

# Kate O'Brien

1897–1974

*Novelist and playwright*

Kate O'Brien was born into a middle-class Catholic family in Limerick. She lost her mother at six years old and was sent to board at a strict school, Laurel Hill Convent School, in Limerick City. She then won a scholarship to University College, Dublin. After university she took time off to go travelling. She worked on a newspaper in Manchester and worked in the USA as a secretary to her uncle. She also worked as a governess in Spain and formed a lifelong interest in the country and its culture. In 1923 she married a Dutch journalist, Gustaaf Renier, but they divorced within a year. She settled in London in 1926 and became a full-time writer.

Although best known for her twelve novels, Kate started off as a playwright and produced three plays. The first of these, *Distinguished Villas* (1926), enjoyed a three-month run in London's West End. Her first novel, *Without My Cloak* (1931), won two prestigious prizes – the Hawthornden and the James Tait Black – establishing her as a top-class novelist. She was one of the first to write about middle-class Catholics in small Irish towns. Her themes included the moral and sexual dilemmas facing young women in provincial Ireland and the importance of equal education opportunities.

Kate O'Brien became notorious in Ireland when her second and fourth novels, *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *The Land of Spices* (1941), were banned by Free State legislation called the Censorship of Publications Act (1929). The offending points were the coded treatment of homosexuality and a

psychological exploration into the mind of a nun. Since most good Irish authors had works banned by this overzealous censorship board at some point, the ban did not impede Kate's career and her work continued to be successful.

*That Lady* (1946), the story of the discarded mistress of Philip II of Spain, is considered Kate O'Brien's best novel. It was adapted for the New York stage, then, in 1955, was made into a film starring Olivia de Havilland, which its author hated. The book's unfavourable portrait of Philip II caused it to be banned in Spain for a decade.

In 1947 Kate was made a member of the Irish Academy of Letters. She moved back to Ireland and spent the 1950s living and writing in Roundstone, Connemara. She returned to England in 1961, settling near Faversham in Kent. Her popular travel book, *My Ireland* (1962), clearly showed her appreciation of her native home. Despite this she lived in England until her death in 1974.