



# LIMERICK



PART ONE



Kate O'Brien. Portrait by James Sleanor.

With warmest love,  
as my father Tom O'Brien would have thought proper,  
I humbly dedicate this ...  
to Limerick, my native place — 1962

AS my life began at Limerick and has often brought me back there, so these memories and reflections about Irish travel seem naturally to start there too and to weave and wind from that first focus. And now from Shannon Airport it must often be the first Irish city that a stranger will set foot in. It may not be a radiant starting point; but first impressions need not dazzle; and a slow approach is wise where true acquaintance is expected. Always, too, one would commend to a stranger that he take Ireland very slowly through the opening moves. As these moves will likely come from the Irish side it is as well to reflect and pace about a bit as we wait for them.

Limerick should prove a good place for that exercise. Its aspect is grave, and maybe surprising; it could be corrective of literary fancies. But Limerick's aspect, Limerick's first manner - which is sceptical, quiet and deprecatory, I think - might well affect a newcomer, proportionately and with all modesty, as could Santader, or, let us say, Dusseldorf. It seems to me that a sensitive stranger, crossing one of Limerick's bridges, having looked up and down the Shannon and along any one of the wide, grey streets, might feel detached awhile from the mood of coloured folders, and inclined to postpone the sending-off of first impression postcards. Not merely because he would feel that he was going to have to pause over this town, and begin again on his Irish notions.

Mind you, I said a sensitive stranger. And as to that, let me confess that I have had one or two, and maybe more than one or two, of that very kind tell me to my face, most politely and even with pain, that they disliked Limerick, found it prim, or boring, or empty. They have

by *Kate O'Brien*

complained of its food, of the poor quality of the amusements, and the dullness of its surrounding country. I have heard that there are too many churches and chapels, and that the Limerick people are cold and suspicious in manner; that they lack style and that the women are not pretty.

Sad fault-findings indeed. But as a man finds so he must speak, and only a fool will try to contradict expressed dislike. Yet one soft and sometimes effective answer to these objections to Limerick is to agree - as truly one must - that some of them may be in a measure true. And why not? There is dull food to be eaten in Limerick, and that city can no more than any command the quality of the movies of this decade, or hush away the Top Twenty noises that issue night and day from juke boxes and radio sets uniformly now throughout the world. On wet days in Limerick the wind can be brutal, the great river a mere stretch of sulky flood, and beyond the subtle fields the unemphatic, lovely hills can simply disappear. As for the churches and chapels, there are indeed many of them dull and boring to the eye. But they ring their bells and cause a stir - and there is one new set of chimes which is a terror when it strikes too close; and anyway these places of worship - Limerick has most of the Christian kinds, and one small synagogue - are the very life and expression of the place, often for comedy, for anger, for conviction, for pride, for music and formality and ceremony - and always for prayer. And I believe that the citizens will not apologise for them to any captious visitor. As for manners: Limerick people tend somewhat to mind their own business, if that is to be cold? But one might describe the inclination, or disinclination if you will, as a form of politeness, a courtesy - even a way of charity? About suspiciousness, well, perhaps a hint of it here and there against exuberance. For what we do lack, markedly, in Limerick is the 'come hither' approach, the sunburst technique. And for the most unkindest cut, about our looks - the answer to that is always the rudest of *tu ques*. Where is the earthly city that has its stree thronged with dazzling beauties, male and female? anyone thinks that the arm-in-arm lads and ladies who parade up and down some of the waterfronts and paesec of Europe or U.S.A. are all as from the hand of Phidias or Botticelli, it is only kind to leave them with their blessed myopia; but we in Limerick are conscious without being told that we have our quota of 'homely' citizens, male and female - homely in both sexes, and dowdy in its own sense. And anyway we are not formal about that swing past at sundown. Still, we know the visitant, Beauty. She has flashed about our grateful heads as often as we seemly in our history, and she will again - like the kingfisher. And I myself, when young, saw the kingfisher more than once, by a Limerick stream.

I have been answering only one or two - strays whose reactions to my native city had surprised me. One remembers as a rule in its isolated outline the shock that exasperated or offended. It is true, I think, and a pity, that the shocks of pleasure tend to vanish cloudily - this troublesome factor of cloudiness in contentment is making it difficult for me to re-examine Limerick, and to present it to strange eyes,

Yet it is fixed in me somehow that if I do not jump off

this time from that old rock that, relatively, I know I shall not get swimming at all and will only flounder about the edges of the island, disoriented and embarrassed.

The spire of St. John's - let us take bearings from there, since it is easy to see from anywhere across the plain, and is beautiful and gentle. It is infinitely younger than Limerick, it and the cathedral church of which it is the constant praying voice - for they are not yet a hundred years old; and Pugin was already more than ten years in his grave when a modest local character, an architect called Hardwick, ventured to thrust this piece of brand-new Gothic into an unsuspecting Georgian skyline. But there was no quarrel at all; there could not be with such a fluke-felicity. And St. Mary, good grey thirteenth-century tower could do no less than welcome the accent, the stress of reminder, the pointing-up of her age and importance, which the new-old neighbour in the sky bestowed as it were fortuitously upon her.

So St. John's, in a shabby north-east corner between Garryowen and the slums of Irishtown, took its place as late as the eighteen-sixties in a rather tired and history-tattered town, and as if it was indeed itself a part of the long, uneasy record.

Marcel Proust's family party, or rather the family of the Narrator, always knew Combray from the train by the spire of St. Hilaire, for the church epitomised the town; and once they saw it they knew exactly where they were and made haste to fold their rugs. So strangers, travelling across Munster, when they see a greyish blur on the blue and green and out of it rising a spire that makes them think of Salisbury will know that they have arrived, whether they want to or not, at Limerick.

The Shannon is a formidable water; nothing parochial about it, nothing of prattle or girlish dream. It sweeps in and out of the ocean and the world according to the rules of far-out tides, and in association with dangerous distances. So its harbour has been long accustomed to news and trouble in and out, and in the general movement of time Limerick has been shaped as much by invasions and sieges as by acts of God and the usual weatherings. It is for Ireland therefore a representative city: whatever happened to Ireland because of things that happened here.

Lloyd George, they say, used to wince whenever De Valera mentioned Cromwell: 'Not again, please not again, Mr. De Valera!' And when one realises that the Protector spent literally only nine months of his life on Irish ground one has to marvel at all that he left behind him to be done and undone by the historians and the soldiers of Ireland. Efficiency was ever conducted anywhere in the world by an invading soldier. True, when he sailed from Youghal in May 1650 it did take his lieutenants two years to finish off what his sword and precept had ordained for the Irish people: and out of those two years they had to spend fourteen months and many, many lives in trying to knock out Limerick, most obstinate and principled of all the invaded cities. Yet Cromwell was a man who did his own work, and in the nine months during which he razed Drogheda, Dublin, Kilkenny, Wexford and Clonmel and demonstrated the purpose of his war, he did in fact finish it - by finishing ordinary hope, in the hearts of witnesses. Even the protest of Limerick must when it came have been a desperate one, sustained though it was. But anyway it put the citizens and the walls into practice in 1651, for 1690.

The stranger passing by from far away, and bent on present pleasure, does not seek a history lesson. Perhaps least of all from Ireland will he want history, since he may likely have the impression, erroneous maybe, that he has heard it all and that enough's enough. But in Limerick he will see in souvenir form of some kind, or on postcards, or in its unprepossessing actuality, an object called the Treaty Stone. This undressed lump of limestone sits on a squat, small pedestal; when I was a

child I thought it partook in some degree of the sacred, the supernatural, but I did not find it endearing. No one could indeed. Yet oddly enough, seated obscurely there on the western end of Thomond Bridge the Treaty Stone commemorates unheeded two pieces of European history, each of a peculiarly brilliant poignancy: (a) the end for all practical purposes, in 1691, of the Jacobite cause and: (b) the gift to the terrible advancing battlefields of eighteenth-century Europe of the Irish Brigade. That is all the imagination needs to know about the awkward piece of stone that Sarsfield and the Williamite used as a writing table.

Walking back from the Stone along the North Strand which is leafy and residential and in County Clare, one can take a good stare at Limerick's best facade. The river is wide and, joined under the Court House by its little tributary, it runs fast under two good bridges towards the docks and the deepening estuary. The old town rises mainly in grey from here, its dominant being the stained and shadowed limestone of St. Mary's Cathedral and King John's Castle on their dark lichened rocks: Limerick's chief Norman remains, and specimens with merit. But as for the still grim and strong Castle, now made to look silly by the ugly tops of little mean cement houses built within and staring stupidly over its parapets - I for one am allergic to fortifications, and find them boring wherever I go.

City walls, for instance - and we have a few remnants of such in Limerick - do not attract my interest. Whatever is vulnerable has a value never found in the defended. A fact which has to remain in the airer spaces of belief, of course, since its springs from ideas of moral and aesthetic perfection not in common exchange. But if I do find my imagination naturally and always bored by turrets, keeps, dungeons and, onward from them, by architectural expressions of defensiveness of any kind, and so of extreme functionalism - that baulk may come from a weak non-combativeness in me, an innate dislike of side-taking, a shrinking from passionate convictions - a condition of all-round uncertainty that bedevils me. But it also comes, less feebly, out of humanism; and out of aesthetic boredom before the unsubtle and brutal principles upon which the expressions of defence and functionalism must stand.

City walls, in short, displease the eye; as do Norman forts and keeps, and nineteenth-century gaols, and twentieth-century barracks, oil tankers, hotels, spaceships, garages, warheads and space-war emplacements. All are conceived in defensiveness and ruthlessly egotism and 'I'm All Right Jack' always come out on their strong features.

This dislike has often saddened my contemplation of the scene of Ireland. Our plains and hills are over-richly marked by broken keeps and towers, square-face, efficient structures which in their day of pride existed for one function only: for a man to defend himself and kill the man outside. Ivy, weather, and the beholder's awareness of the stony arrogance, these give pathos now, and that is all; there was never beauty in these buildings and where beauty has not been in at birth it does not visit.

But our landscape has more remains than watch towers; and from these others we may read a moral, and preach a sermon. Contemporary with the fighting chieftains and plundering invaders of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were the monastic orders. They, like the soldiers, were stonemasons - and much else.

As indeed were their great predecessors. The men and women who sprang into the new Christian apostolate out of St. Patrick's life and mission in the fifth century were most successful apostles, teachers and founders... The monks made for us and gave us enduring examples of what was best and most humanistically expressive of man's activities during their period - which is much more than our soldiers and princes bothered to do.



The Crescent and the O'Connell monument.

I have gone a long way round merely to say that I care not at all for King John's Castle in Limerick, while always gratefully admiring of gentle St. Mary's. Square-towered and grey, never of first-flight inspiration, and often patchily restored, it is nevertheless of stalwart Norman bearing and the city's only extant reminder now of the saints and scholars.

The stranger should visit St. Mary's. If he climbs the tower on a summer's day, as I did long ago, he may think himself rewarded, for the view thence on any side is at once lively and tranquillising; beyond the intricacies of roofs, trees, streets and people, the landscape spreads, if the sun is shining, in a Persian weave of colours broken by serpentine flashes of waters, to blue hills, mainly blue, and a high, transparent sky.

The traveller may well undergo, unsuspecting on this parapet, a first injectin, or infection, from Ireland's beauty. As he looks south over Limerick's Georgian part and past the lonely great warehouses of the docks, as, smelling brackishness in the fresh air, he seeks towards where the Atlantic must be, his sensibility may pick up a kind of rarity, a foreign, new element - new to him - in what he looks at. Austerity? A kind of cold restraint, an underflow of silence, a bony, throwaway grace?

It is here, I think, to be found. I have always found it about the Limerick lands - the hard essence, the deep limestone indestructibility of Ireland's puzzling and eternal good looks. Good looks as indisputable, as unpredictable and indeed at their most native as such a special taste as is, say, that delicate yet uncompromising beauty which their painters once found in the women of Siena.

A troublesome claim. Down from the tower, the newcomer should walk about the nave and transepts, to look at a few good tombs, and the misericords in the stalls; and consider the sad silk of battle flags. On the tombs he will find the once dominant local names - O'Brien, for one - as everywhere in the churchyard's, mansions, pubs and cottages of Limerick and Clare. The princes of Thomond - the O'Brien's, a wild and treacherous and touchy people, left a bad record at the end, in the seventeenth century. But they left noble ruins too - Bunratty and Leimnigh Castles; and such great abbeys as Holy Cross and Corcomroe - gifts to his people - as was this cathedral of St. Mary, of the pious prince Donal O'Brien. A few of his less virtuous descendants rest under these cathedral stones - peaceably neighboured by later arrivals, for instance, Roches, Perys, Arthurs, Russells, Sextons - upstarts of the eighteenth century who built the modern city in its Georgian order, and merit their memorials in this place.

Were it not so tricky nowadays about printing what one has in mind, I could offer flesh-and-blood introductions in my own city to persons who could make a foreigner's passage through it far more vivid and entertaining than ever can I from between the covers of a mere book - persons more integrally engaged with Limerick too than by, say, selling rosary beads outside the Augustinians. (But that is something no one does in Ireland any more, as far as I can see). It was all very well in the eighteenth century, when a few bored subscribers might or might not dip into the calf-bound folio of memoirs that an indeb-

ted author pressed upon them with flourishes of flattery. In such a happy and illiterate time Arthur Young, for instance, could coolly record in print: 'To Limerick Laid at Bennis's, the first inn we had slept in since Dublin. God preserve us this journey from another!'. He can slap out like that, most helpfully to other travellers — and not a word out of Bennis! Or out of any kind of Turismo Authority. Happy Arthur Young! How intelligently and graciously he travelled! One has, of course, to skip about in his pages, and accept his maniacal interest in rape cake and 'turneps'. Once — on Lord Kingborough's land at Mitchelstown, I think — he came in a field one morning on 'FOUR HOARS OF TURNEPS'. He said that he could not have been made so happy if he met four emperors! That is agricultural zest, indeed. But of course — as to meeting emperors anywhere, least would one wish to meet them in a turnip field in the early morning, I believe.

Young's scientific purpose apart — though you cannot separate him from his ruling passion — he is a wonderfully humane, observant and mannerly traveller, and a man impossible to fool, I should say. He comes into mind as we leave St. Mary's Gate, and stroll towards modern, eighteenth-century Limerick, leaving the old quarters of sieges, wars and destruction at our backs, because he liked Limerick well and was about when its fine new streets were going up in Georgian order, tall and well-spaced houses of brown brick, and Custom House, Court House, Savings Bank. He found it a very lively place, with many carriages and sedan chairs on the move; an assembly house, and plays and concerts, he reports. And a responsible citizen informed him in 1776, that a gentleman commanding £500 a year in Limerick could keep a carriage and four horses, 3 menservants, 3 maids, a good table, a wife, a nurse and 3 children. A design of living which even then, one suspects, must have meant some strain about keeping up with the Joneses; still, it does sound very nice — and with the wife well down the catalogue of comforts, in a place which suggests that she is not expected to be any way vocal or burdensome. The serious expenses will be, one would guess, the carriage and 4 horses.

Then at Limerick this cultivated Englishman salutes the great Shannon with reverence and admiration '... A most noble river, deserving regal navies for her ornament, or what are better, fleets of merchantmen...'

'... Upon the whole, Limerick must be a very gay place', says Young, 'but when the usual number of troops were in town much more so...'

Yes, it was a gay town, within memory, when the troops were in; at least, that was one aspect of gaiety that Limerick wore, up to 1914. It was a garrison town, and did not deny itself the glitter and spangle of such. Troops are no longer gay, in any part of the world; 'gay' will never again be an appropriate adjective for soldiery; the decorative, thin notion died around 1914, and a long way from Tipperary. All to the good. But the women of Limerick have often been brilliantly beautiful — pace those one or two observers who have declared themselves cheated of glamour hereabout — and English regiments flirted and courted among them with traditional allure — my memory tells me — and often effectively, and even respectably. They must indeed have been an answer to life very often, those enemy troops, if not literally an answer to prayer. And one of them, come to think of it, fathered Lola Montez here, in some gay hovel near the docks.

The married women of Limerick — and we had some singularly beautiful ones around at the time I am remembering — were often very gay and gentle with the fairhaired lieutenants and trim captains from 'across'. And one well-instructed school-child watching the comedy, in skating-rinks, on tennis-courts, on river picnics and around demure pianos, used to wonder about the

rules, about confession and temptation and continence and the queer phrase, 'taking pleasure'. She was often troubled for favourite beautiful ladies who probably did not know her at all, and certainly were unaware of her sneaky and precocious watchfulness. And if the ageing, dimming eyes of any matron of the Limerick bourgeoisie should fall on these lines, let no such reader protest in virtuous forgetfulness that it was only the loose beauties of the Protestant ascendancy who enjoyed a military gallop — for she will not be telling the truth. There was a chiel amang ye.

No: Limerick was and is gay — as well as grave. A measure of gaiety is essential to normal life, and that life is quick here the wide streets proclaim. For they are packed and restless, and quite monotonously now have all the usual shops of all the world become with the usual tediously celebrated packaged goods. No glossy cosmopolitan need go short of his customary fads in Limerick. A mink stole could probably be bought as soon as wept for; diamonds are certainly on sale, and there is no way at all of flustering our wine or spirit importers. There can be no known make of car that would surprise our younger citizens, the cosmetics of the world are on the girls' shopping lists and faces, and we have elegant teddy boys to give any visiting critic a cool once-over. We can easily ask four-and-sixpence for a single rose — and in jazz can be as far out as you've ever heard.

That is what is ordinary about us — that is what seems inevitable and is sad. The unavoidable mass supply-and-demand thing which has long ago made most of the cities of America unidentifiable, interchangeable. There is no use crying out against it. That is the way the future intends its world to be — in uniform. But we are not really into the future yet, thank God. And when I ramble about Ireland I evoke indeed all the efficient, day-after-tomorrow things that are being done, and the lifts and changes that are being worked, for all our benefit, upon the beautiful old face. But the beautiful old face stays old, is still itself. And so in Limerick, while I admire now prosperous, handsome O'Connell Street, admire and wonder, I can identify it; I can find Limerick, the private town I was a child in.

Todd's is gone, of course — fine, Victorian Todd's where every stitch that everyone wore was always bought — and charged! And where an old man in a top hat opened the doors. The burning down of it is a loss which no town of character can easily bear. It will come back, and we can suppose in splendour, but there is an important sense in which it is gone forever. Yet Cannock's clock is still above our heads and still keeps time and chime. Lloyd's is ended — all untidy mahogany within, with grapes standing round in barrels of bran, and the air sedative with smells of spilt port and brandy; but a little up the street where once there was a tea merchant's the life-size Chinese mandarin still stands against the old facade. There is a long-shaped kiosk near Tait's Clock that hasn't been repainted since I was twelve years old and where comics are still called **Tiger Tim** and **The Magnet**. And the coachmen on the carriage boxes when the funerals cross the bridge from St. Munchin's are the same coachmen of all the generations, as are their horses and their very high top hats. Also Limerick still has, dominating proudly all the new drugstore-style chemists' shops two lofty marbled mahogany-ed Medical Halls that inspired awe in childhood and still in Victorian calm can do the same through evocation. How peculiar, how delicate the smell of a Medical Hall! There was one in Fermoy, I remember —

But let us leave Limerick for a bit. The place grows too much my own.

