

Arts and Studies

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JIM Kemmy TD has a lot on his mind these days but there's one notion that never leaves him; his sense of how much Kate O'Brien did for Limerick and how earnestly that city needs to commemorate her.

"It's very important that she be commemorated here because she was a fine writer and yet she was neglected not just in Limerick but in Ireland as a whole. We were a bit too narrow in our understanding of life and literature; we were censorious and self-righteous and her invaluable contribution wasn't appreciated during her lifetime." Various attempts to have the freedom of her native Limerick granted to her while she was alive failed, he adds, because there was no political support for it.

"She had an Olympian view and she took a philosophical attitude to this rejection because she was a woman of the world who travelled a lot but still it undoubtedly hurt her and pained her. After all she did a lot for the city. She captured for all time the ethos of the middle class commercial Limerick as it was at the turn of the century; the lifestyle and mores of the Catholic merchant princes of the city. She didn't understand the Limerick of the working people but she loved the city and its history and almost all her writing is redolent of this affection," says Jim Kemmy who one day hopes to commemorate Kate O'Brien himself. "I'm a stonemason after all, and I'd like and intend to commemorate her with a stone plaque in Limerick limestone on Boru House if possible."

Boru House

Boru House, a solid red brick dwelling on Mulgrave St, was the home of Kate O'Brien both as a child and as a young girl.

While its name and the arm and sword that perch on top of it conjure up shades of Brian Boru, the carriage wheel design on the stable gates are symbols of her father's trade for, like his father before him, he was a horse breeder and dealer. In fact on so large a scale was the business that one of Kate's uncles lived permanently abroad where they mounted cavalry officers in many countries, sold hunters to all the great Masters of Foxhounds, and matched carriage horses for the nobility.

Her mother, a Thornhill from Kilfinane, was of Cromwellian settler stock and in her memoirs Kate remembered Grandfather Thornhill as spirited, quick-witted and honourable. "As I write these words I can see him as clearly as I did when he used to dash into our nursery, with Mother laughing at his side. If Mother was with him and well and laughing, that means that I can only have been about three — and Grandfather would have been, I guess, seventy. And two gayer or more distinguished looking people you could not wish to see." Eagerly he would snatch Kate up in his big arms to dangle her towards the ceiling, while she in fascination would fix her eye on his watch chain.

Years later however, she marvelled that he had been able to be so gay, for: "Mother, in her thirty-seventh year, was beginning to die; and Grandfather would have known that and she was not only his first-born, but — as everyone acknowledged — his idea of all that was beautiful, and the very core of his heart."

Never Forgotten

Though only a tiny girl when her mother died, Kate never afterwards forgot her radiantly lovely face and anyway, the memory of her was kept forever alive by her sisters, Mary, Fan and Anne; the three Thornhill aunts immortalised in Kate O'Brien's magnificent book, "Presentation Parlour."

These aunts and various other relatives put all they had into rearing the nine motherless O'Brien children. "They were an anxious lot on the whole, I think; and they took us very seriously. Poor Kitty's children. They took us on to help Tom — our father, and they found

In the fourth of her series of articles about Irish writers and where they lived in Ireland, CAROLINE WALSH went

In Search of Kate O'Brien

or decided, found I think they would insist, that they loved us."

A home from home for the children was the Presentation Convent on Sexton St. where their aunts were nuns: Mary who entered first

there were signed portraits of Elizabeth of Austria whom the O'Briens had supplied with horses when she came hunting in Ireland.

Shortly after her mother died Kate was sent to school at Laurel Hill convent run by the

Faithful Companions of Jesus, a French order, where she was told that two of the nuns, Mother Lelia and Mother Sabina, were nieces of the poet Sir Samuel Ferguson. Here she was kept busy in the war years, knitting mufflers for the Munster Fusiliers, speaking French, taking classes, among other things, in politeness, and occasionally walking with Reverend Mother under the elms of the visitors walk. Much of this atmosphere was of course later to appear in her banned novel "The Land of Spices." When we visited Laurel Hill the other day many of the nuns were on holidays but Miss O'Brien is still remembered there. "In the beginning we were a bit ashamed of her having written books that were on the index — banned — but we are more proud of her now and the community especially loved her book "My Ireland," said one nun.

Though after leaving University College, Dublin, most of her life was spent in England and Spain, she regularly came back to Limerick to stay with her family, especially her sister Nance, who lived across Sarsfield Bridge out the Ennis Road. She always, she wrote, visited the city with love and "My Ireland" is dedicated to it. "With warmest love as my father Tom O'Brien would have thought proper, I humbly dedicate this little book to Limerick, my dear native place," it says.

Marriage

Her memories of it were as a garrison town full of what she called glitter and spangle, with young lieutenants and captains dallying with the ladies on the tennis court, picnicking with them by the river, and joining them around the piano at eveningtime. She



Kate O'Brien — a portrait by James Sleator, now hanging in the Limerick City Library and Art Gallery.

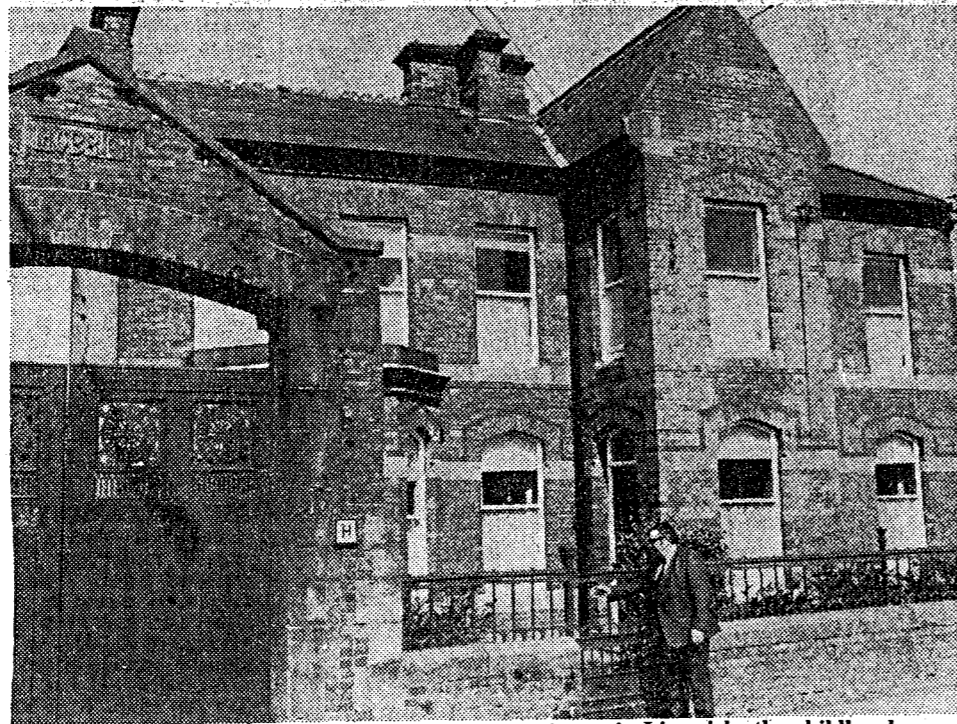
especially loved Sarsfield Bridge. "I always like to go slowly either way, across this bridge, for from it there is everything to see — all of life and one's own regrets and sentimentalities."

Though her short-lived marriage to a Dutchman, Gustav Renier, was not a success, her career as a novelist had taken off after the publication of "Without my Cloak" and years later, on the proceeds of her book "That Lady," she bought herself a home in Ireland; not in Limerick, but in Roundstone, Co. Galway, in a house believed by some to be haunted. "In Roundstone there were many legends about my house, and many long acquainted with the village thought I was rash, if not mad, to buy it — and very brave indeed to sleep there alone, as year after year, we did, my cats and I, in a happier and more silent peace than I have known elsewhere on earth."

Winter and spring were beautiful in Roundstone. "Nights of fair and cool December, April mornings, wet February days — I had a good largesse of those in that place and so I have them now until I die." — she often sat up writing until 5 a.m. and loved having visitors, all of whom she loved to entertain, but when the money ran out she had to give the place up and return to England. Roundstone became, she said herself, her Paradise Lost.

What she had loved especially was the graveyard where the Roundstone people were buried, on a hill by Gurteen Beach. "I used to say that one reason why I lived in Roundstone was to have the pleasure of being buried there. This will not happen now, for where the tree falls let it lie, in Heaven's name."

When in 1974, in mid-August, just at this time of year, she died in a Canterbury hospital, she was buried in the cemetery in the Kent village of Boughton, on the road along which David Copperfield had walked to find his Aunt Betsy, she had once written, and where, though she missed Ireland, she had spent many happy years of her life.

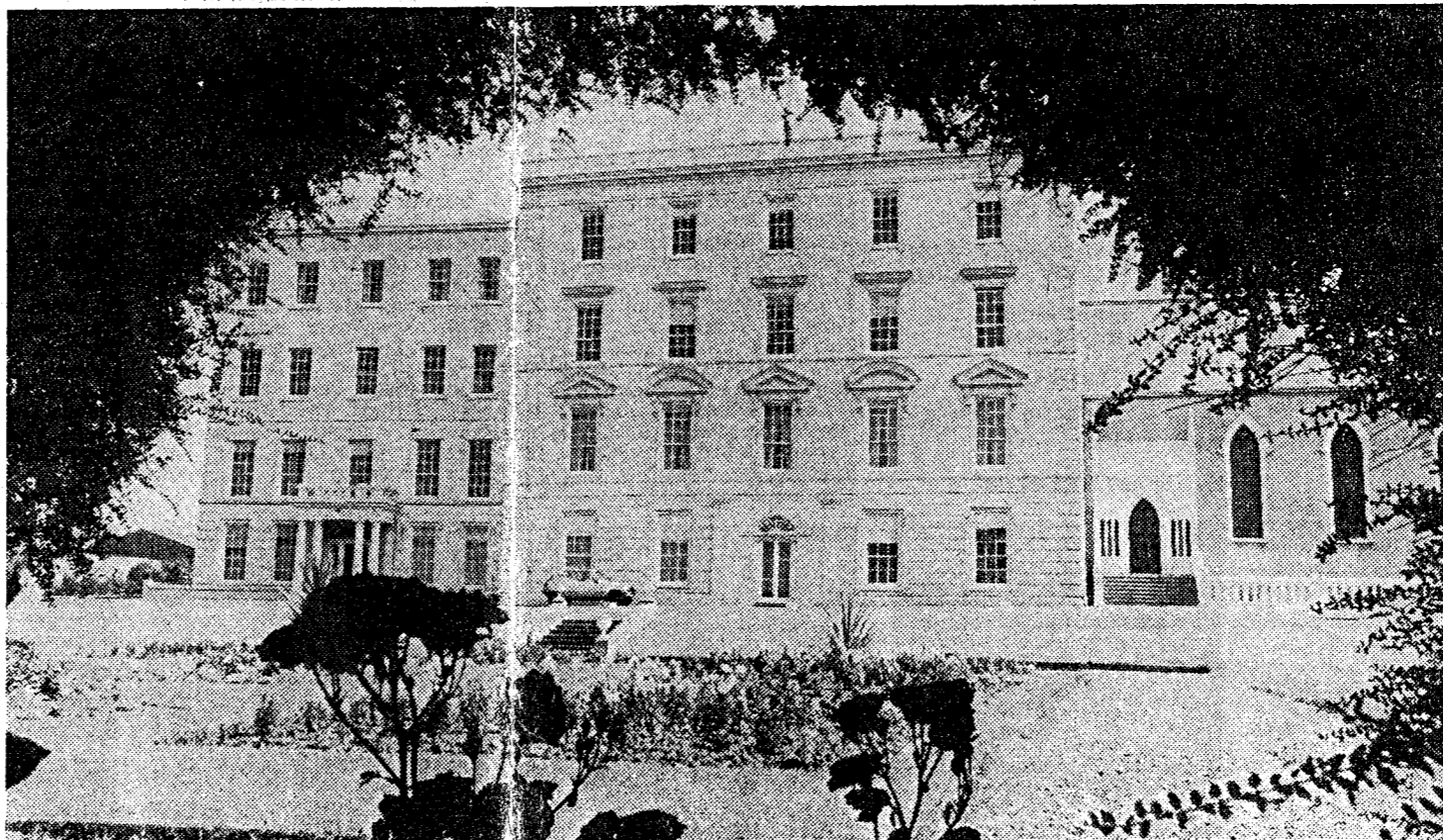


Jimmy Kemmy at the gate of Brian Boru House, in Limerick, the childhood home of Kate O'Brien.

and Fan who, her niece surmised, entered not because she had a vocation but out of loneliness for Mary. "We children on feast days or special days were permitted to stay long hours 'in the parlour' with our aunts. We loved to do so, because we were spoiled there, running wild in the kitchen garden and among the lovely chicken runs, allowed to play the piano, and sometimes to examine the sacristy — and stuffed all the time with refreshments — puff cracknels, Madeira cake, milk and pears and all delights." On Christmas Day between noon and 3 p.m. the whole family would troop into that parlour with its highly polished floor, its Victorian chairs, its plants in brass pots, its two portraits of bishops on the wall, and its piano to the accompaniment of which Kate's sisters would sing "The Battle Eve of the Irish Brigade" and "The Snowy Breasted Pearl." While the adults drank port and ate Turkish Delight Kate's father would entertain them by juggling with oranges and apples.

The children also spent a great deal of time just outside Limerick at Shannon View, the home of their uncle Mick O'Brien and his wife Anne Liddy, who talked to Kate about George Eliot and the Brontës and made her read Milton, Pope, Byron and Macaulay. However this aunt had one terrible flaw. "She was in fact mean; and in our family that was a freakish thing to be," Kate wrote, recalling how Uncle Mick would call to Boru House on Saturdays with goodies for the children to try and make amends.

Shannon View was choc-a-bloc with beautiful things because Uncle Mick could not be kept away from auctions. "The large country house in which he lived childless, with his sardonic wife, was crammed with his random buyings. Some of them lovely." Everywhere



Laurel Hill Convent, Limerick, where Kate O'Brien spent her schooldays.