

Limerick honour for a controversial daughter

by **Tom McCullough**
news@limerickpost.ie

THE remarkable legacy of one of Ireland's most controversial novelists will be highlighted on Monday when a commemorative plaque to Limerick born author Kate O'Brien will be unveiled by University of Limerick President Dr Des Fitzgerald.

Organised by The Limerick Writers' Centre and Limerick Civic Trust, the public ceremony will take place at the place of her birth, Boru House on Mulgrave Street from 5.30pm.

A world renowned novelist and playwright, Kate O'Brien was born in Limerick in 1897. Her novels were some of the earliest examples of Irish literature to feature homosexual themes, which ultimately lead to them being banned under the Irish Free State's censorship laws.

She was one of ten children born into a wealthy Catholic horse dealing family. They lived in the distinctive redbrick residence on Mulgrave Street, which Kate's grandfather built in 1880. Although the family has long since departed the house, many of the original features, including horseshoe paintwork in the interior, remain to this day.

Following the death of her mother when she was five, she became a boarder at Laurel Hill Convent and graduated in English and French from the newly established University



Limerick-born author Kate O'Brien

College, Dublin. She then moved to London, where she worked as a teacher for a year and in 1922 worked as a governess in the Basque Country, in the north of Spain, where she began to write fiction.

She worked as a journalist at the Manchester Guardian and was awarded the James Tait Black Prize and the Hawthornden Prize for her debut novel 'Without My Cloak', a chronicle of middle-class Irish life. Its theme would be constant throughout her novels, namely the struggle (particularly the struggle of Irish women) for individual freedom and love against the constricting demands of family, bourgeois society and Catholic religion.

She penned *The Ante-Room* (1934), *Mary Lavelle* (1936), *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938), *The Land of Spices* (1941), and *The Last of Summer* (1943). Her most successful novel was *That Lady* (1946), set in sixteenth-century Spain. It was later made into a film.

She returned to Ireland in 1950 and settled in Roundstone, Co. Galway where she wrote 'My Ireland', an idiosyncratic pen-portrait not unlike her earlier 'Farewell Spain' (1937), for which she was banned from Franco's Spain. She also wrote a biography of the saint Theresa of Avila (1951). In 1965, she returned to England and died in Canterbury in August 1974.

LIMERICK'S LITERARY TRAIL

The unveiling of the memorial plaque to Kate O'Brien is part of a wider project to create a Limerick Literary Trail. An initiative of the Limerick Writers Centre in partnership with the Limerick Civic Trust, its purpose is to encourage the public to discover the city through its literary heritage. In February this year, President Higgins unveiled a plaque to poet Desmond O'Grady outside the White House bar. In July 2016, Frank McCourt was honoured with a plaque outside South's Bar and in October, Richard Harris had a plaque unveiled by his son Jared. In July 2014, a plaque was unveiled outside The Locke Bar on George's Quay to commemorate war poet Robert Graves and his association with the city. Through its Commemorative Plaque Project, Limerick Civic Trust has erected almost 70 plaques around Limerick to indicate the location of important landmarks or buildings that had links with the city's past and to provide historical points of reference.