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Limerick, as I Remember It.

BY KATE O'BRIEN.

I HAVE been asked to write a few words about Limerick as I remember it. But I don't remember Limerick. I see it. I am still alive, and Limerick grows and lives before my eyes. And I have been lucky in being able to return to this dear place, Limerick, again and again, over the years. From where I stand now in life, far on—I look around, and I think it is perhaps regrettable that one was not lucky enough to stay in Limerick, to live here always.

When we are young we are often silly—though sometimes our silliness can be developed into a kind of wisdom. And, of course—would my appreciation of Limerick be what it is if I had never left the town? Clearly, it would not. I love and appreciate Limerick not only for all it says to my heart and memory every time I walk up O'Connell Street, but because with pride and delight I see it doing very well. I can relate the city of my childhood to the world we have all had to grow into—and I see Limerick behaving marvellously, under the stress of the times. And I mean marvellously. Look at how it has cleaned itself up, and dealt with its housing problem! And how well we have all dealt with that problem. How pretty and promising and airy and roomy are our new suburbs! Yes, it is deplorable that Arthur's Quay had to come down—but granted its state it would have been absurd to have kept it up—and there is now a splendid open site, and may Limerick's curious good sense take its time over that.

I think that ours is a very beautiful city. Actually, I'll chance my arm and say that I think that, purely on urban and architectural merits, it is the most beautiful city in Ireland, and I only wish that we could have more protected our beautiful O'Connell Street. But facades hardly matter.

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What really matters is the line of the conceived street. And in Limerick we have superb 18th century lines still.

Limerick prospers now; and no one can park anywhere, and the shops are packed. But I walk up and down, and is still the dear town of my childhood. I can't use old friendly names, but I can speak of Miss Smith's, since her business has long been gone from Thomas Street. Do any of you remember Miss Smith's? My brother, Gerry, had his birthday on 12th June. Naturally he didn't go up to the Crescent that day, and we, his sisters, were in Laurel Hill. So Gerry was rather foxed for celebrating his birthday. And what did he do?

He went into Miss Smith's at eleven o'clock, and for a shilling, he ate twelve éclairs. Twelve absolutely superb éclairs full of real cream, for a penny each. You can search the vulgar world now and not get, did you pay a shilling for each one, éclairs to match Miss Smith's penny ones in Thomas Street. Not in Rumpelmeyer's or Gunter's, not in the Pâtisserie de la Madeleine. And that famous cake-shop was in fact founded by a woman out of The Pike, in Limerick.

Miss Smith's, and the Theatre Royal, with Shakespeare himself on the beautiful drop curtain, and the lovely Compton family waiting to delight us behind it in "She Stoops To Conquer," "Much Ado About Nothing" and "Moody Manners," "The Merry Widow"; and Joseph O'Mara in Carmen and Lohengrin. And Peter McCarthy's first cinema—a long, funny, narrow place, where we all pursued the desperate adventures of Pearl White and the romantic vicissitudes of someone called, I think, Maurice Costello?

My father was a movie fan, and used to embarrass us sophisticates, I remember, by his exuberant pleasure in the new medium. Just as he believed that when you were telephoning Dublin—we were on the telephone early on, I think—that you had to bawl. "Do you realise you're speaking to Dublin, child? Raise your voice, in God's name!"

What I would like to praise in our present Limerick is the lovely, flowering park—I only wish we could carry its idea down to the waterside, and make our great river front a place of peace and pleasure. There should be benches, and flowering trees along the Shannon banks. If I were rich, if I were ever a real best seller, I'd like to make the embankments of our river a source of rest and pleasure to Limerick.

But one thing before I end—I must praise our Library and Art Gallery. I have an idea—in which I hope I am wrong—that Limerick does not know how good its library is. When I was a girl and the library was then, I suppose, a Carnegie affair, I got to know how useful it was. But in all the years since, when I've been back and seeking this and that information for work in progress I have found our City Library of wonderful help, and its librarians excellent. And I believe that the Gallery deserves encouragement, and should be a source of education.

Above all things, however, I praise the beauty of Limerick. Our city is not only a beautiful piece of 18th century town planning, but it is also now clean and orderly, and without undue offence to the past it has managed to play fair with the exactions of the 20th century. I never come towards it, by train or car, without delight. St. John's great spire rises up, most exquisitely. And I am reminded that I was baptised under its shadow. St. Mary's Norman tower argues, but friendly, with our Puginesque triumph. But Limerick spread out as we move in. And it is a dear and beautiful city. I am always happy when I'm there, and I am very proud to be able to say that I am from Limerick.

