A visit to Limerick-1938

by Dorothy McCall

THE SUN shone warm and kind as I boarded a bus for Limerick. We drove through a pleasant green country of small farms, he driver negotiating with easy skill the zigzag road. Delectable blue mountains came presently into view, and vanished again. We passed over brown trout streams and through sleepy towns. One feature of the landscape struck me forcibly—a passion for strong gate-posts, which must, I imagine, have their origin back in Ireland's stormy past.

The tiniest cottage with a thatch, a box of geraniums in the window and a fucshia-edged pathway, will sport a pair of massive stone posts anything from two to five feet in diameter. The gate may be of the flimsiest, or even be non-existent, but not to keep up a pair of splendid portals would evidently mean a fall in dignity. I was reminded of the Essex farm moats which are said to refer back to the age when the wolf still rampaged in England.

A few scattered villas and a brand-new all-electricity house warned me we were approaching Limerick. Past some dull terraces, and suddenly we seemed back in the eighteenth century. Only the raw bricks of a Jesuit college warned me that the Crescent we were now entering was not a dream, that I should not be seeing patches and powder on the footway. Down the long continuous thoroughfare of O'Connell Street, Patrick and Rutland Streets to Charlotte Quay we went, between rows of lovely Georgian houses of dark-red brick, built apparently to one pattern. Even the porticos are uniform. A pair of Ionic pillars above a stately flight of stone steps supports each beautiful fanlight, and with few exceptions the windows with their twelve or sixteen panes remain intact. But the houses themselves are sadly ravaged, glass out of a fanlight here, a broken step there. And when we reached Charlotte Quay, I was appalled by the squalor. Swarms of ragged children ran in and out the great doors, for these palatial houses have now become a hive of tenement houses occupied by the poorest of the poor.

Round the corner are the Old Custom House with its river-side garden, and other quays, their tall houses all showing the same sad face. And past them flows the strong tide of the Shannon from which the Atlantic breezes blow, fresh and cleansing.

As a child I had spent a day in Limerick driving round on a jaunting-car, and had longed to stay on and taste the full flavour of its charm. So now I rejoiced to be here again, and to lean over the parapet of Sarsfield Bridge, looking out to Thomond's seven stone arches and King John's Castle. That massive keep, and the battlemented tower of St. Mary's Cathedral, gleaming in the sunshine, seemed to be mocking the eight centuries that have not availed to break their strength or turn them into ruins. The climate here deals kindly with the native limestone.

In the evening I walked beside Abbey River, past Sir Harry's Mall, where my quest drew its first blank. The tall houses were all gone, and only imagination could call back my father sailing boats long years ago in one of the great cellars.

Beyond, on the King's Island, hundreds of trim white houses were rising, some already occupied by former tenement dwellers from the crumbling Georgian quays; a fine scheme, but it seems only the years will make it popular. The fanlighted staircase leading to single immense rooms and Adam fireplaces are the familiar background that the shawled women still mourn when dispossessed by the house-breaker of modern progress...

Next morning I was wakened by a strangely familiar yet long-forgotten sound, which resolved itself into that of many hoofs and rumbling wheels. The street below was alive with horse and donkey traffic. Shawled women and small boys drove scarlet donkey-vans, each carrying a can or two of milk to the creamery. There were larger carts bringing in wood and vegetables from the country and drawn by fine thick-set cobs. Four nuns bowled past in a smart governess cart, chattering gaily, one of them handling the reins in masterly fashion. Jaunting-cars were bringing farmers' wives in their best clothes into town for shopping. There was even a mysterious contraption, which revealed itself to my astonished gaze as a hoary landau, with its decaying upholstery planked over, doing valiant service as carrier's van.

I plunged into this jolly scene to wander round the town, and then to look for the key of St. John's Parish Churchyard. That, after scouring the town, I eventually did retrieve the key of St. Munchin's was to be expected; and that when I **did** find the right key, I had to get the boys of the neighbourhood to wrestle with it before I got in, was also just as natural. I eventually searched the St. John's registers in a third church with a genial dignitary who would have worn gaiters in England, but was here trousered and entirely approachable and helpful, despite the humble nature of my search for information. He even thanked me for making him go through the records so thoroughly, and refused to accept more than a trifling donation to the church funds.

And in those records we certainly came on sidelights on the practical value of respectability in centuries past. There was entry after entry of 'soldier's child', 'a poor woman's child': no name vouchsafed to those luckless little passengers who had been so unwelcome or passed so swiftly from a hard world. It was good to come out into the light again, and move on to the more robust company of the Freeman's Rolls at the Town Hall.

I quickly found all I was likely to find in Limerick by now, but I still carried on my researches in a spirit of pure adventure, largely because half the town was now also sharing my quest as they passed me hand to hand.

It was: 'And now you would need to meet So-and-so, he lives at 23, but it is next to 26 in that street'; or 'Mr. A. will be your man unless you was to go and see his brother-in-law that was once churchwarden.' And I would go to 23 and find that it was next to 28 and not 26, and that the former churchwarden's gardener was as anxious to help as ever the brother-in-law could be, even suggesting that I should interrupt a tennis match to get hold of the churchwarden.

One day I wandered into the Chamber of Commerce, intrigued by the date of 1809 over its door. Commerce seemed to have deserted it. I passed through a quiet stone-paved hall to find a wonderful upper room with a glorious Britannia carved on its brass and marble mantel, facing a unique eighteenth-century bookcase which must have been designed and built for the room. And through the window I saw an old stone pigeon-cote gracing the high garden wall. Once it held pigeons, trained to carry messages from the merchants living in their country houses in the days before the telegraph came. As I focused my camera on it the representative of Commerce at last found me. Far from resenting my intrusion, he helped to steady the camera and then spent half an hour searching the great bookcase for an old diary that might interest me. He did not find it, but then he so well might have, for he pointed out an ancient petition and

plan for widening the docks which had been retrieved and sent back by a firm of Lancashire waste-paper merchants. Those classical fronts in O'Connell Street must hold many secrets for the anitiquarian, for in out-of-the-way corners there, many documents are still safe and sound, papers that would have been burned to ashes if they had been stored in an orderly way in the Four Courts at Dublin.

I could have spent pleasant weeks, too, in the offices of the oldest newspaper of Ireland—the **Limerick Chronicle.** It has an almost unbroken collection of files, and I spent one happy afternoon turning over two that held some interest for me, and noting that in 1851 one could visit the 'Crystal Palace by a Cheap and Elegant mode of Travel'—by sea for fifteen shillings return. And one could spend five weeks at the Palace, if its charms held out that long.

Another day the owner of the very old printing office of the McKern brothers showed me their poster of 1809 in a frame. To printing and stationery they added the sale of the 'new festal matches., warranted to light a candle instantaneously'. It must have been truly festal to throw away the tinder-box, make paperweight of the flint, and flock to Bank Place to buy the miracle we take for granted today.

Then one day I was met on the doorstep with: "Are you the lady from England that wrote that book?"

It seemed a copy of a magazine for which I had written an article on my father's childhood in Limerick had been handed round the town, and that his worship, the judge, would like to see me.

His worship did even more. He invited me to sit in glory beside him on the Bench to watch the administration of justice. The atmosphere was serious, but there were some light moments; for instance when argument raged as to whether a human body was a soft substance.

'Some are. Some are not,' decided the judge.

'Was ye perfectly sober when ye started?' the defending counsel asked a witness. A list of drinks consumed, though alarming to me, then convinced even the prosecuting counsel that his sobriety must have been entirely beyond question. Anyway the accused was acquitted, leaving me assured that an Irish jury's strong suit is mercy.

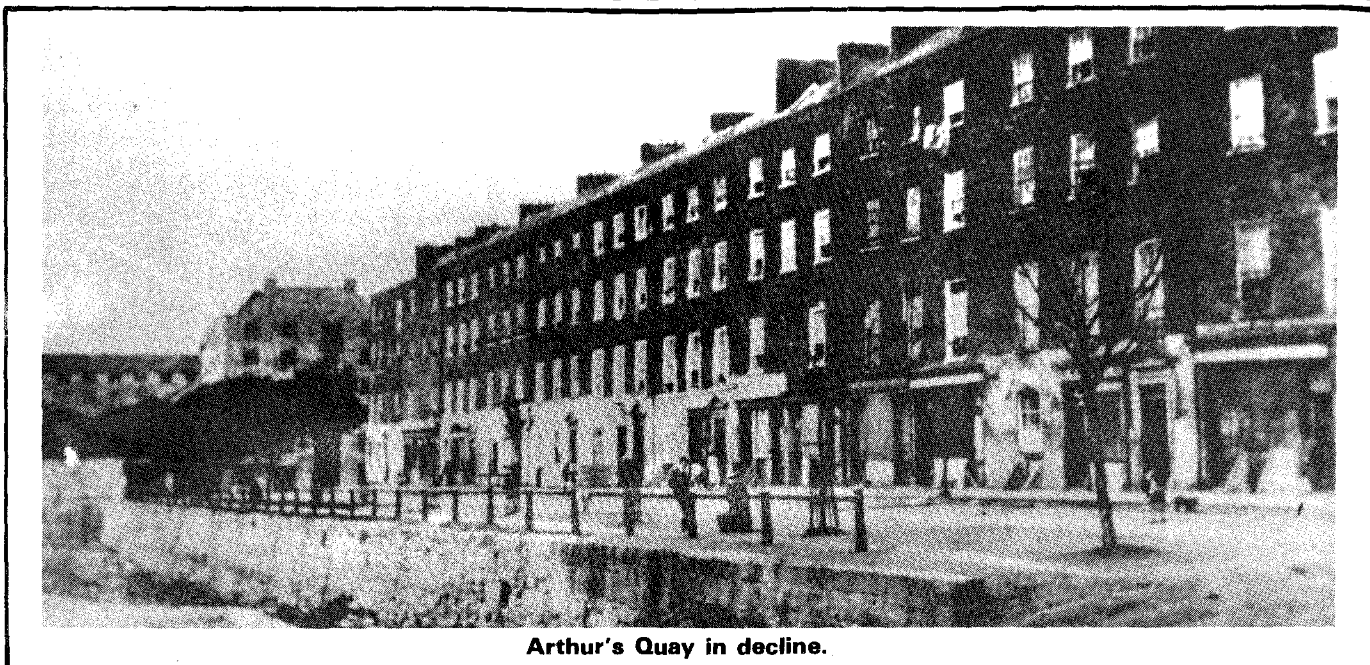
I was sorry to have missed a case in another court, concerning a fight with brooms and pails on a tenement house staircase, in which the defendant clinched her argument with: 'I am a lover of harmony, your worship, me husband being a musicianeer!'

Fortune also took me to an hotel where my quest brought me many friends and never-failing entertainment. It used to be said that every Englishman met every other sooner or later under the clock at Charing Cross. That Irish hotel lounge holds a like position. Here travellers from all parts meet to while away an hour over a drink between trains, or to spend the night before crossing the great waterway to other parts. There was a clock, too, a curious clock, which had the merit for the reveller of making time turn back after he imagined midnight to be approaching.

And outside, another clock thoughtfully broke off its chimes for the night watches, to begin them an hour to the good next morning, an hour mysteriously replaced during the day! For these things alone it is worth going to Ireland, not to mention the amazing and sustaining conversation that flows on and on like the majestic Shannon while the clocks do their fancy turns! A mere listener at first, I found myself before long drawn into the magnetic circle, my drop of Irish blood expanding in the climate and leading me to heights of conversational prowess of which I had never dreamed. Men and women of every county and class met me there, turned my opinions inside out, invited me to their homes and their friends' homes, to share their drinks and their friends' drinks, looked up my ancestors, offered me cuttings for my garden, and horses for my non-existent stable, or any other odd thing that would please. We never had to make conversation. We simply could not exhaust all the engrossing topics lying around.

Another night it was a green rose I had been given which started brisk discussion in the lounge. One was for carrying it to England in damp moss, to strike ten days later. Another sat down to write to the head gardener at Powerscourt, who would know the best way to keep its

Georgian Limerick: The City Hall.



Arthur's Quay in decline.

fading charms alive. I demurred at parting with my trophy to this expert, so another kind friend gave me a letter to his friend—Wille So-and-so—who would certainly send me a whole green rose-tree from his garden just for the asking. To all of them the flower was a topic of surpassing interest in our talk. I still have the rose pressed between the leaves of a book, and perhaps I may write to Willie one of these days, but when I show it to my countrymen here they remark that it is rather ugly. Such is the gulf that separates the Saxon from the Celt.

Now I was given this green rose in the village of Castleconnell where I had gone to look for the old house, Roselawn, from which my father and his youthful friends had sallied out long ago to fish for salmon to the music of Handel. It was still standing, battered and neglected, its garden overgrown with weeds; a ghost of a vanished way of life. The village of Castleconnell is also a shadow of past glories, for the Shannon Power Scheme has diverted much water from the famous salmon leap, and no longer do fishermen from all over the world come here 'to finish their education'. But a fifty-four pound salmon still gazes stolidly out of the window at Enright's, and tales go round of that master of his craft; how he would place a box of cigarettes on the lawn and pick out one with every cast of his salmon line; how he would entertain distinguished company of a Sunday, saying, 'Give us a song, Johnny!' and John McCormack would sing the long afternoon through.

Those grand days are over but Castleconnell is still a pleasant, whitewashed village where the eel-nets still provide some occupation. And as always, there were new friends waiting and tea in a cottage, with slices off a wheel loaf baked in a pot over a turf fire; tales, too, of the baking of great numbers of such loaves and the boiling of scores of eggs as provender, in the old days, when some sad emigrant was to sail to America in the steerage.

Memory is a strange long thing in Ireland; for, after tea my host borrowed a bicycle for me and took me off to interview old Micky whose memory could perform great feats, for he promptly pointed out to me the great-grandchildren of an old dame who had given my father rudimentary schooling in 1830—the year the cholera raged in Limerick.

Old Micky was another pathetic survival, living alone in one of the ruinous lodges of Mount Shannon, yet grateful for even such a parlous shelter on the edge of a scene of devastation where was once unbridled luxury. His mind ran chiefly on the heroic sportsmen of bygone days. 'Did ye ever hear tell of the Major?' he would exclaim, 'him that was lame and went to hunt on a lame horse and came in at the death?' A chuckle, and he would break into another tale of a one-armed sportsman who would shoot along his left arm, bringing down the birds as fast as his loader could hand him his guns. That passion for sport, even if vicarious, appeared not too bad a solace for a very dim evening of life; and Micky seemed marvellously content with the crumbs fortune had left him. He and a few other squatters in the great range of stone stables and farm buildings were the strange heirs of the magnificent demesne of John Fitzgibbon, Lord Clare, once Lord Chancellor of Ireland, who entertained his friends right royally in the fine rooms which in that sad blackened ruin stand open to the sky today. We stood under it, my friend, a learned builder, talking of the ways of eighteenth-century building, and picking up fragments of stucco mouldings from the rank grass, to show how strangely those classical architects could put it side by side with genuine stone.

Building is a craft that leads a man into fascinating bypaths of knowledge, and, as we walked along a great stone wall, he pointed out the amazing skill of those old masons who could form straight courses from stones of most varying size. He told me that it is a skill not yet dead in County Limerick and he took out his foot-rule to measure slates in a yard square, leaning against the wall, and described the quarries of Killaloe from which they were hewn, and the slabs that lie in the bed of the river,all of even thickness, ready to fish out for tombstones.

We ended up in the Protestant church at Kilmurry, where we saw some of these, curiously sculptured in comparatively recent times with the symbols of Passion and the Five Wounds. I have known many good builders and rare fellows but this Irishman was of the best. No wonder that in his village they called him the man who knows everything from the Flood!

On my last day in Limerick I lunched with a grand old couple, both in their nineties. We sat on a terrace, gay with hollyhocks, looking over a beautiful view of the river and the distant spires of the town, while they told me stories of 'the trouble'. They had lived in a state of seige here for a week at the time, sharing their stories with poorer neighbours. The old lady had had to surrender her son's motor cycle at pistol-point at dead of night. She chuckled as she recounted the polite and safe return of the machine on another dark night, and recalled a mysterious whisper dropped by a shawled woman in a shop later—'Did ye get the bike back all right?'—to which a nod could be the only response.