

**Amanda Curtin, *Kathleen O'Connor of Paris***, Fremantle, Fremantle Press, November 2018, 319 pp., rrp AU\$ 34.99, ISBN 978-1-92559-164-4.

Kathleen O'Connor left Perth in 1906, when she was thirty years old. She spent most of the next forty plus years of her life in Paris, with brief trips back to Perth. It was not until 1955 that she reluctantly settled back permanently in Perth. Her work is less well known than that of a number of her contemporaries, many of whom also spent time in Paris. But as the title of this book suggests, Kathleen O'Connor was not an Australian artist who visited Paris, she was an artist based in Paris for most of her working life.



Amanda Curtin's biography of O'Connor draws on extensive and painstaking research to bring together the threads of her life. To this factual base, Curtin adds her own imaginative engagement with the artist. Many are the times when Curtin imagines Kate in a particular situation; she can see her sitting in a café, walking across the Pont Alexandre III to visit the salons at the Grand Palais, sitting sketching in the Luxembourg Gardens.

She walks in her footsteps and compares her experiences to what Kate would have seen some 100 years earlier.

Amanda Curtin is a fiction writer and from the start she asks the reader to go along with her own very personal interpretation of 'biography'. We, the readers, are witness to the author's interactions with 'Kate' as she calls her, or 'Bravegirl', another name she invents for the artist. 'I talk to Kate in questions', she writes. 'I ask and I listen, and I try to make peace with the only certainty possible, that what I hear, when I listen, if I hear anything at all, will be my own voice.' (17)

Kathleen O'Connor was born in 1876, in Hokitika, New Zealand. Her father was Charles (C.Y.) O'Connor, an engineer who had migrated from Ireland to New Zealand in 1865. Kathleen was the third of eight children. In 1891, the family migrated to Australia where Charles O'Connor took up the position of engineer-in-chief for Western Australia. From a very early age, Kathleen showed an interest in art, which she studied at the Perth Technical College.

In 1902, the family suffered the tragic loss of their father when he took his own life. His work on the Goldfields Water Supply Scheme was the subject of constant attacks in the press and he was overcome with mental exhaustion and despair. He was later shown to be blameless in every charge that had been levelled against him and was praised by the Premier of the State when the water supply to Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie was turned on in 1903.

Four years later, Kathleen O'Connor left Perth for England with her mother and sister. Already her plans were well developed. Leaving her mother and sister in England, she went to Paris. After six months she had decided that was where she wanted to stay. She returned to London to inform her mother she would not be returning with them to Perth. She asked her mother for her share of her father's annuity as an allowance. It was only a small amount, but Kathleen had worked out she could survive on it in Paris.

Curtin documents and recreates O'Connor's life over the next thirty plus years: her participation in the various Salons, the two years she spent in London at the beginning of the First World War, her friendships with artists, both ex-pats and French, meeting them in cafés or at artists' studios,

the visits from friends and family, and her own art practice. In the 1920s, as the cost of living rose, she supplemented her allowance by working in the decorative arts, designing fabrics, wallpapers and furnishings. A reproduction of a business card from that period describes her as ‘artiste – peintre – décorateur’ (118), referring specifically to theatre and fabric design. O’Connor demonstrated business nous and an entrepreneurial spirit to ensure that she could continue to stay on in her adopted city.

Throughout her time in Paris, O’Connor wrote articles for Perth newspapers, particularly for *Town Talk*. She wrote about fashion, about the salons and the activities of her artist friends, the racing seasons at Deauville and Longchamp; she advises her readers where to eat and where to shop when visiting Paris; she occasionally refers to politics and world news. She was Perth’s connection to the worldliness and glamour of Paris.

Through the 1930s she continued to paint and exhibit her works in Paris, attracting favourable reviews. However, the war years were to drive her from her adopted home. She left Paris just days before the Nazi occupation and stayed in England for the next four years. When she returned to Paris in 1946, things were different. Her apartment was no longer there. The street had been appropriated by the SNCF (the railways) to extend the Gare Montparnasse. She was sixty-nine years old. Few of the artists and friends she had known before the war were in Paris. She decided to relocate to Nice, where four of her works were to be shown in an exhibition.

‘As I read through her correspondence of this time’, writes Amanda Curtin, ‘I feel a growing heaviness in Kate. I watch her options falling away’ (194). In 1948 she boarded a ship in London to return to Perth. Back in Perth, Kathleen O’Connor was received with a major retrospective of her work at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. She was also greeted by the intransigence of the Australian customs service which insisted she owed quite substantial amounts in duty for the paintings she had shipped home.

Perth still was too small a world for O’Connor and in 1951 she set off again for Paris, where an exhibition of some fifty paintings was held in a private gallery. Unable to find another studio and in ill-health, finally Kathleen O’Connor decided in 1955 to leave Paris for good and return to Perth. She could not recapture the life she had previously described as ‘all there is’ (221).

The final chapters of the book recount the last thirteen years of her life in Perth. O'Connor was an iconoclast, an 'ageing bohemian with swathes of silk in outrageous colours, wildly flowing scarves, tortoiseshell bracelets clacking at her wrists' (234). She was outspoken and did not resile from shocking people; she was contemptuous of much of the work of the younger artists. She would search in vain for cafés that would bear some resemblance to the cafés in Paris where she had enjoyed her coffee and croissant for breakfast.

Her significance as an artist was eventually recognised in Perth with a solo exhibition in 1961 and then another in 1965, and finally in 1967 with a major solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Throughout her life Kathleen O'Connor defined herself as a French artist, an Australian European. Amanda Curtin's book invites us to eavesdrop on the imagined conversations she has with this expatriate artist over the course of her life. A small number of colour plates allow us to admire her work.

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