

Boylan, Henry Joseph

by Turlough O'Riordan

Boylan, Henry Joseph (1911–2007), civil servant and writer, was born 21 December 1911 in Drogheda, Co. Louth, the seventh of nine children (five boys and four girls) of John Boylan, merchant sea captain, and his wife Mary (née Coleman; d. 1958). He enjoyed a comfortable childhood, spending his free time boating on the Boyne river and the Louth coast. Educated by the Christian Brothers in Drogheda, he left school in June 1930. Boylan's desire to follow family tradition (his father, grandfather and brother were master mariners) and enter the merchant marine was stymied by the impact of the great depression, and he joined the Department of Lands as an executive officer in November 1930.

Moving to Dublin, he found the work 'dull and repetitive, and the days assumed a sameness that was mind numbing' (*A voyage*, 52). Joining the Dublin Rowing Club, he won a gold medal at the 1932 Tailteann games, and a silver medal and the single-sculls Phoenix Challenge Cup at the Dublin University Boat Club 1933 regatta. Winning an open civil service competition in 1936, Boylan joined the Department of Posts and Telegraphs and was assigned as a senior administrative officer to Radio Éireann in Henry Street, Dublin. He adapted books and plays for radio and wrote scripts, as Radio Éireann became a vital outlet for his artistic and literary instincts. He was promoted to general manager of the station under Director T. J. Kiernan (qv) and his deputy Frank Gallagher (qv). Overhearing a reading of the poem 'The three-cornered field' by Frederick Robert Higgins (qv) in 1941, he introduced himself to the reader, Patricia Clancy (see below). They were soon engaged, and married on 18 September 1941 in Dublin. Patricia's influence augmented his interest in the arts, and they had a long and happy marriage together. Drawing on his seafaring heritage and maritime interests, Boylan wrote and presented a radio series about sea shanties, broadcast on Radio Éireann in April 1946.

Hospitalised for two months with diphtheria soon after their marriage, Boylan left Radio Éireann during the Emergency to work briefly in the Department of Supplies under Seán Lemass (qv), then moved back to the Department of Lands in 1942 where he gained promotion. Having commenced a moderatorship (honours) degree by night study in 1941 at TCD (gaining an exemption from John Charles McQuaid (qv), catholic archbishop of Dublin), he graduated with a first-class degree in modern literature in 1945, and with an MA ('by grace') in 1948. While at Trinity, he was involved with An Cumann Gaelach and the inter-varsity Irish-language body An Comhchaidreamh. Fluent in Irish, he joined the editorial committee of An Comhchaidreamh's literary and current affairs magazine *Comhar*, and contributed articles and book reviews to several Irish-language publications; he sometimes used the Irish form of his name, Anraí Ó Baoighealláin, and was later active in Gael Linn

(established 1953). In 1947 he was appointed assistant director at the Gaeltacht Services Division (the successor to the Congested Districts Board of 1891–1923), which aimed to generate and support industrial employment in the Gaeltacht areas where endemic poverty and high unemployment prevailed. Boylan saw potential to draw on the abundant maritime resources of the western Gaeltachts, and lobbied T. K. Whitaker in the Department of Finance to buy a 51 per cent stake in Alginate Industries Ltd, whose factory in Kilkieran, Connemara, had been founded as a joint venture with UK financiers and MacDonagh's, a Galway chemical and fertiliser merchant. The latter were unhappy with a lack of early profit, and placed their 51 per cent share (which was required to remain in Irish hands) up for sale. Boylan spotted the potential in extracting alginic acid from seaweed, and convinced Whitaker of the merits of targeted government investment in the region and sector; accordingly, the Department of Finance acquired the 51 per cent share in 1948. Boylan was appointed director (1949) and joint managing director (1952) of the renamed Arramara Teo. Working hard to unite UK financial partners, Irish government policy and the needs of Gaeltacht workers, he was proud of the profit engendered and the support provided to Gaeltacht residents, and remained on the board for thirty years (as part-time chairman from April 1972) until 1982. A second factory was opened at Meenmore, Dungloe, Co. Donegal, in 1968.

Throughout the 1950s Boylan led the international promotion of Donegal tweed, winning contracts in Europe and the USA to supply the clothing industry. High-end promotion was key to this, and Boylan convinced Sybil Connolly (qv) and Hardy Amies, a prominent UK fashion designer and royal couturier, to incorporate the unique tones and textures of Donegal tweed into their designs. Returning briefly to the Department of the Gaeltacht, Boylan was in 1959 seconded for two years to a Department of Finance task force monitoring and assessing the implementation of Whitaker's and Lemass's first programme for economic expansion. Returning to the lands department as principal officer in 1961, Boylan was promoted to assistant secretary. Managing the department's holding in the area, he served as chairman (from 1968) of the commissioners of the Wexford North Slob, north of Wexford harbour (later the Wexford Wildfowl Reserve), and took a keen interest in the conservation of rare birds. Personally interested in the growing public and governmental awareness of the impact of economic development and societal change on the Irish environment, Boylan from the late 1960s worked on a task force assessing international best practices and how they might apply to Ireland. He took early retirement from the civil service in April 1972.

Boylan's daughter Anna, managing editor at Gill and Macmillan publishers, commissioned him to compile a new dictionary of Irish biography. Assisted by researcher Margaret Coffey, Boylan spent six years compiling the first edition of *A dictionary of Irish biography* (1978). Comprising 1,100 lives written by Boylan, with a thoughtful introduction that eruditely dissected contrasting conceptions of Irishness, the book showed an unerring ability to imbue short entries with character and vividness. It marked a significant step onwards from earlier Irish biographical

dictionaries published by Alfred John Webb (qv) (1878) and John Smyth Crone (qv) (1928), and served as a widely used reference work for general readers and specialists alike. Further editions followed in 1988 and 1998, by which time 500 lives had been added. Boylan also found time to publish the biography *Theobald Wolfe Tone* (1981; reissued 1998) as part of Gill's Irish Lives series – which admired Tone (qv) the man but thought his politics naïve – and *This arrogant city: a readers' and collector's guide to books about Dublin* (1983), a slim, elegant, illustrated compendium of writers' views of the city. Boylan contributed biographies to *Voices of Ireland: conversations with Donncha Ó Dulaing* (1984), based on the latter's radio series. *A valley of kings, the Boyne: five thousand years of history* (1988) was inspired by *The beauty of the Boyne, and its tributary, the Blackwater* (1849) by Sir William Wilde (qv). Having contributed occasional reviews, opinion pieces and short stories to various publications from the 1940s, Boylan was contributor to the short-lived revival of *Dublin Opinion* (1987–8).

In retirement, Boylan joined the board of Conradh na Gaeilge, regularly attended Cumann Merriman, and was an avid hill walker. He was president of the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear hospital (1979–81), and a member of the Dublin Oyster Club and the United Arts Club. An enthusiastic sailor since his childhood, after his time with the TCD sailing club Boylan joined the Dublin Bay Sailing Club in 1964. He joined the Royal Irish Yacht Club in 1969, sailing in mermaid and then ruffian class boats before retiring to land in 1982 aged 70. He was commissioned by the Royal Irish to write *White sails crowding: a history of the Royal Irish Yacht Club* (1994). His autobiography, *A voyage around my life* (2002), contains a vivid account of his Drogheda childhood alongside an engaging account of maritime life in the port. Boylan combined his Irish-Ireland views with a broad open-minded liberalism (the Royal Irish Yacht Club had few enough Irish-speakers among its membership). He was immensely proud of his brother Willy, a master mariner and merchant sea captain, who volunteered for the Royal Navy (insisting that if he could earn his living in Britain he could assist in her defence) in the second world war. Willy was awarded the OBE (1943) for his heroic service on convoy duty during the battle of the Atlantic. Offered a Royal Navy captaincy after the war, he chose instead to return to the B and I shipping line.

Henry and Patricia lived in Dublin at Annville House, Dundrum, then Orwell Park, Rathgar, before moving to York Road, Dún Laoghaire, in 1979. They had two daughters and two sons, including Peter Boylan, consultant obstetrician and master of the National Maternity Hospital (1991–8). Henry Boylan died in Dublin 24 May 2007.

Patricia Boylan (1913–2006), actor and journalist, was born 12 March 1913 in Coalisland, Co. Tyrone, the youngest girl of twelve children (four girls and eight boys) of Patrick Clancy, a general and wholesale draper and JP, and his wife Anne (née Treanor). Moving to Dungannon, she was educated at St Patrick's Girls' Academy (run by the Sisters of Mercy), where she greatly enjoyed studying English.

Drawn to the stage as a teenager, she doorstepped Arthur Shields (qv), who was visiting Belfast with the Abbey Theatre company, by impersonating a journalist, and wrote up the encounter, which was published in the *Irish News*. After training as a nurse at Leeds General Infirmary (1932–6), she graduated from the Royal College of Nursing, London, and in 1937 moved with her parents to Clonliffe Road, Drumcondra, Dublin. A deep yearning to act led her to audition successfully for the Abbey Theatre's school of acting. She profiled the director of the school, Lennox Robinson (qv), for the *Irish Press* (30 September 1937); such occasional journalism helped pay her fees. Enamoured with the spirit of the Abbey Theatre, she was among a group chosen by Robinson to form a verse-speaking class, and appeared as Deirdre in 'Deirdre of the sorrows' by J. M. Synge (qv) on Radio Éireann. She was honorary secretary and central to the founding of the Dublin Verse-Speaking Society founded by Austin Clarke (qv) and Robert Farren (qv) in December 1939. Giving poetry recitals at the Abbey and Peacock theatres, and appearing on a Radio Éireann Monday night poetry show introduced by Clarke for twenty-five years, the society adopted poet Gordon Bottomley's dictum that 'the sound of poetry is part of its meaning' (*Gaps of brightness*, 136). It was while working in Radio Éireann that Patricia met Henry Boylan in 1941. She also worked as an editorial assistant on the bi-monthly *Woman's Life*, ghosting an agony aunt column and managing beauty pageants; she was also an accomplished cook and gardener. Regularly appearing on talk shows and in a variety of Radio Éireann productions from the 1940s, she wrote a social column as 'Darina' for the *Irish Press*. She was a regular contributor to *Hibernia*, editor of the short-lived glossy *Creation*, and contributed to the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Press*, the *Irish Arts Review* and *Books Ireland*. A series of three articles in the *Irish Times* (29–31 August 1973) on the origins of the United Arts Club, of which she was a member, resulted in her *All cultivated people: a history of the United Arts Club* (1988). In 2003 she published a well-reviewed memoir, *Gaps of brightness*. She died in Dublin 23 February 2006.

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GRO (birth cert., 1911); *Ir. Press*, 21 Mar., 18 Apr. 1946; *Sunday Independent*, 22 Jan. 1984; Patricia Boylan, 'Darlin' Austin' in R. Dardis Clarke (ed.), *Austin Clarke remembered* (1996); Henry Boylan, *A voyage around my life* (2002); Patricia Boylan, *Gaps of brightness* (2003); *Ir. Times*, 11 Mar. 2006; 9 June 2007; Emer Ní Brádaigh, 'Sure weren't we always self-sufficient, didn't we have to be!: entrepreneurs in the Irish Gaeltacht' in L.-P. Dana and R. B. Anderson (ed.), *International handbook of research on indigenous entrepreneurship* (2007); www.ainm.ie (accessed May–June 2013); information from Anne Farmar (daughter)