

Keane, Mary Nesta ('Molly')

by Ian d'Alton

Keane, Mary Nesta ('Molly') (1904–96), writer, was born 20 July 1904 at Ballymore Eustace, Co. Kildare, second daughter (among three sons and two daughters) of Walter Clarmont Skrine (c.1860–1930) and Agnes Shakespeare Skrine (qv) (1865–1955; née Higginson) of Ballymore Eustace. Her father, scion of an old Somerset family, emigrated to Alberta, Canada (where he owned a ranch), but returned to Ireland in 1902. Her mother, a poet, as 'Moira O'Neill' wrote *Songs of the Glens of Antrim* (Edinburgh, 1916). Molly's Latin temperament clashing with her mother's Ulster Victorianism, childhood was not particularly happy. With virtually no formal education, being educated at home by a succession of governesses, she spent some time at the French School, Bray, Co. Wicklow, where, homesick and disliked by prim girls, she began to write.

Her literary life falls into three distinct parts: early novels (1920–51); plays (1938–61); and later novels (1981–8). Since it was her view that an identifiable woman who wrote had no chance with men, she, like George Eliot, determined to write under a nom-de-plume. She finally settled on the gender-neutral 'M. J. Farrell', the name of a public house spotted on the return from a day's hunting. As such, she published eleven novels between 1926 and 1951. *The knight of cheerful countenance*, a frivolous romance, was written shortly after she left school, but not published till 1926 (by Mills & Boon). Her upbringing – classic *fin-de-siecle* Anglo-Irish, with horses and dead animals sometimes seeming more important than children and the living – is reflected in the following ten novels, the impetus for many being money in order to fuel her hunting habit and her dress allowance. Of this phase of her writing, *Mad Puppetstown* is perhaps the best-enduring. A happy childhood, counterpoint to her own, tragically ending in war, is wistfully captured and lyrically described in bright-cut phraseology: ' . . . the very house looked languorous. It seemed to open the pores of its stones to the day . . .'; 'A slippery thread of a path spun its way across the field to an unseen gateway, where, under the trees, the air trembled, laden blue in the heat'. Of the other novels, *Devoted ladies* (1934) is the most notable, its lesbian over- and undertones, while satirical, daring for the day.

Her plays – Cowardesque, with fine characterisation and pointed wit – were written with a family friend from Tipperary, the actor John Perry (1906–95). Many produced by John Gielgud, *Spring meeting* (1938), *Guardian angel* (1944), and *Treasure hunt* (1949), were mildly successful, while *Ducks and drakes* (1942) and *Dazzling prospect* (1961), were not, the latter being – in a post-Osborne world – particularly out of place.

In 1933 she took up with a gentleman farmer, Robert Lumley ('Bobbie') Keane (1910–46), son of R. H. Keane, of Lismore, Co. Waterford, and nephew of Sir John

Keane (qv), 5th baronet. An intense and intimate love affair ('. . . in those days it wasn't done – but of course it was done', *Ir. Times* 23 April 1996) culminated in marriage in 1938. Keane was Molly's perfect man: a beautiful rider, witty, intelligent. He encouraged her to take writing seriously. Two daughters were born of the marriage: Sally (b. 1940, m. George Phipps) and Virginia (b. 1945, m. Kevin Brownlow, film historian). Molly was devastated when, following surgery, Bobbie died in 1946 in London. She moved to England while her daughters were being educated, but returned to a small but beautifully positioned cliff-top house in Ardmore, Co. Waterford, in 1952. The lasting grief which Bobbie's death occasioned was reflected in her virtual cessation of writing from the late 1940s till the 1970s.

She returned spectacularly to the literary scene at the age of 77 with *Good behaviour*. Written when she was 'too old to ride to hounds, too poor to pay a gardener, but possessed of a rattling good idea' (ibid.) and completed in 1978, it was initially rejected by Collins, which had been her publishers. Dame Peggy Ashcroft, a friend, persuaded her to persevere and it was published in 1981 by Andre Deutsch to critical acclaim, being shortlisted for the Booker prize in that year. The book is a black protestant comedy, which offsets pathos and glittering success against a vision of the Anglo-Irish *milieu* as one of solitude, poverty, hopelessness, and futility – but always of good behaviour.

While she ' . . . observed and preserved . . . the sounding of the tocsins and the minutiae of the last days of the Irish raj' (Polly Devlin, obit., *Sunday Tribune*, 25 Apr. 1996), her writings, especially in their later phase, are rescued from the mere chronicling of a vanished culture by a contemporary-feeling satire, resonating with a generation of readers too young to have familiarity with the Anglo-Irish universe within which she moved. She wrote of the same world as her contemporary, Elizabeth Bowen (qv) ('a great chum'; quoted in C. Boylan, 'I do miss talking with a chum', *Ir. Times*, 23 Apr. 1996). Yet while Keane's work could hardly be more different, her last novel, *Loving and giving* (1988), mirrors Bowen's *Eva Trout* (1969) with its shocking, violent end. Once again the themes are the Anglo-Irish gentry's conflation of place with person and its obligation to stifle any acknowledgement of the untoward.

Her other works included (with 'Snaffles' (Charles Johnson Payne)) *Red letter days* (1933), issued in America as *Point-to-point*, *Molly Keane's nursery cookbook* (1985); and (with Sally Phipps) *Molly Keane's Ireland: an anthology* (1993). *Good behaviour* (with John Gielgud) and *Time after time* (1983) were filmed for television. A bibliography is found in A. Gonzalez (ed.) *Modern Irish writers: a bio-critical sourcebook* (1997).

Keane had the classic mannerisms and features of the Anglo-Irish, together with an attractive face, brown eyes, and a cut-glass accent, allied with a formal social behaviour. Nevertheless there was a hint of acid, necessary to her writing; and, not

particularly disguising the genesis of many of her characters, she doubtless created the odd *frisson* in south of Ireland Big House drawing rooms.

In later years Keane achieved a recognition denied to her earlier. She was elected a founder member of Aosdána in 1981 (which provided a small stipend), and was awarded the degree of D.Litt. from the NUI and the University of Ulster. She was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. She died at home 22 April 1996, of complications following a fall, and is buried in the churchyard of St Paul's church, Ardmore, Co. Waterford.

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Higginson papers, PRONI D/3590; National Sound Archive (London), C125/301 BD1, H7498/4, B5856/03, T6168R TR2; S. O'Faolain, review of *Full house*, *Spectator*, 23 Aug. 1935; V. S. Pritchett, 'The solace of intrigue', *New York Review of Books*, 12 Apr. 1984; B. O'Toole, 'Three writers of the Big House, Elizabeth Bowen, Molly Keane, and Jennifer Johnston', G. Dawe and E. Longley (ed.), *Across the roaring hill: the protestant imagination in modern Ireland* (1985), 24–38; J. Quinn (ed.), *A portrait of the artist as a young girl* (1986); V. Kreilcamp, 'The persistent pattern: Molly Keane's recent Big House fiction', *Massachusetts Review*, xxviii (autumn 1987), 453–60; J. Cahalan, *The Irish novel: a critical history* (1988); *World authors 1980–1985* (1991); K. Gibbs, *An introduction to the fiction of Molly Keane [M. J. Farrell]* (1993); M. Keane, introduction to *The knight of cheerful countenance* (Virago ed., 1993); obits in *Independent*, *Guardian*, *Ir. Times*, *Times*, 23 Apr. 1996, *Sunday Tribune*, 25 Apr. 1996; R. Lynch, 'Molly Keane's comedies of Anglo-Irish manners', T. O'Connor (ed.), *The comic tradition in Irish women writers* (1996), 73–98; R. Frehner, *The colonizers' daughters: gender in the Anglo-Irish Big House novel* (1999); private information