

# A LIMERICK CHILDHOOD

## PART ONE

Toward the end of July 1911, a seemingly trivial affair of red tape and conflicting interests developed into a grave domestic crisis for Kathleen and Frank (Christopher Isherwood's parents).

The Regiment was due to be transferred to Ireland and stationed at Limerick immediately after its September manoeuvres. Kathleen was expecting her baby late in September or early October; therefore it was out of the question for her to make the move at that time. Frank planned to get leave, so that they wouldn't have to go till later. The Colonel said, however, that he must have a major with him when they settled into the barracks at Limerick. Only two majors were available, a Major Ashton and Frank. Major Ashton was the senior, so he had first choice of leave. He said that he wanted his leave first, thus obliging Frank to go to Limerick - or to 'send in his papers', resigning from the Regiment. That was his only alternative.

The situation seemed to prove how right Kathleen had been about Army life; its caprices were intolerable. Only a dedicated professional or a carefree bachelor could go on indefinitely accepting them. Frank couldn't live from day to day as he had done before he married. However much he might still like being a nomad, he now had two children as well as Kathleen to think of.

(Kathleen Isherwood, Christopher's mother, recorded in her diary:)

**September 25.** Am so **desperately** sorry. I should have liked to do one more station and seen what Ireland was like and I know Frank is simply **hating** leaving though he does not say much.

**September 26.** The Colonel said how sorry he was we were not coming to Ireland. I said, so was I, and what a muddle the whole thing seemed to have been. Felt very severe to him. He might either have done without a major or insisted on Major Ashton taking second leave, as in the end he has had to do. He asked hurriedly if Frank was coming to see the Regiment off tomorrow, but I said I thought there was a limit to what he could bear ...

**October 9.** A bomb from Ireland this morning, a letter from the Colonel enclosing communication from War Office. Frank's retirement not accepted unless he goes to the Militia for five

by Christopher Isherwood

years. This means a month's training each August and might interfere with his taking another job, also it is not easy as a major to get a nomination in a militia.

**October 16.** Frank to London to War Office. The Military Secretary sympathetic as regards his claims not to have to go to Militia, promised to push his case. If it fails, we go back to Regiment and Limerick, if not, Frank retires on his pension.

**November 7.** Despairing letter from Major Ashton to Frank. He says Limerick is the most Godforsaken dirty hole he had ever seen, that he is absolutely miserable, nothing to do ...

**November 8.** Letter from Major Clemson. He had seen the Military Secretary at the War Office and it seems, in spite of the very strong case Frank had, they won't let him off going to the Militia if he resigns. So this decides it and we go to Limerick ... and after all the 'wear and tear to mind and body' we are just where we would be had we quietly been given first leave at the beginning of things. Felt very depressed all day, so many plans to be made, and things to meet and 'lions to pass'. Limerick, apart from the distance from Mama and civilization, does **not** sound delightful.

Now that Frank was to stay in the Army, they found themselves under pressure again. There was much to be done and time was short. On November 30th, Frank was already in Limerick. He wrote to her from the so-called New Barracks:



Christopher Isherwood, his mother Kathleen and his baby brother, November, 1912.

My first impressions are rather favourable. The station is quite near barracks. You go along a typical Irish street, passing Pery Square on the way which is rather like a decayed London square. The barracks are very quaint and old-fashioned and rather attractive and I can't see that they are in such a bad state, however I haven't seen much of them yet. Everyone seems pleased to see me back.

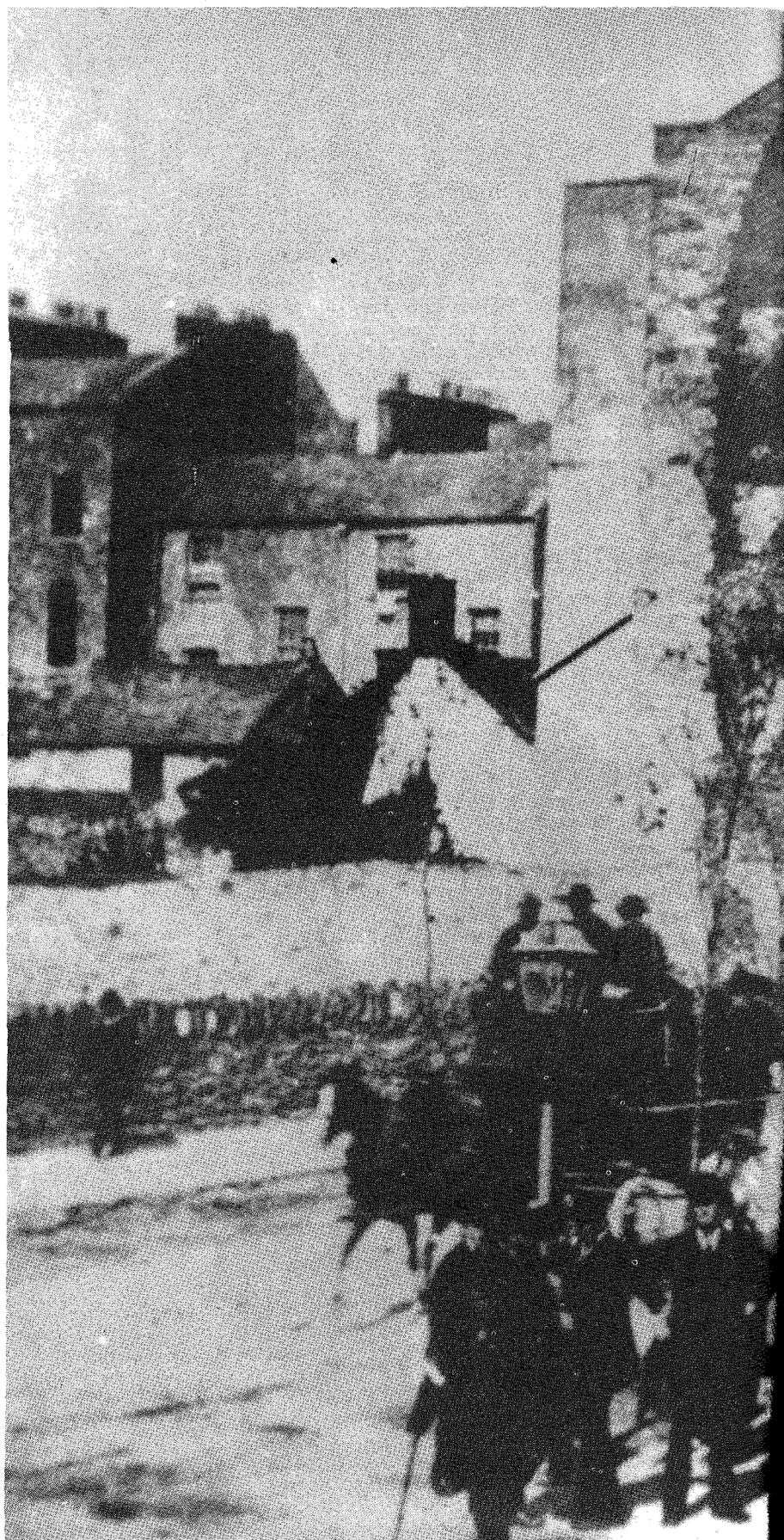
Kathleen's 1912 diary is the first of her diaries without quotations or other matter of an inspirational or romantic nature. Instead, there are names and addresses of Irish neighbours and lists of *officers and their wives who have been invited to dinner on certain dates*. Kathleen seems to be concerned only with her obligations as an Army Wife, and painfully conscious of calls and invitations which haven't yet been returned.

**January 1.** New Year's Day, a momentous day!... The paper said 'smooth to moderate' but for all that a **very choppy crossing** ... Frank met me on the pier at Kingstown. Walked across to Rosses Hotel, clean and friendly. It all feels strangely foreign and incapable. Everyone so leisurely and talkative.

**January 2.** Rosses Hotel great success, kept by father and two sons. One son has a farm outside and supplies them with milk, eggs, butter and poultry. The father is in the hall and talks to anyone who will listen. Bill fifteen shillings for bed, dinner and breakfast. Left Dublin 9.15, flat green meadowland and rather dull journey except for passing Kildare and getting good view of the old church with its round tower, the first I have seen. Arrived Limerick 1.15. Jolty slow tram to Barrington St. Limerick is rather a picturesque and dirty-looking old place with many big Georgian houses.

**January 3.** It appears that yesterday was a fine day in Limerick, a fact I had not realized till I saw the rain today! It went on more or less without ceasing sometimes heavy, sometimes merely a thick wet mist. Mrs Mott came round in morning and we went together over some of the town houses. All with cavernous kitchens and mysteriously dark, and a rabbit warren of places for which there seems no particular use. The servants supposed to sleep in dark roomy cupboards, the only outlook or ventilation being into the kitchen itself. The upstairs living-rooms fine and large, two on each floor. The backyards of unutterable gloom. Mrs Mott has lodgings in a house the size of a palace and the paper peeling and the blinds torn.

**January 5.** Have now been over sixteen houses!





of the century view of the Crescent.

On January 7th, Kathleen saw Roden House, her seventeenth, and this, as she wrote later, proved to be the very one she wanted:

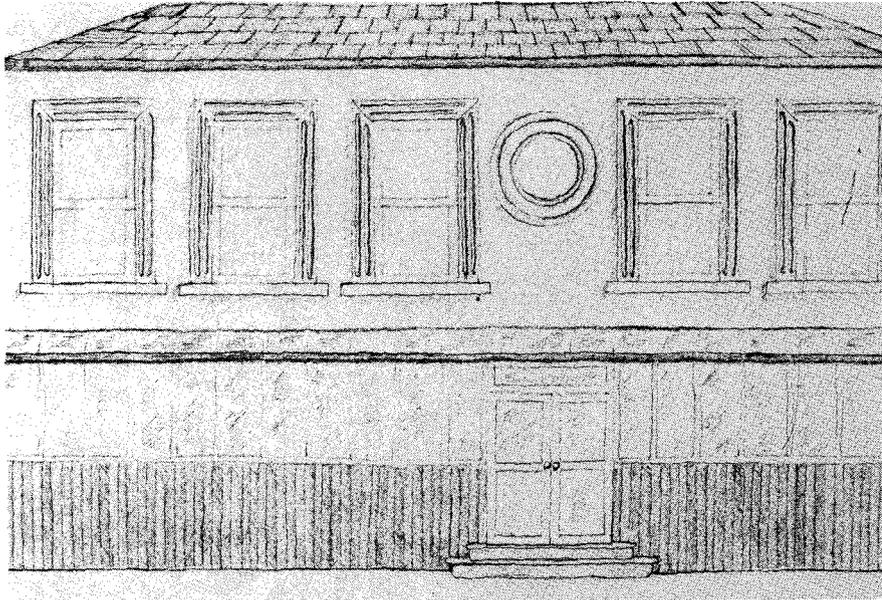
There wasn't a **doubt of it** from the first moment, when the women who had the keys came across with a shawl over her head and let us in mysteriously through a gate in the wall, followed by other shawled people waiting to see what we should do! High grey walls bounded the house on two sides, covered with creepers - really the backs of the cottages in the lane, but only one had a window on the garden, discreetly wired over, where the nice peasant (who had the keys) lived.

(Yes, indeed, Kathleen really does write 'peasant'! Is this the romantic influence of Yeats and Synge? Partly, no doubt, Partly also, an indication of her willingness to be pleased with her surroundings. She wants to picture these town dwellers as retainers on a phantom feudal estate).

In front of the house were prim little beds with box borders and a fountain and an apple tree, and a long glass verandah ran the whole length of the house and above were seven windows in a long row. Inside, it was the quaintest place. Downstairs only a kitchen, servants' hall, pantry, dining-room. But upstairs it was all surprises - little passages and endless doors running in and out, giving one the impression of a network of rooms, some quite a good size, you hardly knew where you were - so unexpectedly did rooms thrust out in all directions, going right through to another lane at the back, looking to the Barracks, in the midst of the most slummy cottages where everyone threw everything out of the window!

I suppose it must have been much larger at some time, as evidently blocked-up doorways must have led into the adjoining cottages and been part of the original house. And it belonged to two old Miss Warmlightons who had lived here from their childhood when the Military Road was nothing but fields, and instead of the big Technical School nothing but a big orchard led away from the upper garden, but still the steps are left leading down into the onetime orchard, and the old iron gate and the square pillars and urns guarding it. I have always wanted **urns** on pillars and an old iron gate! And the Technical School is quite a long way off. There was something very romantic too and unobvious about it all, and so unlike the regular soldiering house. Indeed, no soldier has ever discovered it.

**January 27.** Bright and sunny but very cold. News that the furniture had reached Cork but I suppose it won't come till Monday. We went for a lovely walk to Lax Weir over the fields, where



A drawing from memory of Roden House.

a raised path above river and bogs winds away to the weir, lovely views of Limerick looking back, the cathedral tower etc and flat green meadows in every direction away into blue and misty distances.

**January 30.** Bright and frosty. The foreman from the Junior A and N turned up at 8.30 having come yesterday by sea and train direct. To our disgust a great many of our things were travelling loose, the rest packed in two smallish vans. The Foreman found some ruffianly looking men to help by about midday and the first van was there then. The men made a dreadful mess all over the house. Of course having to walk up the garden added to the dirt.

**February 3.** Mrs O'Callaghan and her box came in the afternoon. Her idea of cleaning her bedroom seems to be to sweep the dust out of it on to the stairs and she made all the floors shake as she walks. She is rather like an Irish cook in a book, but her amusing side would be much more apparent if she was someone else's cook not mine! She is a most imposing figure-head for any house and very impressive in a jetted bonnet with a rose and a velvet dolman and furs!

**February 5.** The dining room and my bedroom look so like home and pleasant. Mrs O'C came in course of the morning and she and Mrs Riley lunched off pigs feet and tea! Dreadful consternation, the water has stopped - this severe frost has frozen everything and in Barracks there is only water to be had in one of the wash-houses. We had to let the fire out in the range. Dined with the Bs. It was gay as we sallied forth from our new front door. The bells were pealing and the Technical School at the front of the garden all lights, and then to come home to a fire and one's

own bed and picture, no words can describe how nice it seemed!

**February 11.** Did not go out all day and spent a day of rest and leisure in our new drawing room watching the birds from the sofa and reading. Such a cheerful lookout - the iron gate with the urns on the top of the crumbling pillars, and the spreading apple tree close to the window and the quaint box-bordered beds below, and trees in the distance and the Technical School and a church spire, and seagulls and blackbirds and sparrows and chaffinches all flying, hopping and making nice noises.

**February 19.** Dreadful day with smoke, the chimneys were bad yesterday but simply outrageous today. The Nursery and Drawing room were unbearable and the whole place was covered with blacks. I took C to school and fetched him and we went into the town after. He is going to the Girls High School where there are also a few little boys. I like Miss Mercer the head, also Miss Croston in whose class C is.

**February 21.** Christopher very pleased with his school which I hope will make him much more independent and tomorrow he is going to walk there alone. When C came out of school we went down to the town and back along by the river to watch the loading and unloading of the ships.

**February 22.** Smoke, though less violent, continues to cover everything with smuts and the rooms are cloudy with smoke, it is so tiresome. C to school alone from the Technical School and walked back all the way by himself.

**February 24.** Bright day. Christopher has whole holiday on Saturdays. He and I went to do Sunday marketing and looked into the old Market which has sort of cloisters running all round sup-

ported by Doric pillars and behind which a great trade in old clothes is done, a great deal of colour and clusters of women in funny little donkey carts. The women manage to arrange their black shawls to give an almost eastern effect, often folding them across the lower part of their faces so that little more than their eyes are visible. Frank ran with the men in afternoon, 8 miles and came back in about 150th out of 600. We had to sit in the ante-room, the man never came to put the chimney pot on and the bells have all ceased ringing again!

**March 3.** Took C to the garrison service. In afternoon gave him commission to pick up the dirty pieces of paper flying about the Technical yard and then we made a bonfire. Richard slept in his pram while F sketched the house. A fire in the drawing room but it was not a success and smoked! Richard wore his first socks and shoes!

**March 22.** Doyle came to look at Chimneys. He declares they never smoked before! But seemed half-hearted as to any remedy, saying old flies were so difficult to deal with! I heard from Mrs Senior who lived here 8 or 9 years and I am sorry to say she gave the chimneys a very bad character and appeared to have suffered from them much as we do now!

**March 25.** C top of his class. Man about chimney has suggested another chimney\_top that the smoke came out of at the side only, or else taking the chimney to pieces which probably would be the most satisfactory thing, only it is a big order. F painted in the glass room out of the dining room which is very pleasant. The hedges are all getting quite green and the pink of the apple blossom is beginning to show in the big old tree outside the window. I love the house.

**March 28.** A Mrs Townsend called just as the smoke was puffing out at its worst into the nursery where there was a fire and into the drawing room where there wasn't one. Feel quite tired out with the chimneys and the gloom. Poor C's one idea being that if only it would smoke into the drawing room and spare the nursery and Nanny's displeasure!

**July 4.** The usual grind of shopping. Never in any place has the housekeeping been so tiresome as here. In afternoon we drove up to the Market's Fields for the Church Lads Brigade sports. A most fortunate afternoon for it. Frank inspected. I gave away the prizes!

**July 17.** Interviewed policeman about the children in the lane, lawless little hooligans who bang at the door (which we have to keep locked, now that Frank is away) and dash in the moment it is open to try and steal the apples

and pick the flowers for sheer mischief's sake, not for the love of either! The Irish seem most **hopelessly** lawless and murders are overlooked in a way to make an Englishwoman's blood boil

**July 26.** An interesting talk with Mrs F, who told me quite mediaeval stories about the state of things in Ireland.

world war, he sometimes likened his position as a child in Ireland to that of the son of a Nazi officer in occupied France. This comparison was intentionally melodramatic - to startle the students into attention - and didn't of course imply that the York and Lahcasters behaved like the Nazis or that the Irish of 1912-14 reacted to them like



**Roden Street.**

They think if Home Rule really comes they will be too much at the mercy of all sorts of incapable and dishonest people to make it possible to go on living here.

(When Christopher taught at American colleges, after the second

French civilians of the Resistance. The English soldiers were certainly hated by many Irishmen as invaders. But, during that period, religious hatred was still uppermost. When street boys shouted insults at the children of the garrison, their epithet wouldn't be 'dirty Englishman!',

but 'dirty Protestant!' Irish Catholics hated all Protestants, English and Irish, and they were quite capable of turning on their own countrymen when the quarrel was religious (as will be shown by Kathleen's October 17th entry). It was only after the Easter Rising of 1916 that Irish nationalism began to prevail over religious differences and Irish hatred focused more sharply upon the English as English. Thus a situation arose which was indeed somewhat like that of the French collaborators after the Nazi withdrawal; many of the Irish families who had shown hospitality to the now withdrawn English garrisons found themselves in trouble, some had their houses burned and were frightened into leaving the country. Miss F. may well have been one of these.

While Christopher was at Roden House, he took the hostility of the street boys for granted, as a part of daily life, along with the caressing charm of their eyes and voices, the music of their accent, the filth of the picturesque lane and the stink of sewage in its puddles and gutters. However intensely Kathleen may have thought of herself as an English-woman with boiling blood, she wasn't the sort of mother who would try to teach the same attitude to her children. When Christopher got angry with the boys and girls he played with, he accused them of many things but never of being Irish.

(The yard, despite Kathleen's efforts to keep it tidy, remained a resting-place

for every piece of lumber or hardware which the Technical School discarded. It was therefore an ideal playground, full of props for games of make-believe, such as planks, barrels, packing-cases, detached doors, broken laboratory apparatus, wire, rope, plumbing fixtures, sheets of glass.)

**September 28.** Nurse and C to the moving pictures at The Gaiety, the new place of entertainment at St. George's Street about which C has been excited for weeks.

(Thus Christopher's lifelong devotion to the movies began, as an indiscriminate appetite for **any** two-dimensional happening on a lighted screen in a dark theatre. He finds it hard to remember individual film actors or films from the Limerick days, but he is certain that he saw John Bunny, Francis X Bushman, Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Annette Kellermann, the Keystone Cops, Mae Marsh, Mabel Normand, **The Spoilers, Judith of Bethulia**, the Italian version of **Quo Vadis** and episodes from many serials including Pearl White's **The Perils of Pauline**.)

**October 17.** To the town before lunch. Every other shop, nearly, has suffered from the riots of last week and has smashed glass. From starting politically on the grounds of the big Unionist meeting, it ended by being a religious riot. The Roman Catholics especially attacking all the Protestant shops and the Archdeacon's house and the church

next door, into which they threw nearly a thousand stones. The Archdeacon was chased and cut about the face. The priests finally came out on Saturday and addressed the people, imploring them to cease, and they did.

**October 29.** In afternoon to Patrick Punch Corner to see the men return from their fortnightly run, six miles across country. Frank's company second and he very well to the fore, far ahead of most of the officers and men.

**1913.**

**February 19.** Took C to his first dancing class at the George. Thirteen children and a very alert little teacher from Cork.

**March 17.** To see Miss Mercer this morning. She is giving up the High School on account of her health. Talked of Christopher and I told her of our intention of sending him to Miss Burns on account of the society of a few other little boys. She said as far as education was concerned she feared it was time wasted and that to send him to England would really be better. We parted very solemnly. His education is a great problem and difficulty here. If only -!

**April 7.** Took Christopher to Miss Burns's school, Mount Saint Vincent Cottage, up the Military Road, next to the Convent, only six or seven children but the majority are boys. Do hope it will be a success.



**Barrack Hill and the gates of the New (now Sarsfield) Barracks.**