Kate O'Brien's Christmases

By MICHAEL O'TOOLE

Limerick-born Michael O'Toole is a journalist with the Irish Press Group and this year saw him publish his first book, *More Kicks Than Pence.*

□ IN later life Kate O'Brien bitterly regretted the fact that her father never allowed her as a child to attend Midnight Mass at St. John's Cathedral — a stone's throw from their red-bricked villa, Boru House, in Mulgrave Street on what was then the outskirts of the city.

Tom O'Brien used to say that the riff-raff of the town would be loose at that hour and he would not have his children meet it. His famous daughter later explained his reasoning: "He felt that in the churches crowded by the poor and the dirty we might get fleas, or worse afflictions.

"Let him not be judged un-Christian for this — for he was not," she writes in her memoir *Presentation Parlour.* "He was only a clean-habited and affectionate man who wanted to keep us in good health and as long as possible unaware of violence and uproar in life."

So instead of the mystery, fun and novelty of the midnight ceremonies, the young O'Briens were marched off "fasting and frozen" to early morning Christmas Day Mass in St. John's.

"The novelties were only the exquisite alto boy's voice in *Adeste Fideles* after the Consecration — and before the Credo there were the ten minutes of the Administrator's Christmas sermon," she wrote.

"I have heard bad sermons all over the world, and I believe good sermons to be the whitest of white blackbirds; I have listened only to two tht I remember for merit. But the sheer agonising badness, flatness, inexcusable platitudinous fatuity of those Christmas sermons from the various head priests of St. John's Cathedral over my years of childhood and girlhood — and I was an attentive listener — take all the cakes and every imaginable biscuit. They were agonising, that is all I can say. And some of those flinty, dead, unholy voices I can hear now this minute as I write."

Presentation Parlour is Kate O'Brien's splendid memoir of her childhood in Limerick in the early years of the century. Born in 1897, she was sent to Laurel Hill as a boarder at the age of six after the death of her mother and remained there until 1916 when she went up to University College, Dublin to read modern languages.

Presentation Parlour came out in 1963 at a time when Kate O'Brien's career as a writer was at its lowest ebb. The previous decade had produced only two novels, *The Flower of May* and *As Music and Splendour* and neither had either a great critical or a commercial success. It was the age of the angry young man and the daring young woman and her novels were out of fashion.

Worse still, her creative powers were on the wane. She had been toying with a novel called *Constancy* but never succeeded in finishing it. Her last big success — critical as well as financial — had been with *The Lady* in 1946. In the event, *Presentation Parlour* turned out to be a minor triumph, an exquisitely written, wise and warm invocation of her childhood recreated through the stories of her five aunts. In the hands of a lesser writer the material could have been sentimental, even maudlin. Here it is wise, humorous and stately.

Two of these aunts — Aunt Fan and Aunt Mary — were nuns in the Presentation Convent in Sexton Street and much of the narrative takes place in the convent parlour — hence the title.

The two nuns were sisters, but opposites. Aunt Fan (Sister Clare) was fat, hypocondrical, fearful of responsibility and had a tendency towards laziness. Aunt Mary was slender and wiry, a natural governor of her fellow nuns, tough and entirely self-possessed.

Every Christmas Day the two nuns held a reception for their brother-in-law Tom O'Brien and his children in one of the convent parlours. Kate O'Brien takes up the story:

". . . Breakfast over, we younger ones were not given half enough time to brood over our presents; we had to be upstairs, changing into our newest and best, and setting off hours too early 'to bag the parlour.' This was father's idea — and over such a matter this kindest of men was a tyrannical fusspot. So off we had to go, feeling fools, in dressed-up instalments, to take up our positions, much too soon for the aunts in the parlour.

"Father himself, who took everything to do with Christmas with the most generous seriousness, would not leave the house until the post came. The sending of Christmas cards — and presents, may I add, for he was princely — but the sending of cards was only equalled in pleasurable seriousness for him by his reception of the cards and greetings of his friends — and ours! (Unless to hope for a private message from anyone at Chrismas. Father, in sheer pleasure, had to see and consider all that came to his house.) So he waited, alone, for the postman who arrived intoxicated before one o'clock, and very certainly did not leave our house withour some further cheer.

"Then, and only then, would father have himself driven to the convent, and come smiling and waving up the long garden — I can see him now — with a Gladstone bag. Our Christmas post, which would be publicly and ruthlessly opened, by him and Fan and Auntie Mick and Sister Bernadine in the parlour — and thoroughly discussed and disputed and assessed, every silliest card of it.

My old friend William Hill — a nice card really — but I've known William to choose better . . .

"Father, through his business and his friendliness, had many friends in England as well as Ireland. He also chose a very traditional horsey card for himself, had a great many of them engraved, and sent them punctually to such old friends as William Hill. I think that it was with this especial old friends that the comedy persisted for years of the exchange between them of a Limerick ham and a Stilton cheese. Now most people can eat ham — we must hope Mr. Hill could — but father could not stand cheese in any form, at any time. And as for Stilton! I always remember the amused groans at the arrival of this handsome Christmas present."

The parlour she describes as "A large, square Georgian room, with two fine broad windows giving on to the visitors' garden, two doors facing each other, one from the hall, the other through which the nuns came to us and beyond which we may not travel. A handsome Georgian fireplace. Plants in brass pots. Two portraits of two bishops of Limerick on the walls . . . Some prints and engravings of religious subjects from old masters. A highly polished floor. A re-covered Victorian sofa. A central table to which, on Christmas Day and other days, many kinds of refreshment were borne by Sister Lucy and Sister Philomena.

"A very pleasant parlour. But on Christmas Day one could not see it very well because by one o'clock it was thronged. Nine of us, Katty's children, for a start, ranging — let us take a date at random — from twenty years to five. That means that mother — Katty — is more than five years dead and that her name can at last be spoken without instant tears among the elders.

"Nine of us fidgeting around; father on the sofa with his Gladstone bag; Fan safely planted near him, between him and the window, cushioned, shawled and happy, as eager as dear Tom about the Christmas post in the opened bag. Auntie Mick, who will not stay long, across the window from Fan, upright and elegant, talking to Mother Liguori, and dealing very firmly with Gerard, the youngest of us whom she detests and who seems to love annoying her. He pulls and teases now at her exquisitely rolled and delicate silk umbrella; his fingers are chocolate-stained. But with father so near she will not give him the brutal slap and insult that he would get on her own ground."

There followed a concert around the piano, each of the children playing and singing in turn. ". . . at last the Bishop of Limerick was shown brilliantly in — and brilliant he was and looked, Edward Thomas O'Dwyer . . . So the concert went on, broken only by applause, and by the episcopal entrance. Father, who loved bishops and princes of the church . . . was delighted to have Aunt Mary place the deaf prelate beside him. He knew him well. Bishop O'Dwyer, who would allow none of his priests to hunt, was a great horseman.

". . . my sister Clare, persuaded by some gentle nuns near the piano, began to sing . . . *At the mid hour of the night* . . . The young, rich voice, its purity seeming to contradict the great sorry of the theme, still insisted that it knew what it sang. I think that father, some Christmas card in his fidgety hand, could hardly bear the desolate and ghostly song — and yet he loved it.

"The bishop rose and we with him, dropping all on one knee for his blessing — and a minute later one could watch him pacing down the garden, silky, silver hair blowing, pink hand cupping his good ear as he conversed with Aunt Mary, this Reverend Mother whom he admired extremely. His carriage horses chomping, and even if the wind were cold he would linger with this nun — and hear what she said. An autocrat mostly disliked by his priests, a man of iron principle and courage as he was to prove in political troubles yet ahead, and one who expected to be listened to and obeyed, he often listened and often, I think when this young nun, his mere subaltern spoke . . ."

Presentation Parlour by Kate O'Brien, will be reissued next year with an Introduction by Michael O'Toole and published by Poolbeg Press.

Pictured at the Plassey Camp in 1915.