



Adele Dalsimer . . . wishes she had known Kate O'Brien

Taking a fresh look at Kate O'Brien

IN "The Land of Spices" by Kate O'Brien there is a line describing two men "in the embrace of love". Because of it, "The Land of Spices" was banned in 1941. Seven years earlier, her novel "Mary Lavelle" had also been banned. In the 1930s, General Franco banned her from Spain when she wrote "Farewell Spain." It was something she must have got used to.

Yet when she died in 1974, her books were out of print and practically forgotten. In the early 80s, Arlen House and Virago Press reprinted some of them. Except for a recent book by Lorna Reynolds nothing has been written about her. None of her papers, works-in-progress or letters are available. There are rumours that she destroyed them before her death.

Adele Dalsimer, co-director of the Irish Studies programme and lecturer of Irish literature in Boston College, has just written a book about Kate O'Brien. "My book is a reading of the novels," explains Dalsimer. "I do not deal with her life. It's a literary journey really."

According to Dalsimer, each of O'Brien's novels marks a position in the author's life which takes her further away from Ireland, towards self-definition and autonomy. And pain. "Her vision was a tragic one," maintains Dalsimer. "For the artist there is no living in Ireland. You must break away from the claims of family, kinship and country. But the love you find away from home, whether it's homosexual or heterosexual, will always disappoint you. There are inevitable losses. You will lose as well as gain."

For Dalsimer, the journey begins in the Limerick of O'Brien's birth or the Mellick of her novels and with characters who can't break away from their families. "The earlier novels are like that," says Dalsimer. But the

Next year, Gill and Macmillan will publish a book on author Kate O'Brien, tackling, among other things, lesbian themes in her work. Mary Carr talks to its author, Adele Dalsimer.



Kate O'Brien

turning point comes with "Mary Lavelle". Although Mary returns to Ireland from Spain, she only does so to collect her inheritance and become a wanderer. Most of O'Brien's characters are wanderers.

O'Brien's own life was punctuated with partings from and returning to Ireland. She lived in England in the 20s, and later in Spain, and returned to Ireland

where she lived in Galway for many years. She finally left Ireland in 1965, for England, where she later died.

"In her last novel 'Of Music and Splendour', the lesbian heroine returns home for her grandmother's funeral and realises that she can never return there again. She realises that the love within the primary family must be denied or else it will strangle you. She's doomed, in a way, to exile. But in the previous novel 'The Flower of May', O'Brien described the beginnings of a lesbian relationship in a very utopian way. She presupposes that if you go off with a female companion, you need not know the sorrow of individual search. By the time she gets to 'Of Music and Splendour', she knows that was only a dream."

The lack of biographical information on Kate O'Brien's life made Dalsimer's work very difficult. "The only aids I had were Irish history and social history books and some lesbian biographies. She's an extremely subjective writer and I yearned for some letters or diaries. I did not want to write a book based on conjecture but I had to make certain assumptions about her. I don't know what difference the material would have made to the book. I feel that it would have just validated all my hunches about her."

"The Kate O'Brien in the novels is a very courageous woman, away ahead of her time. Her last two novels, for instance, pre-date the women's movement in their portrayal of the lesbian who knows no shame. And although she loved her bourgeois roots, there was a harsh ambiguity there. They were the villains of Irish life, non-nationalist and tied to religion. She knew she had to break away from them, for the need to define herself in relation to them. She was aware of the price she would have to pay and the ramifications for the woman, the lesbian and the artist. She is very moving. I wish I knew her."