

IN BRIEF: HISTORICAL FICTION

From Brian Boru to the Great War

There's much to admire in this recent quartet of historic novels, writes **Anne Cunningham**

I have long been an admirer of Patricia O'Reilly and her latest novel, **Orpen at War** (Liffey Press, €22.95), based on fact, is about Irish painter William Orpen, who was appointed an official war artist by the British during World War I. Jocular and sociable, he initially thinks he's in a gung-ho adventure as he arrives with chauffeur and Rolls-Royce. His high spirits are short-lived when he sees the trenches. In fact, he's struck numb and can't work at all.

A reprimand from London kick-starts him, however, and he embarks on his most prolific period, far from his high society portrait work in London. He meets Yvonne in France and an affair ensues. How he slides a portrait of her past the authorities is worthy of a whole other novel.

O'Reilly doesn't venture beyond 1918 in this fully illustrated and beautifully produced gem, but she nails Orpen's progression from a hail-fellow-well-met to a bewildered and increasingly alcohol-dependent man in a marvellously elegant feat of storytelling.