

Escape To East Or West

By Desmond O'Grady

AS I HAVE written elsewhere, Limerick city in 1954 seemed, to those of us leaving school, the last bollard on the dark edge of Europe, and O'Connell St seemed a Desolation Row for anybody with a curious imagination.

There were only two grabs for the reaching mind then: the road east to the capital boat if one had the guts to face the bias of Britain; the road west to Shannon Airport and all-welcoming America if your family had the money to send and the relatives to sponsor you. Some of us got out east, fewer west. Many never moved at all but stayed behind and shrivelled.

Limerick in the early 50s was a cast-divided city of Catholics and Protestants, urbanites and suburbanites,

Laurel Hill and Presentation girls, Jesuit and Christian Brother boys. The Rugby, Rowing and Church clubs were equally divided. Laurel Hill girls flirted with and married Crescent boys; Presentation girls went with and propagated Christian boys; Shannon Rowing club didn't speak to Artlunkard and Garryowen didn't drink with Young Munsters. And the Patrician Jesuits looked down their Roman noses on the legions of the Capital Redemptorist Confraternity.

However, there existed an eccentric elite of aspiring and amateur artists among whom cast or class held no hard currency and among whom promise and excellence were applauded; classical music and fine singing, amateur acting, the odd writer like Kate O'Brien, and, with the beginning of the Art School



● Desmond O'Grady, Annette Reeves and Richard Harris in O'Connell St, Limerick, Winter 1954

some gifted painters like Jack Donovan.

In 1954 the Arts in Limerick were very local and low key but there was Desmond O'Grady seriously writing poems and Richard Harris dedicated to becoming an actor.

As all teenagers do on there way home from school, Laurel Hill girls in their uniforms had their corner, Mulligans corner on O'Connell St, before they took their buses home to Ballinacurra, Corbally or the Ennis Road.

The Crescent boys dallied with the Laurel Hill girls on their way to Rugby practise - Dickie Harris, Maura Graham, Gordon Wood, Betty Slattery. In 1954, I was an exception because I had been sent away to a Cistercian boarding school. In those adolescent years I had been a naughty boy and was consigned to Roscrea Cistercian Cloisters.

Harris had fallen ill and was confined to bed for some months. We both had our personal epiphanies at this crucial time. Through our lonely reading Harris discovered plays and I discovered poetry. During this hiatus of adolescence Harris realised the radiance of Marlon Brando and the modern New York School of method acting. I discovered James Joyce and the modern movement in literature. Our painter friend Jack Donovan discovered Cezanne and modern painting. We three became fast friends.

The three of us met frequently in Limerick's Savoy tea-rooms to talk about our different Arts and ambitions. We had little or no money but the innocent waitress liked us because we were different and she kept out teapot refilled with hot water, while we talked and pretended we were in some famous cafe in the Thames, the Seine or the Danube. Harris and I went to the Carlton cinema to see the early Brando films and any forbidden continental film they got.

Harris, who worked for his father in the flour mills, was also trying to write plays and poems. He wore the newly fashionable duffle coat because it symbolised international rugby and the London art world all in one. I, like James Joyce, dressed in clerical black and sported my sister's Laurel Hill beret because it looked Paris Left Bank. The painter Donovan wore crumpled country and a battered tweed hat that evoked Cezanne. We talked method acting, modern literature and Matisse.

Harris had studied the body vocabulary and language of Brando, Karl Malden and James Dean and practised on us his friends and in the local College Players under Kitty Bredin, who encouraged the eccentric

three of us.

At this time I made my decision about my life. I would get out to Paris and write my poems. Harris wanted to study at the best Dramatic School in London. The day I left he came to fare me well and gave me a curious parting gift - the Confessions of St Augustine, which he had been reading. I still have it. I got to Paris and in time finished and published my first book of poems. Harris got to London and studied acting for a while.

As soon as I could afford it I crossed over to London to visit him in his dingy confession box of a bedsitter. Two penniless Paddies in a London winter cut a pitiful picture. We talked what we were doing, plays and poems. And we talked about Finnegans Wake. Even fought over it. In the evening we went out to dine penniless together - to the local fish and chipper. With such little money we could only afford one serving, which we shared. Again the

waitress, as in the Limerick Savoy, liked us as different kinds of Paddy and served us extra large helpings and put salt, pepper, mustard, ketchup, vinegar, Wostershire, bread and anything else around our plate.

Harris promised to visit me in Europe. 37 years later he hasn't yet.

The rest is theatrical history. Brendan Behan was discovered and the Quare Fella put on in the West End. Harris got a silent walk on part, his first on the London stage. The new English-working class novel sprung up and they filmed *This Sporting Life*. Harris got the part, made it, and was made.

Since our idealistic and innocent beginnings 36 years ago. Harris must have played in over 20 productions, I have published as many books. We are not dead yet!

Desmond O'Grady's most recent book of poems is *Alexandria Notebook*, Raven Arts Press, Dublin.



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