Then it was strange - nobody wanted to eat it. We fished a lot.

Angela: You did your own fishing. Did you catch your own salmon?

René: Salmon - no. Mackerel, Pollock and other things.

Angela thanks René again.