

WARMEST LOVE

PART TWO

by Kate O'Brien

As I write these words I am long out of sight of St. John's spire, but I imagine and hope that Limerick is fast asleep this minute, and the Shannon running quietly past Barrington's Pier. I read in "The Times" this morning that someone was dead, 'late of Castleconnell, Co. Limerick'. It is surprising how often Limerick is named in this great London newspaper. Over the years I have come to the opinion that the place averages three appearances to six issues! Extraordinary.

But this person, 'late of Castleconnell' — I wonder what he last saw, within, as his eyes closed? Had he been a child in Castleconnell and did he play in one of those tangled gardens above the wide, cataracting Shannon? Did he know Doonass across the water, and with his brothers take the ferry-boat above the Falls and walk by those fields under the Hell-Fire Club to picnic on the little lawn of *The Angler's Rest*? Did he have friends who lived in the Tontines? Did he run in and out of Cusack's Rod and Tackle shop? And did all rush back into his slowing heart the other night?

Last things to be remembered — not Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven, as they taught us, taking us surely to be almost freakishly neutral in intelligence and in feeling? But I wonder to what one says the last, involuntary good-bye?

That is one wonder that will not be resolved — not, at least, for the record. But the scenes of early childhood are those which shine clearest and best refresh the middle-aged, the ageing mind. Senses which are tired, and often glad, be it said, to recognise that they are truly tired of the commonplace stimulations of adult life can still be surprised, and the soul illumined, by a memory, accidental or sought, out of the first years of life. It is as if the brief state of being very young is found, when towards the end we turn over the baggage we have held on to, to be a durable substance, a bright stone that we can hold in our hand now and weigh and polish and consider, when other phases of us seem either to be missing from the satchel, or grown amorphous, discoloured. We discover our childhood at the end of life as if it were something sculpted, detached, that we can walk round and appraise, and can see to be still living in its own right, when much of the rest of us is by every good right dead or dead-alive.

'Late of Castleconnell' has reminded me — though I need no reminding — of this chief warmth of the cooled-off years. Yet, turning over these pages I see that I have set down in them far less about what I best know — I mean that of Ireland which was mine in birth and childhood — than of points and places that came into my acquaintance by the chances of adult life. Better so, I hope, in this small book; for among the latter it is easy to be selective and arbitrary, as was my intention — whereas I find that to write descriptively and directly about Limerick or Kilkee is all but impossible — for every sentence turns in on me, becomes evocative, imaginative and private.

If there are any readers still with me in these meanderings, they are now going to suffer one of those show-off, 'popular' author's personal anecdotes. No excuse except that I like it.

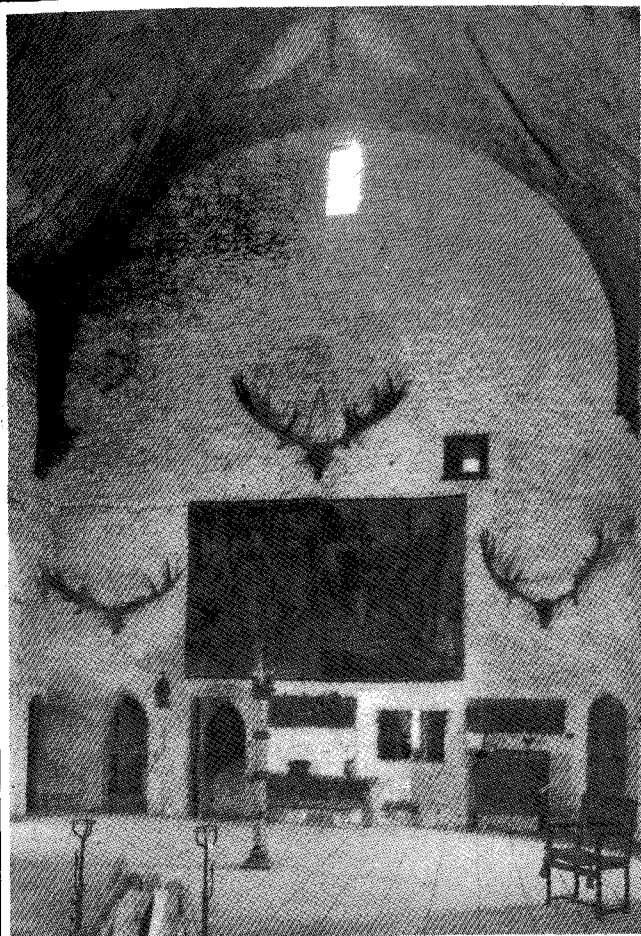
Bunratty Castle is a limestone fortress to be seen, and nowadays to be visited, in Co. Clare, on the main road between Limerick City and Shannon Airport. The site and name have a very long history, but the present structure was built by the MacNamaras in the mid-fifteenth cen-

tury, about 1460, to be a proud and comely residence as well as a fortress. But early in the sixteenth century it passed, whether peaceably or not is not known, into possession of the O'Briens, then the Kings of Thomond, later to become the Earls. Being richer and more given to ostentatious self-expression than their MacNamara cousins, they embellished the new acquisition creditably — with gardens, water gardens and plantations which were one day to excite surprise in the Italian Legate, Cardinal Rinuccini; with carvings, fine plasterwork and noble fireplaces. Indeed from the drawbridge up, where, ignoring beneath us the very ugly dungeons and convenient ice-house, we enter the retainers' hall and see the butler's handy offices, upward to the superb Hall of the Earls and the lovely little decorated chapel, to the bedrooms and parlours further up still, including the Earl's bathroom, some dressing-rooms and several lavatories — we find this great four-towered edifice to have been an uncramped and noble house, in a truly aristocratic style.

Donagh O'Brien, a late Elizabethan, and fourth Earl of Thomond, seems to have liked Bunratty more than others of his houses: he spent much time and money there, and is responsible for the more subtle of its beauties. Clearly he was a princely man and a man of taste. The Hall of Earls, the chapel and details throughout the staircases and upper rooms speak for that. He might well indeed have liked the place, if only for its great views to all points, south over the wide Shannon, with a comforting beacon-sight on the Limerick shore of another of his fortresses, proud Carrigogunnel: west to those sea-blown marshes which are now the tarmacs and outfields of an airport: north to the gentle, hazel-wooded Cratloe Hills. It was a palace both beautiful and commanding — like some of those alarming queens and wives to which the O'Briens from Brian Boru onward were addicted.

It was in the reign of Barnaby O'Brien, sixth Earl, that Bunratty Castle died. Barnaby may have been a clever man — he was a source of great trouble with his subtleties in the Confederation of Kilkenny, but he had neither the pride nor the grace of his grandfather. He was, indeed, a trimmer; and during the Great Rebellion from 1641 onwards he managed shamelessly to run with the hare, hunt with the hounds, keep his powder dry, keep in with his Church and lose nothing. Except Bunratty, which was taken by the Parliamentary armies in 1646. They needed it to watch the port of Limerick, then held by the Confederates. And that occupation ended Bunratty's life as an O'Brien possession. The Parliamentaries put a certain Admiral Penn in charge there of the Shannon traffic — so a little boy called William Penn played and learnt his lessons for a while in the Great Hall of the O'Briens.

For all of my life and for many generations before me the castle stood desolate, a slowly crumbling ruin, above the bridge on the turn of the familiar road to Ennis. It was the property of the Studdert family, a forsaken old relic. And then a few years ago came John Hunt — that learned, impassioned student of the past and of forgotten arts, forsaken skills and beauties, a man of pure and scholarly devotion, a lover and servant of Ireland if ever there was one. He decided, studied, plotted, planned, im-



The banquet hall at Bunratty Castle.

pled, begged and every way thought and importuned — to restore Bunratty Castle to what it was when Barnaby, 6th Earl, was a child there at the beginning of the seventeenth century. He loved the neglected structure that he found, and as an expert he knew how to read its indications; and he formed the wish to return it to Ireland, and to Europe, as an accurate example, as accurate as love, learning and money could make, of its own kind of aristocratic house at its own best time.

He had the love, he had the learning. He had a few friends whose taste and judgement were with him. He got erratic, vague 'Yes, yes'es' from uncomprehending patriots, and I believe that he got real attention from the Tourist Board. Also, some anxious, vague words from the Government.

But then he found Lord Gort. This generous peer, landlord of Cutra nearby, in the Coole and Gregory country — it is said that when Coole was sold to the knockers the Swans of Coole, Yeats' fifty-nine wild swans, went over to Cutra — came to examine Bunratty Castle with John Hunt, listened to what he had to say, agreed with it, was fired by it. He bought Bunratty from the Studdert heir and entered into John Hunt's dream, openhanded and determined.

One may leave the ups-and-downs of their undertaking to the imagination of any experienced person. The point is that — with the eventual help of the Government of Ireland these two men did what they desired — and so on a day of May 1960 a great number of us were invited to celebrate in the Hall of the Earls the restoration of Bunratty Castle to its former estate, and as a national possession in perpetuity.

The event was in itself a triumph — but the achievement, as we saw that day and as any passer-by now can

see, is beyond praise, a work of gentle and exacting knowledge, perfected by that patience, that insistence that only knowledge has, and that only love can sustain.

The occasion was celebrated most fittingly. The world was there at noon in the Hall of the Earls — princes of the Church, peers of Ireland, a Minister of the Government, officers of state, ambassadors and visiting foreigners of high-sounding style: some splendid figures of our *haute bourgeoisie*; some priests and nuns, and an observant riff-raff of writers and journalists, in the cloud of which I came, my parchment in my hand. Mass was sung in the Earl's beautiful chapel and afterwards speeches were made, sherry was drunk, there was much talk, and great admiring of the treasures gathered with such care — tables, cupboards, tapestries, goblets, pots and pans; and nothing allowed throughout the house that had not been in existence before 1640. Then we swept off, 500 of us, to a sixteenth-century luncheon in the restaurant of one of the most forward-looking airports in the world. Derelict Bunratty had become a lovely museum of Irish sixteenth-century life; and we were all delighted with our day's work.

And what has that to do with me? Where is my 'personal' anecdote?

Only this: when I arrived at the celebration, punctually at noon, I was handed a letter which had arrived for me that morning. It was the only letter of the day, and it was addressed, obviously, to an O'Brien. Seeing what the day was — the restoring to life of Bunratty Castle — it was strange, and happy, that a letter should come there, for an O'Brien. The letter was of no account: it came from a stranger who wanted information about some matter from me, and who had read in a local paper that I was among these invited to the Bunratty dedication. But it pleased John Hunt, and others: and it pleased me. Because in three hundred and fourteen years — since 1646 — no letter or despatch had come to an O'Brien in Bunratty, until this re-opening day. So as a bearer of the name and accidental addressee of the luckily sent letter, I had a moment of vainglory in the Hall of the Earls.

Yet, that said and whilst I always rejoice in conservation of old beauty (and am slow alas, to welcome conceptions of tomorrow), it is not Bunratty Castle that is dear to me, but the road and land and water that lie about it. For these moved and changed with the weathers of my own childhood, they were alive with me, whereas the pile of forgotten stone above the little bridge was dull: there seemed no movement on its face, only a set pronouncement of dead soldierliness and pride — characteristics which have never attracted me. I did not know when I was young that this harsh-faced monument had been so much humanised by a man of the sixteenth-century: I did not dream that it was so richly spaced within for the arts of living. I took it for a rude keep, where soldiers crammed themselves together and thought only of killing passers-by.

But the fields that lay about Limerick, and these flat-tish western ones among them, were dear to my musing eye when I was young; and I had always a great love for roads. I liked very much the ordinary roads, with hedges and footpaths, that led in and out of my town. Much happened that was interesting on these; and we were often on them, in pony-traps or walking. The footpaths are gone — and how lovely they were, with low grassy ridges keeping them defined — and with gates here and there breaking the hawthorn-gates on which to sit and consider the fields, for mushrooms or fairy grass, or bulls. From behind Bunratty it is not far up to the Windy Gap or to old, crumbling Six-Mile-Bridge, and to go home by Delmege's Glens was interesting. 'When up through Cratloe Woods I went, Nutting with thee — And we plucked the brown and clustering fruit From many a bending tree...' Samuel Ferguson's happy girl and boy

would have to mind where they were going now with their love-making, for on a cleared slope of Cratloe there is a spectacular Lourdes Grotto, with steps up and down, and much ancillary pious ornamentation — and this is a place of prayer and pilgrimage. When I was young the woods were pagan and innocent. I have been told that on the day when the expensive, fine grotto was consecrated — it had been a great parochial and regional effort to collect for it — one citizen of Limerick, walking home from the ceremony, said to another:

'All we need now is a miracle'.

'And we've had that', said his friend. 'Didn't Canon C. spend £100 of his own money on the Grotto?'

Walking into Limerick from the west, from Cratloe or Bunratty, used to be a rustic progression not very long ago, between wide fields and past glimpses of the chimneys or kitchen gardens of secluded residences, until one came to the Workhouse Cross where the wide Ennis Road became a respectable, flowery avenue of terraced villas. An orthodox and short lead in to the river and the Georgian town. But now that self-conscious avenue and south of it those embosqued and tennis-courted mansions of the upper bourgeoisie, though still in fact there, are all but engulfed in new Limerick, which has rushed and is rushing out westward very fast — though not as untidily as might be feared. A sports stadium, some gleaming petrol stations, a furniture factory, a pleasant modern church, uncountable bright villas, and of course no workhouse any more but in its place an alert-looking City Hospital — all these blur out the clear, remembered lines of the town one learnt by heart on pony-drives and in school crocodile-walks. And the fields which used to melt away beyond the Workhouse to Long Pavement and the edge of the Clare Hills, are housing estates now — which God knows, as does anyone who remembers Limerick's fabulous eighteenth-century slums, were badly needed, and now alarmingly and happily swarm, ring and clamour, day in day out, with the child-life of the vanishing Irish.

At the inner end of the Ennis Road on this slow walk we are taking, we come to Limerick itself, and as we stand to admire it beyond the river and over the bridge we will find ourselves at a wide, tree-shaded *carrefour*. The riverside roads to left and right of us here are called O'Callaghan's Strand and Clancy's Strand. Quiet roads, in which a few Victorian-style villas stand back in long gardens, in sound of the Shannon, and with fine views of the city.

Strangers may pick up nothing from the two name-plates; but like Cork, Limerick had its First Citizens murdered by Black and Tans — only with a difference. They walked coolly about their city in defiance of the new, inexcusable enemy, as in Cork Terence McSwiney had done until they jailed him.

Michael O'Callaghan who was Mayor in 1920 was said to have been the one who gave those 'Auxiliaries' their nickname. He by chance saw somewhere a first lorryload of them just landed, with Lloyd George's terrible instructions and in their untidy uniform, half policeman's black, half soldier's khaki — and described them as like a famous Tipperary pack of hounds, Black and Tans.

George Clancy, who took mayoral office in 1921, had been a friend of James Joyce in University College, Dublin — and had tried to interest him (a) in the Irish language and (b) in Irish patriotism. He is called Davin in *A Portrait of The Artist as A Young Man*. Richard Ellman says that according to Joyce, George Clancy was the only one among his friends at university who called him James; and there appears to have been a special vein of gentleness and respect in Stephen Hero's feeling for this young dreamer from Limerick.

Clancy had, it is recorded, sometimes said in Joyce's hearing that twelve men with resolution could save

Ireland. Such foolishness suggests almost a death-wish. And anyway, the Black and Tans came to his door, in masks, on a spring morning, 1 a.m., of 1921, and waking him from his bed, shot him dead, in the presence of his wife.

They had just come from the southern end of the Strand. There they had roused Michael O'Callaghan also from sleep, and in his hallway as he stood beside his wife, they had shot him dead.

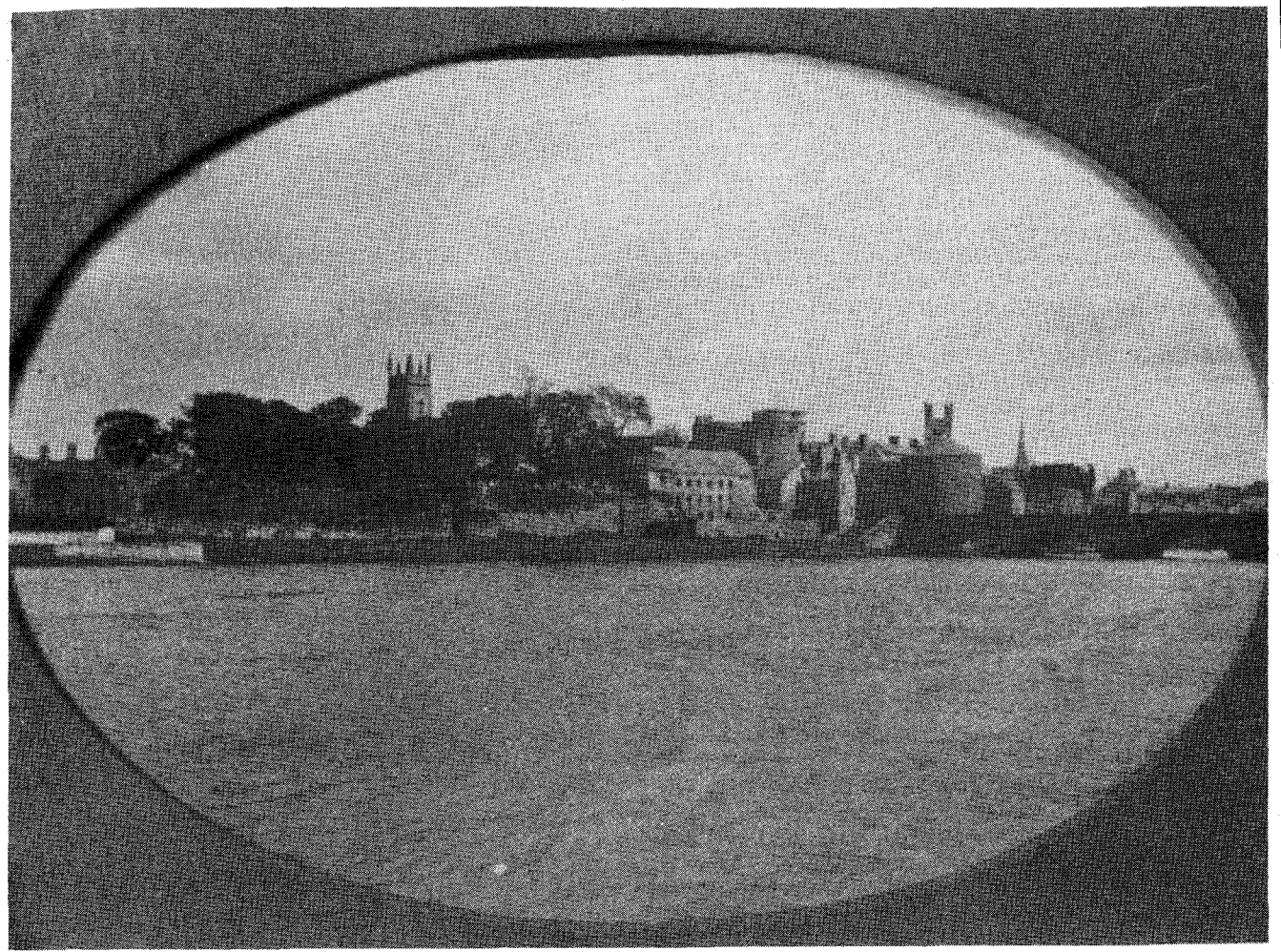
So in this we match Cork — that Limerick has a Mayor and ex-Mayor to remember with mourning pride out of 'The Troubles'.

And oddly enough, in a tree-surrounded house that stood midway between those two outraged houses, there lived a man the friend and colleague of the two dead — who also was 'wanted' by the Tans. He was not at home on that night, Stephen O'Mara — but for the 'auxiliaries' there were plenty of other nights. He invited the dark fate that had visited his friends by assuming George Clancy's chain and title on the day of the double murder. And it was only by the thinnest chance that it did not come to him also, masked and in the night.

There is to be a memorial on the south corner of this crossroads — on land once owned by Stephen O'Mara, under his trees — a memorial to the two mayors — a fountain, a garden? It is slow in coming to pass — but a noticeboard announces it — that is at least a step — and Stephen O'Mara was eager in helping to design it before he died. I wonder, at the rate our City Fathers move, if any of us who were young when Michael O'Callaghan and George Clancy were murdered, any of us who remember their faces, will live to have a drink from their promised fountain?

So across Sarsfield Bridge, between the two Boat Clubs — and taking my time. I always like to go slowly, either way, across this bridge, for from it there is everything to see — all of life and one's own regrets and sentimentalities, of course; but also much better things, detached and, in terms which human imagination will allow, everlasting — the sky, in unchanging changefulness, high, wide and handsome indeed, as always from this vantage; the marvellous river, strongest and most impatient, most contemptuous, if we admit the pathetic fallacy, and least sentimental of Irish waters — and the ancient and so eagerly progressive town itself, its lovely and sad and repetitious human life pouring back and over for centuries gone and unborn between these simple parapets. St. Mary's; the Courthouse lighting up above the water; prams in collision. Seagulls tearing a filthy fish apart; a Boeing Jet streaking across the blue, making its own pure line of cloud.

I am home from my meander — and I find I am out of step again. For the deep wound made by burnt-out Todd's is filling up — concrete, glass and steel are the new graft; and, shockingly Cannock's 1822 facade has vanished behind scaffoldings, though they say we are to be given back the clock. Let us indeed hope so! But, almost worse than the death of Cannock's is that one of our two beautiful Medical Halls is suddenly gone — and gone forever: to give place to Aer Lingus's proud needs. I suppose no one could be expected to book a Polar Route flight to Tokyo — and that is now a major Limerick pastime — behind a stucco, Dieu-et-Mon-Droit frontage of 1835 (William IV!), or standing on early nineteenth-century mosaic? There is, one notices, a sympathy, a need of sympathy, between action and the scene of proposed action. But we still have that other Medical Hall which once was a music shop, and carries plaster emblems and symbolic figures of music on its exterior — a house where young Catherine Hayes, the washerwoman's child who was to sing in La Scala and in Covent Garden, gave a first concert to her patrons and backers of the city, before they decided to send her on to Italy. We still



A rare, century-old view of the ancient city.

have that Medical Hall. But beside it we had until now the Royal George Hotel, in the same, pleasant mid-nineteenth-century idiom. And that is coming down in dust and rubble all about O'Connell Street, to make room for an objectionably named sign of our progress — a luxury hotel.

All this in a few months.

Will Limerick stay? Can it hold out and hold its character much longer? I, for one, do not know — but hope to find it mine for the time left to me. St. John's still points its holy finger to a recognisable sky. And as I walk away from it, thinking to take an evening bus to Castleconnell I do not feel inordinately sad. Limerick is a well-proportioned place, and from its established layout, its old look of good manners and good sense I take repose. And that blessed word reminds me perversely of the motto on the city's coat of arms, which I have never liked, 'Urbs antiqua fuit, studiisque asperrima belli'. It was an ancient city, and fierce (most fierce) in the skills of war. I am instructed that this unattractive slogan or commendation is taken, in two bits made into one, from the Aeneid. But I find it neither Virgilian nor at all to my Limerick-conditioned mind. My father used occasionally to flourish at us the first part — *Urbs antiqua fuit* — which is an innocuous claim, since many towns are very old; but whatever fragments of Latin the Jesuits may have hammered into him will have been from the Missal, so he did not dwell on the trickier phrase. Not that he would have minded the conventional fierceness, for in a boyish way he would have thought it patriotic, and although by nature gentle and tolerant of all men, he enjoyed the flourishes of Irish convention, processions, flags and 'who fears to speak ...' and tales of the Fenians

and the Ribbonmen. He could deliver passages of Emmet's speech from the Dock — but he also liked to sing Moore's Melodies, and to hear them sung. So I think that no more than myself would he have liked the word *asperrima* as descriptive of his native town.

It was, by the way, a distinguished son of Limerick, William Moloney of Reuter's, who gave me the provenance of our patched-up motto. He learnt his Greek and Latin in Limerick; in the hard way of scholarship, from 'The Holy Fathers'; and now, with Horace always in his left-hand pocket or on his ready tongue, I think he would say that he owes to those stern instructors uncountable hours of pure delight among pagan poets, whose felicities first surprised him in boyhood in a school which might have been described as *asperrima*.

But it is not a good word for Limerick. Circumstances did sometimes demand of us the virtue, or attribute, it claims — but mercifully the accompanying expression did not stick — for the features of the place are humanistic. There is a certain austerity, or rather decorum, underlying the civic character, perhaps — an addiction to form and self-control, which we must hope will stay with us, even now when Shannon Airport with new and strange devices for weather and progress brings daily so much threat and glitter to our doors: novelties, exotics, ambitions that are not to be stemmed, since everywhere now we are in 1961, and nowhere can be called a hiding-place. Nowhere anymore is there silence — though there used to be in the winter days in Roundstone. And still there is in Castleconnell. So I will get off the bus, and walk past the Tontines as far as the pier at the World's End.