Meynell, Esther

"We are a curious & often stupid people, but I think on the whole we do know our great men."

(Esther Meynell in a letter to Admiral John Arbuthnot Fisher, Lord of Kilverstone, from 20 May, 1915)

Profile

Esther Meynell is the author of the well-known book, "The Little Chronicle of Magdalena Bach" which has been translated into many languages. It was first published in 1925 in England by the publisher Chatto and Windus, London, and in the USA by Doubleday, Garden City and New York. In the German first edition from 1930 published by Kochler and Armelang, Leipzig – as well as in the English one – the name of the author was omitted, giving the impression that this was an original chronicle by Anna Magdalena Bach. In the English edition the last page of the book contained this note: "Those familiar with the known and authenticated facts of Bach’s life will realize that certain episodes in the book are imaginary." This note was not included in the German editions. The “Chronicle” experienced an enormous distribution in Germany beginning 1935, due in particular to celebrations on the occasion of Johann Sebastian Bach’s 250th birthday and represented “one of the most successful books in recent years in Germany” (Stirk, 1935). It was translated into numerous languages and is still being published today. Experts argue that the purely fictitious text, whose language and style convincingly fit the historical period, has no factual basis in any sources whatsoever (Hübner, 2004). It is viewed as a “well-meaning attempt to grasp the phenomenon of Johann Sebastian Bach through the eyes of his second wife” and as a “sentimental depiction of the Bach’s family life” (Hans-Joachim Schulze, 2004). In fact, very few original documents or reports from Johann Sebastian Bach’s second wife exist, but there are numerous musical scores of her husband’s copied in her hand (see Hübner, 2004, p.137-140).

Due to its wide dissemination, the “Chronicle” played an important role in both the reception of J.S. Bach and the perception of the singer and musician Anna Magdalena Bach – independently of her role as J.S. Bach’s wife. In 1934 Esther Meynell wrote another Bach biography in which she relates the life of J.S. Bach using the more traditional perspective of a neutral narrator. Beyond these, she only composed novels and biographical narratives on non-musical subjects. Under the name E. Hallam Moorhouse, she wrote several works on the English sea heroes, Sir Francis Drake and Lord Nelson, as well as on Lady Hamilton.

Cities an countries

Esther Moorhouse was born in Leeds, Great Britain in 1878. In 1909 she married the publisher Gerard Meynell with whom she lived for various periods of time in London, Brighton and in Ditchling, Sussex, where she died in 1955.

Biography

Esther Meynell was born in 1878 to the wealthy Quaker family of Samuel Moorhouse in Leeds, Yorkshire. When she was ten years old she moved with her family to Brighton, Sussex. She was taught at home for health reasons. At the time of her marriage in 1909 she was already a well-known author. Using her maiden name Moorhouse which she furnished with the unusual name “Hallam”, which was usually a boy’s name, she published the biographical novel “Nelson’s Lady Hamilton” in 1907. After
the publication of seafarers’ letters from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, she began to concern herself with Sir Francis Drake (“Drake and the Elizabethan Navy”, published in 1912) before she composed a chronicle on “Nelson in England” in 1913. With her husband Gerard Meynell (1877-1943), typographer, book printer and publisher for Westminster Press in Patcham Church, Sussex, Esther Meynell first lived in London, where her daughters Joanna (dates of birth and death not known) and Rosemary (1917-2003) were born. In the 1930s, the family moved back to Sussex, first to Pulborough, where an aunt of Gerard Meynell lived, the poet Alice Meynell (1847-1922). Esther Meynell converted to Catholicism here in 1931, perhaps influenced by Alice Meynell, who was very close to the Catholic Church. It is notable in this context that Esther Meynell was intensively concerned with Johann Sebastian Bach’s Protestant-Lutheran convictions during precisely this period - the “Chronicle” was published in 1925, and her second Bach book in 1934. The family later moved to the village of Ditchling, where they built two small cottages which became the subject of Esther Meynell’s books “A Sussex Cottage” (1936) and “Building a Cottage” (1937). In addition to these, Meynell wrote about the local history of Sussex and was a long-time member and supporter of the Sussex Archaeological Society. She died in 1955 in her house in Ditchling.

Appreciation

Twelve letters from the years 1911 to 1920 from Esther Meynell to the British Marine Admiral Sir John Arbuthnot Fisher, Lord of Kilverstone (1841-1920), have survived and yield insights into her thought process and work methods (FISR 3 ‘Further official correspondence’ in Churchill Archives Cambridge). Fisher, the son of a captain who was knighted in 1909 for his service in the British Marine, came from a middle-class background and was greatly honored because of his origins, his views as Admiral and First Sea Lord (1904-1910 and 1914/1915 the highest ranking service level in the Royal Navy), and also as modernizer and critical reformer of the British fleet. In this regard, however, he was also often controversial. In May of 1915 he resigned from his office as protest against Churchill’s plans for the Battle of Gallipoli (Dardanelle Operation), which led to him being attacked in the public arena and in the media. In Esther Meynell’s view, he did not receive the recognition he deserved for his service in the First World War. The surviving correspondence between Esther Meynell and the Admiral, who apparently published his own texts in Gerard Meynell’s publishing house, date from this period. His historical studies on Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton were another thing he had in common with Esther Meynell. Fisher apparently also preserved relics from Nelson. Esther Meynell – and her husband Gerard as well – admired and honored the Admiral, who was already seventy years old at the beginning of the correspondence, for his life’s work and for his courage and foresight in standing up to Churchill’s battle plans – in fact, the Gallipoli Campaign against the Ottoman Empire was a defeat with heavy losses for the Royal Navy and the entente.

Esther Meynell was in her thirties during this correspondence, freshly married and over its course became mother twice over. Her enthusiastic adoration for Fisher who in her view was unappreciated at the end of his life conformed to the pattern of hero construction found in writings of other women music authors – for example in Lina Ramann’s descriptions of Franz Liszt’s life or La Mara’s (i.e. Marie Lipsius) of Ludwig van Beethoven. The typical components of this kind of heroic biography include the social advancement of the hero from lower classes by means of exceptional achievement and resulting in competition with the gentry, confrontation including disputes and hostilities, but also in a reputation as modernizer and reformer in his area (with regard to Nelson the design of capital ships). There is on top of this a lack of recognition for these life achievements by the ruling class, which results in a strong sympathy on the part of the authors and in their sometimes public defence of the hero, and in a deep, personal admiration which is offered to the hero as a kind of compensation for the injustice they have suffered. Thus, Meynell writes to the Admiral on the occasion of Nelson’s protest and his upcoming resignation from office:

"May 20.1915.
Dear Lord Fisher, Nothing has frightened me this was except the idea that you might be leaving the Admiralty – but thank the Gods who guard Britain that that is passed. Of course the English people wouldn’t let you go – we would seek a Cabinet before that should happen! We are a curious & often stupid people, but I think on the whole we do know our great men. Your burden must be heavy, but when I think what your name will stand for in English history I can hardly believe I am privileged to know you. I wear the Admiral’s buttons you gave me daily over my heart! Your always adoring
Esther Meynell."
And on the following day, 21st May 1915:

“Burn this... (further remarks not legible)

May 21. 1915

Dear Lord Fisher,

I cannot believe it, that they should “cash out” you – & I cannot bear it if they do. It would be the last word in infamy – you, you to whom we owe this bavy/bary[?], to whom we owe our lives & our freedom from awful infamies. Why, the whole womanhood of England must cry out against such a thing. I shall be in agony till I know you stay, so I hope & shall know soon.

[Margin notes not legible]

It is nice of you to say you want to see me – you can imagine my sentiments! Its [sic!] one of the things I’m living for. If ever you have half an hour I’ll come whenever & wherever want me.

Is this rather a mad letter? But I feel mad! Yours always

Esther Meynell.”

(Transcription by Dr. Regina Back.)

The construction of the hero Johann Sebastian Bach in Meynell’s “Little Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach” (1925) and in the biography “Johann Sebastian Bach” (1934) follows a similar pattern. In a personal manuscript for a slide show on Esther Meynell (which was made available to the author in October 2014), Tommy Dufty from the Ditchling History Project mentions, based on Meynell’s semi-autobiographical book “A Woman Talking” (Meynell, 1940) that although Meynell did not attend a school, she received piano and singing lessons at the Brighton School of Music – and with so much success, that she even received a scholarship: “There I spent many enchanted hours, and first encountered one of the major influences of my life – Johann Sebastian Bach.” (Ibid.)

While working on her Bach book she also learned how to play the organ. However, no further works on other musicians followed.

Meynell explicitly states her intentions in the introduction to the “Chronicle”: “This work desires to provide information to the incalculable droves of those who love Bach and his music – the music, in other words – and who have repeatedly asked themselves what kind of person this man was, who produced such extraordinary music. [...] We get to know the person Bach in his daily life, the classic type of artist as creative person in whom the secular and the sacred come together in equal quantities and power, infused in perfect harmony, so that in his existence and work no place remains for human difficulties. This small work is furthermore something like a generally valid monography of the genius’s spouse, who is his equal. We see what kind of woman she was and probably had to be to measure up as the spouse of a creative man. And in conclusion it also seems to us as if the author was able to capture the sea in a shell, as this shell was perfect love, and in fact an eternal love.” (quoted from: “The Little Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach”, new edition A.D. 1944 by Hase & Koehler, Leipzig, p.6-7) This last comment in particular makes it evident that the “author” implied is Anna Magdalena Bach, whereas the identity of the purported “editor” is not revealed.

For the “Chronicle”, which serves as narrative form for the biographical depiction of the life and work of Johann Sebastian Bach, the author assumes the role of Anna Magdalena Bach as first person narrator, who, seven years after the death of her husband gets the idea from one of his students to write a chronicle of the years of her marriage to Bach. This perspective enables the author to not only describe her ideas about the role of the artist, but also about the role of the wife of an artist – or, about marriage to an artist.

Meynell portrays the very first encounter between Anna Magdalena and Johann Sebastian Bach through music. Both protagonists are professional musicians and come from musical families. It is doubtful that Anna Magdalena was ever in Hamburg with her father, but in the ‘Chronicle’ she meets her future husband there for the first time, when he is playing the organ of the St. Katharina Church:

“I do not know quite how long I may have stood there in the empty church, with no sense but hearing, as though I had taken root upon the stones – " (Meynell, 1925, p.5).

A year later the two meet again – and again music is being played. This time it is Anna Magdalena who has been asked by her father to sing for the Kapellmeister of Köthen. According to Meynell, he is able to contain his enthusiasm: “Master Bach just looked at me very steadily for a moment and said, ‘Thy voice is pure, and thou canst sing.’” (Meynell, 1925, p.10) This restraint is presumably intended to serve the characterization of Johann Sebastian Bach’s reserved personality, but of course it also conveys the artistic gap between the two.

In the biography that follows, the dichotomy between the highly gifted, serious musician and his heroic work and the worshipping wife, who takes a backseat to his life and
work, is systematically constructed. “I felt like a little stream absorbed in the ocean – enveloped, sustained, enfolded, in a life larger and deeper than my own could ever be. Year by year, as I lived with him so closely, I grew to understand his greatness more fully – he was so far beyond me that at times I felt frightened, but I did understand him because I loved him. [...] Thus began my real life.” (Meynell, 1925, p.15-19).

The establishment of the portrayals of men such as that of the artist as hero, in whose life the woman on his side may only play a subordinate role without developing her own artistic ability took place within the social and cultural discourse simultaneously with the construction of the idea of women as untouched virgins, childlike temptresses, femme fatales all the way to the point of the negative image of the whore. In both cases – interpreted psychoanalytically – undesirable or inexpressible aspects of the personality such as sensuousness and desire for men, or creative artistry and heroic battle courage for women are stylized in the role model of the opposite sex in order for these aspects to be separated and yet not abandoned. Christa Rohde-Dachser describes this “container function”, developed by Wilfred Bion in 1965, as follows: “In an imaginary room, declared as feminine and thereby strictly separated from the world of the man, man deposits his fears, wishes, longings and desires – that which is unloved, one could also say, so that in this way it can be preserved and also consistently located,” (Rohde-Dachser, 1991, p.100). It appears that women also created this kind of room for the opposite sex in order to combat the wishes and longings that violate the female role model, and at the same time preserve them and keep them accessible: in the image of hero who can only be completely masculine, the artistic genius. Perhaps these could be called “myths of the masculine”, created by women in order to secure their own sexual identity.

In her book “Johann Sebastian Bach”, published in 1934 by Duckworth in London, Meynell again deals with the biography of Johann Sebastian Bach in the form of an essay. She refers in this essay to sources which consist primarily of the works of Charles Stanford Terry, to whom the “Bach” book is also personally dedicated. However, original sources are also included, some of which were also incorporated into the “Chronicle” as pictures (at least in the German edition from 1944). Apparently Meynell reviewed original music manuscripts and facsimile editions of Bach’s that were accessible in London, in order to describe them with regard to the external impression, the handwriting, the condition of the material, etc. A further consideration of the sources was presumably beyond her intention, nor did she have the knowledge that would have been necessary for it. She does not make consistent use of scholarly citations, and neither in the body of the text, nor in footnotes or endnotes does she state exact titles or page numbers. Individual sentences or statements in the text are identified as quotes by quotations marks, but the citations are missing. The book had two editions in England (1834 and 1946) and three in the USA (1947, 1949, 1962). It was not translated.

Reception

The high print run and the enthusiastic reception of “The Little Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach” in Germany is attributed in part to the publisher’s clever maneuver in leaving out the name of the author, which according to Samuel Dickenson Stirk was done with the author’s expressed permission, although she “had not the slightest thought of deception” in doing so (Stirk, 1935, p.1266).

Also, in the introduction of the “Chronicle” in the German edition, unnamed “editors” talk about “the author” in such a way that the impression arises that this is an original chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach. Readers continue to make incorrect assumptions about the authorship even today, although Esther Meynell has always been named as author in later editions.

The book’s successful sales numbers in Germany, which was deemed a “best seller” even then (Stirk 1935, p.1265) are, however, probably mostly to be attributed to the “song of praise to the German family” and to “German marriage” promised on the dust cover which conformed to the Nazi ideology and relegated women back into the family. This was sufficient reason for the book “to be found on the birthday present table of young women for years” (Pleßke, 1960, p.18). The fact that the author was not German, but in fact English could also be the reason that the publisher initially tried to veil the name of the author and the book’s origins – as Stirk suspected in 1935. The German and worldwide success of the book must, however, also be attributed to the text itself, especially to the sensitive and convincing voice Meynell gives to Anna Magdalena Bach, “an accomplishment that deserves to be recognized and which did not ill serve Bach’s general popularity” (ibid.).

In spite of her success as a writer, Esther Meynell was not included in the pertinent literature lexicons beyond
the “Who’s Who” of the period, not even in the “Encyclopedia of British Women Writers” by Paul and June Schlueter (New Brunswick/New York/London 1998). Only her sister-in-law Alice Meynell is listed here, who also lived as writer in Sussex, along with her daughter Viola Meynell.

In their film “Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach” (Germany and Italy 1968), Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet used nothing but the title of the book. The script and narrative structure are based on sources and constructed parallel to musical structures, according to Barton Byg in his essay “Traces of a life: Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach” (in Byg, 1995). Byg, however, does mention two scenes in his essay that are based on Meynell’s “Chronicle” (ibid, p.59 and 63). The precise references made to the book by the film still need to be researched.

List of Works


Weitere Veröffentlichungen (Erscheinungsdaten unbekannt):

The story of Hans Andersen.
The young Lincoln.
The English spinster: a portrait.
Lucy and Amades.
Biografie von Wordsworth.
Für alle Lebenslagen. Kleine Weisheiten.

Sources

Twelve letters between Esther Meynell and Admiral Fisher, Lord of Kilverstone (1841-1920), from the years 1911-1920, FISR 3 ‘Further official correspondence’ in The Churchill Archives Center – Churchill College in Cambridge, UK.


Tom Dufty, Ditchling History Project, private manuscript for a slideshow on "Esther Meynell" with numerous source citations on reviews.

Research

Twelve letters between Esther Meynell and Admiral Fisher, Lord of Kilverstone (1841-1920), from the years 1911-1920 have survived and are preserved at Churchill Archives Center in Cambridge (Shelfmark: FISR 3 'Further official correspondence').

Biographical information on Esther Meynell is at this time only available on the following internet websites:

http://www.barron.co.uk/Macdonald+Gill/item1043, accessed on 11 September 2014.

Email/Blog entry by McCann, Tim: https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/sussexpast/conversations/topics/199, accessed on 11 September 2014.


Need for Research

A biography of Esther Meynell should be developed; a literary investigation and evaluation of her works has also not yet been undertaken.

A detailed examination of the references made by the Straub/Huilet film to the “Chronicle” by Esther Meynell should be carried out.

Authority control

Virtual International Authority File (VIAF):
- http://viaf.org/viaf/107595610

Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):
- http://d-nb.info/gnd/127748008

Library of Congress (LCCN):
- http://lccn.loc.gov/nr88001633

Author(s)

Martina Bick

Editing status

Editorial staff: Anke Charton, (deutsche Fassung)
Meredith Nicollai, (English version)
Translation: Jennifer Hohensteiner
First edit 12/06/2015
Last edit 04/12/2018

mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de
Forschungsprojekt an der
Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg
Projektleitung: Prof. Dr. Beatrix Borchard
Harvestehuder Weg 12
D – 20148 Hamburg