

A POET IN PARIS 1955-56

FROM LIMERICK TO THE LEFT BANK

For me in the winter of 1954, O'Connell Street, Limerick, was Desolation Row on the dark edge of Europe. There was no work. Unemployment was at a peak and emigration was rampant. In the Limerick of that year, there was no liberty, no equality, no fraternity – except the fraternal friendship of four kindred spirits who had a common interest, the Arts. Each of the four friends have a story. This is part of mine.

Of the four of us, Jack Donovan was the most stable. A gifted young art student, he was studying painting at the School of Art, in the Technical Institute, O'Connell Avenue. Already, painting was his whole thinking life, and coming in from Rathkeale, County Limerick, to school every morning and returning home every evening structured his day and life. He would naturally qualify and have a career as an art teacher and a life as a painter. That was *his* chosen life.

Richard Harris had a serious interest in the theatre and acting. During the day, he helped in the office of his father's flour business. There, he read plays and poetry and scribbled his first verses and drafts of plays. He was secure in the knowledge that he always had his father's business to fall back on. But he wanted to study acting in London, go on the stage and make a lifetime career in the theatre.

The third was Michael Cunneen, whose art was music. He came from a very musical family, and studied the violin. His sisters played the piano and sang in choirs and his father had a fine voice, when they all performed together at home. Michael had learned his father's trade of draper and was secure in the knowledge that he could continue his business, if he chose to do so.

I was the youngest of the four, and my vocation was poetry. I read a great deal and had been writing poems seriously since I was fifteen. I hoped one day to publish a book of poems. I had no family business to go into, but thought of a possible career in teaching. With emigration in full flow, there were few teaching jobs available, and qualified teachers were among the emigrants. I decided to emigrate, too, not to England or America, but to Paris.

The four of us frequently got together during weekdays at tea-time in the



Desmond O'Grady, Annette Reeves and Richard Harris, on 11 November, 1956, in O'Connell Street, Limerick.

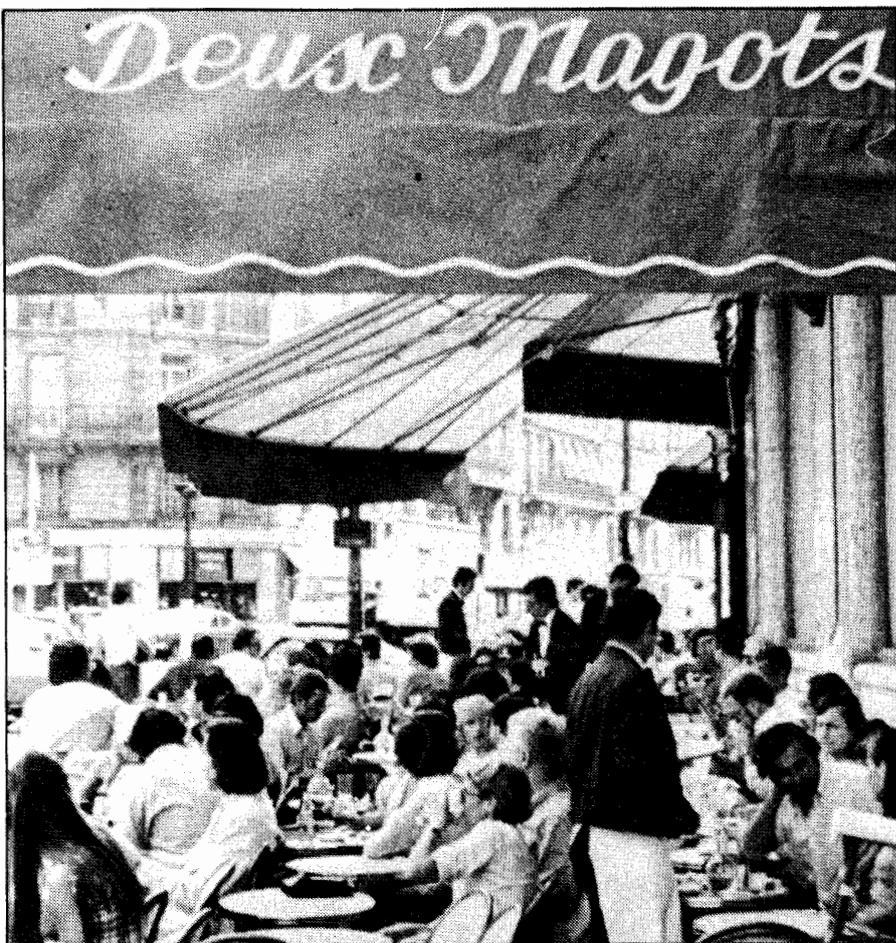
BY DESMOND O'GRADY

tearoom of the Savoy cinema to talk about art, writing and concerts. And we lived out our Bohemian fantasies. I affected a French beret, stolen from my sister, and fantasied we were at the Café Savoy on the Left Bank in Paris. The Shannon was our Seine, the two rowing clubs were on the Ile de la Cité, from where you could see a tower of Notre Dame in St. John's Cathedral, over there near the Bastille of the Irishtown. And on Saturdays, I walked through my les Halle in the Market. We studied reproductions in Donovan's art books and in poetry books borrowed from Bob Herbert, the liberal Limerick City librarian. The Carlton cinema occasionally ran Continental films, which Harris would comment on. And we all wanted to be like our great hero-artists: Harris was Marlon Brando; Donovan was Matisse, Cunneen was Yehudi Menuhin and I was James Joyce. Once a week, I had the Poetry Circle to go to. Organised by Kitty Bredin, the group met in Arthur O'Leary's house to read and discuss the modern poets or a modern play. These activities were the only source of light at the end of the Limerick tunnel, in the winter of 1954. The rest was gloom and doom, depression and despair. Donovan was too set in his ways to move, so I lectured Harris and Cunneen that we

must get out. By early spring, my mind was made up. I announced grandly that I was leaving. I was going to the real Paris. I had enough for the boat-fare to England. There, I would get work and make enough to go on to Paris in the autumn. Nothing would stop me. Harris was excited: he promised to follow. He would go to London and get into the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. He promised. I left. London was tough and rough, but I made and saved the money and got to Paris in the autumn. I was free.

The first place I headed for in Paris was the youth hostel off Pigalle in Montmartre. This I would use as a base until I learned my way around. I knew nobody, and had no contacts. I was on my own. I was not afraid. I was free and happy. The first week was spent learning my way around the Montmartre of our Limerick fantasies. Of course, it had not exactly the same ambience as in Lautrec's day at the turn of the century, but it wasn't much changed either in the thirty-odd years since 1920. Of course, I went to all the museums to see the original paintings Jack Donovan used to show me reproductions of, and I walked through all the places in the paintings. Then I crossed the river.

The Left Bank in Paris was another world – certainly a very different world to the left bank of the Shannon in Limerick City. My first day was spent wandering the main boulevards, St. Michele and St. Germain, and the warren



The Deux-Magots, Paris.



Place Furstenberg, a quiet corner on the Left Bank, Paris.

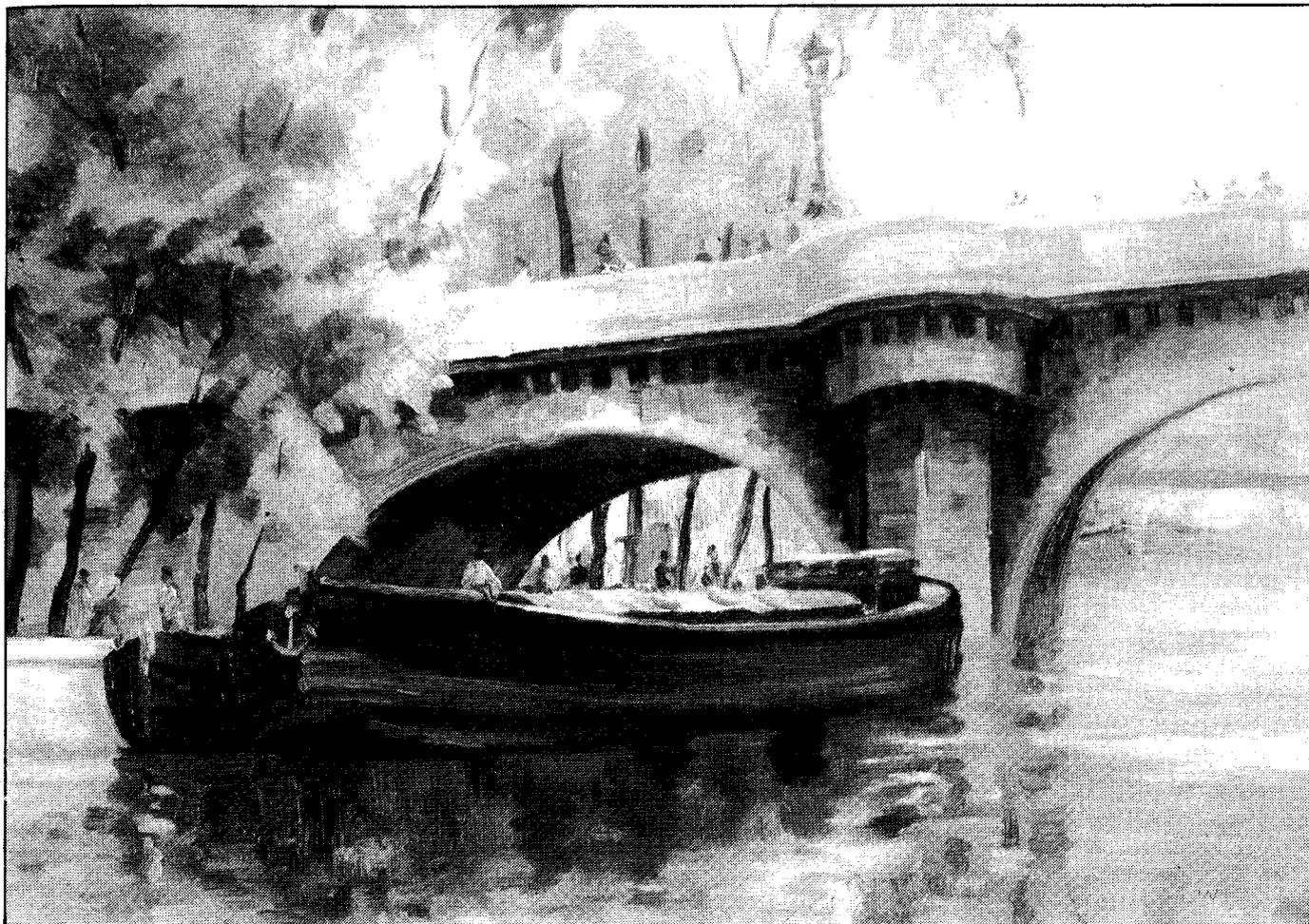
of side streets off them around the Sorbonne and Place St. Germain-des-Prés. I happened on a little Anglo-American bookshop, La Mistral, facing Notre Dame, owned by George Whitman, an eccentric American who settled in Paris in 1945, after the war. Of course, the most famous English bookshop in Paris in the post-First World War years and in the 1920s had been Shakespeare and Co., frequented by Joyce, Pound and all the other expatriate literati. Sylvia Beach, who owned Shakespeare and Co., had published Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922. Now she lived as a recluse in retirement, and La Mistral had replaced her bookshop in spirit.

La Mistral was then the meeting-place of the expatriate literati and artists. You could sit there and read anything you liked but couldn't afford to buy, talk with other like-minded people about writing, art, politics and philosophy. It was a great place to learn how to survive in Paris, and George Whitman was, if silent and eccentric, a most hospitable man. And he had a special grudge for the Irish. Having discovered this meeting-place, I returned daily, became good friends with George, and helped him in sorting and selling the books. When he had to go out, I looked after the shop. One day, he told me he planned to go away for ten days' holiday, and asked me to run the shop for him. I immediately left the youth hostel and Montmartre and moved into the La Mistral and the Latin Quarter. From this centre, I looked around for a permanent pension where I could create a room of my own. I slept at the back of the bookshop and got to know the quarter well. At night, it was Montmartre café-life.

Café-life before lunch was the trio of parnasse, St. Germain-des-Prés, the Flore, the Deux-Magots and La Palette; at night it was Boulevard Monparnasse, the Dome, the Sélect and La Coupole. Besides the regular European faces like Sartre, Giacometti and others, there were the Americans, Richard Wright and James Baldwin, the black American dissident novelists, the English poet, Christopher Logue, and the group around the Travellers' Library who had just published *Lolita*. A few years later, the Beatniks came - Ginsberg, Corso, Orlovsky, Burroughs and Kerouac. There were quite a few American ex-G.I.s from the Korean War who were hanging around in the wake of James Jones, the novelist, full of talk about the novels they were going to write on their G.I. Bill income. All talk - but in the cafes once frequented by Faulkner, Joyce, Hemingway and the other greats. I did my share of talking too. Too poor to pay for even cheap drink, I talked about Anglo-Irish and European literature - Joyce and Yeats, Synge, Kavanagh, Clarke, Mann, Camus, Moravia, Svevo, Calvino etc. The Americans paid for the drink while I talked. I learned the more you talked about it, the less you wrote.

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'Under the bridges of Paris', from a painting by the Limerick artist, Fergus O'Ryan.

One American even wrote and published a novel about me called *Nobody Dies in Paris*. I don't remember his name.

It was autumn, I was out of money and, not able to pay rent, had no place to live. Two clochards pushed over on their metro grating on Place de la Contrascarpe and I pushed in beside them, wrapped in my ex-Navy Store duffel-jacket, the hood pulled down like a Cistercian monk in his coffin. Eating and drinking was paid for by the Americans in return for literary and artistic conversation. The undrunk and left-over drinks I'd pour into a bottle and bring back to the grating for heating and somnolence. This, with the hot air from the grate, kept the two clochards and me warm. Before winter set in, it was obvious I had to get a job and make a regular income and find a room I could afford. My Irish rebel hero, James Joyce, was my example. When he left Ireland permanently for the Continent in 1904, he got a job teaching at the Berlitz School of Languages. I followed his example. Now, with a job teaching English to French watiens, barmen and lonely old ladies, I could afford to rent a room at Hotel du Midi, and I left the Metro grating. That was the coldest winter Paris had suffered in fifty years. The Seine froze and my two clochard friends literally froze too, to death, one night on

the grating. I survived.

One of my teaching colleagues at Berlitz was an elderly Irishman called Fred Gallaher, who came in evenings to give English lessons to old ladies to pass the time. Originally a Dubliner, and pushing seventy, he had left Ireland as a young man for London, came later to Paris, got away to South America when the Germans invaded, but was now back with his Peruvian wife. He still had a strong Dublin accent, and we became friends. One evening, he asked me if I had heard of an American professor called Richard Ellmann. I said I had, that he had written two books on Yeats. Why? Gallaher explained that growing up and as a young man in Dublin, he had a neighbour friend who also had emigrated and lived in Paris. Ellman wanted information about Dublin people in Joyce's books because he was writing a biography. And it suddenly dawned on me that my Gallaher was the prototype for Ignatius Gallaher in *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*. I was stunned. A real live Joyce character right there. Gallaher asked me if I would come with him to meet Ellmann, and I readily agreed.

We met one evening at the Deux-Magots. Ellman was with another man and introduced him: Samuel Beckett. He, too, was writing books and plays, but nobody except a very select few outside

Paris knew about him yet. But all that was about to change with the first production of *Waiting for Godot*. We had a very interesting evening: Ellmann asking the questions about Dublin and Dubliners of Joyce, and Beckett and Gallaher telling him what they knew or remembered. We met daily for a week, with Ellmann taking notes. A few years later, I would meet Ellmann again in Rome and we became friends. He helped me with my decision to go to America to study at Harvard, and we corresponded until the year he died.

That winter in Paris, I worked hard at writing poems, surviving through teaching and living the Latin Quarter life. Events in 1956 had me back in Ireland, where I finished my first collection of poems which appeared in Limerick that year as *Chords and Orchestrations*. My first book was published. Donovan was teaching painting in Limerick. Harris was acting in London. Cunneen was working in Limerick. Our lives were launched, but I still see all three.

But there was no future for me in Ireland, so I moved again, this time to Italy and Rome. I stayed away for thirty years, creating my own liberty, equality, fraternity wherever I've lived. I returned to create my own form of exile from exile in the freedom, fraternity and equality of Kinsale.