

# A LIMERICK CHILDHOOD

by Christopher Isherwood

## Part two

**O**n July 24th 1913, Kathleen and Frank Isherwood (Christopher's parents) went off for a week to Connemara. Here Kathleen saw genuine peasant women, wearing 'deep bright crimson' skirts. They travelled through a country of bogs, with peat stacked beside them, passing Croagh Patrick, where St. Patrick expelled the toads and snakes from Ireland, to Achill Island. They stayed at a happy-go-lucky, sometimes amusing, sometimes infuriating hotel, where nothing was done punctually and there was never quite enough to eat. On Achill they admired the luxuriant hedges of fuschia, Slievemore Mountain, which Kathleen describes as having a tender blue mistiness and looking like her idea of Mt Fuji, and Keem Bay, which she calls 'the most beautiful small bay I have ever seen'. Other features of the island were the jig-dancing, 'the nearest public house to America', and The Protestant Stores, which were then being boycotted. Their manager had to have his supplies brought to him under a police guard. Kathleen was told that he had already tried to escape from Achill but had been recognized and stoned; she wasn't sure if she believed this. Anyhow, she boldly visited the Stores, which sold groceries, post-cards, second-hand books and whales' ears - there were whaling stations in the neighbourhood. After listening sympathetically to the manager's a small rounded bony object which you could hold easily in your hand.

When the day came for them to leave, Kathleen and Frank discovered that the hotel bill was 'anything but happy-go-lucky, one pays heavily for the atmosphere of irresponsibility and Irishness'.

That autumn Kathleen comments on the growing tension in Ireland. The Home Rule Bill was now almost certain to become law and Ulster was determined to resist it, fearing the rule of a government of Irish Catholics.

(Kathleen Isherwood, Christopher's mother, recorded in her diary:)

They have appointed all the members for their own government should Home Rule come in force and intend governing themselves should Ireland separate from the Imperial Parliament. They are backed by funds and a trained army of volunteers who mean fight without any doubt.

Meanwhile, in Limerick (October 12th):

The statue in the Crescent is decorated with mottoes of FAITH AND FATHERLAND and a dozen or so young men dressed in saffron coloured kilts and stockings appeared in a long procession which with many bands marched through the chief streets, representing the Home Rule demonstration. They were afterwards addressed by Redmond. The general opinion seems to have been that they were rather a disappointed looking band, but the day was depressing.

**October 26.** To my great pleasure the two Miss Warmleightons came to tea. They were passing through Limerick on their return to Dublin. They were so nice and old-fashioned and very pleased to go over the house. The ante-room they called the Music Room and had little concerts in it and the Nursery room was the Blue Room and there they used to sit and do needlework. Indeed they seemed to have lived just the quiet lives with their music and their books and their work that I had imagined - which was most gratifying!

**October 29.** One of the popular ideas is that, if Home Rule comes and the English leave, the Irish American millionaires will then come back and flood the country with money, build mills and have fine ships up and down the Shannon.

On November 1st, Frank and Kathleen were invited to stay at Curragh Chase, once the home of Aubrey de Vere, the schoolmate of Byron, whose sonnets (e.g., **The Rock of Cashel**) were called by Wordsworth, 'the most perfect of our age' and of his son Aubrey Thomas de Vere, also a poet (**Florence MacCarthy's Farewell to her English Lover**) who had entertained Tennyson, Coventry, Patmore and Watts; Watts had done an outline on the stairs for a fresco of Dante meeting Beatrice. Kathleen admired the house, which was built in the grand manner:

The long room which opens out of the hall is called The Saloon, there are busts all down the room and tall french windows open on to the broad stone terrace, just now the woods beyond the lakes are perfectly gorgeous with the colouring of autumn and the mountains to the south the most wonderful blue.

The present owners of the house had what seemed to Kathleen and Frank an amusing eccentricity; they ran it on Daylight Saving Time:

All through our visit they kept explaining what the time was, according to **them**, which made the hours of meals very confusing! They get up at 7 and call it 8, go to bed at 9 and call it 10, or at 10 and call it 11. Of course the scheme is that it should be universal, even so it seems unnecessary to put the clock on!

**March 21. Very warlike news.** It seems as if the Government were trying to bully Ulster into making the first move. Of course Ulster is in absolute readiness and backed by such leading men as Sir Edward Carson, Lord Roberts, etc etc and thousands of volunteers have offered themselves from England if they need further help. Some say numbers of cavalry officers at the Curragh have already resigned their commissions sooner than fight against Ulster.

**March 22.** Perhaps having brought the country to the verge of civil war, the Government will at last see they are incapable of governing. Practically, England is now governed by the Irish, as Asquith sold himself to Redmond, promising him Home Rule in exchange for the Irish votes - however he reckoned without Ulster! Took Christopher to the cathedral and Frank brought the soldiers to church. Everyone was wondering if they would come, but the town seemed peaceful.

(General Gough, commander of the Curragh Camp and some of the officers under him had indeed just handed in their resignations. This forced Asquith to compromise and declare that Ulster would not be coerced into Home Rule - at least, not for the present.)

**May 26.** The third reading of the Home Rule Bill passed yesterday and last night there was a good deal of shouting and playing of bands and it is said the effigy of the King and Queen was burnt!

**June 28.** The Regiment goes off on Tuesday. Some say the town nationalists are only waiting till they are gone to raid the guns and ammunition left behind. However the General won't hear of the Regiment not going on manoeuvres.

**July 10.** In afternoon to the town to get another trap for we are now in-

fested with rats and seven have been killed the last few days. Fearfully close and heavy and the air full of oppression and smells.

**July 13.** The papers look fearfully serious Ulster is an armed camp. Sir Edward Carson says 'if it be not peace with honour it must be war with honour'.

**July 27.** The Nationalists tried to land arms at Howth near Dublin and police were sent to prevent them. There was a row and shots were fired on the police. Then the soldiers appeared, the crowd hustled and threw things at them, injuring several, and finally the soldiers started firing. Of course the outcry of 'murder' on the part of the Nationalists is tremendous.

(This is a garbled account of the events, which is hardly surprising, considering the kind of newspapers Kathleen read. She seems sarcastic about 'the outcry of murder' but in fact four people died and thirty-five more were wounded.)

**July 30.** A wire from Frank to say the Regiment were returning home today, so I suppose they are afraid of rows in Limerick. Nurse also wrote she would be glad when we were back, that two soldiers had been nearly killed on Monday and that the guard at the barracks gate had been doubled and armed.

(Nanny, as always, must have exaggerated the alarms. Because of the sensational stories she later told him about their life in Ireland, Christopher grew up believing that the Regiment had been sniped at on its way to service at the Cathedral, on several occasions. He only recently discovered that this wasn't true.)

**July 13.** It seems **so appalling**, one can't take it in. I never thought of Irish troops being called upon. The only hope is that Germany does not want to fight, but they have asked Russia why they are mobilizing, and if it is to assist Serbia then Germany is bound to help Austria. It seems so extraordinary that in a few hours Home Rule and Ireland have sunk into insignificance. Unionists and Nationalists alike agree to throw in their lot with England.

**August 2.** Showery. C. and I to the Cathedral as Frank was taking the soldiers to church. No definite news. To the band after church.

**August 3.** Germany has not only declared war on Russia but crossed the French frontier at three different points. It is impossible for England to be neutral. The fleet are to mobilize and the army are awaiting orders. All the men went through their medical exam today to be in greater readiness.



**The Quinlan Street house where Christopher Isherwood attended school.**

**August 4.** Down the town with Frank who wanted to get various things in preparation. All available horses are being called for. Flour and sugar have gone up but there is enough wheat to last four months. Paper notes are to be issued and the banks are closed till Friday. At six pm came a message from the Barracks that the troops are **to mobilize at once**. On the fifth day they will be ready to go. It is simply crushing, the suddenness and awfulness of it all.

This is the moment which Christopher's memory has chosen to retain, not only as a picture but as a playback of Frank's voice. Kathleen and Christopher are together in one of the rooms of Roden House and Frank looks in, only for a moment; he must hurry back to Barracks. He says 'the order to mobilize has come'. His tone is quiet, almost reassuring. Then he is gone.

**August 5.** Showery all day. In the town to get an aircushion for Frank. **England has declared war on Germany**, and now seven countries are at war... Met various people, all very kind and sympathetic. Gave a month's warning of the house.

**August 6.** Made Frank a housewife in morning. Various rumours but it seems pretty certain that the Ger-

mans and English are having a naval battle in the North Sea. In London Mama writes sugar is a shilling a pound. In the Isle of Wight they are expecting the proclamation of martial law and all arming in anticipation of an attack from Germany. Various German spies have been arrested.

**August 7.** 300 reservists arriving between 7 and 8 pm. 300 come tomorrow. Rumours that eight German battleships are sunk, also that the English flagship has gone down.

(No naval fighting of any kind had actually taken place, so far.)

**August 9.** Service at the Cathedral for the soldiers. They marched down a thousand strong. The Dean, with a great want of tact, assured the men that widows should be looked after! They had 'Jesus Lover of my Soul', 'The King of Love' and 'Oh God our Help'. The psalms were the 23rd and the 27th. Somehow it was as little impressive as was possible, which was a comfort considering the terrible solemnity of the occasion. In afternoon the troops were reviewed by the Colonel and all their kit inspected.

**August 10.** The Dean came after lunch to pay a sort of farewell and condolence visit and say how sad it was to think that perhaps half of the men in the Cathedral on Sunday **would never come back**, so cheering and tactful!

**August 11.** No real news. Felt rather seedy and faint all afternoon as I ran two staylace tags into me by sitting on them. Christopher to the Gaiety pictures in evening.

**August 12.** A beautiful day and very warm. To sketch view of King John's Castle. The men inoculated against typhoid. Frank done and it made him feel wretchedly sick and gave him a bad head. Some of the men fainted. Everything now is just waiting ...

**August 13.** Frank very busy with final arrangements. Did not go out beyond the 'Technical' for fear further orders came. They came later to say they were to start tomorrow in two lots, leaving 12 and 1.

**August 14.** Breakfast 6.30 and parade at 7.45. Close heavy day. Christopher and Richard and Nurse and I to the Barracks after saying goodbye here to my dear - he looked so tired and his arm is hardly well. We went to the station, there were a good many people to see them go, and it was just heartbreaking. They only knew that half were to embark at Queenstown, half at Cork, no orders further till they get there.

Postcard from Frank, August 14th:  
Arrived Queenstown.

Postcard from Frank, August 15th,  
Holyhead:

Arrived this morning. 'Quite safe'. Going off this morning into the unknown. Settled in till about midnight and everyone was very tired and hungry. Managed to get a sort of meal off bloater paste and dog biscuits. You have no cause for anxiety and we aren't so very uncomfortable and very lucky to have got across without delay or losing anything except indeed the poor little mare. She is so associated in my mind with you and it is dreadful to think of all the fright and indignities she had to put up with. It seems such ages since we parted and you are in another world to which I long to get back. In the afternoon Sandys and I went on the Backs which were looking lovely. I thought so much of you and the time we sat there on the seat together. Went to tea at Buol's, another of our old haunts.

**August 18.** We went ... to the meeting of the SSFA at the Strand Barracks, held in an upper room looking across to Arthur's Quay and so associated with Frank and happy days that I nearly wept. It looked so lovely, the still reflections in the water, but no one saw it.

(The SSFA was an organization which helped the families of Soldiers and Sailors.)

Letter from Frank, September 10th,  
St. Nazaire, France:

Our arrival was very amusing. The ship had to go through a narrow channel, right through the middle of the town, this was lined with a crowd, very enthusiastic, partly composed of the seediest-looking French soldiers I ever saw. When our men threw them coppers and hat-badges etc the sentries deserted their posts and scrambled with gamins on the quay for them. The men sang what now seems to be the National Anthem, 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary'.

**September 15.** Roden House soon after breakfast. Wrote letters in the Verandah keeping an eye on the men. One big van filled by dusk.

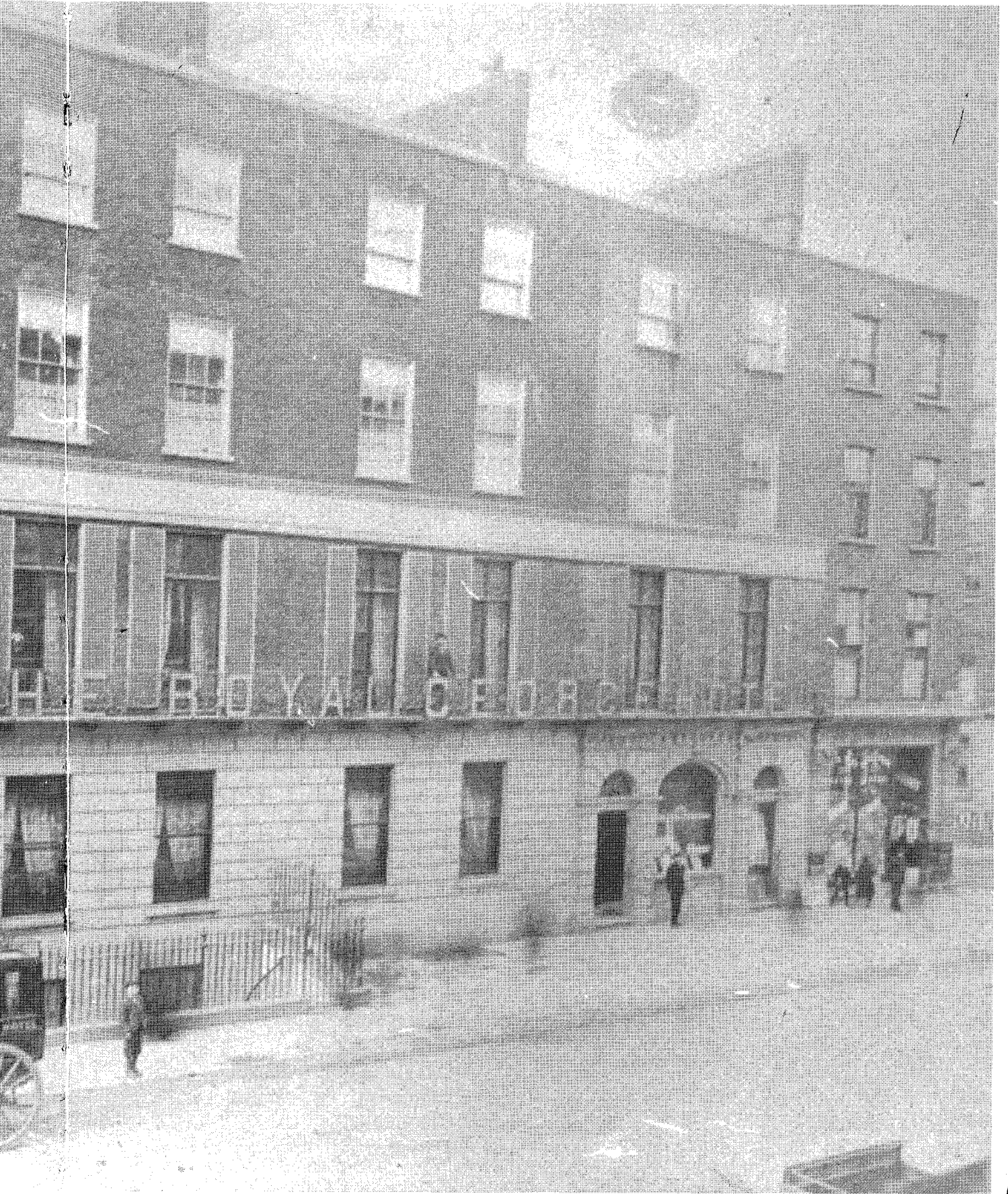
**September 18.** Furniture all out last night. The King to give the royal assent to the passing of the Home Rule Bill today, which we concluded he did, from the shouting in the late evening.

**September 21.** Very smooth crossing - my twenty-first! The Allies seem to be holding their own and the dreadful casualty lists keep appearing. Frank's Mother, Richard and Nurse met me at Stockport.

(This was the day Frank's unit reached the front. They were in trenches near the village of Vailly on the Aisne for the next three weeks.)



A turn of the century pict



of the century picture of the Royal George Hotel.