

MEMORIES OF ST. JOHN'S GIRLS SCHOOL

by Patsy Harrold

PART ONE



Most people remember their first day at school: the sheer fright and excitement of the occasion usually anchors the memory in the mind

for all time.

On my first day at school my terror was only calmed when Mrs Isadore took me from my grandmother's tightly held hand, hugged me warmly, and wrote my full name, Margaret Patricia, in the school register.

Officially Mrs Isadore was known as Sister, but the women of the parish always gave her and the head-nun the old-fashioned title of "Missus". When I later asked my grandmother why the nuns were called Missus when they had no husbands and children she told me that they were married to Jesus.

Years afterwards I saw the film of a nun being professed. She walked down the chapel, dressed in a long, white dress and bridal veil and, kneeling at the altar rails, took her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Then the bishop cut off her long head of hair, the supreme symbol in Victorian times of a woman's sexuality. Placing a silver ring on her wedding finger in the elaborate ritual he declared her a bride of Christ.

The nuns in St. John's School had always been close to the women of the parish. Families were large and times were hard in the 1930s but nuns and mothers made common cause in trying to protect the children from the real hardships suffered by the poor because of a harsh and uncaring social system.

Discipline imposed in the school was sometimes stern, and a century of Jansenist Catholicism had made the nuns overconcerned with the sins of the flesh, but they never physically abused the girls in the same brutal way that some boys were beaten by the men who taught them.

The infants' room was battered and dusty, but Mrs Isadore did her best to



Three little maids: Katty O'Connor, Maura McGowan and Nancy Anderson.

make it warm and homely for the small children of the Babies class, some of them not even toilet trained. She usually wore her sleeves tucked up and, in an era when bathrooms, flushed lavatories and toilet paper were costly

luxuries, she was always opening windows to leave out a medley of smells.

One of my earliest memories is the fascination with which I watched our bottles of milk bubble and dance before the big fire in the schoolroom. On wet



An action song by Patsy Harrold and her classmates.

days she dried our sodden coats and with one, brisk, upward movement of her elbow and pointer, rather like a rocket being launched into outer space, she raised our flagging spirits as she led us in this chorus:

"Ta se ag fearthainn, ag fearthainn go trom.

Taimid ar scoil agus fanaimid ann. Beidh rinne is canna is sport agus greann.

Nuair a bhionn se ag fearthainn, ag fearthainn go trom".

("It's raining, raining heavily, We are at school and there we will stay.

We'll have dancing and singing and sporting and mirth, When it's raining, raining heavily").

Sometimes in the early summer Mrs Isadore sat us down in the sweet-smelling meadow beside the school, behind St. John's Cathedral. This treat was known as "going to the field".

For catechism we had: Miss Kennedy. She was a holy terror. If we were unable to finish the Hail Mary, she had a way of dropping her false teeth on to her lower lip which frightened even the boldest of us.

To be fair to her, she was a poorly-paid substitute teacher, with no formal training. These junior-assistant mistresses, or "Jams" as they were known for short, were always in such demand that at one stage my grandfather, when reading a newspaper, remarked: "There must be no end to the amount of Jam being made in the country!"

Poor Miss Kennedy had the almost impossible task of teaching the "strays", known officially as "Miss Kennedy's class". The class contained children who, through parental neglect, physical handicap or mental disorder, could not keep up with the others. Our new, emerging nation was preoccupied with other priorities to care too much about what happened to these children.

When our year with Sr. Isadore was coming to an end, we fretted as we waited to pass into "Middles". But this change had its mixed blessings, as the lady who taught Middle Infants was a cheerful, golf-playing extrovert who had little patience with small children.

As we looked ahead with eager anticipation to our new adventure, none of us could have foreseen that sad day more than thirty years later when the old Garryowen school, with its imposing stone structure, would be reduced to rubble in the late 1960s. The school had complemented the Gothic cathedral and the parochial house, and when it was demolished the grace and beauty of the whole cathedral close was spoiled.

In truth, however, like most Victorian public buildings, the interior had many shortcomings. Going back through the decades in my mind's eye, I can see the overcrowded classrooms with their high ceilings, dreary green walls, dusty aspidistras and hard benches - most benches occupied by three children at the same time. One of the worst for wear rooms was called

"The Bower", though anything less like a bower is hard to imagine.

Then there was the "Nuns' Room" which no one dared to enter. It was only in later life that it occurred to me that there was a toilet in this room for the nuns' use. To us children nuns were other wordly kind of beings, entirely independent of the normal bodily functions.

The front hall was an intimidating place, full of stuffed birds who glared out of their cases with malignant eyes. This little-used entrance was mainly the preserve of the clergy, school inspectors and, occasionally, the bishop, and seemed to belong more in spirit to the cathedral rather than to the less pretentious school.

Miss O'Connor's room was a haven in the time-worn building. It was a small assembly room with a stage at one end and a piano at the other. Expensive miniature open-up desks were placed in an open-ended rectangle in the centre of the room. Each desk had its own tiny Bentwood chair of the type used in the big shops and expensive cafes of the 1920s and 1930s. High up on the wall above the piano, was a statue of the Virgin Mary.

Each May the statue was taken down and placed on the floor, facing the stage. My grandmother and other mothers spent what they could ill-afford at the market on bunches of flowers, while the parents who were too poor to be able to afford these flowers searched the banks and hedges of the Shannon for wild blossoms for

the May altar. So the statue was surrounded by an abundance of flowers, wild and cultivated. Only the ill-omened hawthorn failed to find a place in the garland.

Every year, when the scent of lilacs and lupins drifts in from my own and neighbouring gardens, I am reminded of the solemn-faced girls grouped around the statue answering "Pray for us," as Mrs. Finbar, the head-nun, intoned the Litany of the Blessed Virgin.

May was also First Communion month. Mrs Isadore, discarding her normal motherly personality, became our stern mentor as she taught us hymns and prayers for the communion service. On the First Communion day itself, when the last white-clad girl and black-suited boy had passed from the cathedral into the front hall, Sr. Isadore, her smiling cheerful self once more, invited us into the communion breakfast in Miss O'Connor's room.

For the rest of the year the room remained Katty O'Connor's domain, for the nuns, recognising her exceptional gifts, were only too happy to let her make full use of them. Katty came from Athlunkard Street. Her family were pig-buyers and were known throughout Limerick for their love of music. Her uncle, Brian O'Connor, had been an outstanding rugby player.

Katty herself was a singer and actress of considerable talent. She appeared regularly on the stages of Limerick theatres, taking leading parts in operas and musical comedies. She was also well known on the concert stage.

Always in demand for charity concerts and bazaars, she introduced to

Limerick a type of entertainment, which was popular in London, called "Cafe Chantant", a French term meaning a singing cafe, or a bazaar held in a room, where people drink tea (Miss O'Connor's room, with its stage, piano and miniature cafe chairs will be forever associated in my mind with the cafe chantant in the novels of Jean Rhys). Katty would play the piano, while a group of girls danced and sang - a genteel form of our modern cabaret.

Katty used her gifts as a pianist and singer to develop the talents of the poor children she taught. Most of the girls had few inhibitions about music and were perfect material for her. They were "mad" about the "pictures" and singing and dancing came naturally to them. Children of labourers, tradesmen, guards and itinerants, barefoot and shod, marched in and out daily to the cheerful tinkling of her piano. She banged out marches, waltzes, tangos, musical comedy numbers and pop songs of the day - songs that the girls, with their working class culture, could easily identify with.

Year after year her action song group, with its snappy song-and-dance numbers, put life into the dreary Thomond Feis, and walked away with many of the prizes.

Katty O'Connor wrote two books of songs in Irish for children, set to traditional airs. These books were extensively used by the Department of Education, and for this contribution to Irish culture she never got due credit.

She had a number of "hard-cases" in her class but, because of her city background, she delighted in the street

wisdom and nonchalance of the children that poverty and neglect had made precocious and tough.

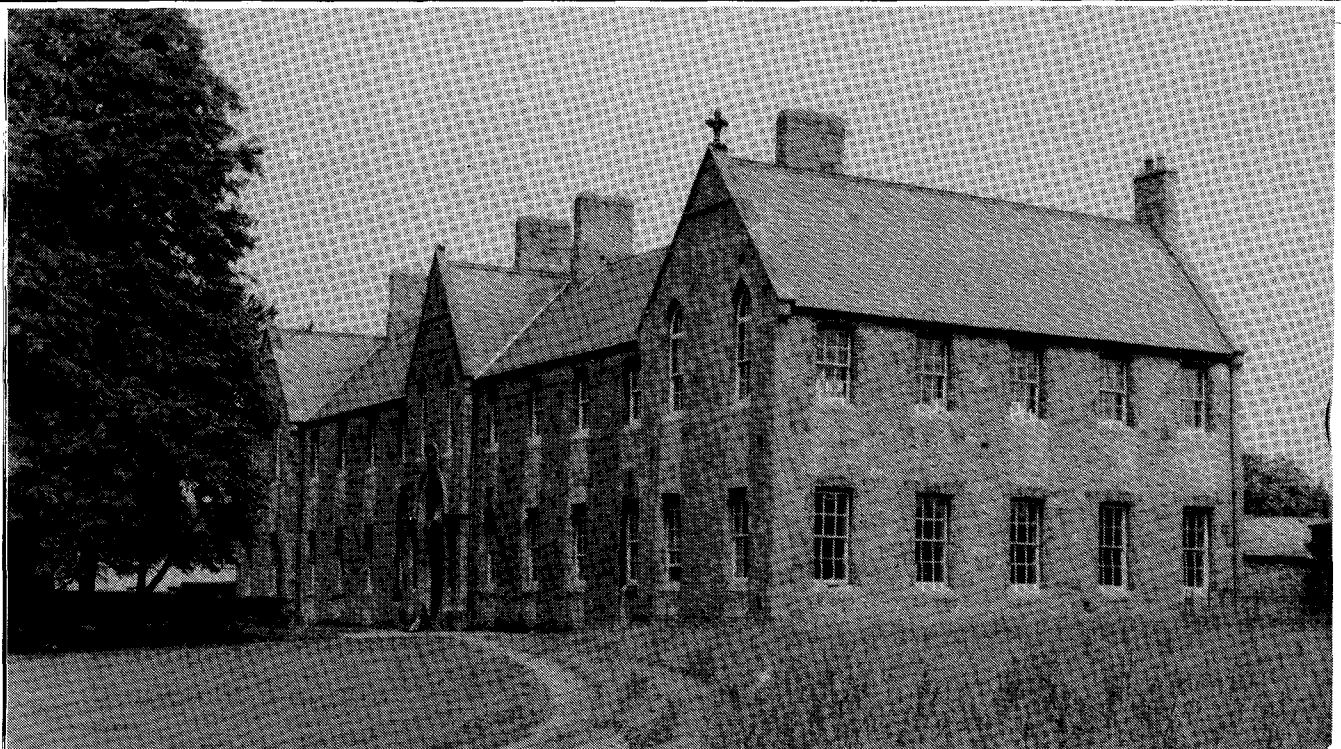
Crying was generally frowned on in the infant classes as being "cissyish". As I cried easily, I was always in dread of being called a "crybaby". On one occasion, when Miss O'Donnell and Miss O'Connor were going through the roll-call, they caught me chattering. When challenged, I denied the charge at first but then admitted it, bursting into tears with the shame of my guilt. Shortly afterwards, as we rose to march out to lunch Miss O'Connor sat down at the piano and played "It's A Sin To Tell a Lie". Even to this day my face burns at the mortification of the memory.

Although tears were discouraged as a rule, there was an common understanding that the children leaving Miss O'Connor's class for the last time could not help crying. Katty, herself, conscious that her girls were leaving babyhood forever, and with her theatrical sense of melodrama, had her own special repertoire of sad little songs for the occasion.

As we stood up to march away, she launched into "Danny Boy". The first upper lips started to quiver and by the time she reached "Little Boy Blue" the dancers were bawling. The singers, too, were crying and those, like myself, who could neither sing nor dance were crying from downright emotion.

As the last few girls filed through the hall into First Class, Katty's piano tinkled "Can I Forget You?".

Can we ever forget you, Miss O'Connor?



The entrance to the girls' school.