These opening lines of T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘Burnt Norton’, the first part of his *Four Quartets*, seem to resonate strongly with Böll’s understanding of time. To use another phrase from the poem, Ireland arguably became Böll’s ‘still point of the turning world’: the centre of a revolving wheel, itself remaining in the same place but of crucial importance as the real source of movement. What Böll seemed to have found in Ireland was freedom from worldly attachments, from Eliot’s (and arguably Böll’s) perspective, a way to give value to human actions in time and thus to redeem time itself. Böll’s use of time in the *Irish Journal* is a very specific one and is central to the book’s unique portrayal of Ireland. One reviewer in Germany, Rolf Becker, repeatedly refers to time as the most important experience for Böll in Ireland, indeed the true essence of the book. He argues that the special relationship to time that Böll finds in Ireland is the very reason why Böll loves the country, namely that it implies a strong humanity, which is not to be found in Germany due to a perceived lack of time there.² This might have been the case, but, as James Reid points out, time plays a key role in all of Böll’s work.³ Reid argues that from Böll’s earliest days he took a passionate interest in everything that was happening

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around him: ‘the contemporary world was the material from which he constructed his novels, stories, plays and radio plays. “I am of my time, passionately of my time.”’ This is reflected in all his novels, and a number of critics have pointed out that – at least following *Wo warst Du, Adam?* (1951) – these are all set in the year of their publication or in the year immediately preceding it. ‘All past is for him present in the present.’ Present time in his novels is recognisable through certain indicators, for example references to current affairs and political discussions.

In Böll’s own comments the concept of ‘Zeitgenossenschaft’ (strictly speaking ‘contemporaneity’, but also translated as ‘contemporary’) is mentioned frequently. This idea is double-edged. Firstly it has consequences for art in general, which is an expression of present time and firmly rooted in it, though some permanency is possible: ‘I am not interested in whether art will last; I believe that art is made by contemporaries for contemporaries; there are unrecognised contemporaries and recognised ones, there is fleeting and there is permanent contemporary.’ Secondly it has implications for the author, who according to Böll is not freefloating but is bound to his surroundings and the experiences of his age group, in Böll’s case a particularly unsettled generation which due to the war has not really grown up:

[...] tied] to time and times, to what a whole generation has experienced, digested, seen and heard, which in autobiographical terms has only rarely been anything like significant enough to be articulated in language; tied to the restlessness and homelessness of a generation which suddenly finds itself transferred into grandparenthood and still has not reached – how do they call it – maturity.

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4 J.H. Reid, *Heinrich Böll*, p. 3.
6 Hoffmann, *Heinrich Böll*, ibid.
If both author and art are dependent on time and contemporaries about whom and for whom the author is writing, obviously there will be a marked change when readership and characters are no longer congruent, as when writing about Ireland. If the war and Hitler were the defining experiences for Böll and his generation, then, as neither had a comparable impact in Ireland, his book about that country is not one where much of Böll’s own background can be the basis, although of course it still plays a role for him as well as for his readers (a critic, who congratulated him after the publication of *Irisches Tagebuch* on leaving the ‘smell of laundries’ behind, received a withering answer in the form of Böll’s essay ‘Zur Verteidigung der Waschküchen’ [‘In Defence of Laundries’]).

Traditionally the defining experience of Ireland had been found in one particular aspect – the history of the English-Irish relationship. Given his emphasis on the contemporary, however, Böll found something else in Ireland; for him the uncharted environment became an opportunity to search, to be open to new things, and arguably also to experiment with the very ingredient that had always played such an important role for his writing – time. Past, present and future took on different meanings and shapes. Böll’s enjoyment in playing with time in the *Irish Journal* is not surpassed in any of his other writing with the exception of his film about Ireland *Children of Eire*. One example is his description of almost illusory punctuality in the train which is precisely on time:

> [...] and the stationmaster smiles into the departing train as if to say: No, no, you’re not dreaming, it’s really true, it’s really four-forty-nine, as my clock up there shows. For the traveler (sic) is sure the train must be late: the train is punctual, but the punctuality seems deceptive; four-forty-nine is too precise a time for it to be correct in these stations. It is not the clock that is wrong, but time, which uses minute hands. (p. 104)

Even as he arrives in Ireland the narrator comes across a one-line aphorism in the *Irish Digest* which indicates the importance of the past in juxtaposition with the present: ‘The cemeteries [...] are full of people the world could not do without’ (p. 10). This expression comes to sum up for him the substance of Ireland, which is presented as a conjunction of opposites: ‘[...] later on it seemed to me a kind of key to this strange

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9 In: Ferdinand Melius (ed.): *Der Schriftsteller Heinrich Böll*, Cologne/Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1959, pp. 33-36. A ‘Waschküche’ was a common feature of houses in Germany, generally a room in the cellar where the laundry was done, the term ‘sculleries’ might come closest as ‘laundries’ conjure a less domestic setting.
mixture of passion and equability, to that temperamental weariness, that indifference coupled with fanaticism’ (p. 10).

On several occasions past and present are mixed up, indistinguishable, almost reversed, as in a passage in ‘Limerick in the Morning’ from the first part of chapter 7, ‘Portrait of an Irish Town’:

Moss shimmered green on ancient walls from the eighth, ninth, and all the subsequent centuries, and the walls of the twentieth century were hardly distinguishable from those of the eighth – they too were moss-covered, they too ruined … (p. 43)

This corresponds to a passage reinforcing the image of dark ruins and poverty, in the second part of the chapter, ‘Limerick in the Evening’:

King John’s Castle reared grimly out of the darkness, a tourist attraction hemmed in by tenements from the twenties, and the tenements of the twentieth century looked more dilapidated than King John’s Castle of the thirteenth … (p. 50)

Further examples can be found in other chapters: in ‘A Small Contribution to Occidental Mythology’, ‘the walls from the twentieth century are indistinguishable from those of the sixth century’ (p. 98) and, a little earlier, when Böll describes the eighty-eight year old man on Hare Island as ‘born before Rumania became what it has for years no longer been’ and as a contemporary of Sun Yat-sen and Busoni, the narrator adds: ‘all this merely to catch him in the frail net of time’. By characterizing time as a net, and a frail one at that, Böll emphasizes the arbitrary nature of history, in which some events or people are ‘caught’ and remembered. The image could be of a fishing net or perhaps a climbing net, with knots connecting apparently unrelated figures such as the man on Hare Island, the Chinese revolutionary and the Italian composer, and offering a structure for referral and remembrance.

While in a number of chapters time plays a significant role and takes on all kinds of shapes and forms (notably in ‘Gazing into the Fire’ where we hear about time embodied in cigarettes, leading to ‘chopped-up time’ being thrown away, p. 82) Böll devotes one chapter expressly to the subject (‘When God Made Time …’), where he ponders the links between time, punctuality and humanity:

The man who has no time is a monster, a fiend: he steals time from somewhere, secretes it. (How much time must have been wasted, how
much must have been stolen, to make the unjustly famed military punctuality so proverbial: billions of stolen hours of time are the price for this prodigal kind of punctuality, not to mention the monsters of our day who have no time! They always seem to me like people with not enough skin …) (p. 54)\(^{10}\)

Here Böll combines a ‘medieval’ understanding of time (his description of time in Ireland was in fact used by a historian to emphasise the similarity of his understanding with that prevailing in the Middle Ages)\(^{11}\) with a striking criticism of military order, probably with reference to noted Prussian virtues. It is ironic in this context that one of the many memories people in Achill have of Böll and his family is their punctual arrival at Mass on Sunday: ‘You wouldn’t need an alarm clock, you’d know the time when you saw the Bölls.’\(^{12}\)

The critical view of strict time-keeping resurfaces in the chapter ‘When Seamus Wants a Drink’ where it is connected to alcoholism. There the regulations force Seamus to cycle for miles on a Sunday, as a traveller who is at least three miles from his own village may not be refused a drink. But worse, the strict adherence to closing time brings an ‘influx of all those who are not drunkards but who have suddenly realized the pub is closing soon and they haven’t done what they possibly wouldn’t feel in the least like doing if it were not for this insane law: they haven’t got drunk yet’ (p. 88). It takes the tourists in the summertime to ‘liberalize hard-and-fast time’ – then ‘time stands still, and rivers of dark beer flow through the

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\(^{10}\) A theological study by Hans Willy Hohn on time in the Middle Ages echoes Böll’s comments and argues that time is not owned by man but by God who gave each creature ‘his’ time. If time is therefore a God-given substance of nature and of man then it is not only meaningless to measure the time of an object – for example with a clock, but it is a sin not to use it to God’s given purpose, and even worse, to use the time of others for that. This interpretation means, according to Hohn, that time cannot be ‘disposed of’ as that would require time to pass neutrally, unchanged by God or nature. See Hans Willy Hohn, Zyklizität und Heilsgeschichte - Religiöse Zeiterfahrung des europäischen Mittelalters, in: Rainer Zoll (ed.), Zerstörung und Wiederaneignung von Zeit, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1988, pp. 120-142, 132.

\(^{11}\) See Anton Gurjewitsch, Das Weltbild des mittelalterlichen Menschen (Munich: C.H. Beck 1980, p. 171), who argues that the medieval view of time was of slowly moving, unhurried, enduring time which was not saved. He then quotes Böll’s comment on time in Ireland as characteristic of that medieval understanding of time: “When God made time, the Irish say, he made enough of it.”

\(^{12}\) Conversation with Mary Colohan, Achill, 28 August 2002.
whole summer, day and night, while the police sleep the sleep of the just’ (p. 40).

The special role played by time is also notable in differentiation between past, present and future. Only for very few, such as Siobhan in ‘The Ninth Child of Mrs D.’, is the future secured; for most it is ‘farewell and tears’. As a result no-one gives it any thought; it is negligible, ‘for here the present counts for more than the future’ (p. 96). Concern about what is to come is explicitly banished – ‘I shouldn’t worry’.\(^{13}\) The result is ‘improvisation instead of planning’ (an approach generally favoured by Böll, as for example when he writes in chapter 4 of the train ride on credit), but the weighty present will be ‘balanced with tears’ when it comes to emigration (p. 96).

Böll hardly touches on the Irish past or English rule in Ireland, topics intrinsically combined and dwelt on at length by all other German writers about Ireland in Böll’s time. A. E. Johann repeatedly talks about being taken aback when faced with the hatred towards Cromwell: ‘his harsh deeds are still alive and present as if they had been committed only yesterday [...] In Ireland people hardly seem to know the difference between past and present.’\(^{14}\) Enno Stephan proclaims that it is impossible to understand Ireland if one does not take into account the terrible past – Cromwell, William of Orange and the famine\(^{15}\) – and Peter Grubbe looks at old castles and notes:

In France, in Germany, in Spain ruined castles and their stories belong to the past. They have turned into history, have become memories. The wounds inflicted in their cause have long since scarred over. Here in Ireland they seem to bleed still. Here the ghosts of the slain seem even today to have found no rest. An invisible shadow lies over the rich, fertile green of the meadows and the pastures. A hidden sadness, a deep melancholy.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{13}\) For example Irish Journal, pp. 27 and 110.


\(^{15}\) Enno Stephan, Eins Dritter Dublin, in: Der Fortschnitt No. 33, p. 3 (part 1); 21 August 1953, in: Der Fortschnitt, No. 34, p. 5 (part 2); 28 August 1953, in: Der Fortschnitt, No. 35, p. 5 (part 3); 4 September 1953, in: Der Fortschnitt, No. 36, p. 5 (part 4); 10 September 1953, in: Der Fortschnitt, No. 37, p. 5 (part 5) and 18 September 1953, in: Der Fortschnitt, No. 38, p. 5 (part 6), here second part.

\(^{16}\) Peter Grubbe, *Die Insel der Elfen, Esel und Rebellen* (*The Isle of Elves, Donkeys and Rebels*), Wiesbaden: Brockhaus 1954, p. 81, translation Alison McConnell,
This view was not restricted to German writers of that time (or before: one of the most interesting of all German descriptions of Ireland is Richard Bermann’s *Irland*, published in 1914, and delving heavily into the Irish past and its lingering shadows in the present). H.V. Morton, for example, wrote in 1930 along similar lines:

> Even educated Irishmen will talk about Cromwell’s campaign as though it was the work of the present British Government. A wrong has never died in Ireland. Every injustice inflicted on Ireland since the time of Strongbow is as real as the last year’s budget.  

In comparison with these elaborate and extensive reviews of the past, Böll is tight-lipped on the ‘official’ past at least. He does mention a number of decisive historical events: the Famine, the founding of the Free State (which according to Böll took place in 1923 (p. 111), a year later than was actually the case), and the signing of the Treaty in Limerick of 1691 when freedom of religious expression was promised, but later revoked by the English parliament, resulting in Limerick being called the city ‘of the broken treaty’ (p. 44). Any background to that information is, however, missing and few German readers – at least until the start of ‘the Troubles’ – would have been in a position to realise the importance of the religious question in Ireland. Another scene is even more illuminating – a reference to the monument of an Irish patriot executed in 1799. The family is asked whether they have seen it and answer, ‘yes, we’ve seen it’ (p. 36), without any further curiosity displayed or information given – who was executed, why and by whom seems of no interest or relevance.

Although the general theme of history being preserved is strongly present in Böll’s *Irish Journal*, it is significant that this is not on the level of official history but very much in the vein of storytelling and oral history among the ‘ordinary’ people. In the chapter ‘A Small Contribution to Occidental Mythology’, he notes that ‘in spite of radio and newspaper, news from the lips of the man you shook hands with, the man you had tea with, that’s the kind that counts’ (p. 98). Böll’s first person narrator becomes

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18 Far more explicit is Max Senger’s blow-by-blow account of events in 1690-91 in *Irland, die seltsame Insel*, Zurich: Büchergilde Gutenberg 1956, pp. 85f.
19 See also Thorsten Päplow’s “Faltenwürfe” in Heinrich Böll’s ‘Irisches Tagebuch’, Munich: Judicium 2008, on Böll’s focus on the individual as a form of literary history telling, especially pp. 149-153.
part of the ongoing ‘mythologisation’; through a misunderstanding he becomes part of a heroic war story, with the probable result that tales will be told in ‘fifty or a hundred years from now, of Rommel, of war, and of Henry’ (p. 101).

Böll’s description of Ireland can therefore appear in stark contrast to other German travelogues of his time and before, where Ireland’s history tended to be among the main topics, intertwined more often than not with a lengthy catalogue of English sins against her neighbour. If one goes back further, to German publications on Ireland in the eighteenth and (early) nineteenth centuries, England was as it were the filter through which Ireland was seen from Germany; the pathway to Ireland went not only geographically but also culturally through England. In both world wars, especially the first, Ireland had been a convenient subject of propaganda, giving rise to publications such as ‘Germany’s Victory, Ireland’s Hope’ (1915). Böll may have wanted to avoid this blatantly political perspective, perhaps because he did not want readers to think that there might be any equivalence between England’s treatment of Ireland and what Germany had unleashed not twenty years earlier, of which Böll reminds his German readership with references to Stalingrad and ‘millions murdered and killed’ (p. 101). The one time some of the key references to English-Irish history appear, it is tellingly in a juxtaposed presentation when a lone Englishman (interestingly also called Henry) appears almost as a victim, as someone who suffers the fate of the exempted individual from a despised group:

‘I don’t know’, he said, ‘why I come back to Ireland every year; I don’t know how often I’ve told them I never liked either Pembroke or Cromwell, and that I’m not related to them, that I’m nothing but a London office worker who has a fortnight’s holiday and wants to go the seaside. I don’t know why I come all this way from London every year to be told how nice I am but how terrible the English are; it’s so exhausting. (p. 39)

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20 Doris Dohmen even argues that the German image of Ireland is always tied into the context of German-English relations and that the resulting polarisation is the defining focus for all German literature on Ireland (cf. Das deutsche Irlandbild, p. 189), arguably disregarding not only Böll’s book but also a lot ‘German-Irish’ literature in his wake.

21 Hans Rost, Deutschlands Sieg – Irlands Hoffnung. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagshausanstalt 1915. See also Hans A. Walter, Irland und wir, Deutschlands Kampf – Irlands Hoffnung [Ireland and us, Germany’s fight – Ireland’s hope], Munich: A. Hertz 1915.
But it is only in this context of the individual Englishman who clearly cannot be blamed for long past injustices and cruelty, that Cromwell is mentioned – and crucially in the same context as complete misconceptions about Hitler – thereby implicitly making clear that from a German perspective there is enough to be dealt with in its own history and no referring back to or indeed blaming England for any atrocities.

What Böll achieved by essentially leaving England out was that there was suddenly, to all intents and purposes for the first time in popular awareness of his time, a direct route from Germany to Ireland. Ireland became attractive and interesting in her own right.

But there was another result of Böll's preference for the present over the past as one topic is left out that could hardly be explained without going into history: the ensuing casualty was Northern Ireland. There is no reference whatsoever in Böll’s *Irish Journal* to the difficult political situation in the North. This is in fundamental contrast to all other German-language books on Ireland at the time. Even long before the Troubles started, other visitors (including the Swiss writer Max Senger) paid at least fleeting attention to Northern Ireland. A. E. Johann mentions Northern Ireland at first only to exclude it explicitly on the grounds that his book is not intended to be political, but even then he nevertheless still refers to it a number of times, while Peter Grubbe devotes more than a quarter of his book to the question. If Böll indeed intended, as is sometimes claimed, to create a utopia based on Ireland for Germany (a country also split at the time and experiencing different political systems) then arguably what he did was to create one of the island of Ireland for Ireland as well.