



Interviewee: John F Deane, Poet And Founder of Poetry Ireland

Interviewer: Angela Maye-Banbury

Location: Poetry Ireland Dublin

Date: 6th Jan 2020

Running time: 0:06:08.925

Leaving Achill For Mungret College, Limerick; father's love of Russian literature (Gogol) and Heinrich Böll's work; playing Tatars and the Cossacks as a boy.

Angela: And so when did you leave Achill?

John: Well, I left Achill when I was 12 to go to boarding school in Limerick. Mungret College, Limerick which is a Jesuit run place. And my older brother Declan who died 2010 was two years ahead of me. So he had blazed a trail. And he was a very bright intelligent man. I was the wild one. I hated, I disliked, my secondary schooling enormously.

Angela: Yeah. What was it about it that you didn't like?

John: I didn't like being if you like locked up. You came to your four o' clock class, ended, you had to walk around a bit or play a game and then there was study time and all of that stuff. So there was no going out to climb trees. No going out to take your bike out and wander around the island. No freedom. I'd lost every sense of being free to do what I wanted to do. It was also not a great school at that particular time. There were a lot of pretty poor teachers in it. And I did rebel quite quite a lot. Got into a lot of trouble and was punished a good deal physically.

Angela: Oh no - that's terrible.

John: Yes. But it was my own fault. I deserved everything I got. It was kind of deliberate boldness. Just be wild. And my brother got me off any serious punishments. I was threatened with expulsion two or three times. But they told me because my brother Declan, who was actually going to go on to become a Jesuit, that they would overlook all y misdemeanours. So getting out of there was a great relief.

John's father: his father's love of literature ; his father teaching himself German and Russian

Angela: You were very relieved not to be at the school because your freedom had been curtailed having had the childhood that you had where you had this whole paradise, freedom, being able to roam. Yeah. Did you...did you like poetry when you were at school? Was that a recurring thing or?

John. No. Poetry. Reading meant very little to me in those years. We used to get a box of books from the library in Castlebar, I think. A big trunk full of books. And they were delivered by CIE bus. And I think once a month or once every two months this box would change and a new one would come. And I remember often sitting at the front of the stairs going through this big box and picking out stuff. But not a great deal of it held my attention in those times. Any literary sense that came out of those times came out of my father, Lord rest him too, who worked in Achill Sound, in the dole office. And it was just a terrible job for him. He disliked it intensely, in an office all day stamping things and all that. So when we came home, he looked for a bit of wildness and he found it in literature. So he studied German at home. He studied Russian at home with records and so on. Became quite fluent in German and Russian.

Angela: He was self- taught in Russian and German. That's amazing.

John's father and his love of Heinrich Böll's work.

John: Yes. And there were two consequences of that basically from my perspective. Number one was that Heinrich Böll lived two miles away from us. And my father used to get these books from Germany direct from the publisher of Heinrich Böll. So he had read everything that Heinrich Böll had written. So when I came to consciousness better, I said :”Hey Dad, you know, the man's living three miles away. Why don't you go and have a chat with him in the original German? He loved to know that someone is reading him in the original.”

Angela: In German - the language that it was intended to be read in.

John's father and his love of Russian literature, notably Gogol.

John: Yes. So he said “No, no. I'd be too shy to disturb the man. I won't do that.” But it already gave me a sense of who Heinrich Böll was and what he was doing and where he was living and what was going on in his life which mattered much later on when the Heinrich Böll cottage came up for sale if you like. The other consequence was he loved Russian literature so much and the wildness of it.

Angela: Dostoyevsky...

John: Dostoyevsky. But mostly a guy called Gogol and the whole war and battle kind of life between the Tatars and the Cossacks. So, as we grew up, we did not play cowboys and Indians. Quite literally, we were Cossacks and Tatars.

Angela: Ah, that's brilliant (laughs).

John: So I got an insight into Russian literature that way as well. So his, my Dad's dealing with us, he used to tell us stories at night. And these two I remember from Pushkin, with the book in Russian in his hand, just telling us the story in English as he went through that. So he opened my imagination, he opened our imagination for children. Wonderful, he was.

Angela: So the world of fiction through your dad having, you know, taught himself to read Russian and German. That one fragment of fiction can be a lifetime of experience for many people. It opens up this whole realm of thinking and that there is this whole world which is out there which was very, very rich and very textured.

John: Absolutely. Yes. He was an incredible man that way. Good story.

Angela: That's really amazing.

Ends.