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Christabel Bielenberg. © Eva Maria Elfes

# Author, Activist and Anglo-Irish Émigré: The Life and Work of Christabel Bielenberg (1909-2003)

Claire O'Reilly

## Christabel Bielenberg: An Introduction

In any overview chapter on Christabel Bielenberg there are at least two thematic strands that must feature: Bielenberg's literary work, and her non-literary work. In both cases issues of identity and belonging, as well as the question of legacy will be raised as these matters are relevant and important in the formation of an overall picture of Christabel Bielenberg<sup>1</sup>. Considering the academic quality of Bielenberg's work and the never-waning general interest in the subject of Nazi Germany and World War II, it is surprising that her autobiographical novels have received comparatively little scholarly attention with corresponding few publications analysing her work. Elaine Martin (Professor Emerita, University of Alabama) conducted an interview with Christabel Bielenberg in 1988 which has remained unpublished; however the interview did form part of her discussion of women in the Third Reich in two subsequent publications<sup>2</sup>. Significant progress on numerous aspects of her work, including an analysis of World War II as remembered and portrayed by Bielenberg in her novels, can be traced in a recent doctoral dissertation by Dorothea Depner<sup>3</sup>. New data from the Bielenberg literary estate, details of which are discussed below, was accessed for the first time by Depner and this

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- 1 I would like to thank Mr Nicholas Bielenberg, son of Christabel and Peter Bielenberg, for his considerable time in reading a draft of this chapter and for providing valuable insights on details entailed in this chapter.
  - 2 Elaine Martin, *Autobiography, Gender, and the Third Reich*: Eva Zeller, Carola Stern, and Christabel Bielenberg. In: Elaine Martin (ed.), *Gender, Patriarchy and Fascism in the Third Reich – the Response of Women Writers*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993, pp. 169-200 and Elaine Martin, *Memory, History, and Autobiography: Women Re-Vision the Nazi Era*. In: Gerald Gillespie et al. (eds.), *ICLA Tokyo Conference 1991: The Force of Vision II. Visions in History – Visions of the Other*. International Comparative Literature Association, 1995, pp. 117-124.
  - 3 See Dorothea Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War in the Works of Christabel Bielenberg, Francis Stuart and Hugo Hamilton*. A thesis submitted to the School of English, University of Dublin, Trinity College, for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 2013.

is included in the most recent omnibus edition *The Past is Myself and The Road Ahead* published by Corgi in 2011.<sup>4</sup>

We first turn our attention to questions of identity and belonging, as reading the subtitle of Bielenberg's autobiography, *The Past is Myself: An Englishwoman's Life in Berlin under the Nazis*, one may ask why and how a chapter on an Englishwoman is included in a book on Irish-German biographies. In an interview she comments later, "I was English, I was in Germany, and I was going to witness the end of the war in Germany as an Englishwoman" and her realisation that she was, as a result, "living history"<sup>5</sup>. These words provide some useful cues to Christabel Bielenberg's life and biography.

Christabel Bielenberg was born in Hertfordshire, England in 1909, daughter of Percy Burton and Christabel Rose (née Harmsworth). Both her parents' families were Irish born<sup>6</sup>. She came to live in Ireland in 1948, where she stayed until her death at the age of ninety-four in 2003. Against this background, it is perhaps unsurprising that she refers to herself as an Irishwoman at times.<sup>7</sup> A letter to her parents in England in July 1945, two months after the

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4 A number of objections and threatened legal cases after the first edition of *The Past is Myself* in 1968 caused the then publisher Chatto & Windus to withdraw all copies of *The Past is Myself* from circulation after 1969. The book was republished with Ward River Press in 1982 and by Corgi in 1984. The objections and correspondence with the persons involved (Wilhelm or William Roloff, the first husband of Lexi, née von Alvensleben, and Ursula Terwiel, the only surviving member of the Terwiel family) can be read in detail in Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, pp. 124ff.).

5 Martin (1988: 5), qtd. in: Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 115.

6 The Burtons were a long established Irish Protestant family dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1610), when they came from Shropshire, England and first settled in Co. Clare. Many generations later William George Burton settled in Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow, where he was manager of Munster Bank. Here he and his wife raised their children, including Percy Burton who was born in 1879 (father of Christabel Bielenberg). Her mother's family originated from the South of England, though Christabel's grandfather Alfred Harmsworth met her grandmother Geraldine Maffet from Co. Down whilst teaching in Dublin. After the birth of their first son, Alfred Jnr Harmsworth, the family moved from Dublin to London where a further ten children were born, including Christabel Rose Harmsworth, Christabel's mother (correspondence with Nicholas Bielenberg, May 2014).

7 Her Irish identity is often deemed the reason she acts in certain ways in her writing. For example, in her description of entering Tuttlingen, a town in Baden-Württemberg in 1944, she draws attention to German women's ability to sew and darn and mend clothes, commenting that her inability to share these skills was due to the fact that she "could never quite rid [herself] of a seemingly inborn Irish inclination to look quite fatalistically on holes in clothes", leading her to "throw them out" (Christabel Bielenberg, *The Past is Myself: An Englishwoman's Life in Berlin under the Nazis*.

downfall of National Socialism, reads: “Food is slightly difficult, but I’m not an *Irishwoman* for nothing, & the last six years have given me good practice!”<sup>8</sup> In her work, hetero-perceptions of her national identity are both Irish and English. A fitting example of this can be seen in a conversation with resistance fighter Adam von Trott zu Solz, where at his home in Berlin in Spring 1944, von Trott comments, “I wish I were as fascinating as you make me sound [...]. But, bother you, you are Irish as well as English” (PM 143). Depner speaks of an “ambivalent self-image”<sup>9</sup>, Bielenberg herself, however, seemed to perceive little divisiveness in relation to her national identities<sup>10</sup>.

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London: Corgi Books, 1984, p. 191. In the following abbreviated as PM). At other intervals she attributes an innate ability to analyse charm to the fact that she was “more than half Irish” (PM 100).

8 Christabel Bielenberg, *The Past is Myself and The Road Ahead*. London: Corgi Books, 2011, p. 518 (italics added). In the following abbreviated as PMRA.

9 Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 97.

10 Of the interviews that Bielenberg did give, Elaine Martin was the first to position the work and Bielenberg’s experiences within the genre of womens’ autobiographical writing of the National Socialist era. In discussion of Eva Zeller, Carola Stern and Christabel Bielenberg, Martin found that Bielenberg was the only one of the three authors not in search of her identity in any way, indicating that the author had a robust sense of identity despite shifting circumstances and the dual nature of her identity as both a German-, and an Englishwoman at times (see Martin, *Autobiography, Gender and the Third Reich*, p. 175; Martin, *Memory, History, and Autobiography*, p. 122). The translation into German of *The Past is Myself* emphasises the telling of an Englishwoman’s story in WWII Germany: “*Als ich Deutsche war, 1934-45: Eine Engländerin erzählt*”. In interview with Martin, she emphasised that though she “felt sympathetically close to Germans”, she “never felt German” (Martin, *Autobiography, Gender and the Third Reich*, p. 179). Dorothea Depner’s erudite study criticises Bielenberg’s perceived oscillation between being an outsider, a stranger, or German at times, and her need to move back to the security of her British identity. Her critique appears to be directed at Bielenberg operationalizing her national identity for her own purposes, and echoes Martin’s views that Bielenberg used memory to “shape a past that emphasises the ways in which she was an outsider rather than the ways in which she shared the fate – an responsibilities – of her German friends and neighbours” (Martin, *Memory, History, and Autobiography*, p. 122). At the same time, the question remains why it is not possible to feel differently about one’s national identity before, during or after an event such as war, or even if most of us consciously reflect upon our national identity and how we would react in such perilous circumstances. All the while despite changing passports, her heart, which often steers questions on identity, seemed to belong to one country: “German nationalism, I had learned, was a tender plant, continuously having to be nourished by success. It had nothing in common with the warm, comfortable, take-it-for-granted feeling I had for my own country” (PM 244, italics added). Depner emphasises how markers of national identity provided Bielenberg with a sense of security in an otherwise hostile environment: “[Bielenberg’s] recourse to cultural memory’s storehouse for stereotypical images of self and

She adopted German citizenship in September 1934 (PM 16; for twelve years until October 1946)<sup>11</sup> and Irish citizenship after 1949 when she and her husband, Peter Bielenberg, acquired Munny House in County Carlow. Thus, from these examples alone, one can see that her identity based on nationality was transient and fluid depending on external circumstances. While there is no apparent contradiction evident in the author's writings concerning her self-appraisal of her identity during World War Two Germany, Depner finds an "ongoing negotiation of her self-image", with Bielenberg at times asserting a boundary – to the guilty Germans – and at other times affirming her belonging based on nationality<sup>12</sup>. Arnds, on the other hand, finds that the author's identity "loses its national solidity and opens those boundaries that are determined by one's own culture" as she moves across identity fronts, from British to Irish to German at times.<sup>13</sup>

#### Events Leading up to her Life in World War II Germany, and thereafter to Ireland

Christabel Bielenberg was born, along with her other siblings, "with a silver spoon in her mouth"<sup>14</sup>. At the age of 23 she met Peter Bielenberg while studying singing in Hamburg<sup>15</sup>. Following a two-year courtship they married in

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other not only participates in perpetuating literary constructs of national character [...], but more importantly, it also reflects the persistence of a deep-felt human need to imagine a home for the self among a group that provides a setting of security and intimacy" (Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 144).

- 11 In recounting her first meeting with Missie Vassiltchikov she notes that she was "German by marriage" denoting her demarcation of her new identity and the reason therefore (George Vassiltchikov (ed.), *The Berlin Diaries 1940-1945 of Marie 'Missie' Vassiltchikov*. London: The Folio Society, 1991, p. vi).
- 12 Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 141.
- 13 Examples here with Arnds' words: "She gives up her British passport, hides behind her Irish heritage so as not to reveal herself as an enemy, and, although she never entirely becomes German, she becomes estranged to some of the politics of her own country" (Peter Arnds, Book Review: Christabel Bielenberg. When I was a German. An Englishwoman in Nazi Germany. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. In: *Post-Identity* 3/1 (Summer 2001), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/postid/pid9999.0003.109/--book-review?rgn=main;view=fulltext> (accessed 23 April 2014).
- 14 Correspondence with Nicholas Bielenberg, May 2014. Christabel's mother's family, the Harmsworths, had owned a number of national newspapers and large houses in London as well as country estates (PMRA 491).
- 15 Her son, Nicholas Bielenberg notes: "[Singer] John McCormack apparently thought that my mother had the makings of a great operatic soprano, and prompted her to go to the highest regarded singing teacher in Hamburg, Frau Schadow, under whom the celebrated soprano Elizabeth Schumann had also studied. It was there that my mother

London, against both parents' wishes<sup>16</sup>, on September 29, 1934. The early years of her marriage took place against the backdrop of rising National Socialism and Hitler's coming to power in January 1933. It is the story of resistance to National Socialism and to Hitler which runs throughout her work, particularly in the case of Peter and Christabel's friendship to Adam von Trott zu Solz and his wife, Clarita. Clarita recalls the beginning of their friendship when only a few weeks after Christabel and Peter's marriage "they made the acquaintance of Adam von Trott in the house of Ingrid Warburg, on the Koesterberg in Hamburg-Blankenese. It was to be a fateful encounter. For the first time Peter found a friend who was eager to be politically effective"<sup>17</sup>. On the cusp of World War II, when the couple had decided to leave Germany to move to England or Ireland, it was von Trott who persuaded Peter to stay to help in the resistance effort. The Bielenbergs acquired a house in Dahlem, Berlin, and Peter went to work at the Ministry of Industry and Commerce<sup>18</sup>. In Bielenberg's *The Past is Myself* and *The Road Ahead*, the author delivers a lucid and intimate account of the rise and fall of National Socialism on them as a British-German couple, raising three children during the Nazi regime, and how National Socialism affected everyday Germans around them. The excerpts concerning Herr Neisse and Hans below serve as two examples of how and why individuals fell prey to the deceptive philosophy behind what was National Socialism.

Surviving the war, in May 1946 Bielenberg returned to Germany from England (having left Germany for England in August 1945) to overcome being separated from Peter, who was only allowed to leave Germany in October that year<sup>19</sup>, where she began working as a special correspondent for the *Observer*. This was short-lived, however; the couple moved to Ireland in late 1948, purchased Munny House and started farming the land on the Carlow-Wicklow border in 1949.

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met my father Peter Bielenberg resulting in their marriage in 1934 [...]” (Personal correspondence, May 2014).

- 16 “When they got engaged it was met with disapproval by their respective parents. In my mother's case this was because she was marrying a German, and my grandfather's previous involvement in World War I. In my father's case because he was regarded by his father as being too young and did not have any financial means. However, in spite of this they got married in 1934 in a registry office in London, which was somewhat unusual in the case of their respective backgrounds” – Nicholas Bielenberg reflects on his parents' decision to wed (Personal correspondence, May 2014).
- 17 Imperial War Museum, *Peter Bielenberg*, published Interview. London 1995, p. 80f.
- 18 Peter Bielenberg, Obituary. *The Telegraph*, 14 April 2001.
- 19 Despite Peter's involvement against the National Socialist regime, he still had to be cleared by the British occupying forces as being a non-Nazi.

## Christabel Bielenberg's Literary Work

### *The Past is Myself*

*The Past is Myself*, first published by Chatto & Windus in 1968, was written from the author's home in Ireland, but based on her original diary entries during the war years in Germany. The title of the book was taken from a quotation by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Essays of the Road*<sup>20</sup> found in her late mother's Victorian birthday book under the decisive date of July 20:<sup>21</sup> "The future is nothing, but *The Past is Myself*, my own history, the seed of my present thoughts, the mould of my present disposition".<sup>22</sup> As Depner points out "The calm acceptance [by this time] of, and emphasis on, continuity between former and present self, and the exclusion of future personal developments are striking, although not altogether surprising at the stage in life Christabel Bielenberg had reached in 1967, the time she settled on this title [...]"<sup>23</sup>.

Located in memoir literature and historical accounts of the war, the book commences with the declaration of the British government being "at war with Germany" (PM 13) and then steps back into the period 1932-1934 (Part I) and 1935-1939 (Part II). Part I is situated in Berlin and is divided into seven chapters, or "snapshots", of her life at the time<sup>24</sup>. Part II, comprising sixteen chapters, traces the impact of the devastation of World War II on the couple and their children as Christabel and her boys leave Berlin for the less dangerous location of Rohrbach in the Black Forest, and something of the nature of her life there can be found in the following:

I knew that I should have been glad of the peaceful nights, the good simple food, of the knowledge that Peter was not in Russia, and that my children were safe and healthy in a quiet backwater. I had little excuse, except perhaps that I was mentally a lot alone, that I had had no message from England for nearly three years, and that since one of the trunks which had gone astray [on their train journey from Berlin] had been full of books I had nothing to read but our little local newspaper, or, if we ran out of lavatory paper – the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Party rag. Day after day the two-inch headlines recorded the dozens of 'air pirates' shot down over the Reich territory, the retreats which were vaunted as victories, and the medals for valour which were becoming daily more numerous, monthly more resplendent [...]. (PM 134f.)

20 The full title reads: "Notes and Essays, Chiefly of the Road" and is taken from *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* (1896). Edinburgh Edition. London: Chatto & Windus, p. 90. Digital version available under <https://archive.org/stream/worksof-robertlvol21stev#page/n7/mode/2up> (accessed 31 August 2014).

21 See above and *The Road Ahead*, 1992, p. 210f.

22 R.L. Stevenson, *Essays of the Road*, and Epigraph to *The Past is Myself*.

23 Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 117.

24 Martin, *Memory, History, and Autobiography*, p. 122.



Though necessarily wary of Germans who became Nazi-members and activists, Bielenberg shows empathy and compassion at times in her writing. This can be seen firstly in the case of her gardener and *Blockwart*, or party representative, Herr Neisse. In recounting his financial losses and poor peasant background, she understands, employing ironic humour, how his circumstances made him susceptible to the message of National Socialism.

Although he did not mention it, I imagined that he had also a man-sized chip on his shoulder and a weather eye open for some sort of 'ism. Communism did not appeal to him; he had always worked for the well-to-do, amongst their plants and trees. In some small way he was a creator; he did not want to bust the whole place up, he just wanted to belong somewhere. Nationalism? That was for the gentry, the ones who still had something to lose. National Socialism, that was more like it; he started attending Party meetings. (PM 54f.)<sup>25</sup>

An encounter with “Hans”<sup>26</sup>, son of a former landlord in Berlin and another supporter of National Socialism, also elicits her empathy concerning his blind support and acceptance of the National Socialist philosophy, as

Hans was by nature a gentle fellow, but sometimes when he really got going he rose to his feet, his face flushed, and struck poses very like those in the postcards [Hitler in many different postures]. I never asked him whether he practised in front of a mirror, because I liked him and he was too honest and too earnest to be teased (PM 21).

The book culminates with Christabel Bielenberg bravely facing the Gestapo in an interrogation situation to make a case for the release of Peter from Ravensbrück concentration camp, and to convince them that her husband had not been involved in the plot<sup>27</sup>. Her intervention had the effect that Peter was released to an army punishment camp shortly afterwards, but managed to escape and hide in the vicinity of Rohrbach village.

Using humour together with wry understatement – although criticised for making horrendous events easily acceptable<sup>28</sup> – serve to build a bridge in

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25 Returning to Berlin after the war in 1946, she looked for Herr Neisse and found that “my hunch had been a right one. He had done us no harm, passed on no incriminating titbits, such as other zealous informers had thought fit to do” (PM 60).

26 Depner argues that the omission of Hans’ surname is a coping mechanism which served to distance her and protect her [Bielenberg] from the reality that Hans had later committed suicide after Germany’s defeat. To what extent this may have been a “misremembering” (Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 127) or a desire to protect the family from dispersion of this fact in the public domain is difficult however to ascertain.

27 A detailed account of her husband’s arrest, interrogation and torture by the Gestapo can be read in Peter Bielenberg (in interview with the Imperial War Museum, London 1995, pp. 68-76).

28 See Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 131.

translating the most heinous acts perpetrated by the Nazis and make the incomprehensible comprehensible to a general readership. Moreover, Bielenberg's lack of emotional engagement must be seen as a positive at times, enabling her to think clearly, seen here upon hearing of her husband's arrest:

September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1944: The news I dreaded has come [...] There is a stage beyond pain just as in physical pain there is a borderline beyond which one becomes unconscious. So there is a boundary to psychical [sic] pain, beyond which a sort of numbness sets in. [...] I have decided to leave for Berlin tomorrow. The Americans are coming daily nearer and the journey is long and dangerous and perhaps I shall be cut off from the children but I must go. The last time was in G. [Graudenz] Peter showed me those Gestapo brutes and said they were after his blood. I know they've got him. There is no thinking what they may do to him. I think I will go first to Munich and see Seiler. And then up to Berlin. Let's hope no alarms. There is of course a chance that I'll be arrested too. I have written to Mummy and Pom in case. I want the children to go to England if anything happens to us. I have decided that should I find out that they have definite proof on Peter then I must try to bribe Lange. If he forgets P's *Akte* [file], then I will see if I can help him after the war. I think the end must be near now, and he must know it too. There is of course the chance that he will arrest me too, but I must risk that. Sometimes I find myself wishing I didn't know so much. I have no idea how I will react to third degree or those injections. The best thing I think is to read and soak myself in 'Völkischer Beobachter' [official newspaper of the NSDAP] until I talk N. Socialism in my sleep (PMRA 501f.).

The decision to act on behalf of her husband's life, although the danger to her own life is a very real possibility, shows tenacity of spirit and resolve, and the ability to vocalise the impact of these events on her emotionally is noteworthy.<sup>29</sup> As Guilfoyle finds: "[...] Christabel's strength of character, at the most trying time in her life on her trip to Rohrbach [sic] to face her husband's captors and plead for his freedom, her intelligence and tact came into play. She proved herself to be very elusive and resourceful"<sup>30</sup>. Later, Peter admits that this visit to Ravensbrück concentration camp and her interrogation was probably what "tipped the scales" for his release (PM 266).

*The Past is Myself* was adapted for screen portrayal based on a script by Dennis Potter and acted by Liz Hurley with whom Christabel subsequently became good friends. Although the plot is modified in some scenes and thus

29 Returning here to issues of Christabel's national identity, her son Nicholas Bielenberg notes that her Irish roots "would at times be of benefit to her, particularly following my father's arrest, when she no doubt played the Irish card when needed", and she "used the English card in the hope that the influential Harmsworths might help with Kriminalrat Lange to try and get Peter released from the concentration camp" (personal correspondence with Nicholas Bielenberg, May 2014).

30 Laura Guilfoyle, *Female Resistance to Nazi Germany*. Undergraduate Thesis, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, 2013, p. 27.

not true to the original<sup>31</sup>, it does give a tangible insight into the struggles and challenges of Christabel's life in Nazi Germany and the toil the period had on her and her family.

### *The Road Ahead*

The sequel and second autobiographical memoir to *The Past is Myself* was written by Bielenberg in response to numerous letters from readers wishing to establish what her life was like after the war, and was published in 1992 under the title *The Road Ahead* (see book cover, PMRA).<sup>32</sup> Written from her home in Ireland, it covers almost four decades of her life from the liberation of Germany to her seventieth birthday, and many Irish themes emerge in the book's six chapters which chronicle "the family's more peaceful postwar blossoming in Ireland"<sup>33</sup>. Issues of identity and grappling with changing self- and other-images also come to the fore:

In recounting her personal memories within the context of two nations' histories, Bielenberg gives an insight into the difficulties involved in positioning herself in re-

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- 31 A notable example is the scene where Bielenberg feels she must turn away a Jewish couple in search of a safehouse: "'I can't,' I said, and I had to hold on to the railings because the pain in my side had become so intense that I could hardly breathe, 'at least –', did I hope to get rid of that pain by some sort of feeble compromise? 'at least I can't for more than a night, perhaps two' [...] I loathed myself utterly as I went back to the house to fetch the cellar key" (PM 114). The couple did not leave by their own actions as portrayed in the film, pointing to the wish to eliminate any questions of moral guilt or omissions of Christabel's character by Potter.
- 32 *The Road Ahead*. London: Corgi, 1992; in the following abbreviated as RA. Bielenberg estimated that she received approximately four thousand fan letters (cf. Introduction, RA). Dawe recalls the thought-processes leading up to the second memoir from conversations he had with the author at the time: "Christabel had been thinking of following up on the success of the book with a new work which would, in some manner of means, take into account the thousands of letters she had received from all over the world – many of which were from survivors of Hitler's camps, in one of which Peter had himself been incarcerated. But the correspondents also wanted to know what had happened to the various figures she had brought so vividly to life in *The Past is Myself* – her family and friends and the vibrantly drawn community of local people with whom she had lived in Germany: in Berlin and in the Black Forest ("Exchanging Messages: The Literary Legacy of Christabel Bielenberg", p. 86: Lecture delivered at Trinity College Dublin, 30 April 2010. Reprinted with kind permission of Gerald Dawe, Professor of English, School of English, Trinity College Dublin).
- 33 Tonkin Boyd, *The Past is Myself & The Road Ahead*, by Christabel Bielenberg. *The Independent*, 17 February 2012, see: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-past-is-myself--the-road-ahead-by-christabel-bielenberg-6988507.html> (accessed 29 July 2014).

lation to her English roots, her German past and her new Irish home, and in overcoming convenient images of self and other.<sup>34</sup>

And, on reflection of her life on the occasion of her seventieth birthday celebrations, Bielenberg finds that many of national myths about England, Ireland, Germany had exploded behind her [and her husband] (RA 215).

### *The Omnibus Edition*

More recently, in 2011, a 527-page volume comprising both memoirs *The Past is Myself* and *The Road Ahead* was published also by Corgi. Previously unpublished works including two chapters omitted from the original books are also included in this tome, namely 'A Luncheon Party, Summer 1940' omitted from *The Past is Myself*, and another untitled chapter from *The Road Ahead*. 'A Luncheon Party' sheds light on her actions within German resistance circles at the beginning of the war, showing, as Depner argues in the introduction, that "Christabel had played an active part in a daring plan devised by her close friend Adam von Trott zu Solz" (PMRA 480). In the untitled chapter, her relationship to her mother and something of Christabel's childhood and ancestry unfolds, and when her mother passed in 1968 – coincidentally in the year her first memoir was published – sadness prevails: "her dying left an aching void in all our lives" (PMRA 489).

In addition, the omnibus edition includes a number of unseen diary entries from July-September 1944 chronicling the failed attempt on Hitler, and a collection of letters to family and friends in England during the war, and to her husband Peter after the war. The book ends with the news of Peter being granted a visa to come to England from where they plan to apply for Irish visas. The final words herald also a new beginning:

Peter was able to leave Germany a few months later and the Bielenberg family was reunited in England. The stamp in his Military Exit Permit indicates his departure took place on 14th November, 1946, from Flensburg railway station in northern Germany. His destination is entered as Eire (Athy), but a three-month visa for the United Kingdom is stamped on the back of his travel document. The stated object of his journey was simply TO LIVE WITH FAMILY (PMRA 527).

### Christabel Bielenberg's Literary Work and Legacy

Christabel Bielenberg's literary strength lay in her ability to relate well-known events using an interplay of distance with displays of emotion to render difficult and raw situations tangible, while at the same time containing emotional responses to ensure credibility. In addition, the intermittent use of

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34 Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 151.

humour and irony in the most horrendous of situations is characteristic of her writing. This ability to make the horrors of World War II accessible to a general readership has been the rationale behind at least one literary award bestowed on her. As her publishers reflected on the award of The Richard Hillary Memorial Prize for literature to Christabel Bielenberg in 1968:<sup>35</sup>

One of the satisfying things about this award is that although it's a literary prize, it's not a particularly 'literary' book. It's *a very personal book which enables one to understand her and the situation she found herself in during the war in Germany*, and she does it in a completely unaffected manner<sup>36</sup> [italics added].

These comments (italicised above) underline one of the facets of this genre of autobiographical writing, bringing, as Martin argues "a largely unfiltered immediacy of experience and emotion perhaps unusual in war literature"<sup>37</sup>. However, the very nature of the act of remembering and the pain associated with this calls into question the objectiveness regarding the writing and re-writing of history. Hayden White argues that historical narratives contain "an irreducible and inextinguishable element of interpretation" and contests the possibility for establishing objective scientific history in the process<sup>38</sup>. Arnds, on the other hand, argues that this subjectivity renders a more rounded and ultimately more objective account of history<sup>39</sup>. Bearing this in mind, some account must be taken of the fact that Bielenberg primarily wished to chronicle this period of her life for her own family members, and that she was not setting out to write a history book per se. In her own words:

Since the war an unprecedented amount of material has been available to historians and to others, enabling them to assess and also to draw their conclusions about the happenings in Germany during those years. I make no claim to be so equipped, but I have one advantages perhaps over those whose knowledge must [sic] needs depend on documents: I am English; I was German, and above all I was there (PM, Foreword).

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35 Christabel Bielenberg received a prize in honour of Richard Hillary, a British pilot in the Battle of Britain, whom she had previously mentioned in her book *The Road Ahead* (in conversation to Adam von Trott when reading *The Last Enemy* by Hillary, PM 140).

36 Mullane, Dermot, 'Carlow Author wins Literary Prize'. *The Irish Times*, 6 March 1969, p. 8.

37 Martin, *Memory, History, and Autobiography*, p. 119.

38 Hayden White, *Interpretation in History*. In: *New Literary History* 4 (Winter 1973), pp. 281ff.

39 Peter Arnds, Book Review: "Christabel Bielenberg. When I was a German. An Englishwoman in Nazi Germany, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/postid/pid9999.0003.109/--book-review?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

In 1988 Christabel Bielenberg was awarded the Commander's Cross of the Federal Order of Merit for her contribution to German-British understanding. The Cross was awarded to her by President Richard von Weizsäcker on December 10, 1986 and presented to her on February 4, 1987<sup>40</sup>. She also received a gold medal of merit from the European Parliament on September 4, 1993.<sup>41</sup>

Her literary legacy also extended to her account of friends who were not as fortunate to escape the National Socialist regime, and who were executed after the attempted assassination of Hitler in June 1944. In particular, her engagement with the biography of Adam von Trott in the 1960s and her attempt to correct certain incorrect views about von Trott testify to this. Indeed, according to Elaine Martin, in her interview Christabel Bielenberg related that her initial motivation behind writing down her story was to vindicate a friend, to set the record straight, to inform/warn the younger generation. "I had a tremendous feeling of responsibility for having survived"<sup>42</sup>.

Yet another view of the author's life can be found in a poem entitled "The Bay Tree", written by Gerald Dawe, narrating something of her life and their friendship.

The Bay Tree<sup>43</sup>

*in memory of  
Peter and Christabel Bielenberg*

The time the bees were swarming  
in the eave-runs of the front attic  
looking out to the mountain  
"under the sun" and we came back,  
  
a year later, in late summer again,  
and the bees were dusty thistledown  
on the ledges and on the carpet  
and even on the books about the war

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40 Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 109; see also PMRA, Introduction.

41 Christabel Bielenberg, Obituary. *The Irish Times*, 8 November 2003, p. 16; Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 109.

42 Interview 3 in Martin, *Autobiography, Gender, and the Third Reich*, p. 191.

43 Gerald Dawe, The Bay Tree. In: *New Hibernia Review* 10/3 (2006), p. 47. On one visit by Christabel and Peter, Christabel took with her a cutting from one of the huge hedges which were around Munny House. One of the cuttings was from a bay tree. Dawe planted the cutting in his Galway home and it grew, "She said to us that she always wanted to have this bay tree because it reminded her of her time in the Black Forest in Germany". A further cutting from this tree accompanied Dawe and his wife when they moved from Galway to Dublin where it blossomed and grew. For Dawe "this was a kind of fascinating symbol, a moving symbol from Munny to Galway, and from Galway to Dublin" (Dawe in interview, July 2013).

stacked in nonchalant rows  
and on the writing desk next to an old  
clothes horse and a lopsided mirror  
that had come through it all...

So I thought I should let you know  
the bay tree from your garden  
rustles here still, in the shade,  
just within hearing.

The images in the poem are taken from Munny house, where Dawe used to write whilst on summer visits, in the top of the house and surrounded by many of the books that Christabel used to research *The Past is Myself*. “The Bay Tree” was more than an object of their friendship withstanding being uprooted and replanted; it represented a symbol of both healing, but also memory. For Dawe, it was “the way in which she had used her writing as recuperation from the damage of the terrible experiences of war, but also the way she had re-born her life and her boys and the family in Carlow”. And, further:

So to put it in its simplest yes, the poem is about the war and Peter and Chris’ experiences of it, but I try to move it out so that it is almost as if through writing – the imagination is a kind of repository or a refuge from the struggles they went through –, her voice is never lost. That is why the line about the sound of the bay tree in the garden [is included] (Dawe in interview, July, 2013).

Dawe perceives a continuum from the past to the present, symbolically using the sound of the bay tree to represent the legacy of Bielenberg; he further draws an analogy between the bay tree and Bielenberg’s literary work:

[...] I often thought that *The Past is Myself* and *The Road Ahead* were great memoirs not just about the facts of which she is talking, but actually also as artistic or literary creations. They have got this wonderful muscular sense that the imagination can withstand history, just as the bay tree withstood its uprooting (Dawe in interview, July, 2013).

### Christabel Bielenberg’s non-Literary Work and Legacy

Considering the theme of this volume, “Cultural Translators”, it becomes apparent, also from her non-literary work, what a fitting biography Bielenberg’s is within this context. The Bielenbergs’ help to children of assassinated resistance fighters, both in terms of respite in Ireland during the summer months, and financially by setting up a fund, the ‘July 20 Memorial Fund’<sup>44</sup> for these families, are examples of humanitarian and cultural outreach from their home

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44 Christabel acted in the capacity as secretary to the Fund from 1947, writing to those who had both donated and to the German families who received the funds (cf. Depner, *Germany, Ireland and the Second World War*, p. 108 and 111).

in Ireland. This idea was extended beyond children of executed resistance fighters in Germany<sup>45</sup>, seen namely with the children of Tcheledi Khama of Botswana<sup>46</sup>, later prominent politicians in Botswana, who affectionately came to be known as Bielenberg's honorary sons following their stays in Munny House. Clarita von Trott zu Solz remembers how "these children flourished visibly, noticeably and audibly in the care of their holiday parents". Of the host parents, she notes

a more impressive, benevolent father figure than Peter would have been hard to imagine. He instructed the boys every morning in their work on the farm. As a complementary figure there was Chris, who with her generous, calming, reassuring ways, her splendid humour and inexhaustible fund of Irish stories, ensured that all youthful problems and tragedies lost their sting, and that Munny House was filled with gregarious, exciting, hopeful life.<sup>47</sup>

Christabel Bielenberg's "very strong sense of right and wrong", and the fact that she was "very strong on political morality" and "felt passionate[ly] about her belief that violence was not the way forward"<sup>48</sup> served as the backdrop to her involvement in the Peace Women of Northern Ireland. Getting personally involved, she attended rallies, mentored the Peace People, and travelled with the leaders to Britain, Germany and the United States. This was one aspect of her life that impressed Dawe, originally from Belfast, in particular: "She was fearless in identifying with [The Peace Women] – she had a sense of selflessness [...]. When she went public on it and defended the women's movement, it was without fear or favour."<sup>49</sup>

45 Noteworthy here is the fact that another lifeline came into being in the translation of the idea to give children of assassinated NS-resistance fighters a holiday in Ireland: Charlotte von der Schulenberg, daughter of assassinated NS-resistance fighter Fritz von der Schulenberg, came to Ireland in 1956 on one such holiday. Subsequently in 1958, she married Nicholas Bielenberg, son of Christabel. Her sister Angela married a second Bielenberg son, Christopher, in 1966. The author is grateful to Christabel Bielenberg's grandson, Andy, for entrusting letters written by his mother Charlotte von der Schulenberg from this time to her for translation.

46 See RA, Epilogue.

47 von Trott zu Solz in: Peter Bielenberg (in interview with the Imperial War Museum, London 1995), p. 83.

48 Dawe in interview with the author, July 2013. Bielenberg herself was from a Protestant faith, but her engagement went far above any religious labels usual for the time. Discussing the religious divide in Ireland, and North and South, and positioning this side by side with resistance fighters who had been united in their faith against Hitler, she crosses religious and national divides by asserting that "to me this (Protestant and Catholics uniting in their faiths against National Socialism) had nothing to do with churches, statues or monuments, but signified the true strength of Christianity as I believed it should be" (RA 194).

49 Dawe in interview with the author, July 2013.



Thinking about “Culture” also in terms of the Latin translation “cultura”, or “cultivation”, it is noteworthy also how Bielenberg and her husband turned their hand to a new business venture they embarked upon in Ireland, managing by all accounts a successful farm in County Carlow. This farming and scholarly legacy was passed on to the next generation, with Nicholas Bielenberg completing a PhD on agricultural methods in Trinity College Dublin, and Munny House was all-important in this context.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

Considering the numerous spheres in which Christabel Bielenberg moved and left a mark, it is perhaps not surprising that she was voted one as one of “100 women who shook the world” by readers of the *Observer* in 1995 (PMRA). Christabel Bielenberg – author, political and human rights activist, mother and motherlike figure to numerous children – imparted without doubt a legacy that went far beyond merely a literary one, though her many awards and accolades for her literary prowess are testament to her talent as an author.

Her memories of war-torn Germany left a lasting imprint on her as a person, which in turn, as she related to those around her, influenced future generations, as her granddaughter comments on her life in advanced years:

In her later years, failing eyesight and her age prevented her from climbing the stairs to her former workroom, where her letters and papers were kept. Instead, her sustained act for posterity was to talk: to her sons, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, to friends, and at length. The experiences of her time in Germany and the people she and Peter knew there informed each day of the rest of their long lives (Katharina Bielenberg in her preface to PMRA 477f.).

Christabel Bielenberg’s work, though perhaps not very well known within the public domain, has had a lasting impact on Irish-German and on English-German relations. Her publications now firmly belong to the corpus of literature and scholarly work on (women’s) accounts of the war years in Nazi Germany. Although autobiography is at times considered to be a disputed source of reliability in terms of factual correctness<sup>51</sup>, it is a particularly compelling and instructive form of writing. Comfortably moving from English to

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50 He notes: “Regarding my own education, it is very unlikely that I would have studied Agricultural Science if my parents had not purchased Munny House Farm. I went to Trinity for an Agr.B. degree, and after graduation I was fortunate to get a post-graduate scholarship to Marshall Aid for post-graduate studies in the agricultural economics department of Purdue University in the USA, which culminated in a PhD from the economics faculty in Trinity College Dublin” (personal correspondence, May 2014).

51 E.g. White, *Interpretation in History*.

German to Irish contexts and vernaculars, Bielenberg was certainly a cultural mediator par excellence.<sup>52</sup> Her experiences in Germany also influenced her work on Northern-Irish relations, as Dawe reflects on her contribution across the geographical divide:

For a woman writer of Christabel's generation to have produced a classic non-fiction text such as *The Past is Myself*, reprised and concluded in *The Road Ahead*, deserves its own acknowledgement. For a woman to have crossed so many borders and opened and preserved lines of exchange between both parts of Ireland, between Ireland and England, between Ireland, England and Germany, (and different versions of all of these) and to have bothered to keep doing so into her final late years is surely an exemplary life for our times.<sup>53</sup>

More than this cultural and intercultural ease, her life was based on values that surpassed notional categories of nationality and identity being rooted in integrity and humanity. Returning to the opening discussion of the author's identity, Ireland in the final analysis became her chosen home, as she reflected on the occasion of her seventieth birthday party in 1979. Her words, speaking to those who would be still here when she and her husband had passed – her own family and the many friends and travellers who had stayed with them in Munny House, show a mind consciously building a bridge from the past to the present, and mindful not to let future generations forget:

Thirty-three years had slipped by since I stood leaning on a low wall in Kilmore Quay looking out over the sea to the Saltee Islands [...] On that day I had come to a tentative conclusion to live out my days if possible in this beautiful and unpredictable island. And this we had done, whilst Peter built up what was now considered to be a flourishing farm. Munny House, too had become a home and, to judge from those who had travelled far to be with us this weekend, a home for many besides ourselves. Children of those who had been killed by Hitler, coming for the holidays and always returning; our own sons growing up here, married now, and nine grandchildren. I would like to think that Peter and I had managed to build something on the ruins we had left behind us. Something perhaps demanded of us by the very fact that we had survived (RA 217).

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52 Arnds argues “One can see [...] how crosscultural immersion brings about true and beneficial *Bildung* (Peter Arnds, Book Review: “Christabel Bielenberg. When I was a German. An Englishwoman in Nazi Germany, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/postid/pid9999.0003.109/--book-review?rgn=main;view=fulltext>). Her son, Nicholas Bielenberg, “regard[ed] her as being an internationalist who could fit in very well, whether she was in Germany, England or Ireland” (personal correspondence, May 2014).

53 Dawe, *Exchanging Messages*, p. 92f.

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