

ARTS

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Edited by Des O'Driscoll



Joanne Betty Conlon's pictures of Limerick in the late 1980s and early 1990s inspired author **Kevin Barry** to dip into his own memories of that era in his hometown



Scenes from the analogue city



1. Then came the year of the Libyans. All at once there were hundreds of them in the city. They were in for a big construction job down the docks. They had great dark extravagant hair and a quality of skin tone beyond the usual currency of the place. The heads of the local banshees were turned.

The local boys were not happy. The local boys had skin like sour milk and hair like crows. The situation deteriorated. Soon on the hot summer nights there were running battles with the Libyans. There were random assaults with iron bars and knives. There were screams that ripped the sky alive. And the banshees wailed on the dockside stones.

2. Just beneath the skin of the city there was a kind of threaded pulse that caused odd energies to reverberate. Events were inclined to take on an unpredictable spin. It was a madcap and comical and sometimes a malevolent place. There was a tradition of antic tricksterism. There was a certain whisper of wet-eyed tenderness that could segue on the beat of a moment into a roar of outraged injury — the city was on a hair-trigger, emotional, alert to the tiniest of perceived slights. There was a sharp appetite for stories of violence, tragedy and general misdeameanour.

We pretended to be outraged but in fact we were happily agog. The city's history was one of besiegement and this can send echoes beyond the span of living memory or experience. The place was never entirely right in itself, and also it was falling down around our ears, and also it was tremendously sexy.

3. I had a job as a cub reporter on the *Limerick Tribune*. Our ambition was to be a scalding tabloid dizzy with vice in the fashion of the *New York Post*. On Thursday mornings I attended the sittings of the District Court. Every couple of months there was the real meat of the Circuit Court. I was attempting to cultivate a scowling, hard-bitten, unreadable persona that was largely derived from Mickey Rourke in *Angel Heart*. I imagine the effect was to make me look perpetually constipated.

More Thursdays than not I was softly threatened outside the courthouse — you going to put my brother in the paper, are ya? The way the question was posed, with tender, emotional eyes, and sad-mouthedly, on the suck of a tragic rollick, and the wind carried a cold poignant tang off the November river. Just before half past ten the van would roll up from the prison. The accused would be led

out, handcuffed to each other, and marched to the courtroom — the younger ones were inclined to walk it with a glamorous, penitentiary strut; the repeats had a more resigned (in fact an almost sheepish) air. In the courthouse the remand defendants were arranged in a two-tier pen. Their families and beloveds squinted from the public gallery to see how they were getting on inside. How's he moving? Has he any colour on him?

Among the solicitors and guards and court officials there was an air of banter and easy fraternity. Yawning wearily like a seasoned old hand I'd scan the charge sheets to get the addresses. The same estates every week. There was one family with ten or twelve brothers and there was always confusion about which brother was up and was it the right brother they had. There was always too a procession of no-shows — he's gone to England, judge. I had my own bastard shorthand. I never saw a working class person's word taken above the word of a guard.

4. A city of flats and haunted bedsits. The old Georgian terraces shimmered with ghosts. They shook them off in the wakening haze of the grey morning light. Walk the streets again and sense them — there were stretches of exultancy, there were pockets of dread. Gerald Griffin Street, Catherine Street, Cecil Street, so many of the buildings were in flats, with hundreds and thousands of little podded lives, with lime-green wallpaper and carpet on the toilet seat and your virginity in a bucket in the corner.

Tiny bedsits heated by turf briquettes that smouldered dimly in the comically ornate fireplaces — there was a better bang off the carbon monoxide than there was off the dope

I climbed into the back of the squad car, and we rolled out across the Shannon Bridge, and the river was astonishing, and the city was made of pale fire, and the backs of the guards' heads looked vast as the cliffs of Dooneen

from Buddie's Lane. (The better hash was brought in by the soldiers at Sarsfield Barracks, the fabled Lebanese Blonde, the way it crumbled softly into the Rizla without burning.) A taxi driver went missing and was murdered in the Clare hills and this was never figured out. We talked about books and films late at night in Burgerland on William Street over coffee and the little apple bake things that were heated to Hiroshima levels and William Street felt especially edgy and existential being the street you were most likely to get a batin' on when you headed for home.

5. I was hallucinating heavily on LSD one morning at dawn on the banks of the Shannon river. I was perhaps attempting to delineate the precise natures of time and memory with special reference to the way the fractal light was moving in arcs on the water, or something.

It was at this point that a squad car rolled up beside me. It was two guards that I knew from the District Court. I held it together beautifully. I said that I was just on my way home from a party, actually, and I was taking a bit of a rest on the way. Where's home? they said. Out that way, I said, pointing towards the North Circular Road, though in fact I lived in the other direction, back in town. We'll give you a lift, they said, and I climbed into the back of the squad car, and we rolled out across the Shannon Bridge, and the river was astonishing, and the city was made of pale fire, and the backs of the guards' heads looked vast as the cliffs of Dooneen, and we got to the North Circular Road before I realised quite where I was (or indeed who, or when) and they said, which house? Oh, this one, I said. This one? No, two up, I said.

And I got out of the squad car and waved them away blithely and I went in through the gates to someone's front garden. I thought I'd better give it a few minutes to let the coast clear, so I crawled into the hedge and lay on my back there. The morning light was coming through from above. I got densely involved with the foliage. The light on my face was intense as jungle heat. Insects crawled my skin and the cawing of a tiny bird had the volume of a dinosaur roaring.

Clouds passed across the sky above the canopy of the jungle and they moved in rhyme, and then in counterpoint to each other, and then to the sequence of an odd music. I tried to make out the tune. But then far off there was a burst of gunfire and then the cacophonous whirring of the massed helicopters. This was my Vietnam.



Joanne Betty Conlon's pictures of Limerick were taken in the late 1980s and early 1990s.



6. *Limerick lay under dust. It was hot. One found a baking station-yard and a long, straight main street suggestive of a Canadian prairie town. How ugly this place is and shadeless! The old fashioned Cruise's Hotel near the Town Hall had been taken over as a temporary police barracks, outside which Black and Tans lounged and smoked ...* Wilfred Ewart, from *A Journey in Ireland*, 1921

7. But where you were depended to a large extent on what was coming through your headphones. Sat on the steps outside my flat, on Pery Square, on a warm evening, listening to Public Enemy ('1989, another summer ...') had me inclined towards the belief that I was hanging loose on a Brooklyn stoop. Walking the docks in winter, listening to Joy Division, meant it was the north of England, incontestably, as I had the long black coat, and the light had a grey-hatched density, as of coal-smoke, and the water had a metallic sheen that held the line of the crumbling rooftops, and the expanse of the fractured sky, and the factories were all closing down again.

8. Guided by voices the taxi cabs roamed. Rain came in great drifts up the haunted estuary. The streets were low-slung and huddled in close conspiracy to murmur to each other beneath the warm sodium glow of the lights. Dodo Reddin marched a pramload of dogs down O'Connell Street in the colours of Young Munster.

Along Mulgrave Street there was in an unfortunate line the Blessed Trinity: Limerick prison, St Lawrence's graveyard, and many's the poor soul that must have done the hop, skip and jump from one to the next to the other. Jack Nash sold the Chronicle and the Leader outside the Leader offices. There were Debs dances in January; there were sad veiled brides outside Cruise's Hotel by June. 2FM declared that the 'Beat On The Street' would no longer be held in the city on account of bottle-throwing incidents.

There were dis-graceful scenes at mid-night mass on Christmas Eve — fellas scuttled at the back of the Redeptionist's singing Fun Boy Three songs. Oh and here again was that facial expression particular to the city — our signature look of innocence aggrieved. Everyone made plans to leave. Everyone

came back in the summer. When by the lottery of Atlantic weather we were granted a fine evening that summer the light over the broad river, across the sky, that fell on the Clare hills, it was extraordinary. We were in the west of Ireland but largely we were disowned by the west of Ireland. We didn't fit the noble rural peasant template. It was the western seaboard's city truly urban space but the city was never considered inherently attached to the west of Ireland. The faces didn't fit. The narrative was off. We were the awkward squad.

9. *Limerick was in an edgy state. It had just been relieved of a siege and there was still a crack or two of sniping at night. There was a strike on at the bacon factories and there was an attempt to start a Soviet. I went to see the committee and politely took my hat off and made a small French bow. The leader told me to put my hat back on. They had finished, he said, with bourgeois manners.* — VS Pritchett visits in 1923, as recalled in *Midnight Oil*

10. Besieged even once, a city will always be prone to the same fate, and that fate has recurred again and again over the span of many centuries — history as an echo chamber. By the early 1990s, it's not too much of a stretch to say that Limerick was besieged by the forces of the New Banal. God and socialism were booted out the same gap. The city was redrawn as nothing more extravagant than an outdoor shopping centre with ample parking. It was simultaneously spruced up and desexualised. It was prettified and it was spayed.

Cruise's Hotel was knocked and Cruises Street — which is essentially a facsimile of a street in Milton Keynes — replaced it. Where the Black and Tans couldn't break us, Next and Zara so easily could. So much of the old city has been razed, rezoned, reshaped.

So much from these photographs seems to have disappeared forever now. But the old city has not quite gone away. It exists still in the subconscious realms, of the people and the place both. If you close your eyes, you can hear it easily — the whining yowl of the wind off the river, and the glorious fast vowels of the city's mean talk.

■ This piece was originally published in the Winter Papers 3 arts anthology, currently on sale

scene + heard

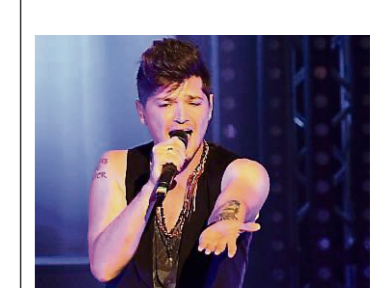


FILM TIPS: Early reviews of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* have ranged from "a significant letdown" (CNN) to "an explosive thrill-ride of galactic proportions" (*The Guardian*), but no matter what the critics say, fans will be flocking to see it over the next few weeks. And, for many of them, as soon as its run-length of 152 minutes comes to an end, the count-down will begin immediately for the third episode of the sequel trilogy, due in December 2019. Incidentally, George Lucas himself described the film as "beautifully made", but then he probably would say that, wouldn't he. With *Star Wars* towering over the holiday box-office, the only film that might put any dent in its definite domination will be *Jumanji: Welcome To The Jungle*, due next Friday. **Triskel** in Cork is among the venues showing seasonal films from Sunday, with a roster including *It's A Wonderful Life*, *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, and *Die Hard*.

MUSIC NEWS: Anybody hoping that **The Cure** will take in an Irish festival this year may be disappointed to hear that the band are pushing their appearance at Hyde Park in London on July 7 as their "only European show of 2018". Tickets for that gig went on sale this morning. Perhaps we'll have more luck with **David Byrne** who has already confirmed several festival appearances in Europe, with the 65-year-old promising his "most ambitious show" since the *Stop Making Sense* concerts he did with Talking Heads. Finally, singer **Sheryl Crow** has blamed money and fear as keeping country music stars from speaking out in favour of gun control in America. As she prepared for the release of her new song that pays tribute to the 26 people killed at Sandy Hook school, she told the *Guardian*: "There's no one that I know of in the popular country world that is willing to step out and really to take a stand on this, and that's really unfortunate."

Tickets for The Script at the Marquee in Cork go on sale today.

GIG WISE: By the time you read this, **The Script** may well have sold out their appearance at the Marquee in Cork on Monday, June 25. If so, will the Dublin band put on another gig, as both the group and venue seem to be free for a few nights afterwards? **Alanis Morissette** (July 4) and **Nathan Carter** (July 1) also announced appearances at the Leeside venue. One of the big questions on the lips of Cork music fans is whether **Microdisney** will play a gig in their hometown following the addition of the Barbican in London (June 9) to their sold-out appearance at the NCH in Dublin. Meanwhile, the summer gig roster is quickly filling up, with a double bill of **Beck** and **Yeah Yeah Yeahs** (3Arena, May 23) the latest to tempt punters. For a springtime sojourn, there are still a few tickets left for just one (March 8) of **The Gloaming's** seven gigs at the NCH in Dublin.



Tickets for The Script at the Marquee in Cork go on sale today.

ON THE TELLY: **Graham Norton** has a *Star Wars* special tonight, with appearances from such stars as Mark Hamill, Daisy Ridley and John Boyega. **The League Of Gentlemen** returns to BBC for a three-part special over consecutive nights from Monday. On the same night, TV3 has one of the better recent Irish films, **Cardboard Gangsters**, about a group of young drug dealers on a council housing estate in Dublin. Another show for your planner could be **U2 At The BBC** on Tuesday, which has the Irish fab four performing songs and opening up in an interview at the Abbey Road studios in London.

ALL AND SUNDRY: Anyone who had already bought tickets online to one of **Peter Kay's** six dates in Dublin in January 2019 should be automatically refunded via Ticketmaster after the English stand-up cancelled the entire tour "for family reasons". The **Glucksman** gallery in UCC currently has an exhibition **Outposts**, featuring a number of artists linked through the theme of national boundaries and identities.

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