

Kate O'Brien memories, images recalled during city saunter

By **CLAIRE DOYLE**

ABOUT 30 people gathered for the Kate O'Brien tour of Limerick this week, which was organised to coincide with the launch of a new ground-breaking study of the local author, "Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien".

In an open topped bus, beneath a sky which did not, luckily, fulfil its threat, members of the O'Brien family, students and literary critics enjoyed an informative and interesting afternoon - visiting the house on Mulgrave Street where Kate was born and Laurel Hill, the school at which she boarded for 12 years.

Wine, pretzels and the singing voice of John McCormick accompanied Jim Kemmy's informed commentary. The party was told that although the famous author spent much of her time in England and in Spain, she often returned to Limerick - the city which was the inspiration for much of her work. If Limerick were to be knocked to the ground, it could be rebuilt from Kate O'Brien's writing, it was claimed.

She wrote in "My Ireland" (1962), the travel book she dedicated to "Limerick, my dear native place"; "Wherever I am, it is still from Limerick that I look out and make my surmises."

Outside Boru House, the imposing red-brick building where Kate was born to a prosperous family in 1897, Alderman Jim Kemmy explained that Kate never liked it. Directly facing St Joseph's psychiatric hospital, he said that Kate had disturbing memories of patients scrambling over the walls trying to escape. He urged the party to remember that at the time when Kate was growing up, mental institutions were very different places from what they are now.

It remains a fine, spacious, detached house, proudly bearing, in carved stone, the name of her remote ancestor, Brian Boru. Above it can still be seen the O'Brien heraldic flourish of arm and sword, also in cut stone. Jim pointed out the carriage-wheel design on the stable gates, stating that it was an enduring symbol of the family's profession of horse breeding and dealing.

As many of the people taking part in the tour were not from Limerick, Mr Kemmy named the streets and pointed out important or interesting buildings and statues as the bus drove through the city. Approaching Mulgrave Street, he said that there are

three main landmarks on it; the prison, the psychiatric hospital and St Lawrence's cemetery. "There's a saying," he laughed, "that if one doesn't get you, the other one will."

At Jurys hotel where the party was later served tea and cream buns, he said that it had once been the site of Strand House, a magnificent mansion which belonged to Kate's older sister, Nance and her husband, Stephen O'Mara. He said that the Ennis Road and Clancy's Strand were among her favourite walks.

At Laurel Hill, which was known in Kate's time as the "French Convent" the party was greeted in the grand parlour by the principal of the A School, Sr Paidrigin Ni Bhainnsigh, and engaged by anecdotes about the school's most famous past-pupil, from Sr Emmanuel Grant. Although she didn't know Kate well, the 89-year-old nun said that she did remember her as they boarded in the school at the same time.

"She passed me in the corridor one day, when I was about ten and I remember asking who she was. She was a very kind girl", Sr Emmanuel said, "I had an invalid brother who died when he was 11, and she used to spend hours talking with him."

In Kate's controversial and fourth novel "The Land of Spices" (1942), she describes a school very much like Laurel Hill. The school, the party heard, had a great influence on Kate. At the tender age of five and a half, she went there as a boarder, and remained there until she won a scholarship to UCD in 1916. The party was told that it was in Laurel Hill that she came to know and understand the nuns, developing a great affection for them. She has written about the pain she felt on leaving as "an unbeliever".

The tour also visited St John's cathedral, boasting the tallest spire in the country, where Kate went to Mass with her family as a child. Jim Kemmy said later in the evening that Kate is remembered as saying that she never heard more than two interesting sermons in her life. "The lengthy duration of the masses bored her," Jim explained. His comment was made in the presence of Bishop Edward Darling, but Deputy Kemmy stressed that he was not directing the remark at him.

The Bishop said that he has not read Kate's work, but added that the day's events had whetted his appetite to do so now. "She is obviously an author of note," he said.

The tour was greeted by Mayor Quinn at City Hall.

There, Karin Zettl, a student at the University of Vienna, and a guest of the O'Brien family, attracted



Kate O'Brien - picture from Rosemary O'Brien, sister-in-law

lots of attention for her interest in the local author. Currently studying for a PhD, Karin is basing her thesis on Kate O'Brien and said that when she returns to Austria, where she hopes to become a lecturer in English Literature, she intends to place great emphasis on her in her teaching.

Karin said that the Limerick author is included in the course she is at present pursuing and that her particular interest in her was sparked by the writings of Elizabeth Bowen.

Sponsored by Bus Éireann and Jurys hotel, the tour reached its climax in the City Gallery, where "Ordinary People Dancing" was launched by Jim Kemmy, acting as Deputy Mayor.

Published by Cork University Press, the book is edited by Eibhear Walshe, a lecturer in the Department of English at UCC and the section editor for the fourth volume of the "Field Day Anthology". He also advises on new Irish writing at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.

The title of the book was taken from a 1962 "Self Portrait" RTE interview, in which Kate is recorded saying that the sound of "dance music and the human singing voice... and the sight of ordinary people dancing" always made her want to write.

Tackling all angles of Kate's work, the book of 11 essays by respected authorities, offers a scholarly reassessment of her novels and criticism. In his contribution, one-time Limerick Leader journalist, now with the Evening Press, and author of the memoir, "More Kicks Than Pence", Michael O'Toole, examines Kate's journalistic work, particularly where it is related to travel.

He agrees with Sara Mills in "Discourses of Difference" (1991) when she comments on the biographical reductionism of some critical literature on women's travel writing. He

writes that although Kate's travel writing can be used for colourful and instructive backdrops to novels such as "Mary Lavelle" or "That Lady", "Kate O'Brien's travel writing deserves recognition in its own right, both in terms of its distinction and as part of a larger tradition of Irish travel literature, which is only belatedly receiving due recognition."

Speaking at the launch of "Ordinary People Dancing", Eibhear Walshe said that the book does not claim to resuscitate Kate O'Brien's work. "She has always been a very popular writer, what we are doing in this book is reaffirming her as the most important Irish woman writer of the 20th century."

Several of Kate O'Brien's novels have been reissued in paperback by Virago Press and are available in local bookshops. Lorna Reynold's, author of "Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait" (1987), professor of Modern English in UCG 1966-77, and a personal friend of Kate's until her death in 1974, is currently working on a detailed biography.

No decision on Carew Park road

CITY Council deferred their decision on the Carew Park section of the proposed new super-road from Cork to Limerick again last night.

Proposing the deferment, Deputy Jim Kemmy, endeavouring to find a compromise, undertook to approach the Minister Michael Smith with a view to making more money available to compensate the residents of the area.

Potential noise and pollution are the main objections of the residents.

The County Council propose to locate fencing, mounds and landscaping along the proposed road.

Cllr Jack Bourke said he

would be against any ugly fencing and as he had no seen the type of mounds proposed he could not comment.

He again referred to the fact that double glazed windows had been provided for Dublin residents at the East Link Bridge and said as far as he was concerned it did not matter whether the contractor was private or public.

Cllr Joe Harrington, who is against the erection of a nine foot fence felt the new road would be safer for children than the existing road.

However he is in favour of winning as many concessions as possible from the Minister at this stage.

Kemmy taking O'Hanlon to task

By **Dymphna Bracken**

DEPUTY Jim Kemmy today took Cllr Kieran O'Hanlon to task over his allegations with regard to lottery funding to the city in 1992.

Out of £6.4m lottery for local sports centres in 1992, Limerick received £100,000 which was the lowest of the 16 counties grant aided.

Questioning the small

amount to the city, Cllr O'Hanlon in the Limerick Leader on Friday described the grants as a political "slush fund".

Referring to the fact that no grants were made available so far this year for sport, Cllr O'Hanlon further claimed that the Labour Party had been hoodwinked on the issue.

Deputy Kemmy, deploring the lack of funding to the city in 1992 pointed out that it was Cllr O'Hanlon's own party who were in gov-

Convicted after car incident

A SOUTHILL youth who denied being in a stolen car, but who admitted watching the car career around the park, was convicted of allowing himself to be carried in the vehicle.

He was remanded on bail by the city court.

Garda Hogan said that he had followed the stolen car to O'Malley Park, Southill, where it stopped, and four youths ran from it. He caught one of them, the accused.

Ted McCarthy, solicitor for the youth, who cannot be named for age reasons, said that the youth denied being in the car.

"I saw him get out of the drivers door," replied the garda.

The youth said that he saw the stolen car, but was not in it.

"The car was spinning around the field and a load of people were watching it. The gardai came and about 60 or 70 people jumped over walls into gardens, and started running."

"I was standing in a garden when the gardai came and they caught me. But I was not in the car."

Asked by Detective Sergeant Michael Browne what he was doing standing in the garden, the youth replied: "I was watching the stolen car."

"How did you know it was stolen?" asked the detective.

"Because it was going like mad around the field," he replied.

A friend of the accused said that he had been with him on the night the car was stolen.

"We seen the car coming down the hill, and we went up the park to look at it. It was spinning around the field. Everyone ran. We were all in different gardens, and my friend was two gardens down from me, when the gardai arrived and arrested him."

"He was not in the stolen car."

After hearing the evidence, Judge Joseph Mangan convicted the youth of allowing himself to be carried in a stolen car, and remanded him on bail until this Wednesday to consider his sentence.

ernment when the funds were allocated in the early part of 1992.

"The next thing he will be blaming the Labour Party for the weather," declared Deputy Kemmy.

"Rather than blaming the Labour party he should ask his own deputies, including Desmond O'Malley, to explain why Limerick received such a small amount of lotto funding in 1992," he added.