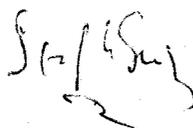


Broad Town Farmhouse,
Broad Town,
Swindon,
Wiltshire,
February 1st., 1980

Of course the Old Limerick Journal may reprint that piece from The Mint. You ask how I came to write about Limerick. Looking for dolmens, caves, sheila-na-gigs and limestone flora, we had been staying in Co. Clare with friends of the Irish poet Geoffrey Taylor. My wife was agonized by getting something in her eye which felt large as the capstone of a dolmen. The something wouldn't be dislodged, and on our way home we stopped in Limerick and in a smart doctors' street, found a very handsome young Irishman, who whisked out a speck of dust and said to my wife as he did so that she couldn't be English, from her accent. She said, no, she came from Vienna. "How much do I owe you?" asked my wife. "Nothing," said the eye-doctor, "a present from one Viennese to another." A good omen, so we stayed on for a while in Limerick.

Yours sincerely,



Geoffrey Grigson

THE CITY OF LIMERICK

by Geoffrey Grigson

In Limerick, the intermixture of past and present slightly distresses an English nose and an English morality. Not far from the station, clean, trim, with blue-uniformed maids disappearing through well-painted, brass-plated doors under the fanlights, an Irish Harley Street runs towards the Shannon. In the consulting rooms of surgeons, physicians, eye specialists, gleamingly equipped, one may see from the framed diplomas on the wall, that a degree was taken, first at Trinity, then, not in London, but in the medical schools of Vienna. Not so far away, if one continues down hill to the Shannon, walks along its open waters by the wide quay, one's enjoyment of the windy air of an open-and-shut day is interrupted suddenly by a smell, the smell of decay and dirt and being poor. Dirty-legged children appear, dirty Rowlandson-like woman slipper-slopper by under black shawls.

As one turns the corner of Honan's Quay, the smell, the whiff, becomes a stench, the dirty, indescribable, formless rubbish on the stone of the quay increases, the children and the women multiply; and with astonishment one sees the long tall cliff of eighteenth-century tenements, which deliciously—at least in the architect's intention—face the openness of the river. Broken, black windows. Broken, black fanlights, leading in, and in (the door having gone), into heaven knows what heart of blackness, what squalor, what indifference; leading in to Sean O'Casey's phantasmagoria of Irish slums. The children weave in and out, the black shawls congregate by the doorless doorways. Through

an open window, a woman between seventy and eighty, with the lower lids of her eyes sagging down and showing the watery red. And above all, around all, in all, the stench, the stench, a bit sweet with the near-bitter intensity and obscenity of saccharine. Mixed with the stench the high voices, shouts from one window to another, from window to quay, quay to window.

At one end the upper portion of the tenement cliff is blind. The wall has tumbled out, and in a great U, the brickwork has been replaced, but without windows. One house in the tenement empty, because dilapidation has gone too far. The windows without glass, and the wind off the Shannon blowing in and blowing out through the roof, yet powerless to cleanse, powerless to obliterate the stench. One remembered O'Casey—O'Casey's slum doors 'scarred with time's spit and anger's hasty knocking', the streets which were 'long haggard corridors of rotteness and ruin.' Only here, because the brick face stared with its corrupted eyes across the Shannon, toward trees and hills, because of all this, the effect was absolute, as if one looked at an aged, noseless syphilitic on a green lawn surrounded by flowers. I remember once a curious sweet smell coming to me in the reading-room of the British Museum, persistent above the dry oil-cloth scent of the desks; and turning half-round, I saw a noseless reader over his books, the nose-holes plugged with yellowish cotton-wool. Cromwell's Ireton died in this city, of the plague, and here were nose-plugged houses (in which fantastically life was possible) dying still of a plague.

Two turnings deliver one from the tenements into Patrick Street, and Patrick Street merges into the long run of George's Street, painted, and clean, alive with the great jars of coloured water in the 'Medical Halls', with fine gilt lettering, elaborate graining. Here are hotels,

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solicitor's offices, shops emitting the smell of newly roasted coffee; and a stream-lined motor-bus from the Atlantic air-port; and children still from the tenements who clutch one when asking "Any gum, chum?" Half-way up a new church opens to the street, people of all sorts moving into it to pray and to dip their fingers into holy water. A slick interior of marble and white, blue and pink statues, and black tubby priests. Then, two bookshops in George's Street, with that stange blend—strange at least to an Englishman—of theology, peitism, and the secular. One could buy in them the new number of "The Bell", Evelyn Waugh, St. Thomas Aquinas, Webb's "Irish Flora", a fascicle on early Celtic art, and almost enough pietistic pamphlets to drive out the smell of Limerick's poverty, and replace it with the smell, and emptiness, of whiteness and water. Bookshops and the slick church, the cheaply printed piety and the smooth marbles, were portions of the new Irèland, not superimposed but growing nastily out of time's spirit.

In between them and the tenement Ireland, in a side street leading back to the Shannon, one came into a crowded cave where Ireland of the town, of the tenement, and of the country all crowded and mixed into a painting of Ostade's: prams, parcels, saddles, saucepans, sacks, young girls and children, long farmers, round nuns, hags under shawls, a hairy hunchback, filling the dark cave around a stove, from which a pipe straddled along to a soot-rimmed hole in the wall. In the centre of the gloom, to which one struggled through bodies and parcels, a

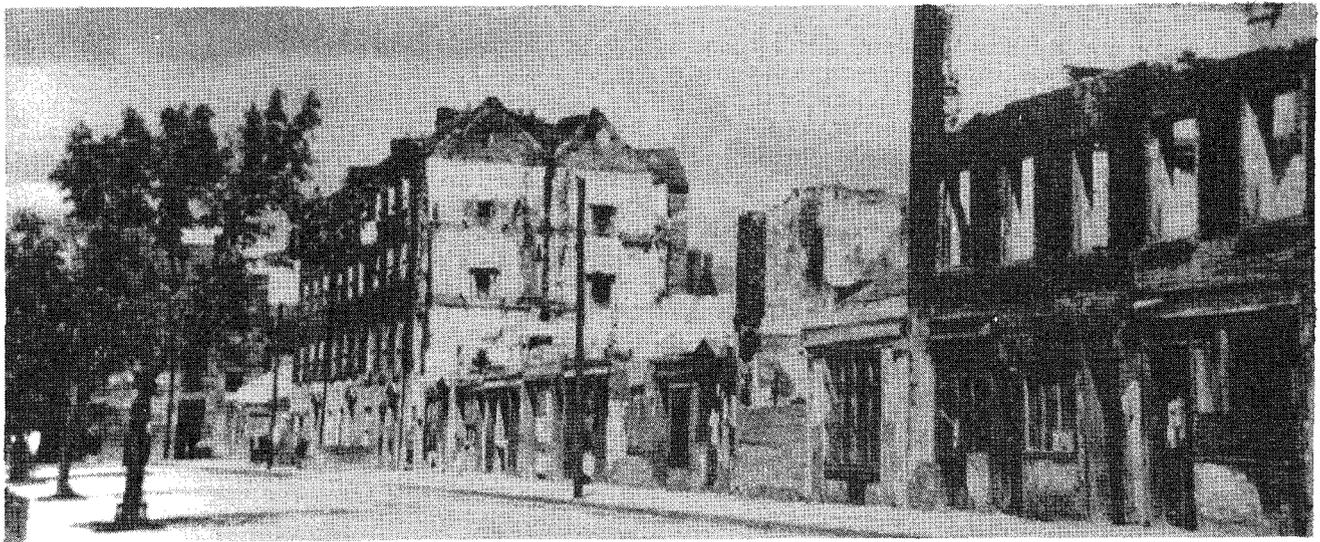
wooden box from which a clerk—since this was the bus station—sold tickets and gave, endlessly, informatio and times. Full buses endlessly moved up and emptie their cargoes into the deep etching of the cave and move off: long-distance buses which tied together all of th south of Ireland. The cave once more, in its darkness shabbiness, elderly inprovisation, its bare wood, its ho human steam and crowdedness, was an Ireland without date, the fecund, active Ireland, so unself-consciously alive, so bewildering to notions of betterment, and tidiness and social services.

When Lady Fanshawe and her husband, with Cromwell 'pursuing his conquests at our backs', came to Galway city, to embark for Spain, they were led by an Irish footman to a merchant's house, their way taking them 'all on the backside of the town, under the walls over which people during the plague...flung out all their dung, dirt and rags, and we walked up to the middle of our legs in them, for being engaged, we could not get back'. One may think, between the bus station cave and the tenements of Limerick, that a visitation of plague is not the prerequisite required for the squalor of Irish towns; and one realizes how foreign the whole concept either of town or village must be to the Irish, how the towns have been imported by the English and foisted upon a tribal, rural Irish, who did not know and still have not learned how to conduct them or live in them. Cats are cleanly animals, but in cages they smell. The town Irish are in cages.

In Limerick, still one other Ireland was visible, as the



Pery Square. "A smart doctors street".



Arthur's Quay in its last days.

dust flew up in stinging curves against the dirty and the clean. Patrick Street has a large curiosity and junk shop. Books, bed-pans, gilt mirrors, gilt wall brackets held up by cherubs, bamboo tea-tables—the expected jumble of the newer meretricious and the older solid. The delicate gilt furniture told of auction sales within the walls of a demesne, of the decay and the death of the Anglo-Irish. And here were their books—Thomson's "Seasons", the poems of Aubrey de Vere, the "Spectator" in calf, Hervey's "Meditations", "The Rambler", the annuals and the Books of Beauty, John Locke, Paley, an early edition of "Modern Painters", armorial bookplated inside, with Latin crests of a moral bravado; and with them the last layer, Farrer's "English Rock Garden", E.A. Bowles's "My Garden in Summer", books by 'Elizabeth', even a few volumes of Turgenev, alongside a history of the Boer War. In England the Farrer and the Bowles would be expensive, in Limerick, they cost a shilling or two the volume.

Beside the junk shop, one should set, last of all, Limerick's museum, which is less a museum, despite torques and blunderbusses and sherds and corporation maces and insignia, than a shrine of relics of 1916 and the rebellion. I.R.A. proclamations, letters of Irish political martyrs and fighters—all are mucked up with the Bronze Age and with the eighteenth century and (again) with Aubrey de Vere in book and manuscript, in a medley of untidiness indifferent to the stratifications of time. But is the I.R.A. proclamations which have pushed the gilt cherubs into the junk shops.

There are many more books, many more cherubs to dribble in from decayed houses, and pile up behind the fly-spots of the shop window. There are country houses, poorish architecture of the eighteenth or the early nineteenth centuries, in which the floors swing under foot, the wallpaper peels down over the cabinets of Spode, and the damp reeks through the wall to spot a water colour, not of Ireland, but of Malham Tarn or Cader Idris, houses where the firmness of fingers around life is weakening, in which one last Anglo-Irish woman of the family, and an elderly Scottish governess sit down to a buttered scone and soda-bread tea brought in by one last servant. The books are not read in the library. The folly down by the lake drops its ornamental stonework into the nettles, the shrubs grow out over the drive, the Gloire de Dijon hangs off the walls, and the stucco falls down flat on to what was once a flower border. There are gaps in the wall of the demesne; and between the gaps, "Up, Dev!" is scrawled along the masonry.

An Englishman feels uneasy at lunch or at the tea-table

in such houses, even in the ones—still shabby—where life is more multitudinous and brisk. He feels the courtesy, the hospitality, the friendliness, he feels the envy of the closeness of this decaying society, the possibility of hiring maids at low wages, the horses, the split-cane rods in the hall, the shooting, the space, the indifference to the clock. But he feels the decay; he feels the hopelessness, and the split between the Big House and the more Irish Ireland; he feels, with the pathos, a slight disgust; he remembers Yeat's liking for the Big House and the remark made upon it by another Irishman, Louis Mac-Neice—that 'in most cases these houses maintained no culture worth speaking of—nothing but an obsolete bravado, an insidious bonhomie and a way with horses'; and above all, he feels responsible. He reads 'Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland', he reads Dr. Arensberg's "Irish Countryman", he reads the speech of the President at a commemoration of the evictions, or any political speech, made anywhere, and reported in any local paper. He reflects on those savage Nuremberg Laws, the Statutes of Kilkenny, enacted by Lionel, Duke of Clarence, in 1366, which say, in effect for ever, we are the superior English, the Master Race, you the inferior Irish, who, in the centuries ahead, shall eat potatoes, and only potatoes, who shall starve in your bogs when the potatoes are blighted; and then he looks round at the shabby house, tastes the bonhomie and the hospitality and the Irish lamb, and, ashamedly and savagely at once, reflects that these Anglo-Irish have inherited the sins of the fathers. After all, what if that Kilkenny division into bog and Big House never had occurred? If the Irish and English had mixed? Would the rose be off the wall, would there be that stench in the Limerick slums, would the petty pietism of the religious pamphlets fill the bookshops? Or would, anyway, would the infinite, brown, flat miles of central Ireland, the low roofing clouds, and the rain have possessed the souls and the bodies of all who lived within the island, Englishmen or no?

So he finds it easier to say yes to another unrationed helping of lamb; he continues to talk about Elizabeth Bowen or "The Bell" or the priests, or the censorship; or how polite the gunmen were when they poured the paraffin on the sofa. (Perhaps the black gunmen will be less polite when at last they fire the houses in South Africa.) And he is relieved when he is looking for plants on the Burren, out of sight of a demesne wall; or when he emerges from the boat at Holyhead, through the customs, and sits again, with "The Times", and not "The Irish Times", in the smug privacy of a compartment of an English train.