

Christmas in Newcastle West

by Michael Hartnett



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H shouting farmer with a shotgun, a few patch-trousered urchins, soaked, snotty and unrepentant, running across wet fields, arms full of holly. The long walk on the railway tracks, the sleepers treacherous and slimy, the dark stations, the lamp-posts with their glittering circular rainbows. We stopped at the shops' red windows, to admire toys we could never have. A few drunks waltzed by, happy and moronic. An open lorry went by to jeers and obscenities; the pluckers, shawled and snuff-nosed on the back, on their way to a flea-filled poultry-store to pluck turkeys at ninepence a head.

Candles and paraffin-lamps did not brighten the darkness in kitchens in Maiden Street - they only made the gloom amber. The purloined holly hung on holy pictures. There were no balloons, no paperchains, no Christmas trees. Coal was bought by the half-stone, butter by the quarter-pound and tea by the half-ounce. The country people trotted by on donkey-and-cart or pony-and-trap with "The Christmas"

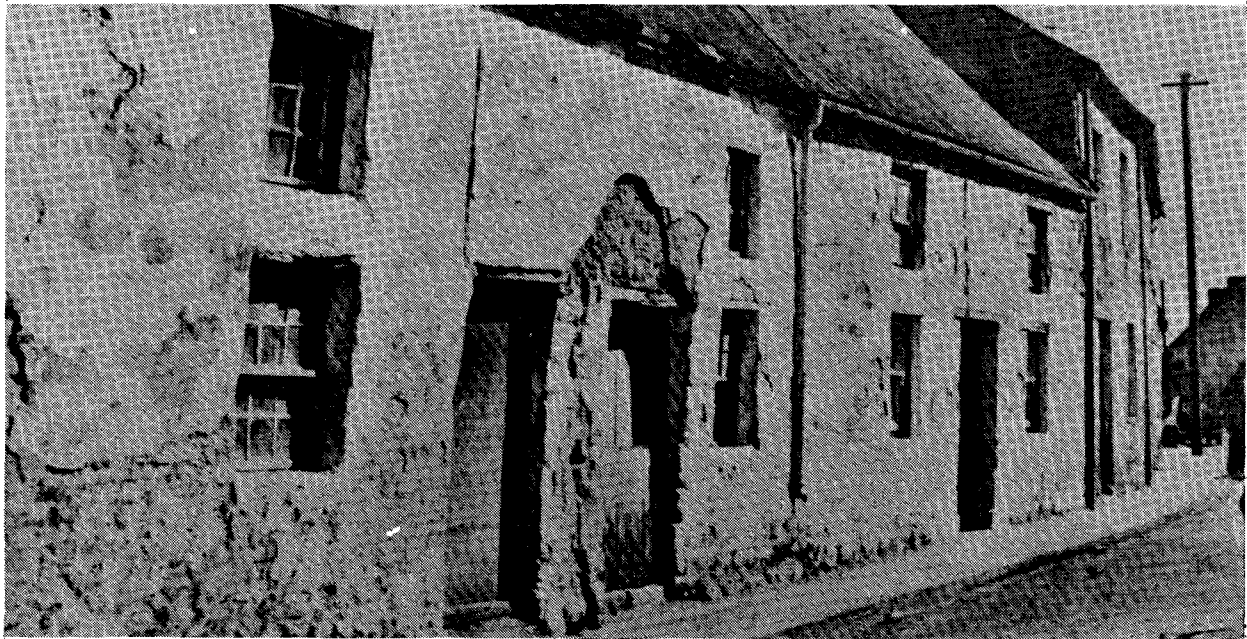
stones of sugar, pounds of tea. Women in shawls and second-hand coats from America stood at half-doors, their credit exhausted, while the spectre of Santa Claus loomed malevolently over the slates and thatch. Members of charitable institutions distributed turf and boots, God-blessing the meagre kitchens, as hated as the rent-man. They stood well-dressed on the stone floors, were sirred and doffed at. They paid their workers slave wages. They looked without pity at the nailed together chairs, the worn oilcloth-topped tables, the dead fires.

Outside, the rain fell and blew along the street. The tinkers fought. Bonfires died out in the drizzle. We were washed and put to bed, happy and undernourished. The oldest went to midnight mass. The Latin was magic, the organ, the big choir. It always seemed like a romantic time to die.

It was a Christmas of tin soldiers, tin aeroplanes and cardboard gimcracks. We were Cisco, Batman, Johnny Mack Brown all that day. Our presents - "pur-ties" we called them - seldom lasted longer than that day. It never snowed. There was no turkey, no plum-pudding,

no mince-pies. The Victorian Christmas was not yet compulsory. The very poor managed roast meat, usually mutton. We often rose to two cocks. The goose was common. There was a fruit-cake, jelly and custard; the dinner of the year. I never remember drink being in the house. There were never visitors, nor were we encouraged to visit anyone. If the day had been anyway fine, we were to be found on the footpath or in the puddles, knuckles blue.

The Wren's Day always brought frost. Small warm heads came from under rough blankets to the sound of flutes and banjos and bodhrans far up the street. We donned boot polish and lipstick and old dresses and went out to follow the wren, tune-less chancers. We sang and giggled our way to a few bob and a glass of lemonade. The back kitchens of the pubs filled up with musicians, the musicians filled up with porter and their wives filled up with apprehension. In a few hours, winter took over again. There will never be Christmases like those again, I hope to God.



Maiden Street, Newcastle West.