Hans-Jürgen Balmes

THE RHINE

The Biography of a River

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A poetic natural and cultural history about the Rhine and the soul of a landscape

The Rhine once rose in the middle of its present-day course, where sea cows frolicked in a tropical sea. Having eked out its bed back to its later headwaters, its geology is astounding. The river is still home to the oldest creatures in Europe, but from source to delta the Rhine has also been shaped by human hand. No other river encompasses so many contradictions – border, transport artery, escape route and lifeline.

Hans-Jürgen Balmes takes us with him on a river journey. We meet people like William Turner, for whom the Rhine came to be an obsession and the focus of his life's work. We see woods and animals come alive in Balmes' sublime reflections on nature and his meditative images. This book about the Rhine beguiles us with its inexhaustible stream of stories and its quiet contemplation. This is nature writing at its best.

- A unique blend of nature writing and journeys through the past
- With a colour picture section, maps and drawings

"Rivers have more to say than mountains, landscapes or cities do. All they need is an intelligent, knowledgeable storyteller like Hans-Jürgen Balmes, whose magnificent book records the river's stories, the pitter-patter of wagtails and the tinkling of white alders." Michael Krüger

"I have never read such a sensual description of the Rhine." Alexander Wasner

Hans-Jürgen Balmes was born in 1958 in Koblenz and is an editor and translator. He wrote for *Mare* magazine about "The Sources of the Seas". His portraits and essays have appeared in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* among many others, and he has translated works by John Berger and Barry Lopez as well as poetry by Robert Hass, W. S. Merwin and Martine Bellen from English into German. The Rhine has always played a major role in his life. He has hiked many times to its sources in the Alps, paddled along the Rhine in his father's old folding canoe, savoured the deep silence and observed the shifting play of light on the water, and the animals in and around the river.

Hans Jürgen Balmes

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The Biography of a River

Translated by Simon Pare

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Among the groynes

I am sitting in the middle of the river at the Bingen Hole on one of the two stone levees that stretch along the riverbed. Kilometre 530, it says on the board on the bank. That's how many kilometres the river has covered so far, and the same number still lie ahead until it reaches the sea: this is its halfway point. And this was once its end. Whereas, left and right, steep hillsides rise up in shadow, the water in front of me casts back the last of the light. The water level is high, and the fast-flowing, eddying river looks as if it is about to spill over. Behind me lies a pool between the embankments, its surface still as glass, as if the water wished to demonstrate its two states – flowing and standing.

The levees were built to make this dangerous bend in the Rhine navigable. The Bingen Hole is the gateway through which the river forces its way into the Rhenish Massif. Emerging from the broad basin of the 'Island Rhine', as the stretch between Mainz and Rüdesheim is known, the riverbed suddenly narrows. Upstream, beyond the Mouse Tower in the middle of the river, the wide watercourse is still visible. With no steep slopes to block it out, the light gathers here and the horizon melts into a glittering haze. There, just beneath the surface, perpendicular to the current, lurk ridges of rock that are laid bare when the water is low. The Nahe flows into the Rhine in the same spot. This tributary is checked by a wall of Rhine water and almost seems to stand still in its final few metres before the larger river sweeps it away like a russet ribbon trailing along its edge, their waters mingling only a few kilometres further downstream.

The Nahe deposits debris and scree into the Rhine, forming gravel banks on which little ringed plovers and gulls settle at low water. These banks leave only a narrow channel for boatmen, and the dykes were built to ensure it always carries enough water and does not back up along the edges. The first begins at a bulge on the bank below the Rhine's confluence with the Nahe, the other begins in the middle of the river just after the notorious Hardstein – a rock that is clearly visible even at high water, as is the Mühlstein further upstream, where floating mills once moored and flour was ground out on the water. This crag is now marked with a cross and holds a casket containing the heart and brain of a man who longed to remain attached to this landscape beyond his death: Niklas Vogt, who attended the Congress of Vienna as a delegate. He was also a poet and a historian – what other kind of man would choose to be buried beside one of Europe's main thoroughfares, a place where sailors feared shipwreck

or felt gratitude and relief once the perilous passage had been tamed, and wooden barques could once more be exchanged for larger, more stable freighters?

The Hardstein, on the other hand, is a refuge for birds that a few cormorants usually defend against a swarm of screeching gulls, like this evening. The thrum of large diesel engines forms a backdrop to their cries. Barges strain upriver against the current as it bears oncoming vessels downstream with uncanny ease. An endless procession of freight trains rattles past. As kids, we would often lose count after 110 goods wagons (one finger for every ten). For a moment it is quiet. A car waits at the roadwork traffic lights, then drives off, and a local train gives a single toot as it rounds the bend. Its signal echoes off the sloping far bank.

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Beyond the Hardstein, at kilometre 530.8, a quartzite reef used to protrude from the river, cutting across the current. The Bingen Hole was a gap barely two metres wide in this rocky shoal, and the natural dam held back the water in the Island Rhine. In medieval times, goods had to be transferred to smaller boats between Rüdesheim and Bacharach to pass through this hole close to the right bank just where the current suddenly gathered speed. In the seventeenth century, merchants from Frankfurt financed the dynamiting of a four-metre notch in the reef. This lowered the water level in the Rheingau district between Mainz and Bingen to such an extent that many islands were left high and dry, and the oak piles on which Mainz cathedral was built were no longer covered by groundwater. They began to rot. The repairs to the foundations were only completed in 1925.

Between 1831 and 1840 the gap was gradually enlarged, metre by metre, but even then it was not wide enough for steam-powered tugboats. By 1894 the opening had broadened to thirty metres and the one-kilometre-long longitudinal structure was now in place – the second stone levee in the river created a second channel for ships heading downstream. Plans were even hatched for a third channel, but it was feared that this would drain the Island Rhine completely. Although the reef was almost entirely demolished by a series of underwater explosions between 1966 and 1974 so that the opening is now the same width – 120 metres – as the bed of the Rhine by the Lorelei, groynes laid out perpendicular to the current have slowed the flow through the Rheingau and keep the river navigable. All along the Rhine, weirs like these protrude from the banks like stone jetties. The roar of the Bingen Hole, once audible from viewpoints a hundred metres above the water, has been reduced to silence.

Having negotiated this bottleneck, the river swings north at the base of a steep green slope and disappears from sight. It is a tricky bend and narrow, so it is no surprise that until the 1980s pilots guided ships through this stretch. They all have radar nowadays.

From the levee where I'm sitting on, connecting dykes stretch out practically at right angles to the bank – groynes, opening out like a fan, each a little lower than the last as you move downstream. If the water is high, some will spill over the barrier and collect in the first basin before trickling from one pool into the next. Below this structure an open sandy bay has formed between the bank and the end of the ridge. There should be carp lurking between the willow roots fingering the river. That, in any case, is the hope of an angler who refuses to give up, though he has been fishing with three rods since noon and caught nothing.

This nineteenth-century structure is now old enough to have become a natural feature in its own right. The upper basins have completely silted up, forming marshy pieces of land crowded with giant willows and poplars, with a splintered sycamore or an oak here or there. Fallen tree trunks, overgrown with creepers and covered with brambles. It is a jungle, similar to the alluvial forests nineteenth-century engineers beat back along the Upper Rhine. There, the river became a waterway, but here a second meadow landscape sprouted of its own accord, revealing how the riverbanks used to look. Such a good likeness, in fact, that tufted ducks from Scandinavia winter here rather than on the Rhine's large ox-bow lakes.

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We always imagine rivers as spanning the distance between their mouths and their sources, which demarcate what seems to be their inevitable course. However, the picture of the Rhine we derive from modern atlases is only the latest of hundreds or thousands of different variants. The river grew backwards. From the Kaiserstuhl hills it eroded its way into the Alps, acquiring ever more tributaries until eventually, towards the end of the last ice age, Lake Constance emerged in its present form and joined the two headwaters – the Anterior Rhine and the Posterior Rhine – to the main river. Nor did its mouth exist in its current guise. The North Sea was a dry expanse, occupied by a vast plain called Doggerland, across which hunters pursued gigantic herds of wild animals on foot from Europe to Britannia.

The whole nature of the modern Rhine, from its mouth to the foot of the Alps and on up to its sources, has been shaped by human hand. A map of the delta, from which Friesian merchants set out

across the North Sea and the Baltic around 600 AD and up the Rhine to Strasbourg and Basel, bears virtually no resemblance to modern charts. It was marshland, and houses were huddled on boggy islands and artificially drained hills whose contours were redrawn by every storm surge and spring tide. The Upper Rhine, which once meandered from Basel to Mainz in countless loops along a bed several kilometres wide, was canalised about 150 years ago into a waterway buttressed by levees, saving ships a distance of over 100 kilometres between Mannheim and Basel alone. The present-day alluvial forests along its banks are the paltry remains of what was once wilderness and were mainly replanted as a retention area for high water. A renatured backdrop with the allure of the original.

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So the Rhine's genesis defies any simplistic logic of source and mouth. Its beginning is to be found in its middle, and it was not sources that created this watercourse but regional subsidence which allowed it to take shape. The Upper Rhine Rift Valley between the Black Forest and the Vosges, the Odenwald and the Palatinate began to form fifty million years ago and eventually stretched to the Kaiserstuhl hills. Rivers and streams poured into this trough from the northern slopes of the Black Forest and the Vosges, creating freshwater lakes in hot, humid periods that in times of drought turned salty with the minerals borne by its feeder rivers. It was not until fifteen million years ago that these waters and lakes coalesced into the Proto-Rhine on this plain. Sluggishly, carrying far less water than it does now, it flowed from the Kaiserstuhl near Freiburg to Worms and thence through Rhenish Hesse via Alzey to the Bingen Hole.

Not forty kilometres from here as the crow flies is the Messel Pit, an extinct volcano, that takes us back through geological and evolutionary time to the banks of the later Proto-Rhine. A second crater, however, shows the present-day Rhine to be a river of the Anthropocene – the geological age many geologists and climate scientists says we are now living in. It is the first era in the earth's history so influenced by humankind that our fingerprints are found all over the world: the fallout from atomic bombs and nuclear tests nestling between the earth's strata; rising concentrations of CO_2 in the rings of trees; thin black smudges of smog in cores taken from the Antarctic ice. This second pit is located directly at the river's present-day mouth. The so-called Slufter is a human-made artificial crater used as a dump for the highly toxic sludge dredged from the bottom of Rotterdam's port. Here the threat is not out of sight but on the surface.

Between these two craters, the river's history unfolds.