

# Erin on the Dark Side

**Michael Joe: A Novel of Irish Life**, by William Cotter Murray (Appleton-Century. 336 pp. \$5.95), underscores the banality and pietism found in rural Ireland. Sean Callery has contributed to British and Irish publications, and in the U.S. to *Commonweal*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*.

By SEAN CALLERY

*The Irish are a fair people; they never speak well of one another.*

—SAMUEL JOHNSON.

**A**FICIONADOS of romantic Irish legends and even those vaguely suspecting that rural Ireland is a pleasant place to live are urged to boycott *Michael Joe*. The author has chosen, rather daringly and ambitiously, to recount the archetypal Irish tale, the merciless and deliberate destruction of the male's sexuality by the women in his life.

Deceptively simple superficially, *Michael Joe* is moored firmly within a suffocatingly narrow perimeter. A young football hero of the small merchant class in a remote village loves a spirited girl of his own *milieu*. His mother discovers Nell Cullen's frightful past—an illegitimate child put out for adoption in England.

Apprised of these horrendous happenings, Michael Joe reacts in the pietistical

fashion that is an Irish commonplace: the girl is a deceiving slut and ought to be ostracized and persecuted *ad aeternam*. Indeed, when she accepts the marriage proposal of another suitor, Michael Joe attempts to destroy the match and is astonished that his successor is willing to marry a girl who does not match up to his own notions of purity. As much for saving face, as for any other reason, Michael Joe contracts a loveless marriage with a girl from a farm and sets up house-keeping with her and his mother—a thoroughly respectable and unsavory *ménage à trois* in the Celtic manner.

At this point a new, macabre cycle begins. Seemingly rivals at first, mother and daughter-in-law soon discover a common mission. The unloving bride gives her husband one male heir, and she and its grandmother embark upon a thoroughgoing program of inhibiting any sort of aggressive masculine develop-

ment that they might detect in the child.

Mr. Murray has utilized an artful, somewhat self-conscious style to ornament an old-fashioned story. Literalness is the dominant characteristic, a device that perfectly underscores the primitive psychology of his characters and the banality of their lives. Let us hear from the traditional elucidator and custodian of morality in Ireland, the canon: The morning after Michael Joe has physically attacked the successful suitor of his first love we find Canon Lyons sermonizing from the pulpit on the subject of Anger. "Right here at home, in our very own parish, before our own very eyes we can see the wrack and havoc caused by this sin that likens us again to the ravening packs of wolves that once roamed our country before the coming of Saint Patrick."

In his first novel Mr. Murray proves to be a lineal descendant of a once-familiar figure in Ireland, the *seanchuidhe*, the professional storyteller to whom the tale was everything and nuance be damned. Evidently more of a catharsis than most initial works, this one is marred somewhat by a paucity of perspective, humor—yes, even Charity. Ireland is everything the author says it is, but it is a great deal more too.

## Another Night on the Town

**Mr. Right Is Dead**, by Rona Jaffe (Simon & Schuster. 192 pp. \$4.50), containing a novella and five stories, offers further examples of its author's fascination with the glamour of New York and its sad, sophisticated waifs in search of romance. David Boroff, teaches English at New York University, frequently comments on contemporary fiction.

By DAVID BOROFF

**T**HE ENORMOUS success of Rona Jaffe's first novel, *The Best of Everything*, was the sort that makes serious writers grind their teeth in helpless rage. A book of scant literary merit, it was largely a rehash of all the clichés about little girls in the big city—*Kitty Foyle* updated. While other writers, steadfast in their craft, languished in obscurity, Miss Jaffe became grist for the publicity mills, and if her literary reputation was ambiguous, her role as a full-fledged celebrity was not.

A writer's current work, to be sure, should not be evaluated in terms of past sins—many of which, in Miss Jaffe's case, were less her doing than done to her.

(Indeed, there should be a literary statute of limitations.) I summon up Rona Jaffe's glamorous past only to establish some continuity with her present work and to point up the weight of prejudicial judgment with which a reviewer must struggle.

For the truth is that Miss Jaffe's new work, *Mr. Right Is Dead*, shows considerable development since the author's first easily-scored victory. The subject matter of this novella and five stories is much the same as that of her first novel: the girls of New York, at once predatory and preyed upon. But the author's sensibility now has a harder grain. Her young women, though wistful to the end, have a shrewd sense of reality and a stubborn stoicism. If they are still diminished by the New York experience, Miss Jaffe at least eschews the cheap melodrama of abortion and suicide.

In *Mr. Right Is Dead* her characters survive, and what survives in them, too, is that nervous romanticism—almost as much tic as illusion—about the glories of New York. What gives this book its tension is the pull between the unquiet dream of fulfillment in New York and the knowledge that it is all silly, ultimately defeating, a hoax, for Mr. Right, indeed, is dead. And Miss Jaffe has



—Clarissa Pryce-Jones.

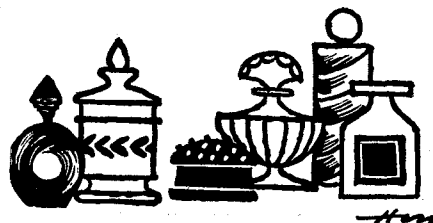
William Cotter Murray—a lineal descendant of the *seanchuidhe*.

forged an appropriate style for the subject—tense, brittle, full of a hectic gaiety and brightness only narrowly redeemed from the idiom of the women's magazines. But her real triumph is her unerring sense of the New York milieu of tony restaurants, with menus like headstones, expense account *voyageurs* in town for a quick fling, and the hippie *demi-monde* of the Upper East Side. Rona Jaffe is a distaff John O'Hara, as fascinated by the great world as the master and as pitiless in laying it bare.

The title story is a wry celebration of a skinny little girl who calls herself Melba Toast, a *nom de scandale* when she was, briefly, a stripper. Her closest friend—the voice of the story—is “a natural born accomplice,” a mousy type who responds to Melba's mixture of flamboyance and gallantry. Together they become “slinky, faceless, and fuzzy, two sleek little New York ferrets out for a free night on the town.” And the novella is an account of Melba's careening from one relationship to another, her amiably larcenous spirit never really defeated.

We have been to this country before—“the girls in silver lamé at three A.M., the men jovial and rested, holding heavy cut-glass highballs.” But in the past there was generally a moralistic copping out. Give Miss Jaffe her due for a kind of undying love affair with the night-town of Melba Toast, for at the end, the drab, morally responsible friend declares: “Even without money and without friends, she was alive and somewhere, and I was half dead and nowhere.”

The short stories that round out this volume are uneven. “Guess Who This Is” is a savage little vignette of two young movie stars, mean-spirited and narcissistic, in quest of home entertainment. “He Can't Be Dead, He Spoke to Me” plunges gamely into the turbid depths of an up-town orgy, but a more muscular imagination than Miss Jaffe's is required to deal effectively with such material. The last story, “Rima, the Bird Girl,” deals with a wraithlike creature who takes on new identities as she moves from one already pre-empted man to another. Here Rona Jaffe is homefree, for it is the sad, sophisticated waifs of New York—the Radcliffe girls gone wrong—who most engage her sympathies. As their chronicler she can bring to bear only modest gifts, but she makes up for this in the intensity of her absorption. Miss Jaffe almost makes us believe in her cruel, enchanted city.



## Kremlin: Evolution or Extinction?

*Russia After Khrushchev*, by Robert Conquest (Praeger, 267 pp. \$5), finds that only through a decisive transformation of her political system can the Soviet Union solve her ever-increasing problems and survive as a nation. Marvin Kalb, diplomatic correspondent in Washington for CBS News, wrote “Dragon in the Kremlin” and “Eastern exposure.”

By MARVIN KALB

ROBERT CONQUEST, a British poet and literary critic, can out-Kremlinologize the Kremlinologists, and do so with grace, charm, and historical insight. His book is an adventure story in politics with a unique cast of characters.

Unlike many students of the USSR, Conquest is generally cool and clinical in his appraisal of Soviet politics. Shunning romance and emotion, he takes exception to assumptions about Russian development that are shared by many experts at the State Department and the British Foreign Office, as well as by most laymen who bother to think about it. Conquest sees no reason to believe that Russia and America are moving, like stars in fixed courses, towards some kind of grand reconciliation in the not-too-distant future, confronted as they are by the irrational menace of a nuclear-armed China.

Observing “tendencies toward freedom of thought, toward liberation from the various anti-humanist dogmas that have poisoned it for more than a generation,” Conquest hopes Russia “may be reclaimed for civilization.” But tendencies are not necessarily accomplishments. The Soviet Union is changing, Conquest seems to be saying, but she has not yet altered fundamentally. He lists “ten permanent characteristics of Stalinism” that still dominate Soviet life, including a self-perpetuating, autocratic Party bureaucracy that continues to exercise full authority over all literary and propaganda efforts, the trade unions, the “collectivized serfs,” the consumer, national minorities, foreign travel, labor camps, and the writing of history.

“For someone who has been chastised with scorpions for any length of time, it is no doubt quite a relief to have the chastiser go back to whips again.” In these pithy words Conquest places Rus-

sia's recent “liberalization” in proper perspective. Moreover, freedom cannot emerge from Soviet politics unless, as Conquest puts it, there is a “decisive split at the highest level” of Kremlin power. He does not specify the kind of split he has in mind, but he seems to be suggesting one between the “concessionists,” who would reluctantly allow a genuine democratization, and the “repressionists,” who would not accept any changes that would mean loss of their own power. Such a division could take place within the Party's Central Committee, or between it and the Red Army. Conquest appears to be convinced that something of the kind is virtually inevitable; that it is now being forced upon Moscow's military and political leaders by a powerful combination of political, economic, and social crises which are presently convulsing Russia and which can be resolved satisfactorily only by breaking the Party's monopoly of political control.



It is possible to envisage such a cataclysmic change in the Kremlin. It is equally possible to anticipate a prolonged twilight, lasting perhaps for decades, while the USSR gropes for a solution to her chronic problems—a period punctuated occasionally by political upheaval but uninterrupted by violent or drastic upsets.

Nevertheless, Conquest asserts that a really radical transformation in the nature and methods of the Soviet political apparatus is “not too unlikely,” given the unrest now sweeping the Communist world. He clearly does not feel that the current Kremlin leadership of Brezhnev and Kosygin, Shelepin and Podgorniy, Suslov and Polyansky, lacking ideological charisma and popular confidence, can cope with the increasing turbulence.

Last fall, a number of events suddenly