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The private Kate O'Brien

Kate O'Brien was a brilliant writer but her readers knew little of her life. Now, a huge collection of letters is changing that. **Anne Sheridan** reports

FEMALE WRITER: no children, brief marriage of 11 months, likes to travel, entertain and spend somewhat frivolously.

That description might be true of some young women today, but for her time, Kate O'Brien, the Limerick writer, broke the mould. Her literary achievements, her travels all over the world, and her fierce independence were not the norm for 30-something women in the 1920s, born at the turn of the century.

But she was all those things and so much more. And some feel that her label as a lesbian does her a disservice, and that her sexuality, in the grand scheme of things, was neither here nor there, even if it impinged on some of her writings, deemed so controversial at the time that they were banned in several countries. She herself was even banned from entering from Franco's Spain for her work Farewell Spain, published in 1937, for twenty years.

Up until recently little was known about Kate's private self. Now, that has is beginning to change.

Over the past few months, a number of archivists and literary scholars at Glucksman Library have been delving into the private letters – more than 650 in all – of Kate O'Brien, whom she wrote to various family members, from the 1920s to practically up until her death in Canterbury in 1974, aged 76.

The letters, which have been donated to the library by the relative of the family, Clare Hannigan (nee O'Mara), have been described as a "real coup" and a "gold mine", not least because they shed some light on the woman herself, but also, more widely, the times she lived in.

Dr Margaret O'Neill, of the school of culture and communications at UL, is among a small cohort at the campus, who feels she is now coming to know Kate personally, decades after her death. Dr O'Neill, who wrote her PhD on O'Brien before these letters came to light, is now writing a book, the first which will use these letters, entitled 'Ireland, Modernism and Desire: Elizabeth Bowen and Kate O'Brien'.

The letters are primarily written to her sister Anne (or Nance) and her husband Stephen O'Mara, who took a keen interest in literature, and they have a fiery exchange of opinions on Lavelle, amongst other works. There are also letters to her sisters May and Clare, though not as frequent, and to her nephew, Peter O'Mara, whom she was very close to and fond of.

Dr O'Neill and consultant archivist Anna-Maria Hajba sit down in the special collections section of the library, on the second floor, where much of Limerick's history is held. So what do the letters reveal? The women smile broadly, and once they start talking about Kate, it's hard to stop. She has become a near familiar friend, one whom they had perhaps wished to have known in their own lifetime.

"It has been absolutely thrilling to get that close to somebody. The letters are very entertaining and quite funny, which doesn't come across in her novels," said Ms Hajba, who has read each and every one of the letters, over the course of eight months, putting them in the right chronological order.

"Her descriptions of village life in Roundstone [in Galway, her only home of any permanence in Ireland] are hilarious. She's a bit of a comic and there were parts where I laughed out loud. Then there are the letters

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Archivist Anna-Maria Hajba, Dr Margaret O'Neill, and archivist Evelyn McAuley, with the boxes containing Kate O'Brien's letters

Letters reveal Kate's other self

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where she's quite vulnerable, as she's getting older, and she reveals the struggles of being a writer and the creative process. She says something to the effect of 'publishing is very cruel to old women'.

"There are letters where you feel you can really get inside her. But in others there is some wall, or barrier, and even in some letters to her family, she appears a little guarded."

"She doesn't talk a lot about the censorship of her novels in her letters," adds Dr O'Neill. "But the silence on the subject tells me she was upset. She also falls silent when Land of Spices was banned in Ireland."

References to Limerick – and Kilkee - are dotted throughout the correspondence, but it was never her real home, nor would it become her final resting place.

Writing to her family in 1962, she quotes the Spanish philosopher and poet George Santayana, in saying: "For the freest spirit must have some birthplace, some locus standi from which to view the world and some innate passion by which to judge it."

"Modestly I say the same for my relationship with Limerick. It was there that I began to view the world and to develop the necessary passions 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."

And what surmises she made. Her clever wit and sardonic turn of phrase is evident across a wide spectrum of the material. Writing to her sister, of some characters at a wedding back in Limerick, she said: "Really, people are far more dreadful in some ways than we poor novelists think up."

There are letters where she documents the struggles of finding a decent housekeeper because she didn't consider herself much of a cook, and "would be in a state of panic if people came to stay", which was often. Her family in Ireland were always posting her items including butter, ham and sausages - even after rations ended with the end of World War II.

Writing from Madison Avenue in New York in October 1949, she gives a detailed account of the cast of That Lady, the play she wrote, and the early days of the rehearsal. She writes again in November of that year from Detroit with a sense of fervour of how the show is progressing.

This image, acquired by UL, shows Michael, Nance, Clare and Kate O'Brien on the grounds of Strand House in Limerick, circa 1916

Kate O'Brien on a beach in county Galway, circa 1930

"We broke all box office records in Buffalo. We didn't do that in Toronto but we did very well – and here they say, in spite of the strikes and depression that have hit this huge town the bookings are going very fast. But of course, it's New York that counts – and no one can ever say beforehand what may happen to a play."

In December, she writes to her sister May, while on board De Grasse, across the Atlantic and is sorry to admit that the New York critics have been savage to the play, particularly a writer with the Herald-Tribune, "who assaulted my part of the job with a vulgarity and stupidity that really took our breaths away".

Moving on to July 1953, there is correspondence between Kate and Arthur Cox solicitors in Dublin, relating to the state of her financial affairs. She also discusses her £3,000 overdraft and her embarrassment at discovering a relative's involvement in getting her out of trouble.

Ms Hajba notes that Kate wasn't entitled to a pension, as you had to collect stamps while you were working, "which she was not aware of until around 65. So she had to keep writing, while her market was dwindling." Sadly, it was not until after her death that her work enjoyed a renaissance, and she was truly recognised as one of Limerick's great writers, giving rise to an annual literary festival in her honour.

A letter to the Collector of Taxes in London in 1963 reveals her on-going struggle to control her finances. "I am not resident in the British Isles. It is my intention to live there, but since I sold my house in Ireland three and a half years ago I have been in very bad circumstances; have been living as the guest of friends and relatives in Ireland or in Spain, am unable to pay rent anywhere, and earn only pittances...I cannot afford to rent even a bed-sitting room'.

"She was put on the Queen's civil list," adds Ms Hajba, "and was mortified by this, as she felt it was for beggars, and didn't want anyone to know, until someone pointed out that it was for a lifetime's contribution to literature and felt a sense of pride."

In one letter, Dr O'Neill notes, Kate describes accidentally starting a chimney fire in her house in Roundstone. The first thing she saved was one of her manuscripts. The second was a work by Picasso. There are other references to famous Irish artists, and Ms Hajba notes that not alone did Kate buy one work for herself, but she'd often buy another for one of her sisters.

Financial matters aside, she moves on to Rome in May 1954, a city which she says is "hard on the feet and nerves, I think", but revels in the freedom and excitement.

"This opportunity to live as an ordinary citizen in Rome is priceless, and is so full of spiritual and intellectual vitamins that I have to take it steady – for fear of the most terrible indigestion."

Even the Blitz in London during World War II brought a sense of dangerous excitement, and she couldn't resist travelling from her cottage in Oxford to London to deliver a manuscript.

"She almost thrived during the war – this feeling that you didn't know what was going to happen, or what would explode where," said Ms Hajba.

Writing to Anne again, on January 21, 1941, she wrote: "Heinemann's [her publishers, who also published William Somerset Maugham and HG Wells] weren't directly hit in the city disaster – though they lost stock, of course. But don't worry about them. They're taking out their troubles by docking 5% per annum off authors' royalties. Everyman's docking everything –these are extraordinary, difficult times. But we'll pull through. The thing is to do all the work we can as fast as one can, live like a church mouse, and trust to luck to keep out of gaol!"

A desire to become a mother was never raised in the letters, nor an intention to remarry, though she was extremely fond of her nieces and nephews.

Indeed, Kate was well aware that her fiery artistic temperament might not make her the ideal partner in marriage. In February 1928, at the age of 31, she wrote an article for the Evening Standard entitled 'Do independent women make the best wives?' Another in the Daily Mirror was entitled 'The Perennial Spinsters'.

Five years previously, she married a young Dutchman, Gustaff Renier, in London, after her travels in the United States and Spain. While the union was to end after less than a year, her travels would continue, for decades to come. In a letter to Anne, dated April 4, 1924, she gives a sense of her unhappiness: "Ever since I married, I have felt the misery of things." He was said to be desperate to get her back and wrote her frantic letters, after she escaped back to Ireland. The reasons why she truly wanted to leave have never fully been explained, nor if she ever fled into another person's arms.

Of her sexuality, Ms Hajba said "there's nothing in her letters to suggest she was or wasn't a lesbian. It just doesn't come into the correspondence.

"I think it's very unfortunate she has been labelled a lesbian writer, because I think she was a great 20th century author."

The only time she lets her guard down in the letters, they say, is when she writes of the difficulties in her marriage, stating that they were 'by no means triangular, but our sexual life was terrible. Both agree that this was a powerful and brave statement for any women in that time to make in a letter.

"She took herself very seriously as a writer, and held herself in high esteem, not in a snooty way, but she knew the value of her work." Writing was always Kate's first and true love, and like many great writers, it would take some time after her death for her work to be acknowledged in full.

Dr Margaret O'Neill will give a talk on the Kate O'Brien letters this Saturday, February 27, at 1pm in the City Gallery of Art, as part of the Limerick Literary Festival, in Kate O'Brien's honour

CHRIS' CORNER

Art reviews and news from **Chris Hayes**, *champion of Limerick's bid to be European Capital of Culture*

Social-media-esque exhibition

DURING the process of writing today's article I've checked Twitter dozens of times, Facebook even more, took at least one selfie for Snapchat and browsed past countless others on Instagram.

Boredom is different than it used to be – the apps have made us busy, rest involves a surprising amount of production. It's not surprising then that many artists today are drawn towards newer forms of image making and communication, wherever they may find them.

TWEETBOX is the latest Limerick Printmakers exhibition, in the Belltable, 69 O'Connel Street, which runs until Monday February 29. It's an exhibition of two-halves; firstly, a collaborative artwork by Noelle Noonan and Catherine Hehir, which is titled Escape Shift; secondly, the TWEETBOX project, which involved a selection of the students, alumni, and lecturers, of the Crawford College of Art and Design and Limerick School of Art and Design. The title TWEETBOX was chosen as a kind of play on words between the social media app Twitter (who's icon is a bird) and a bird box which was intended to act as a symbols for movement, flow, and migration.

The most Twitter-ish, social-media-esque aspect of the exhibition is the volume of work presented – two of the Belltable's large walls have been covered floor to ceiling. Yet, TWEETBOX is in many ways, more a showcase of the range and variety of printing techniques, and the allure of an individually designed and handmade object, than an interrogation of the cultural meaning of digital images and the pervasive influences of networked technologies. The layout of Escape Shift could be described as a collection of multiples – prints overlap and juxtapose by not existing on the same surface. The list of printing techniques involved is long as the artwork appears complex. On the other side of the gallery, each of the bird boxes have been made from printing on flat, raw cardboard, which was then folded into their structure. The images have been translated onto the material, and the material bent and twisted into shape. There is a blunt physicality to each object, and that is emphasised by the ways in which the printed images warp around the edges of each box. The use of industrially manufactured materials – most notably cardboard – and newer, automated production methods, such as laser cutting, are useful supports for the more traditional printing techniques, which arguably take primacy here.

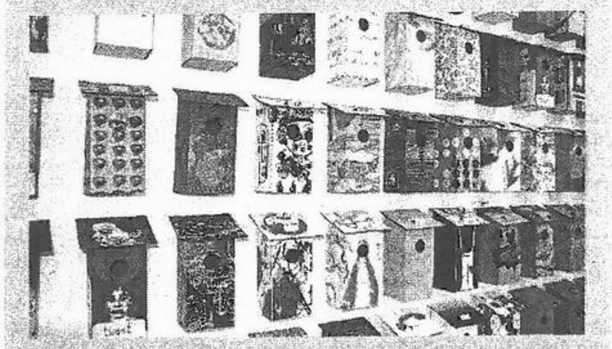

Image from TWEETBOX, courtesy of Limerick Printmakers

In recent years there's been a lot of excitement around artists who thread the line between the digital and the phys-