



From Mary Lavelle I learned literary English at 13 years of age. She was a young Irish woman of 25, tall and delicate, of athletic build,

who took big steps, wore her hair dark, short as a boy; her face was of very white skin and of Greek profile, and her big, grey eyes had an inquisitive look. She arrived at my parents house in 1922, to pass a year and learn Castellano, while my sister and I perfected our limited English vocabulary. She had in her room, that leaned out over the mouth of the river of Bilbao in the Abra, a great pile of books of English literature, beside an English-Spanish dictionary. She liked to stroll and make little excursions nearby. We climbed the steps of the Serantes; reached the mining hollow; to San Salvador del Valle and to the mount of Umbe, and a couple of times every week she minutely toured the steep streets of Portugalete, entering the shops to listen to the talk of the people. She went to the market and to contemplate the return of the little fishing boats in the small fishing village of Santurce and she would be fascinated before the babble of voices and cries that accompanied the return of the slippery and silver cargo of sardine and anchovy and its later journey, in barrels and baskets, to the contracting room.

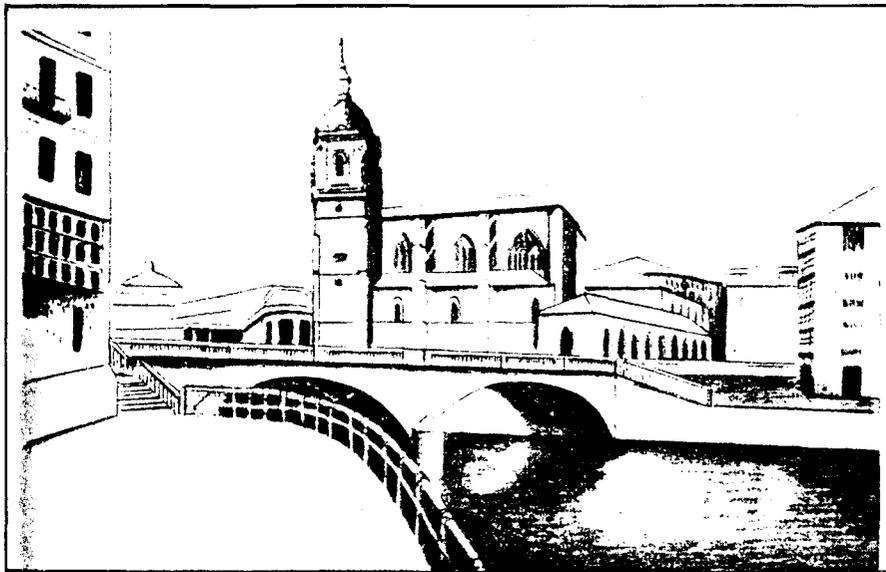


Kate O'Brien.

She liked to attend the Sunday dances in the Plaza around the kiosk, at which the band and the tin-whistle players would alternate, that is to say, close dancing and loose. She said that she had never seen anything so happy as those frequent and popular dances. On Thursdays or Saturdays, she went to Bilbao and met up in the Swiss Cafe with an abundant group of misses, the majority of them Irish, who maintained an unending discussion on aspects of

# MARY LAVELLE

by Jose Maria de Areilza  
Translated from the Spanish by John Liddy



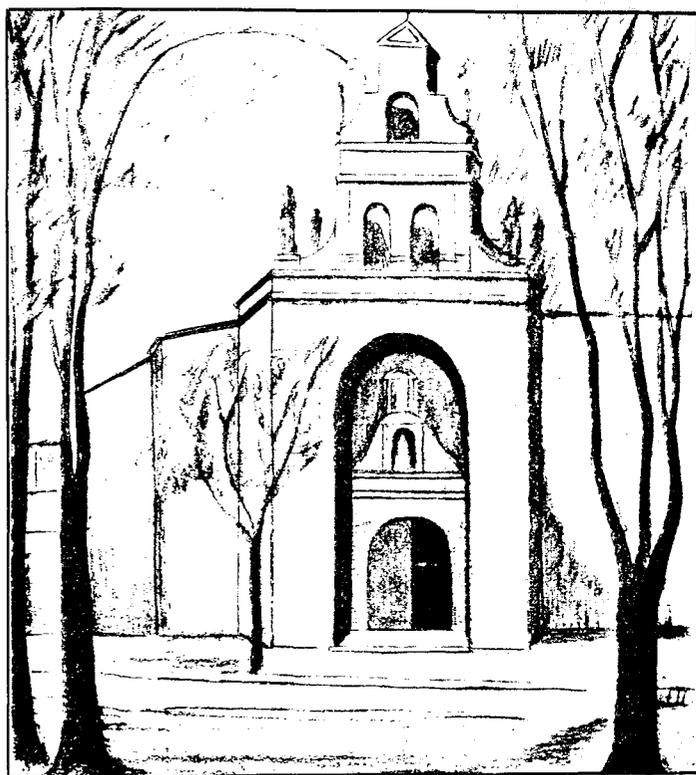
The Church of San Anton, Bilbao, from a drawing by Mary O'Neill.

their profession. There was also at that time a group of German *fraulein*, but the war in Europe, still recent, isolated the group in incompatible reunions.

Mary Lavelle locked herself away some evenings in her bedroom until dinner time and she allowed me to enter so as to reveal her secret. She wanted to be a writer, novelist, perhaps a dramatist. For now she only wrote short stories or short reports, that she sent to a newspaper in Dublin and to the *Manchester Guardian*. She had a boyfriend who was a compositor with the *London Observer*, with whom she maintained an intense correspondence. She filled pages and more pages, daily, in some large blocks, which she carried with her in a case. Her English writing was energetic, beautiful and ordered, almost masculine. I noted the slow and difficult process of creative work, the point of departure and of arrival of every one of the essays – as she called them – which she put in an envelope and despatched by post for their eventual publication. It was she who put me on the road of those writers' works which were worth the effort. I would abandon the atrocious penny dreadfuls or detective serials of Sexton Blake, species of Holmes reduced to the level of a street kiosk, to be introduced, at

first hand to Tavchnitz editions, of Dickens, Bernard Shaw, Wilde, Chesterton, Allen Poe and Kipling. She made me read and recite Keats and Tennyson and Wordsworth, in the Oxford poetic way. And, finally, she told me to try Shakespeare, with some of her own illuminating comments. From then on I would discover great texts from which I saw the world and analysed human passions in a different way. "Shakespeare is a different language", she would say to me.

That unforgettable time of my English apprenticeship lasted one year. For family reasons, and a few days after Primo de Rivers's *coup d'etat*, our Irish guest left with her bags for the green isle, while then a very long Civil War began. It was something that was seldom spoken about, treated more like a painful illness and familial. I remember only the impression made around that time which the key personalities of the rebellion in Éire enjoyed in Basque nationalist circles. In the local *batzoki* (club), the heroes of the fight against Great Britain were exalted with portraits and press cuttings referring to their sacrifice, nailed to the noticeboards. The mayor of Cork, in the south coast, had died on hunger strike. She was originally from Limerick, which



*The Church of San Vicente, Bilbao, from a drawing by Mary O'Neill.*

appears at the bottom of the River Shannon, not far from that city. Shortly afterwards, I learned something of her literary career through the occasional letter. She started to work in the *Manchester Guardian* and her novel *Without My Cloak* was a bestseller which won the Hawthornden Prize in 1931, surrounded by favourable criticism. Some compared it to the *Forsyte Saga*, rooted this time in an old and powerful Catholic Irish family. In the year 1936, when worrisome preoccupations about the Civil War filled the Spanish mind, I received by post a copy in which Mary Lavelle describes in a long and passionate novel her Spanish experience, that is to say, her life in our house of Portugalete, which my grandfather built on top of the sea cliff in 1890. Kate O'Brien, for that was her true name, was on the way to becoming a great writer of the English language and she filled the pages of *Mary Lavelle*, a dramatic story which she has as a background the home of my adolescence, with talented writing and notable realism and in which appeared many personalities, real and fictitious, constructed with pieces of life and with ingredients of fiction. It is the autobiography invented by a young Irish woman who came to a distant and strange place where nobody or almost nobody knew her. But the world of memories has inclined towards the action of the invented protagonists. Mary Lavelle describes with notable truth Bilbao life at the beginning of the '20s. Bilbao is called Altono; Portugalete – Cabantes; Torcal and Playa Blanca are Algora and Las Arenas; El

Salto, which was our house, is known as Casa Pilar; Allera is the sanctuary of Begona, to which Mary Lavelle, fervent Catholic, ascends now and then by the steps of Mallona and lights a candle after praying in front of the image. In Bilbao, her favourite place is the plaza of Albia, and there she sat after looking towards the church of San Vicente and the statue 'of a gentleman of mature years with an air of a dreamer', who was Antonio de Trueba, the poet of the singers, modelled by the Baroc hands of Mariano Benlliure.



*The cover of the Virago edition of 'Farewell Spain'.*

Mary Lavelle loved a young Bilbaino, a businessman with political ambitions, who dreams of governing his country. It is an impossible love because he is married and has children. But the adventure begins on a brief trip to Madrid and Toledo and ends with a pathetic scene on the lonely road of Duranguesado. The good Basque country serves as the final scene for the culmination of the act, with the distant lights of Bilbao reflecting in the darkness of the mountains. The Irish woman returned to her country but the impact of the penninsular experience touched her heart. The last chapter is titled *Hasta Luego* (Until Later).

And that is how it was in her real life. Kate O'Brien returned to Spain many times. She knew our language and literature deeply and visited the towns and places that appealed most to her. Avila was the motive of her predilection, and Santa Teresa her favourite reading matter. The princess of Eboli and her role in the Court and in the life of Philip II was crystallized in her famous story called *That Lady*, and Teresa de Cepeda was also the object of a well known monograph, one of the best in the English language on our saint. At the beginning of our Civil War, she visited the republican zone, well, given her militant pacifism, she inclined openly in favour of the anti-Franco cause. She published then a book called *Farewell Spain*, a type of travel chronicle around different Spanish towns, which contains an admirable chapter on Bilbao, its customs and the temperament of its habitants. But the political tone of the small volume was enough to prohibit its circulation in Spain, and prevent, at the same time, the entry of the author to our country. This absurd measure lasted until 1957, when permission was granted for the writer to travel the country that she loved so much. And so, in 1972, a short while before her death, she assisted in Valladolid at some Irish conferences in the university, where she reunited with many of her Spanish intellectual friends.

Kate O'Brien wrote these words on her young years spent in the Abra of Bilbao "Sitting in the heights of Begona, beside the Basilica, looking at the villa, I don't think I can remember things of general or important interest of the times that I lived in Portugalete. But now I understand that even though it was blurred, that memory resulted in something indelible in my past, a memory more important than others. I am happy for the experience and have enjoyed returning here, once again, to this place, surrounded by my memories, apparently banal".

(This article first appeared in *El Pais*, on Tuesday, 13th of March, 1985. Jose Maria de Areilza is a former Spanish Government Minister and is now retired from active politics).