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Irish Quakers

A Haunted Heart.

By John MacKenna.

Picador. 264pp, £15.99 in UK

John MacKenna works hard. Along with holding a range of posts with RTÉ, over the past couple of decades he has written a number of significant books, turning out five works of fiction in the last seven years alone. Belated media attention was bestowed following the publication of *The Last Fine Summer* (1997), an intense, if sometimes rambling, story about the pain attached to remembered sensuality.

Between his first book, the story collection *The Occasional Optimist* (1976), and this recent flourishing, MacKenna displayed, most notably in *Castledermot and Kilkea* (1982), a documentary interest in his native Kildare that pervades all his fiction. *A Haunted Heart* is inspired by the material of two books he edited in the mid-eighties: *The Annals of Ballitore* (1986) and *Cottage Biography* (1987), both comprised of the writings of Kildare Quaker and diarist, Mary Leadbeater (1758-1826). While the general geographical setting of Leadbeater's Ballitore is retained, MacKenna's new story is narrated by an elderly emigrant Quaker who has returned to Ireland in 1959 to try to make sense of some events that occurred after she joined a Quaker sect, the White Friends, in 1899. Elizabeth Hallhead, now living in Athy, distills, from her voluminous journals, a text intended to explain to the two daughters of Abigail Beale how their mother was destroyed through involvement with the Messianic leader of the sect, Joshua Jacob.

While Elizabeth's present life, her 'attempt at consequence' in the face of terminal illness, is potentially affecting, her suspicion that her writing about the past is 'bland and flat' is unfortunately self-reflexive on MacKenna's behalf. This is, given the narrator's character, partly purposeful ('[I] have never felt the absence of unnecessary furniture to be an austerity'), partly the problem of predictability in the diaristic mode ('Today I returned to my task'/'Today I was too sick to work'), but is largely due to the fact that MacKenna has replaced the nicely measured hard edge of his previous work with a coyness that turns pathos into a reality-drained mawkishness and that ultimately makes Abigail appear a swooning cardboard heroine rather than a believable object of Elizabeth's love.

This elongation of a simple story of obsession does MacKenna little justice. He is one of the notable few contemporary Irish fiction writers not to have treated the short story as a form worthy only of a launching, apprentice volume. While he continues to hone his novelistic style, it is to be hoped that he will persevere in writing stories like those in *The Fallen* (1992) and *A Year of Our Lives* (1995), the better vehicles for his adept sense of inner emotional life and for his moments of confident lyricism.