

LEADER EXTRA



From colonial Africa to remnants of Limerick in Kilkee

By PATRICIA FEEHILY

THE LIMERICK, particularly the Cecil Street, of JM O'Neill's childhood, is almost as far away now as the Colonial West coast of Africa, where he spent much of his adult life.

But the man, who once revelled in the title of the "Laureate of the Irish in London," still finds remnants of the lost Limerick in Kilkee, where he has been living for the past 18 months producing his latest novel, *Commissar Connell*, due to be published by Hamish Hamilton this week.

Hailed for his previous works by the English Guardian and Observer newspapers' critics as an exceptional novelist, and by the Irish Times as "one of the greats," JM O'Neill was born in Newport, Co

Tipperary, but has no recollection of the place. "My grandparents came from Newport, and I was born there while my mother was on a visit," he explains.

But he does remember his young days in Cecil St, then the "home of doctors and dentists," and recalls friends like the Thompsons and the Stockills, whom he now finds himself running into again in Kilkee. He also boasts of his family's cooerage "up there near St Michael's Church."

His own life is like a number of novels rolled into one. After school with the Augustinians in Waterford, he joined the Bank of Ireland as a relief clerk and saw duty "everywhere someone got sick or broke a leg."

He eventually got a permanent posting in Kilrush, but

Barclays and the colonial scene sounded "much more important," so he and his wife, Mary, found themselves posted for many years to Nigeria and the Gold Coast.

He eventually abandoned banking altogether and came back to London to supervise the building trade, where he also became involved in the promotion of folk theatre.

His writing career began with plays, "but London being such a city for musicals, there wasn't much money in it", so he turned to the novel, and since 1983, this is his fourth. *Open Cut*, *Duffy is Dead* and *Canon Bang Bang* have all won wide critical acclaim — he has been compared to Grahame Greene.

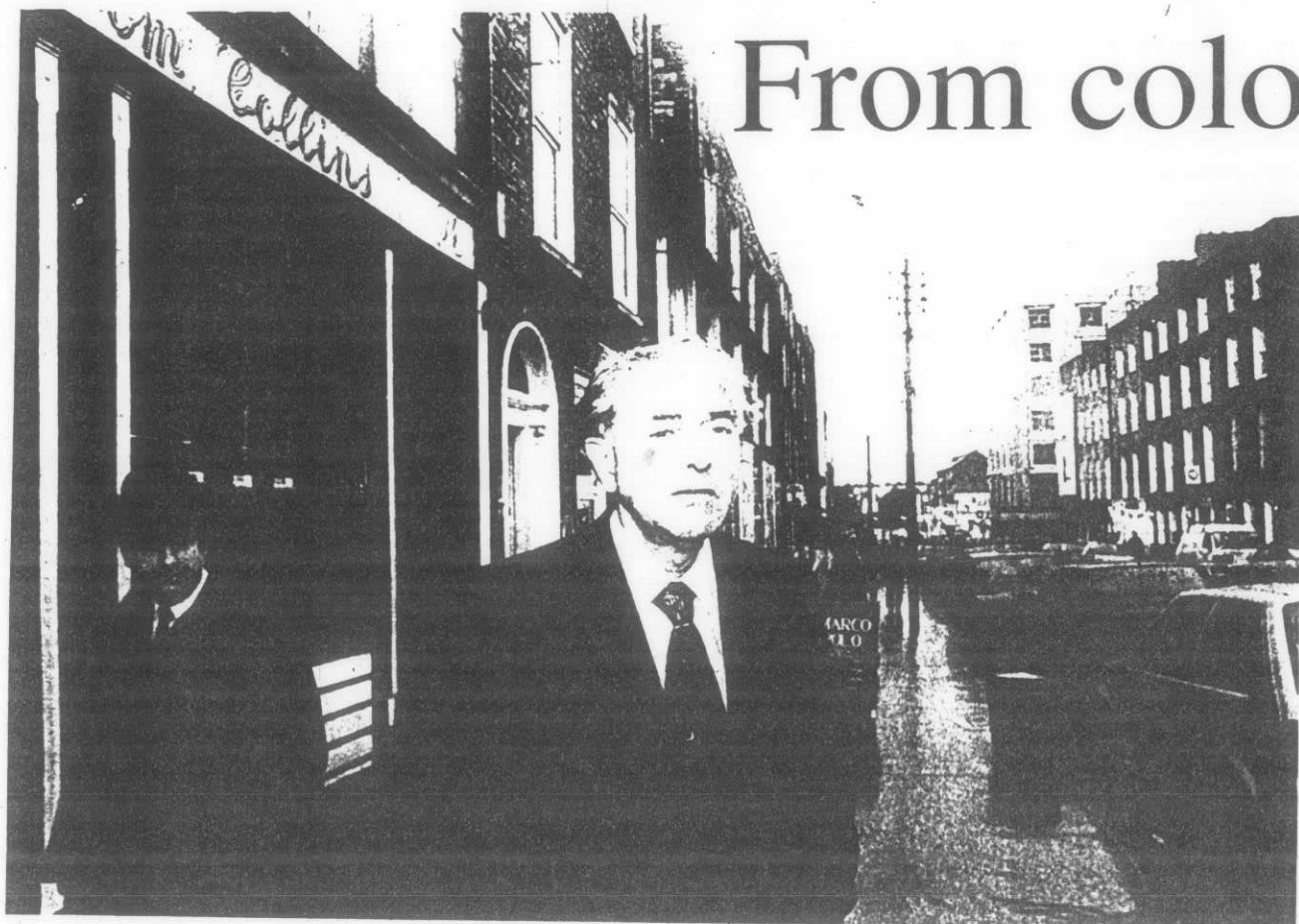
"It's dangerous for me in Kilkee," he declares. "I keep on meeting all my old friends

who steer me straight to the nearest bar for a drink." *Commissar Connell* is a fast moving, dramatic and strange tale of a fugitive Irishman who went "native" in the jungles of equatorial West Africa.

It gives a rare insight into colonial life, but it is not about Africa at all. It is, in fact, a vignette of the tribal warfare of Northern Ireland, and ends in a tragedy that echoes still on the streets of Belfast.

"When I was in London, they always asked me: 'Why don't you write about the North?' This is it," he says. And if *Commissar Connell* has a moral, its author sums it up. "There are no winners in it," he says. "But is not a gloomy book."

Commissar Connell is published by Hamish Hamilton and costs £14.99.



Author JM O'Neill in the street he grew up in.

The lonely nighttime vigil to hook the salmon poachers

By NORMA PRENDIVILLE

THERE IS dedication and dedication. Me? I thought, in giving up my warm place by the fire, turning my back on regular doses of coffee, a good book and Thursday night's telly, to go out into the cold February night in search of poachers that I was demonstrating a rare, (albeit proper) dedication to the readers of the *Limerick Leader*.

But that was before I met waterkeeper Christy Kelleher, and heard about the activities of the members of the Feale Fishing Federation. Because they

ous business indeed. Because from late November to about now is prime spawning season, and the salmon who make their way up the many tributaries of the Feale have to be protected from poachers.

Even one hen salmon lost to a poacher is a serious issue. Each hen spawns up to 6,000 eggs. If they were all to hatch out and grow, that is a hell of a lot of salmon. And especially when you think that each salmon has travelled thousands of miles from Greenland or the Faroe Islands to reach the Abhabheag or the Oulagh Rivers to spawn within ten yards of their own birth place, you begin to realise the sheer vandalism of interfering with such

good to eat, according to most experts and all fisher-folk. Their flesh is soft and slimy. And there isn't too much of it. But the going rate this year was £10 for a cock salmon, £8 for a hen and that, I suppose, is the real answer.

The fact that there are whopping big fines to be paid, if caught, doesn't seem to deter some. But that said, some poachers will go to any lengths to avoid being caught. Recently, a man patrolling the river near Abbeyfeale who had just succeeded in catching a poacher, was pushed from behind by the poacher's accomplice and thrown into the water. In the perishing cold of a January night, it must have seemed a very

and on the nearby bridge — presumably by poachers wishing to make their presence felt.

But although such incidents have given rise to concern among Feale anglers, the fact remains that the poachers are not winning.

Very few spawning salmon were lost this season, says Christy Kelleher. But he, and those anglers who back him up on their nighttime patrols, are not relaxing yet.

With no flood waters to help the salmon who have spawned make their way back out to sea, and with river waters low, these few weeks are critical. In their shallow, six-inch pools, the salmon are sitting targets.

There was little to help a potential poacher. Only the barest sliver of a crescent moon in the sky, and although the lights of homes in Knockbrack, Mount-collins, Meenahila and Tournafulla shone out brightly, deceptively, down by the water's edge, it was deepest black.

Every now and again, a message came over the radio phone to Christy, keeping tabs on his exact whereabouts which was never far from where a poacher might strike.

"Is that a light?" I ask in innocence and in ignorance.

"No, that's a house," comes the reply from a man who knows every twist in every road around the

