ARTS and STUDIES

TWO IRISH NOVELISTS – 2

by Eavan Boland

KATE O'BRIEN

Kate O'Brien

IF—AS OCCASIONALLY seems possible—a new affluence, a false sophistication, should make readers in this country indifferent to writers such as Kate O'Brien, it would be deeply ironic. For no novelist has observed the source and rise of merchant Ireland more shrewdly than she has; few writers can have such insight into the fashions which shape philistinism, and there are few stylists so capable of mocking a merchant reality. There is of course another side to the social ironist: the best-selling author who mastered narrative documentary in "That Lady"; the cartographer of disillusion in "Land of Spices"; the creator of Mary Lavelle.

She was born in Limerick in 1897. Her mother died when she was hardly more than three and she spent a great deal of her childhood in a convent—a happy time according to her, and one which obviously gave her the authority to write on cloistered emotions and environments in "Land of Spices".

Peasant stock

From the beginning two streams merged in her family, making her a witness through her blood inheritance, to the future mingling and usurpation of one class by another in Ireland. Her mother's people were called Thornhills. A Cromwellian soldier called Patrick Thornhill had settled in Ireland after the struggles of Limerick and Clonmel, had married an Irish girl, and at last had deserted the fanatic precepts of his military chief and died a Catholic. Kate O'Brien, in a reminiscence of her childhood called "Presentation Parlour", describes how the Catholic inheritance distorted but did not destroy the fortunes of the Thornhills:

"Throughout the crazily difficult and tragic nineteenth century the Thornhills kept on farming and raising good cattlestock with intelligence and success; so that they were able to hold on to their lands, meet the fantastic extortions of agent and absentee landlord, keep the trust and respect of their own class and kind, and put money in the bank. To have done all these things at one and the same time was to be at once spirited and quick-witted and honourable."

Her grandfather, on the other hand, and father came of the land, the peasant stock which was soon to oust the planter. Of her grandfather she wrote in "Presentation Parlour"! "No one would ever guess from that elegant and emaciated old man that he was an evicted Irish peasant, who had avenged himself on England by making a great fortune in selling to her superb hunters and superb blood carriage horses."

An awareness of such traditional and familial ironies very often broadens to prompt the consciousness of social reality and makes a social novelist. Indeed one would be forgiven if, when reading "Without My Cloak", one thought that this was what Kate O'Brien was going to be. The chronicle is large, well handled, the characters and dialogue are deftly turned. Considines and Hennessys are followed from page to page with interest and amusement. And there Kate O'Brien might have remained, charting a class from humiliation to affluence, through individual fortunes and misfortunes, but inexplicably she turned aside from it. Some germ of perception had been sewn in her childhood in Limerick, in her friendships, in her observation of people, which did not require from her a Forsyte Saga on the banks of the Shannon.

"Without My Cloak" was published in 1931 and by the time she published "The Ante Room" in 1934, her skills had developed and her themes contracted. Where before there was a wide, far-ranging narrative there was now an intense study of a dying woman's remorse and fears. It is a fine book, significantly pointing to the emotional obsession and insight which were to be Kate O'Brien's main achivement.

Spanish background

"Mary Lavelle," published in 1936, is one of her finest books. It is also a new departure, for it introduces a landscape which was to become as characteristic of the outward world of Kate O'Brien's books, as certain feminine conflicts were to be characteristic of her inward world. For the book and its action take place in Spain, not in Mellick and Limerick as the previous two had. Somehow, the rituals of remorse and self-discovery hinted at against a Limerick background are intensified against a Spanish one. The end of the book, in which the governess Mary Lavelle returns from Spain to Limerick, changed in her affections, her thought revolutionised, is typical of Kate O'Brien's work:

"There were truths that were indefensible, truths that changed and broke things, that exacted injustice and pain and savagery, truths that were sins and cruelties—but yet were true and had a value there was no use in defending. She was going home with a lame and useless story, a wicked story that would be agony to John and had no explanation, no defence. And afterwards—she would take her godmother's hundred pounds and go away. That was all. That was the fruit of her journey to Spain. Anguish and anger for everyone, and only one little, fantastic, impossible hope. Yet there it was—a real story. As real as the bullfight—and, o God, o God, as beautiful."

A nun's world

Kate O'Brien's work is only incidentally feminist work. Yet inasmuch as it is this, even in incidentals, it is worth looking at. Mary Lavelle defines herself through love and self-deception in Spain; Theresa Mulqueen in "The Ante- Room" defines herself through retrospect and spiritual remorse. Because Kate O'Brien always takes womanhood one step further than the accepted conventions of the time, because she never defines it within conventional romanticism, she has made a significant contribution to the excellence of literature and the understanding of women. Chiefly, she treats of women imprisoned in a code of response, a minuet of programmed answers and expectations, and tries to show how they are freed by moments of insight.

One of the most trapped and beautiful creations of Kate O'Brien prompted one of the most ignaminious decisions of the Irish Censorship Authority in the 'forties. "Land of Spices" is a novel about a nun whose whole interior world had been changed. destroyed, reversed, because of her glimpse as a child of a homosexual embrace between her father and another man. The insight may not, as has often been said, be sufficiently plausible to account for the course which the nun's life has taken, but it is entirely integral to the artistic process and one must, to understand the savagery of the Censorship decision, realise that the book was banned for these sentences:

> She looked into the room.
> Two people were there. But neither saw her; neither felt her shadow as it froze across the sun.
> She turned and descended the stairs. She left the garden and went on down the curve of Rue Saint Isodore.
>
> She had no objective and no knowledge of what she was doing. She did not see external things. She saw Etienne and her father in the embrace of love.

That decision of the Censorship Board is the more unfortunate when one realises that it robbed readers of what may well be Kate O'Brien's best book. Certainly it is the book which, in its concentration on the cloistered world, went further into her character's consciousness than any other she ever wrote.

There are writers who contribute to literature and others who leave it profoundly changed. Kate O'Brien, with none of the bright implements of literary revolution—no stream of consciousness, no displaced narratives—took the intractable material of womanhood, of the independent mind always straining against its dependent circumstances and made an art out of it, and for those who come later, very possibly an intellectual heritage.

(Concluded).