SOME CRITICAL NOTES ON

Kate O'Brien

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.