

# LIMERICK'S LOST LADY

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

"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 whatever I am it is still from Limerick that I look out and make my surmises."

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. The son inherited his father's flair. Both grew to be regarded as prime authorities 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 unfinished work tells us much about Laurel Hill, its head nun and Kate O'Brien herself.

Its most revealing part 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 unbeliever — my silly lie had been to no avail."

Out of school, the O'Brien siblings mixed socially with the sons and daughters of other middle class families, 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, church-going, 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 the socially-ordained functions of women.

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".

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 recalled her mixed feelings of childish apprehension and fascination, as she gave this playful but penetrating peep into the sexual sidshow:

"The married women 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

Jim Kemmy writes on one of Limerick's greatest, yet neglected writers, Kate O'Brien.

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."

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 indelibly shaped her and her thinking.



• Kate O'Brien.

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. Kate O'Brien's brothers and sisters began to scatter, and Boru House was sold off. Apart from occasional visits, she was never again to live permanently in her native city.

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

"... 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..."

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

*... though she loved the city she could not live in it ...*

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 journal-

ism 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 enlist 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 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 Lavella'*, 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 middle class 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.

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, ignorance and the vagaries of literary tastes. 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.

Kate O'Brien was an intellectual and a profound writer. A full assessment of her work is long overdue. And a biography would not be out of place. It would surely provide a work as interesting as Victoria Glendinning's excellent study of Elizabeth Bowen.