Portrait of a lady

Sunday Independent ◆ June 22, 1997

KATE O'BRIEN: 'She wasn't lonely in the ordinary sense, but eclectically lonely, lonely for people of her intellect to talk with,' says her life-long friend, Dr Lorna Reynolds

By **Brighid McLaughlin**

'FOR prophecy and the day ahead I have no talent and little curiosity," Kate O'Brien — *Farewell Spain.*

"It will be a hazardous assignment," said an old buddy when I mentioned I was writing about the Limerick writer Kate O'Brien. "Her family are very sensitive about allegations that she was a lesbian, and there are other odd rumours . . . Rather you than me," he said witheringly.

The irony of all this drama was that initially I wasn't the least bit interested in whether Kate O'Brien was a lesbian or not. As my late friend, Bob O'Driscoll, used to say, "It is what's between the ears, not what's in the basement, that counts." Writer Maureen Charlton expressed fury at any lesbian assumptions, "All this purloining of homosexuality! It's so irritating. It is deplorable how people are trying to ghettoise Kate O'Brien. We don't read W.H. Auden because he is gay. We read him because he is an inspiring author."

Despite Maureen's protestations, I've always had a curious obsession with O'Brien's life. I wanted to know why this radical, independently-minded outsider who produced nine novels, two travel books, two plays, a study of the life of Teresa of Avila and copious articles and reviews did not even merit a mention in literary studies of 20th-century Ireland.

I wanted to know why O'Brien — who, in her novels in the 1920s, bravely pronounced marriage as a prison — had been so poorly recognised.

A photograph of O'Brien's face, hidden behind a pair of thick horn-rimmed spectacles, intrigued me. Two enormous frightened eyes suggested a polar lonesomeness bordering on fear. I thought of her powerful reflections on love. "The cost of loving for a woman can be no less than the loss of direction of her life by herself, the loss of happiness, the loss of life itself."

Had she lost everything? Sadly, towards the end of her life, Kate O'Brien had. But that tragedy came later.

A rebel, a believer in individual freedom, a lover of bullfights, Irish whiskey and old-fashioned Player's cigarettes, she was unquestionably ahead of her time. Her ideas of liberation as expressed in her work are synonymous with sexual defiance. Her last two novels predate the women's movement in their portrayal of the lesbian who fears nothing. Her characters vociferously claim that the flesh has its rights. Subsequently, her two finest books were banned in Ireland.

Writing about O'Brien was like breaking open an old, brown, prickly husk of a chestnut and finding a deep, strange fruit hidden inside. A fruit that was tantalisingly secretive. After Beckett, O'Brien possibly ranks as one of the most secretive writers Ireland has produced. Bit by bit, I tried to put the pieces together. It wasn't easy.

In *My Ireland*, she writes somewhat enigmatically, "It is pleasing to consider the uniqueness of possession each one of us has in life. We carry little baggage of any importance for the single journey; but we do go it alone, and no customs officer or shadowy boatman, not the 'fell sergeant' himself, can force us to declare anything."

'Not to declare' was the essence of O'Brien's life. Yet many people made declarations after her death. The late John Jordan once publicly suggested, "It was possible that Kate O'Brien had a child."

There were other declarations too. So, in a desperate attempt to keep pace with floods of extraordinary knowledge, I rang the privileged few who knew her. They were loyal to the point of disbelief. I wondered how on earth Kate O'Brien had managed such ingenious methods of privacy. Living within secrets. If, of course, such secrets existed.

Already I suspected that there was not one Kate O'Brien, but two. The Kate O'Brien who was Irish, a Catholic agnostic, conservative. The chain-smoking, hard drinking Kate O'Brien who was European, bohemian, passionate and wild.

O'BRIEN was born in Boru House, Limerick, on December 3, 1897. Her mother died when she was five years old. She was the last of four girls in a family of nine. Her father supplied coaching colts to Messrs Wimbush, the great London job masters, and something like 1,000 hunters passed through his hands in the course of a year.

By all accounts, the O'Briens were well off. They had servants to wash damask tablecloths, to polish rosewood furniture. Kate O'Brien was sent to Laurel Hill Convent until the age of 18. Kate loved the school. Her controversial novel, *The Land of Spices* (1941), is based on a nun who

When O'Brien's father died in 1916, family circumstances were radically altered. In 1916 she went to UCD to study French and English for a BA degree. Dublin was recovering from the Rising. Far from being industrious, she became casual, sceptical and spent most of the time "in idle chat".

After college she tried her hand briefly at several things: the foreign pages of the *Manchester Guardian*, teaching and governessing.

In 1922 O'Brien moved to Spain as a governess. Spain was the great love of her life. It was also the country from which she was barred from 1937 to 1957 for expressed Republican sympathies.

Jose Maria de Areilza remembers the governess from Limerick arriving at his home near Bilbao. "She was a tall, young woman, with very black shiny hair, cut a la garcon, with very white skin, light grey almost, and blue eyes. She was a lively woman but you could also tell by something visible in her character that she had a considerable inner life."

To this day few if any know what went on in Kate O'Brien's inner life. One of the many mysterious episodes was her marriage in 1923 to a Dutch journalist, Gustaaf Renier, in a registry office in London. He was a writer who had acquired quite a reputation for his book, *The English, Are They Human?* The marriage was short and stormy, lasting just 14 months. He was neat and careful. She was impulsive and extravagant. He was obsessed by cleanliness. Kate was not. The uses of Vim were unknown to O'Brien, who was used to servants.

In desperation, her husband wrote to Kate's sister: "Kitty says she has never been happy with me, that she is not made for matrimony and cannot live with me under false pretences." O'Brien could find real happiness only in her novels.

Writing about O'Brien was like breaking open an old, brown, prickly husk of a chestnut and finding a deep, strange fruit hidden inside. A fruit that was tantalisingly secretive

"She always spoke of marriage as an undertaking of desperate gravity," says her life-long friend, Dr Lorna Reynolds, "and quite clearly she was not ready for it. She used to joke, if one asked her why she left her husband, and say it was because he counted strawberries: one for you, one for me, two for you, two for me."

O'Brien left her husband and went to Spain, to the village of Santurco on the Viscayon coast outside Bilbao, to teach English. "I used to fool about the cities of Castille," wrote O'Brien, "taking my time and spending little money. I was fascinated and very happy."

RIGHT now a copy of a photograph of Kate O'Brien sits on my kitchen table. It was taken at a writers' conference, the Communita European degli Scrittori in Florence. Dr Lorna Reynolds sits beside her. O'Brien was a large woman. Butch. Squat and square-shouldered. "A Russian tractor driver" was how one writer described her, somewhat unkindly. She wore the Eton Crop, the most masculine hairstyle possible. Reynolds, by comparison, is elegant, feminine in a fur hat, a fur collar, and wearing gloves over a check suit. It was hard to know what to make of them.

As Dr Lorna Reynolds was one of O'Brien's greatest friends, I arranged to meet this extraordinary lady at her home in Dublin. Reynolds's biography, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, gives a fascinating insight into O'Brien's life. Reynolds describes the relationship as "memorable and strong".

Dr Reynolds was dressed impeccably in a brown tweed suit. Jet black hair was combed from a white alabaster face. She wore a cream ruffled blouse with a 1920s jade brooch pinned below the neck. I thought I was on the set of an Edwardian movie.

Sunday Independent
♦ June 22, 1997

I think of her last years, the pensive melancholy of a drinking writer's life; the growing discontent with herself and her latter years as she half-lived in the consciousness of her infinite unworthiness

from page 1L

"I've made the tea — two thirds Lapsang, one third Earl grey," she said, pouring it into magnificent bone china tea cups. Madeleine cakes and coconut biscuits were placed beside me.

"When I met Kate O'Brien first, she was intellectual, independent, famous, exiled from Ireland. She wasn't my contemporary. She was 49 when I met her. Kate was very funny. She had a deep voice, deepened by cigarettes, and an English accent. She was exquisitely polite and she smoked like a chimney. She had a stare, a petulant, slightly haughty expression.

"I remember she invited me to lunch in the Shelbourne. Kate was over-generous. I recall Kate dispensing whiskey, which made her seem outgoing. But she wasn't outgoing. She had a mask of facile friendliness.

"She liked socialising in the Shelbourne and at home, but I myself found the parties boring. I was a strenuous-minded person and thought that people should explore the North Pole, throwing bridges across great gulfs, penetrating darkest Africa."

O'Brien often stayed in the Shelbourne Hotel and spent her money like wildfire. Reynolds, alarmed by O'Brien's financial recklessness, told her to invest her money. On Reynolds's advice, O'Brien purchased a house in Roundstone, Co. Galway.

There were drawbacks to living in such a remote place. Gossips plied her with a ceaseless string of inane questions. Reynolds soon realised that she had given her the wrong advice.

"Lennox Robinson once asked O'Brien if she was lonely. She wasn't lonely in the ordinary sense, but eclectically lonely, lonely for people of her intellect to talk with," said Reynolds.

"O'Brien needed sophisticated society. She used to work half the night. I remember she and her cats — La Grise and Kelly — used to greet the sunrise in the garden. But she was very restless. She used to be astonished that I could stay seated. Maybe her circulation was just troubling her.

"She suffered fits of depression. She was a very restless kind of person. In Roundstone she'd suddenly say, 'Let's got to Clifden.' In spite of everything we were friends. We used to have ferocious rows. She could get the better of a lot of people with a sweeping remark. I had a tongue too. She used to say, 'How could I get the better of you, you with your rowdy ancestors?' She could be sentimental and soft, a mass of contradictions. I miss her. But it was a long time ago."

IN THE Ireland of the Fifties, it was natural and maybe inevitable that O'Brien should have been thought odd. During the early War years, when she was living in Oxford and writing *The Land of Spices*, she met the Irish eccentric Enid Starkie, a contemporary scholar of 19th century French literature. They became friends. Starkie soon discovered that Kate O'Brien in England bore little resemblance to Kate O'Brien in Ireland.

"Kate had been looking forward to the visit," recalls Dr Reynolds, "but in the event found Enid Starkie too stimulating. She was worried about the effect Starkie would have on the village, for she was dressed for the country visit in the costume of a French sailor, complete to the matelot's cap. The village didn't bat an eyelid, but Kate was afraid she might be made fun of. She was in a tizzy over Edith's visit."

O'Brien had other lady friends to turn to. In 1942, O'Brien went to live in Devon as a paying guest in the house of another novelist, E.M. Delafield, author of *Diary of A Country Lady*. This friendship was cut short by Delafield's untimely death. Later O'Brien befriended the artist Mary O'Neill, who painted her and whom she appointed literary executor of her will.

In 1943 O'Brien wrote her most structured novel, *That Lady*. It sold more than half a million copies in its first few years of publication. On the royalties from the book, O'Brien returned to Ireland.

She spent the early months of 1945 in Italy, in preparation for her next novel, *As Music and Splendour* (1958). Reynolds went with her. They travelled to the opera houses in Milan, Naples and Ferrara and they read up on the history of opera. They shared a life-long interest in music. *As Music and Splendour* was not a success. It described complicated lesbian love. Back in Ireland, Connemara's financial problems grew threatening. O'Brien's life was punctuated with partings from and returns to Ireland. She finally left Ireland for England in 1965, where she was later to die.

"In 1973 I went to see Kate in Broughton, Kent,"

An Irish[redacted]'s Diary

Weekend

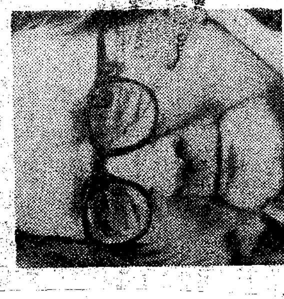
And finally one family that has approached the corner of *The Irish Times* that is forever Finland and has not yet lost an eyelash to the beast within is the O'Byrnes. I have, on account of Maeve O'Byrne, mentioned the Rotunda so many times that people might have thought I had shares in the place or that my private life did not stand up to scrutiny. Her sister Jane has also featured in this column, and so has brother Robert. He does again now, promoting the Kate O'Brien weekend in Limerick from November 22nd-24th, with contributions from Frank McGuinness, Medbh McGuckian, Eavan Boland and others. Contact Robert at 104 Henry Street, Limerick. Attendance fee £15, and £7 for pensioners, students, and something called unwaged. Dreadful term. And now silence falls upon the heap that is forever Finland . . .

KEVIN MYERS

THE IRISH TIMES, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 1985

□ □ □

Next weekend will see the first of what it is hoped will become an annual literary two day gathering in Limerick. Named after the wonderful Kate O Brien the event will focus this time on women writing now. Frank McGuinness will talk about women writing for the theatre while other participants include Medbh McGuckian, Maeve Kelly, Noirin Ni Riain and Colm Toibin. There will also be a panel discussion chaired by Nuala O'Faolaoin and a lecture on the legacy of Kate O Brien given by Eavan Boland. The entire bonanza starts next Friday night and runs through Sunday. The venue is the City Art gallery, Percy Square and the event has been organised by the Mid-West Arts organisation.



Kate O'Brien

The general meeting of the National Childbirth Trust, Cuidiu, will take place in Cork tomorrow, hosted by the Cork branch of the organisation. Doctors and authors Andrew and Penny Stanway are the guest speakers for a day-long seminar which begins at 10.30 a.m. at Ashton Comprehensive on the Blackrock Road.

ARMINTA WALLACE

says Dr Reynolds. "She was not well. She had varicose veins and talked of amputation. The doctors had decided against that. On top of everything I developed a bronchial virus and gave it to my hostess. Everyone knows that there is no worse sin a visitor can commit.

"Her drinking bouts were longer and her moods darker. Kate's drinking made her dull and repetitive and she made me sad. She was a sad, lonely woman. She talked about the horror of growing old. She once said that she learned to put up with herself.

"The last time I saw her was the Christmas of the year before she died. She was staying with her sister Nancy in Limerick. She rang me to call. She was shaky. My last memory was of Nancy, the maid and Kate waving me off. Nancy died shortly afterwards. Kate died in the Kent and Canterbury hospital, Canterbury, in the afternoon of August 13, 1974."

THAT night I thought of O'Brien's lonely last years. The woman who was kind-hearted, generous to the point of foolishness, was now in debt. The woman who was easily hurt, who did not take kindly to contradiction, was rejected by the Abbey Theatre. The Kate O'Brien who liked to travel, to visit the operas of Europe, to eat omelettes, asparagus, roast lamb, had lost her appetite. I looked at a copy of her handwritten will, dated January 14, 1961. It made sad reading, and it finished with: "It is my emphatic wish that there should be no publication at any time of any letters of mine, or any letters written to me. Signed, Kate O'Brien."

I wondered why O'Brien was so terrified that letters might be published. She had written thousands of letters. What was she trying to hide?

The more I reread her books, the more I realised how sexuality was synonymous with her perspective.

The writer Emma Donoghue, in an essay on O'Brien's fiction, observes, "I think it is fair to say that during her life and after it, Kate O'Brien, her family, biographers, critics and friends, all colluded to keep her in the closet."

Was this true? I could only find out.

I met Michael O'Toole in Wynn's Hotel. Michael, who knew Kate O'Brien, was as always helpful.

"I remember her as a rather grand literary lady. Kindly but damned shrewd," he laughed. "My fascination with Kate O'Brien was that she wrote novels of protest about the era I grew up in. I was fascinated by the fact that she was banned. Why was she banned? Her novel *Mary Lavelle* was banned on Christmas Eve. Can you imagine the appetite they had for banning? She was a moralist and the fact that she was banned was crazy."

He continued: "Yes, there were many rumours. Rumours that she had a child and that it was adopted by her childless sister, Anne. Anne was married to Stephen O'Mara. Yes, she did adopt a child called Peter O'Mara. Sadly, he died quite young. You'd have to ask the family about that one. Personally I don't think Peter O'Mara was Kate's child."

I called in to see John O'Brien, Kate O'Brien's nephew, in his offices above Parsons bookshop on Baggot Street, Dublin. If hyper-sensitivity to family feeling remained strongly implanted in Kate O'Brien all her life, the same hyper-sensitivity has been passed to her nephews. Yet John O'Brien was so emotional about his much-loved aunt that I couldn't help but feel moved.

"I loved her," he said. "She was a very private lady. I could almost say it is a family trait. Like Beckett, she would have been appalled by by this non-intellectual interest in her private life."

Did the family keep her in the closet, as Emma Donoghue states? "Absolutely not! There is no question of the family taking any such view. If someone says that she is a lesbian, it is of no consequence to our family. As for the Peter O'Mara rumour, it was a non-event. It became a joke in the family. It was dismissed because it was untrue."

He changed the subject to his aunt's well-documented generosity and kindness. "I was her agent in a completely non-professional way. Her output got very minor in the late Sixties. She seemed to find it very difficult to create. And economically she didn't have the comfort she was entitled to. There was never any question of deprivation," he said.

Yet by all accounts, life for O'Brien became horribly rough. Under stressful financial circumstances she was forced to sell her house in Roundstone, and at the age of 67 move to England and start all over again. It was her sister Anne (Nancy) who repaid years of generosity and bought O'Brien a house in Canterbury. By 1970 nearly all her books were out of print. The loss of writerly status must have been a bitter degradation.

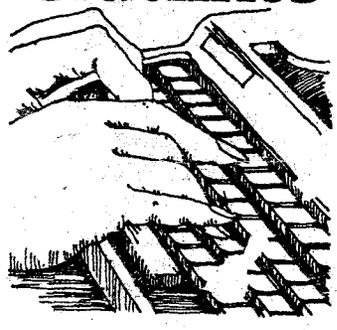
I think of her last years, the pensive melancholy of a drinking writer's life; the growing discontent with herself and her latter years as she half-lived in the consciousness of her infinite unworthiness.

I look at a codicil to her will which bequeaths all her "freehold property to her dear sister Mrs Anne O'Mara, widow of New Strand House, Limerick, Ireland, but if my said sister should predecease me then I hereby give and bequeath the said property of 177 The Street, Broughton, to my nephew, the said Anne O'Mara's son, Peter Joseph O'Mara of 25 Lanahrone Avenue, Corbally, Limerick, Ireland." (Peter died young.)

I think of those precious letters burning. The thin black scarf of secret smoke that has muffled forever the secrets of an extraordinary woman. O'Brien, like her own description of St. Teresa of Avila, was, "A genius of the large and immeasurable kind of which there have been very few." As for those secrets. We can only wonder what those last thoughts were as she lit her last Player's cigarette and threw the match away with a gesture that is surely worthy of a salute.

"Humanity could not give what she could, and all that she was died with her." — Kate O'Brien on St. Teresa of Avila.

Sidelines



THE LIMERICK novelist, Kate O'Brien, died in 1974. Now her work is beginning to find a new audience; magazines have re-discovered her work, and last year her acclaimed novel, "The Ante-Room," was republished by Arlen House, the Women's Press.

The latest sign of a new interest in her work comes from her native city, where the first annual Kate O'Brien Memorial Lecture will be given on May 17. Next year it is hoped to run a short story competition in conjunction with the lecture. The Lecture is being held as part of the Limerick Lady Community Week. This runs from May 15 to May 25.