

NEWCASTLE WEST-1970



Newcastle West, Co. Limerick, is an Irish town that is *not* dying. It has kept its economic stability at a terrible price, the constant exportation of human beings. It is the example of a town that is alive because the young leave, a town that would certainly be ruined if those people born in the '30s and '40s had stayed at home *en masse*. The transportation still continues and it is against this background of population-loss that the town has survived and is now slowly regaining the status it had in the 19th century. It was then, the largest market town in the county, outside of Limerick city. It had woollen, linen and brewing industries, two coal mines were operated in the nearby hills and there was a proposal to cut a canal to the Shannon, 14 miles away. The population then, in 1837, was 2,908.

The population (that part of it which lives in the town proper) has been more or less the same since, but the industries have gone. The harshness of the 1840s led to their death. The people began to leave, at first from despair but in the past twenty years through pure instinct. Today the major employers are the local County Council, two bottling plants, the local hospital for the old and the unwanted, and a few shopkeepers. Some factories, which had been hoped for for many years, have at last been built, and this has reduced the outflow of the young. A new school was built in the late 1950s to replace the old structure, built in 1826: this old school was the one I attended. It was unbelievable. In the summer the swallows built in the large beams inside the rooms, flying in and out all day to feed their young. One of my favourite pastimes was drowning woodlice in the inkwells, as they fell in ridiculous numbers from the rafters.

Some of the boys who did not live in the town brought their lunches - bread and butter and milk - wrapped in newspaper, and these were raided almost every day by the rats that lived under the floor and scampered about, completely ignoring us. Rat-poison was put down, and the entire school was pervaded by the delightful aroma of decaying rats.

Emigration was the enemy. England claimed 30 per cent., Dublin 20 per cent., and Ireland, excluding Newcastle West, a total of 40 per cent. Only 18 per cent found work in the town - seven out of 39. These figures do not apply, of course, to the girls of the town; they

by Michael Hartnett



Fuller's Folly and the Arra River, Newcastle West, from a drawing by Damien Patterson.

also drift away. The enemy is not England, not Dublin: it is the town itself. It fails to attract and it fails to employ. I have met most of those who are in England. They all say: "If I had a job tomorrow I'd go home". But they know there is a problem of integration; they have encountered it when they come home on holidays. It is mainly of their own making. They usually mock the ways, the wages, the deadness of the place, and, what is worse, they manage to acquire an obnoxious London slang which they imagine to be a better English than that spoken in Newcastle West. The people at home resent this,

rightly. If the emigrants do come back to Ireland to stay, the many snide remarks that hint at failure make life unpleasant. Those to whom I have spoken in Dublin have no desire at all to go back, but they have not been alienated from their own. Anyway, to the people of the town "to go to England" suggests poverty; but "to go to Dublin" suggests cleverness at school. Yet none of the 30 per cent. I have mentioned who did go to England were poverty-stricken.

The reasons for leaving are many, but the main one is shortage of work. I have spoken to many of my friends in

London about these reasons. I have sat in Kilburn pubs all night and heard nothing else discussed but Newcastle West, and with a deep nostalgia. One of the immediate reasons, one that arises before the young person's mind turns to employment, is that he has a brother or friend in England. He has heard of the huge wages (usually untrue) and the freedom from priest and parent; he has seen the cheap but tidy suits his returning friends sport, so as soon as possible he is gone.

He returns, usually within a year, to sport himself, and his lies about his wages are in proportion to his misery in London. He is repulsed. He comes again a few years later, and that is usually his final attempt. Many of the fights that happen in pubs involve a local and a visiting emigrant.

I have been told in Kilburn of the social injustices. Some I have witnessed. Many are so unapparent to the people at home that they are barely injustices at all. One young man told me he had left for one reason only: it was a practice in Newcastle West, up to the 1960s, for the priest to read from the pulpit the names of those people who had paid their dues, markedly omitting those who did not or could not - markedly, because the names were read in street order so everyone knew who had reneged. The decency of the good, he said, was turned to pride, and the poor were stigmatised.

Why did the better dressed and richer people sit to the front and middle of the church on Sunday and the poor sit right and left, or stand in the porch? Why were the poor branded and why could the poor not face their God on Sunday? Were they less religious than the rich? He said he lost his religion because he could not walk to the altar rails with a hole in his trousers, or kneel to God because of a tattered shoe: "God may have been at my face, but the sneering population were behind me". I suggested that he was proud and that a Christian should be humble. "Humility should not be enforced", he said. He also reminded me of the cult of the "ould stock": that is if you or even your grandfather was not born in the town, you were still a stranger; on the other hand, if you happened to reside there since the founding of the castle by the Knights Templar in 1184, your history was known, and you wouldn't be forgiven if you tried to marry "above your station".

Newcastle West and its countryside provided me with images. Its neighbourhood is not spectacular: the mountains are miniature, the woods are copses at best. But it soft, beautiful inland country, very green and over-lush in the summer. It is easy to sit in a house with chrome and enamel, in a city with "all mod. cons" and (perhaps) with that essential anonymity found there, away from parent and priest. It is

easy to laugh and criticise quaint ways and hypocrisy, but beneath these there is a great part of a "hidden Ireland" preserved, and no amount of modernity, no television set, no pointed shoes will make up the loss of the last vestiges of an older Ireland.

"Church Street without a church, Bishop Street without a bishop and Maiden Street without a maiden" goes a Newcastle West saying; and Maiden Street alone was - and is - a microcosm of an Ireland that is dying. It was the Claddagh of the town. When I was about ten, I took a friend of mine home. "Please don't tell my father I'm down here", he said, meaning in "Maiden Street". He was ten years old. The town was small - and he had never been down there before, nor was he allowed to go there by his parents. The street was mainly a double row of mud houses, some thatched, a few slated, most covered in sheets of corrugated iron. This was "Lower" Maiden Street; "Upper" was given over to small shops and public houses.

Before the Corpus Christi procession every year, all walls were limewashed in bright yellow, red and white colours, windows were aglow with candles and garish statues, and any unsightly object, such as a telegraph pole, was garlanded in ivy or ash branches. Banners and buntings were spread across the houses, and on the day, with the ragged band blowing brass hymns, followed by all the townspeople who carried confraternity staffs, the Host under a gold canopy was carried through the town. It matched any *Semana Santa* procession in Spain.

Old customs survived for a long time. I played "Skeilg" once a year, chasing unmarried girls with ropes through the street, threatening to take them to Skeilg Mhicil; I lit bonfires along the street on Bonfire Night; I put pebbles in a toisin (a twisted cone of paper in which shopkeepers served sweets) and threw it on the road. If anyone picked it up and opened it, I lost my warts, one for each pebble in the paper, and the person who picked up the paper took the warts from me of his own free will.

Then Maiden Street received a severe but necessary blow. The houses were small with no sanitation: one fountain served the whole street, most of the floors were mud, with large open hearths with cranes and pothooks to take the cast-iron pots and bastables. And, of course, families were large. In 1951 a new housing estate was opened on a hill overlooking Maiden Street and many of the families, including mine, moved there. Now we had toilets and taps (six I counted, overjoyed) electricity and upstairs bedrooms. But Skeilg was never played again.

Better standards of living may improve the health of people, but this price of abandoning poor people's customs must always be paid and the

customless bourgeoisie come into existence. Yet the general spirit has still survived. When the oppressions of religion and work are forgotten, they find again their old joy and innocence. This innocence is not to be confused with stupidity: I mean wonderment, such as expressed by the old man in a story a friend told me. My friend went home to Newcastle West from UCD and met, a few miles away on Turn Hill, an old man on the road, a distant relation. The talk came round to Dublin. "Where do you stay there?" asked the old man. The other explained about "digs". "An' you pay four pound a week for a room only?" He was surprised. No, my friend replied, that included food as well. The old man was amazed. "Surely they wouldn't charge you for the bite that goes into your mouth?"

Our entertainment was innocent too, but not without a touch of cruelty at times; watching crawfish clawing their ways towards the river across the roadway, gambling with passing cars. And on hot dusty summer evenings (all the evenings of summers before adulthood seem hot and dusty) suddenly at the pub not far from our door, there would be the joyous sound of curses and breaking glass, joyous to us because we know the tinkers were settling some family problem in their own way. We would sit on the window-sills, eating our rawked apples, while they fought. We never cheered, nor would any of those who appeared over the halfdoors up along the street. Someone would send for the Gardai, and then light carts and swift horses would rattle off down towards the Cork Road, all the fighters becoming friends before the common enemy. We sat on, waiting for the last act, when half-an-hour later, the fat amiable Garda would come strolling down to an outburst of non-malicious jeers. But we were poor too, and there was the misery of drink in many houses.

I often tried to read by the faint light of an old oil-lamp with a huge glass globe which was suspended from the rafters. The house seemed big at the time, but is really incredibly small, and one had to stoop to enter. I sat there in the small kitchen-cum-living room, innocently working out the problems my father set me. "If it took a beetle a week to walk a fortnight, how long would it take two drunken soldiers, to swim out of a barrel of treacle?" I never worked it out. Or "How would you get from the top of Church Street to the end of Bridge Street without passing a pub?" He did supply the answer to that which indeed is the logical answer for any Irishman: "You don't pass any - you go into them all".

Once a year the otherwise idyllic life of the town was ruined by the coming of the "Mission". It was as if the Grand Inquisitor himself had walked through



A Newcastle West street scene in the 1940s.

the town pointing out heretics. I sat in the church on the long seas, sweating with fear at the Hell conjured up by the preaching father, as he roared all sorts of vile accusations at the people. They sat, silent and red-eared, until he told an ancient joke probably first told by Paul in Asia Minor, a joke that they had heard year in year out, for a long time. But they tittered hysterically, delighted at being able to make a human sound in church. Outside the "Stall", with its cheap trinkets from Japan, was dutifully looked over by the congregation: phials of Lourdes water, miraculous medals, scapulars, prayer-books and all the tokens of religion bought and sold like "fish and chips". But they were not "holy", then, not until the end of the Mission did the preacher bless the huckster's dross and only then did they become sacred.

Part of the old castle grounds were made public by an Earl of Devon in the last century. These overgrown acres were a retreat from the Mission for anyone daring enough to go there during a service. Getting to the Demesne from the town without being seen was an art in itself (which I cannot divulge lest some young person read this and be led astray), but once gained, it was a haven of quiet trees and overgrown paths and two rivers. I read much poetry on such nights, watching the shadowy figures of fellow-transgressors hiding in the bushes a small cloud of blue cigarette-smoke over their heads. I even met a girl there once: easy enough, as the Mission had Men's

Weeks and Women's Week's; their sins, I then assumed, were different.

There are as many things to love in a town as there are to hate. Indeed the only things I disliked were class and priest-power, but if injustice is not seen to be done, such opinions are merely private prejudices. I remember, with pity for the man, a priest beating a child about a schoolroom for no good reason. I remember, with joy for myself, my grandmother coming into town on her asscart, her black, fringed shawl about her small fresh face, with her stories of pishogues and enchanted fairy forts; I remember her illness and her dying and my absence from this, being in London working or drunk in a Dublin pub. If you cannot mock a place you love, how can you love it fully? And can you not hate it because it is becoming televisioned, educated and more middle-class every year? Are pop stars to replace the Wren-boys?

Christmas Day was not unique in Newcastle West. I remember no customs that were not common to today's commercial carnival, but St. Stephen's Day – the "Wren's Day" – was always exciting and memorable. One fine frosty morning the sound sleep of our house after the excess and the boredom of Christmas Day was magically finished by the excitement of bodhran and the wild tin whistles of a group of "Wren-boys" from Castlemahon. I saw the masks and the weird costumes through the window and was out of bed, searching my pockets for the pence of Christmas Day.

"The Wren, the Wren, the king of all birds,
St. Stephen's Day he was caught in the furze,
Up with the kettle and down with the pan,
And give us a penny to bury the Wren!"

That was the first and last time I saw a dead wren, complete with nest, held up in a furze bush hung with red streamers: it was in 1949. The pubs were open on that day, the melodeon, pipes, bodhran, fiddles, drums and tenor voices raced up and down the streets until night. It was like that for a few years, but again progress stepped in; in 1951 the "New Houses" were opened and for some reason seemed prohibitive to the Wren-boys. They still kept to the town, but all we got was a few guitars and little boys with lipstick singing: "I'm all shook up", or some such transient ditty. A brilliant move however was made by some of the townspeople and Wren-boy competitions were organised every New Year, in which authenticity figured greatly, and which has helped preserve the custom, or at least to lengthen its days.

But that small town, the small farmer, is slowly becoming obsolete; even the labourer himself is going. A small town like Newcastle West is perhaps the pattern of all small towns in Ireland – the pseudo-comforts of so-called civilisations like that of the U.S.A. and Britain are being sought after. Few would deny progress but then few reckon the cost.