

SOME CRITICAL NOTES ON

# Kate O'Brien



For all I know, there might well be a deeply researched thesis by an assiduous student, gathering dust in a pigeon-hole in some American university or other, on Kate O'Brien and her place in Anglo-Irish literature. Somehow, I doubt it. She has never been the target for students in search of a thesis. It is not easy to understand why this writer's work has received so little critical attention. Has it, I wonder, something to do with the profoundly Catholic dimension of most of her work, a dimension now out of favour with writers and critics? Whatever it is, even in Ireland she has not received the attention she deserves. Praised yes, and often lauded to the skies, but as far as I am aware, apart from **The Stony Thursday Book No.7** (an issue devoted to her and which gives us some excellent sidelights on her work), anything approaching a critical study of her novels is not available.

True, you will find a paragraph or two devoted to her work in most studies of Anglo-Irish literature, but the impression still persists, that even those who have made a study of such literature have, at best, only skipped through her novels. It soon becomes clear that most of the writers have not read her in depth, and thus we can be pardoned if we find their critical assessments often suspect, sometimes shallow and never quite satisfying.

For instance, when a distinguished English critic wrote: "Genius is the lightning of the mind and Miss Kate O'Brien has it", and when another stated that "her style is one of the most distinguished possessed by any living novelist", we might well ask ourselves if such sweeping statements should be taken seriously or with a grain of salt. Genius is a word which critics should keep under lock and key for most of their lives. It is even doubtful if it could be used to describe any of the women novelists in this century. There is no point in deluding ourselves: **Without My Cloak** is not another **Wuthering Heights**. Kate O'Brien is one of the few accomplished Irish woman novelists, a stylist who will delight anyone in search of this rare commodity, one who gives a leisured chronicle rich in detail, but who finds it difficult to paint a picture with a few quick strokes, which is another way of saying that she has her limitations and is not a genius.

by Paddy Lysaght

From a close reading of one or two of her novels it is possible to see where her strength lies and to suggest a weakness common to most of them.

faults which reappear in many of her novels. She is so pre-occupied with her main characters that many of the minor ones, who come and go in the course of the novel, are somewhat wooden. We cannot visualise them clearly, because they have not been delineated with enough care.

It appears that she is not too in-



A portrait of Kate O'Brien by James Sleator.

Take, for instance, **Without My Cloak**. Essentially the story of an Irish middle-class family through three generations, it paints a vivid picture, often an alarming one, of Irish society of the time, its rigidity, its religious solidarity and the constraints under which some of its people suffered. The main characters, Honest John, Anthony, Molly, Denis and Christina, are as alive as our own acquaintances. We can see them; they are full human beings of flesh and blood with whom we can identify and sympathise. The Considines are a solid family, as solid as the house in which they live outside Mellick (Limerick).

But it is a novel which requires careful reading, and only when it is re-read is one not surprised to learn that it won the prestigious Hawthornden Prize as well as the James Tait Memorial Prize, when it was published. But I think we can note its faults as well,

interested in them herself. She is in such a hurry to examine her principal characters' motives and emotions that she has not the time to sketch in thoroughly all the minor ones. Her Freudian pre-occupation with her major characters means that she views them as one might view a precious stone - from every conceivable angle so as to reveal every subtle nuance of their personalities.

This constant, probing search for minute details in the make-up of her heroes and heroines often mars the flow of her narrative. While an author may legitimately pause to analyse a character's intentions or motives, the undue use of this device can often lead to boredom. It is a weakness, and a serious one; it constantly retards her novels and confuses and often irritates the reader. It is, I suggest, one of the reasons why her novels are not as popular as they deserve.