

Concentrating Citizens' Minds

David Hanly writes about growing up in Limerick City

TO the Fairgreen in Limerick, where I was born and spent the first eight years of my life, the circuses came every summer and raised their tents of magic outside our back window.

On the morning of arrival, this lucky child awoke to the *plie, plie, plie* sound of metal on metal, as the paired teams of bare-chested and tattooed young men brought sledgehammers down on steel stakes. They spoke in strange accents, and the exotic blue messages on their forearms proclaimed their love of 'Mother', or 'Belinda'. The artistes — The Magnificent Molundos, The Four Flamencas, The Great Carlo — were from different worlds, and seemed never to come to Limerick by a roundabout route: they were always 'direct from Czechoslovakia'. In the poorer circuses, it was often possible to detect amazing physical similarities between the Flamencas and the Molundos.

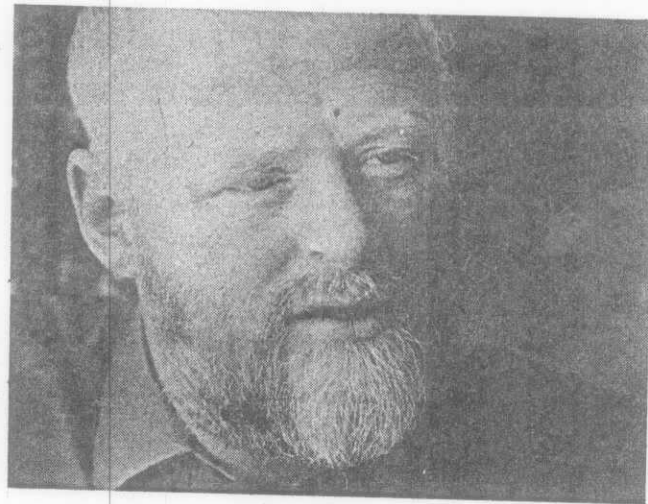
Beyond the Fairgreen was Mulgrave Street, where Kate O'Brien was born, made up on one side of a cemetery (still called 'The New Burying Ground' by an older generation, even long after it was full), the Mental Hospital, (the 'asylum') and the Gaol. At the end of the street was Sexton Street CBS, so that for most of my young life I passed the mad, the bad and

was Shaw's Bacon Factory, later Clover Meats, later closed down. Closed down also now are Matterson's and O'Mara's. On November evenings, on the way home from the library, the air would be heavy with the smell of the factories. Nowadays, this would be a nuisance, unacceptable pollution; then, it was the healthy smell of employment.

At the other end of the city was the Church where the Redemptorists every evening thundered unceasingly against the evil of this and the evil of that; never once did I hear a word about the evil of unemployment, the evil of poverty, the evil of inequality, all of which were to be witnessed all about one.

In the Markets Field on Sundays it was possible to be lifted over the stiles and stand in the cold to get a quickly scribbled autograph from Tommie Hamilton or Donie Wallace, arriving in full match gear under gaberdine coats and leaving a powerful blast of wintergreen in their wake.

Out at Thomond Park, the forwards grunted and mullocked in the seemingly perpetual mud, and the backs waited in the cold for balls



winter, their supporters spent most of the game pelting each other with snowballs; their team they could see anytime, but snow they might never see again. After matches, the pubs filled and the songs started, garrison town songs, sweet tenor voices; in the Shannon Club — the only working-class rugby club in Ireland — the rafters rang to that peerless anthem, *There Is An Isle*.

I worked in Matterson's office during the summers, woefully inadequate to the

accompany their fathers and be introduced to the almost mystical rituals at the men's redoubts.

At the end of the fortnight, as we set off back to Limerick, he always said, "Well, we won't feel Christmas." Christmas Day meant a long walk to Barrington's Pier for the bracing air. One by one we grew old enough to demur, and one fateful day Mick, my father's favourite, felt able to say that he would go "so long as it's not down to that pier again." My father went off alone.

On St Stephen's Day, in black polish and dresses, we serenaded hungover neighbours: That all ended when another brother — the mercenary in the family — actually sang for, and got money from, a family of travellers who were camped in a field in Garryowen. This shameless reversal of the norm struck the rest of us as being a bit much and we never went out on the 'wran' again.

I learned to dance at the local 'Hop', among people whom I knew, and where my chronic shyness in girls' company could be camouflaged. Moving up the scale to Cruises and the Royal

possessing as myself.

On the other hand, I wasn't a bad mover on the floor (how inept a mover off it) and there were enough young women around who liked dancing enough not to bother much about the partner's looks.

I left Limerick at eighteen, and so have no adult experience of trying to make my way in Limerick society. The city that I left was run-down, with great pockets of wretched dilapidation, and a populace among whom truculent irony seemed to be the accepted currency of conversation, 'ball-hopping' the highest social art.

Now, at last, it has its own university. Now, at last, there is new - and fine - building going on. Revival is in the air. In 1991, the city will celebrate its '300', as Cork did its '800' and Dublin its Millennium. The latter has provoked - and continues to provoke - scepticism about its value, and there is no doubt that there was much to be sceptical about. But there is also no doubt that, whatever else it did *not* do, the Millennium caused many Dubliners to think seriously about their city for the first time in their lives.

If the 'Limerick 300' does nothing more than concentrate the minds of the citizens