

# KATE O'BRIEN'S LIMERICK

**T**he light of the October day was dropping from afternoon clarity to softness when Anthony Considine led his limping horse round the last curve of the Gap of Storm and halted there to behold the Vale of Honey. The Vale of Honey is a wide plain of fertile pastures and deep woods, watered by many streams and ringed about by mountains. Westward the Bearnagh hills, through whose Gap of Storm the traveller had just tramped, shelter it from the Atlantic-salted wind, and at the foot of these hills a great river sweeps about the western valley, zigzagging passionately westward and southward and westward again in its search for the sea. A few miles below him on the river's bank the traveller saw the blue of a town. 'That must be Mellick ... The Vale of Honey!' he said softly. 'I've often heard 'tis a grand, rich, easy-going place. It's like a saucer, upon my word, the shape of it, or like a dish, the way the little hills come up all round it.'

Thus Kate O'Brien opened the first chapter of her first novel **Without My Cloak**. The word "Mellick" was no throwaway term. Kate O'Brien was too careful a writer to diminish her native city by the use of an ill-chosen word. Mellick is a symbolic name and it conveys the rich, lush feeling and flavour of the Golden Vale - the Vale of Honey.

As he entered the city, Anthony Considine observed his new surroundings:

"Anthony splashed along the puddled footpath; if he perceived the gentle evening, if he heard the rattle of cart-wheels, the thudding and laughing of boys at play, the scrape of a fiddle, the bark of a dog, the hoot of a coal boat; if he smelt lime and horse-dung and porter, hay and new-milled flour ... he did all these things only with the slight sensibility of habit ..."

This is a vivid, poetic description of the sight, sound, smell and colour of the city, resembling the lively account given by the nineteenth century local poet John Francis O'Donnell in his poem "Limerick Town".

But the city also has its less pleasant aspect, as Anthony soon found out:

"He discovered Mellick's slums, for instance - the crumbling Old Town

by Jim Kemmy

that looked so gently beautiful at evening, grey, sad, and tender, huddled on 'humpy bridges over canals and twisting streams - and found that under its mask of dying peace it lived a swarming, desperate, full-blooded life, a life rich in dereliction, the life of beggars, drunkards, idiots, tramps, tinkers, cripples, a merry, cunning, ribald, unprotesting life of despair and mirth and waste ..."

Seldom, if ever, has Limerick been better described in fact or in fiction. **Without My Cloak** was published in 1931 when Kate O'Brien was thirty-four year of age. She was to write two other novels set in Limerick - **The Land of Spices** and **Pray for the Wanderer** - and two more books containing her reminiscences of the city and county - **My Ireland** and **Presentation Parlour**.

Kate O'Brien was born in Boru House, Mulgrave Street, on 3rd December 1897. She was one of nine children, having three sisters and five brothers. Despite the fact that she only spent the first eighteen years of her life in Limerick, the city had a powerful and lasting influence on her life and on her writings. In **My Ireland** she acknowledged this fact:

"When I grow tired of stravaiging about Ireland, either in imagination or in my too, too solid flesh, I can turn towards Limerick, and feel relieved. I suppose that in relation to one's birthplace one has no sense of responsibility? Indeed, perhaps I might say that the shoe is on the other foot and that if Limerick made me and made me love her that is Limerick's funeral ... It was there that I began to view the world and to develop the necessary passion by which to judge it. It was there indeed that I learnt the world and I know that wherever I am it is still from Limerick that I look out and make my surmises ... It is really all you know about yourself - that life began, that you became involved, that you asked all your leading questions there ... in Limerick."

In her last book, **Presentation Parlour**, published in 1963, eleven

years before her death, Kate O'Brien gives a good deal of information about her family background. Her mother's maiden name was Thornhill. The Thornhills were of Cromwellian stock and had settled in Ardpark, Co. Limerick, before going on to become shopkeepers in Kilfinane. In 1886 Catherine (Katty) Thornhill married Tom O'Brien and went to live in Limerick.

Kate O'Brien tells us about her father and grandfather:

"This Tom O'Brien was by Kilfinane standards, indeed by any, a man of the world. He was in fact a child of the post-famine evictions, for his father had been turned out of his smallholding near-by, in Bruree county - about 1850, and had made his way with wife, young daughter and two sons, and with a few household remnants on an ass-cart, as far as Limerick. Then, middle-aged and ill, he had sought about for a new way of living. He began to buy and sell horses. He had a flair for horses and in a very short time he made himself an expert on the breeding of blood-stock, hunter and harness thoroughbreds. During the first or second year of this new beginning his last child - twenty years younger than his only daughter - was born. By the time this boy Tom was leaving school his father was an admired citizen of Limerick, and was building himself a brick villa to flank the paddock and stables where he had based his business of blood-stock breeding. He already had a large stud farm, and was buying pure-bred stallions".

This brick villa was Boru House, built on the edge of the city in 1880. It is still a fine, spacious, detached house and is now owned by the Lloyd family. Its name is carved in stone high up on the front of the building, below the O'Brien heraldic flourish of arm and sword, also carved in stone. Over the archway leading to the stables the O'Brien name is lettered, and underneath the carriage wheel design on the stable gates is an enduring symbol of the O'Brien's profession of horse breeding and dealing.

Kate O'Brien described her two grandfathers as "hard-beaten peasants of the desperate 'forties who had survived to reach the refuge of a town ... courageously to earn their way on

to the foothills of the middle-class". Their daughters, she writes, "having received only such minimum convent education as could not now be called education, and being all five steeped, but steeped, in Roman Catholicism, of which the conventions and period-bigotries were as unquestionable to them as the rules ... were individuals, to a woman".

Her father was educated by the Jesuits in Limerick, and was sent by his father to learn the horse business at Tattersall's and Newmarket in England. He inherited his father's flair. Between them, she continues, young man and old, they grew to be regarded as first authorities in Ireland on thoroughbred horseflesh.

In about fifty years the family had come from abject poverty to a position of some affluence and consequence in the life of Limerick. Horses provided much of the locomotion and power of the age, and the O'Briens provided the horses for the merchants, the clergy and the garrison. Such was the wealth of Tom O'Brien that he could afford to buy some historic O'Brien diamonds from the Earls of Clare and have them set in a ring for his wife Katty.

Kate O'Brien's mother died in 1903, and at the age of five she entered Laurel Hill convent as a boarder. Her twelve years in this school were later to provide much of the material for one of her best novels **The Land of Spices**. At the time of her death in 1974 she was engaged in writing an autobiographical work **Memories of a Catholic Education**. This fragment tells us much about Laurel Hill, its head nun and Kate O'Brien herself:

"Reverend Mother was not just English; she was late Victorian upper-class English ... She was aquiline and neatly rotund and very small ... She was in her quiet way an almost fanatical instructor in behaviour or deportment, on the obligation in a lady to sit quietly, to hold her back straight, to open and close doors correctly, and to sit still. She aimed to teach us total outer command of our bodies ... quite early in the century a Dublin weekly called **The Leader** - which seems to have been more socially than nationalistically **avant garde** - in an article, assaulting the absurdities of education in Ireland, called out Laurel Hill convent by name and accused it of educating Irish girls to be suitable wives for bank managers and British colonial governors. If this charge was brought to Reverend Mother's attention - and almost certainly it was - she might have winced about bank managers, as they would have been a very low social target".

Kate O'Brien relates how the nun "kept us all busy knitting mufflers for Munster Fusilliers" in 1914.

The most revealing part of



*Kate O'Brien*

#### **Memories of a Catholic Education**

is when Kate O'Brien describes her final parting from the school and its reverend mother. After twelve years of intensive religious education she was to leave Laurel Hill as an unbeliever:

"I told her a lie on that day when she forced me to speak about my non-belief and my private sins; and she accepted my lie and said she expected it and went on talking as if I had not uttered it ... I was never to see her again after that painful conversation under the elms of the Visitors' Walk. After twelve years I was going out from her house an unbeliever - my silly lie had been of

no avail".

Out of school the O'Brien siblings mixed socially with the sons and daughters of other middle class families such as the Egans, O'Maras, Ebrills, Gaffneys and Bourkes, and went pony-riding and to parties with them, especially during holiday times.

Life was not all work for the merchants and the professional classes. Drinking, dancing, race-going, hunting, card-playing, dinner-partying, womanising, discussing politics and religion filled much of their leisure hours. In this world the role of women was rigidly defined and regulated. Housekeeping, breeding, child-rearing

and serving as decorative appendages of their husbands were their socially-ordained functions.

But for single women the social pressures and tensions were inescapable. Without a husband, a woman was automatically relegated to an inferior status. The iron laws of convention decreed that young women should marry in their first flush of youth. To remain "on the shelf" was to be stigmatised as an "old maid".

The obsession of Mrs. Barton, in George Moore's under-rated novel **A Drama In Muslin**, published in 1886, showed the extent to which women's minds had been conditioned:

"A woman can do nothing until she is married ... I would sooner have the worst husband in the world than no husband. A woman is absolutely nothing without a husband: if she does not wish to pass for a failure she must get a husband, and upon all this her ideas should be set ... Keep on trying, that is my advice to all young ladies: try to make yourself agreeable, try to learn how to amuse men. Flatter them; that is the great secret; don't waste your time thinking of your books, your painting, your accomplishments; if you were Jane Austens, George Eliots, and Rosa Bonheurs, it would be of no use if you weren't married. A husband is better than talent, better even than fortune — without a husband a woman is nothing; with a husband she may rise to any height. Marriage gives a girl liberty, gives her admiration, gives her success; a woman's whole position depends upon it".

Kate O'Brien, who was later to explore similar themes in her fiction, did not escape the relentless pressure. Two of her aunts — Mary and Fan — were nuns in the Presentation Order and, after the death of their sister Katty, they made determined but suffocating attempts to push their niece May into an early marriage. In **Presentation Parlour** Kate O'Brien writes:

"Aunt Mary wanted for us the worldly success that she had eschewed... For us in Aunt Mary and in her arch-conspirator Aunt Fan, it could become very annoying. About marriage, for instance ... it was her intention that Katty's four daughters should marry well, marry young, and into Catholic bourgeois security — the more security the better. The first in line for these plans was our beautiful sister May ... Her indifference to what they called her was a lasting frustration and even a grief to them. Neither my sister Clare nor I was any good to them either in the marriage market. Only one of us, Nance, happening to make a romantic marriage, managed also to console them by bringing to them a bridegroom whom they saw to be

without fault. Stephen O'Mara, handsome, original-minded, witty, was not only of a distinguished Limerick family, not only wealthy, not only Roman Catholic, but he was also a patriot and one of those committed in loyal service to Eamonn de Valera".

But a few mettlesome married women threw off the shackles of sexual convention. As a schoolgirl Kate O'Brien observed them on their flighty way. In **My Ireland**, published in 1962, she recalls her mixed feelings of childish apprehension and fascination, as she gives this playful but penetrating peep into the sexual sideshow:

"The married woman of Limerick — and we had some singularly beautiful ones around the time I am remembering — were often very gay and gentle with the fairhaired lieutenants and trim captains from 'across'. And one well-instructed school-child watching the comedy, in skating-rinks, on tennis courts, on river picnics and around demure pianos, used to wonder about the rules, about confession and temptation, and continence and the queer phrase 'taking pleasure'. She was often troubled for beautiful ladies who probably did not know her at all, and certainly were unaware of her sneaky and precocious watchfulness. And if the ageing, dimming eyes of any matron of the Limerick **bourgeoisie** should fall on these lines, let no such reader protest in virtuous forgetfulness that it was only the loose beauties of the Protestant ascendancy who enjoyed a military gallop — for she will not be telling the truth. There was a chiel among ye".

Kate O'Brien stayed with her father and family at Boru House during holiday times. In **Presentation Parlour** she gives an account of Christmas at home:

"Christmas Day would be a good occasion ... We had all been to eight o'clock Mass at our parish church, St. John's Cathedral. Father would have no going to midnight Mass. The riff-raff of the town was loose at that hour, he said, and he would not have his children meet it. And in the churches crowded by the poor and the dirty we might get fleas, or worse afflictions ... So instead of the fun and novelty of the midnight ceremonies we had the bleak morning rigours of ordinary Mass and Communion, fasting and frozen. The novelties were only the exquisite altar boy's voice in **Adeste Fideles** after the Consecration — and before the **Credo** there were the ten minutes of the Administrator's Christmas sermon. I have heard bad sermons all over the world and I believe a good sermon to be the whitest of white blackbirds; I have listened to only two that I

remember for merit. But for sheer agonizing badness, flatness, inexcusable platitudinous fatuity those Christmas sermons from the various head priests of St. John's Cathedral over my years of childhood and girlhood — and I was an attentive listener — take all the cakes and every imaginable biscuit. They were agonizing, that is all I can say. And some of those flinty, dead, unholy voices I can hear now this minute, as I write".

So it can be seen that Kate O'Brien was storing up a wide variety of memories in her retentive reflective mind. Though she left Laurel Hill and Limerick in June 1916, after winning a scholarship to University College Dublin, the city, its people and institutions had forever shaped her and her thinking.

June 1916, also marked a turning point in the family's financial affairs. With her father's death, in June 1916, the family business went into decline. Mick O'Brien, Kate's uncle, had always been a poor judge of horse-flesh and was not equipped to run the business on his own. Family debts had accumulated, forcing Mick to sell his mansion, Shannon View, and to move with his wife to St. John's Villas, a short distance from Boru House. Kate O'Brien's brothers and sisters began to scatter, and Boru House was sold to the Lloyd family.

Apart from occasional visits, Kate O'Brien was never again to live permanently in her native city. But in **My Ireland** she fondly retraced her childhood steps:

"The spire of St. John's — let us take our bearings from there, since it is easier to see from anywhere across the plain, and is beautiful and gentle ... The stranger should visit St. Mary's. If he climbs the tower on a summer's day, as I did long ago, he may find himself rewarded, for the view thence on any side is at once lively and tranquillising; beyond the intricacies of roofs, trees, streets and people, the landscape spreads, if the sun is shining, in a Persian weave of colours broken by serpentine flashes of water, to blue hills, mainly blue, and a high, transparent sky".

Though she was born in Mulgrave Street and spent her formative years there, she did not retain happy memories of the place. She never liked the "ugly" house, as she called it, and was slightly embarrassed at her father's extravagant heraldic device at the top of the building. Boru House is situated directly across the road from St. Joseph's Mental Hospital and Kate O'Brien always had unpleasant childhood memories of poor, demented patients entering and leaving the asylum grounds. The circumstances leading to the sale of the house had also hurt her. On her visits to Limerick

she stayed with her sister Nance and Stephen O'Mara at Strand House (where **The Land of Spices** was completed in 1934) and at Mulcair House, the home of her brother Gerard and his wife Rosemary (where she wrote part of **Pray For The Wanderer** in 1936).

She liked Strand House which was located a short distance from Sarsfield Bridge on the Shannon. This was the part of Limerick she savoured, as she relates in **My Ireland**:

"So across Sarsfield Bridge, between the two Boat Clubs — and taking my time. I always like to go slowly, either way, across this bridge, for from it there is everything to see ... St. Mary's, the Courthouse, lighting up above the water; prams in collision; seagulls tearing a filthy fish apart; a Boeing jet streaking across the blue, making its own pure line of cloud".

The Shannon was never far from her thoughts and her novels. In **The Last of Summer**, written in 1942, she wrote:

"... divine, Olympian river. Of an entirely other character than the sweet English streams or the winding waters of France ... If it was your river you would know it always across years of absence".

Kate O'Brien found it easier to write about Limerick in her fiction. She admits as much in **My Ireland**:

"... whereas I find that to write descriptively and directly about Limerick or Kilkee is but impossible — for every sentence turns in on me, becomes evocative, imaginative and private — all out of place here ...".

At a time when Limerick was sensitive and even hostile to self-analysis of any form, criticism from Kate O'Brien or anybody else would not have been welcomed. Perhaps because of this factor and a consideration for the feelings of her relatives still living in Limerick, she displayed in public an uncritical attitude to the city and its people. But her inability to come to terms with the place and her long years of exile speak for themselves.

Muriel Spark, another woman novelist, said about her native place: "It was Edinburgh that bred within me the conditions of exiledom; and what have I been doing since but moving from exile into exile". The same could well be said about Kate O'Brien and Limerick.

The truth is that though she loved the city, she could not live in it because she found it restrictive and claustrophobic. She wished to have a good though distant relationship with its people, but this relationship was never an unguarded or a comfortable one.

For instance, even in the last decade of her life, when her creative writing had almost dried up and she was largely dependant on casual journalism for her income, she was not given the Freedom of Limerick, despite intensive

lobbying by her friend and champion, Mrs. Mary Hanley. Three mayors of the city were directly approached to seek their help in this campaign but to no avail. The three main political parties were faint-hearted about the proposal and Kate O'Brien was to die in 1974 largely unhonoured in her native city, except among a small group of her admirers.

What was the reason for the reluctance of the City Fathers and the local establishment to honour one of their most outstanding natives? The banning of her two novels **The Land of Spices** and **Mary Lavelle**, her independence of mind, her intellectual approach to her writing, her broad political outlook and her cosmopolitan lifestyle did not endear her to many of the powerful and influential leaders of public opinion in the city.

So what, then, was Kate O'Brien's achievement? Firstly, it can be said that she portrayed life in Limerick vividly and accurately in the period before and after the first World War. Whatever else about Kate O'Brien — and everything has not yet been said about her — it can be said with certainty that she was an important and, sometimes, masterly writer.

Her picture of Limerick life was not a complete one. For instance, she did not know much about working class life in the city. Many will remember her radio broadcasts of the mid-1960s and her account of "the small, slummy houses of the Pike". Though she was born almost on the doorstep of these little dwellings, and within a stone's throw of the Garryowen houses, because of her sheltered childhood, she knew little about the lives of their inhabitants. In **Without My Cloak** she gives a fascinating account of an attempt to form a Dock Labourers' Trade Union and of the resultant attempt at a strike in the port. She shows a perfect understanding of the employers' attitudes and prejudices but, at a time when servants were supposed to be well-behaved and obedient, her dockers are only pale shadows.

But she did capture the lives of the Limerick merchants and the middle-classes for all time. In his classic essay on Marcel Proust, in his book **Axel's Castle** Edmund Wilson wrote: "Proust was the last great historian of the loves, the society, the intelligence, the diplomacy, the literature and the art of the Heartbreak House of capitalist culture". It is a measure of Kate O'Brien's greatness as a writer that she became the historian of Limerick capitalist culture for much the same period. (And it should of course, he said that Kate O'Brien was influenced by Proust and the Symbolists. Indeed, this influence can be clearly seen in her descriptions of Limerick, particularly in the manner in which she compares the spire of St. John's with that of St.

Hilaire's in Combray).

But it was in her exploration of the role of women in society that Kate O'Brien achieved her greatest breakthrough as a writer. In **A Drama In Muslin**, George Moore, the novelist and social commentator, wrote:

"The history of a nation as often lies hidden in social wrongs and domestic griefs as in the story of revolution, and if it be for the historian to narrate the one, it is for the novelist to dissect and explain the other; and who would say which is of the most vital importance — the thunder of the people against the oppression of the Castle or the unnatural sterility, the cruel idleness of mind and body of the muslin martyrs ..."

Kate O'Brien wrote about the unnatural sterility and cruel idleness of mind and body of the middle class women of Limerick. She laid bare the passion, tension and conflict of their inner lives. She revealed their silent suffering and suppressed cries. She championed the right to individual freedom, and the integrity of the writer and artist. These are recurring and pervasive themes in her work.

Though she avoided controversy in the day-to-day life of Limerick and Ireland, she did not shrink from the confrontation of difficult and unfashionable themes. She maintained her dignity and sense of humour, even when she suffered at the hands of obscurantism and ignorance. She journeyed in land and in literature above the small-mindedness and intolerance of de Valera's Ireland. She was a committed writer who wrote wherever she found herself.

In 1961, when she was in her mid-sixties, she was forced by financial difficulties to leave her cottage in Roundstone, Co. Galway, to go to live in England. Though she went into exile for the last time, and was not well off in her final years, she was never bitter or cynical about Ireland or Limerick. She died in hospital in Canterbury on 13th August, 1974. Shortly before her death she wrote of her achievement: "We have made a literature, slowly and in some pain and confusion".

Kate O'Brien was a pioneering writer and her contribution to Irish literature and to an understanding of the psychology and sexuality of women has not yet been fully recognised. She was a warm-hearted and fallible human being who believed in the primacy of the feelings of the heart. Her writings are a record of her life and passions. It comes as no surprise to learn that her favourite quotation was George Santayana's "The holiness of the heart's affections".

Kate O'Brien was an intellectual and a profound writer. A full assessment of her work is long overdue, but it can be said with certainty, that she assured Limerick and its people of an enduring place in Irish literature.