

Our Literary History (II)

SOME NOVELISTS OF DISTINCTION

Great novelists are a rare breed. We are fortunate in being able to claim that two outstanding Irish novelists, Gerald Griffin and Kate O'Brien, were born within the boundaries of our city and that they wrote about the place and its people in their work.

Griffin was born in Bow Lane, on December 12, 1803. At the age of nineteen, like other Limerick writers before and after him, he left to make a name for himself as a dramatist in London. He worked as a hack-journalist before he turned to the writing of novels. He sought to provide a true picture of contemporary Ireland, and to influence the often ill-informed attitude of the English people to this country.

Gerald Griffin's sensitive, self-critical mind did not allow him to bask in the modest success he achieved during this period. To the surprise of many people, he abandoned his literary career and joined the Christian Brothers. He died prematurely, at the age of thirty-six, on June 12, 1840. His novel **The Collegians** is widely regarded as the finest Irish novel of the nineteenth century.

Griffin's biographer, John Cronin, in his brilliant study of the writer and his work, wrote: "... Griffin may ... be accounted one of the great Irish realistic writers ... he achieved as much as his strange nature and terrible times permitted".

Kate O'Brien was born in Boru House, Mulgrave Street, in 1897, nearly a century after Gerald Griffin's birth. Her first novel, **Without My Cloak**, published in 1931, immediately established her as a masterly writer. She wrote a total of eight novels, three travel books, two plays and two other books up to her death in 1973.

Kate O'Brien was a middle class writer who wrote about the middle class city she knew so well. She wrote about the cloistered world of the nuns at Laurel Hill and Presentation convents and about the merchant princes and their self-absorbed lives.

Her fellow-novelist, Benedict Kiely, has written: "... few novelists have understood as well as Kate O'Brien did the meaning of a prosperous house, a solid middle class family, of a town ... escaping small town stagnancy."

The inscription on her travel-book, **My Ireland**, shows her affection for the place of her birth:
With Warmest Love,

... I humbly dedicate this little book to Limerick, my dear native place.

It is to be regretted that through a combination of cowardice and neglect, Kate O'Brien was not given Limerick's highest honour, the Freedom of the City, during her lifetime. It is to be hoped, however, that she will find as talented and as sympathetic a biographer as Gerald Griffin found in John Cronin. Her literary contribution is well worthy of such an undertaking. And the erection of a stone plaque to her memory at the house where she was born would also be an over-due tribute to her life's work.

The city still continues to produce novelists of distinction. Since Kate O'Brien's death, three young Limerick writers have published five novels between them.

Michael McNamara met his untimely death in a car accident in America in 1980. His two novels, set in the city, **The Vision of Thady Quinlan** and **The Dancing Floor**, show what a promising writer we have lost.

Few modern Irish novels have made such a dramatic impact as David Hanly's **In Guilt And In Glory**. The book contains some powerful writing, as the author's cool, clear eye takes in the Ireland of today.

Our latest novelist is Michael Curtin. His two books, **The Self-Made Men** and **The Replay**, present a different Limerick from that of Kate O'Brien's city, but in the raucous world of pubs, porter, soccer and sex by the Shannon, his comic, zany style provides some uncomfortable insights into our male chauvanist culture.

Thus, our novelists have given us a many-sided and valuable picture of Limerick life through the years. Their stories will not be found in the history books, but they make for rewarding and stimulating reading about our own place and its people.