

# Invisible Irelands: Kate O'Brien's Lesbian and Gay Social Formations in London and Ireland in the Twentieth Century

E i b h e a r W a l s h e

Oscar Wilde was the most visible gay Irishman of the late nineteenth-century. As a result, the legacy of his name, his writings and his trials had a profound influence on the formulation of twentieth-century cultural notions of homosexuality in Europe and North America but what about his nationality? Paradoxically Ireland, the country of his birth, is almost a blank space when it comes to any identifiable social history of twentieth-century lesbian and gay culture. Recently some valuable sources for Irish lesbian and gay history have emerged, for example a collection of essays of Irish lesbian and gay voices called *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland: Towards the Twenty-First Century* edited by Ide O'Carroll and Eoin Collins. Also of great value is a study by Irish political activist, Kieran Rose called *Diverse Communities. The Evolution of lesbian and Gay Politics in Ireland*, published in 1994. Otherwise there is a great deal of social history unwritten on this aspect of modern Ireland and recent scholarship is attempting to locate submerged lesbian and gay cultures.

A few noted queer figures stand out from this invisible history of Ireland, the rebel Irish patriot Roger Casement (1864–1916) the poet Eva-Gore Booth (1870–1926), the lesbian novelist Kate O'Brien (1897–1974) and the theatre directors Michael MacLiammoir (1899–1978) and Hilton

Edwards (1903–1982) and my essay collection *Sex, Nation and Dissent*, published in 1997, deals with many of these figures. Otherwise lesbian and gay communities and cultures in Ireland in the twentieth-century are simply recorded in police records, prosecutions of men for same sex activities or medical records of institutional committals of men and women for the mental illness of inversion'.

Male homosexuality was finally decriminalized in Ireland in 1993. As a result, visibility for lesbian and gay communities has improved in major urban centres like Dublin, Cork and Galway and increasingly in more rural areas throughout the country. Writers like Emma Donoghue, singers like Brian Kennedy and many television personalities are now identifying openly as lesbian and gay in Ireland as part of this increasing confidence in a contemporary Irish gay identity. At the time of writing of this essay, a case is being taken by the Equality Tribunal on behalf of two women, Catherine Zapone and Ann Gilligan in a bid to have Irish law recognize their partnership and accord them full legal rights as a long term lesbian couple. So much for the present. But what about the past?

The challenge for the cultural historian of queer Ireland is the attempt to trace lesbian or gay communities or social formations in the earlier and middle 20<sup>th</sup> century,

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particularly in the years after independence for southern Ireland in 1922. From the 1930s onwards, the Irish Republic became an overwhelming catholic country with a strict code of censorship outlawing any overt lesbian and gay cultural life thus any cultural history is an implicit one, underground and subterranean. My own essay *The Wilde Trials and Ireland, Eire/Ireland 2005* and David Norris' groundbreaking 1981 essay *Homosexual People and the Christian Churches in Ireland* are instances of recent scholarship recovering lost materials from this hidden chapter in Irish social history.

There are other possible sources for individual lesbian lives in Ireland and this essay presents an account of one such life. In the course of my biographical research on the Irish lesbian novelist, Kate O'Brien, published by Irish Academic Press in 2006, I have found evidence of two distinct social lesbian and gay formations in London and Ireland in which she moved. In this essay, I will contrast these distinct social contexts of her life and her writing career 1930s London and 1950s Ireland – to suggest one way in which one Irish lesbian constructed a social circle in which to accommodate and reflect her sexuality.

Kate O'Brien was born in Limerick in 1897 and educated at University College, Dublin, where she graduated with a degree in modern languages in 1919. Immediately on graduation, she emigrated to work in England, writing for the *Manchester Guardian*. Many Irish women left Ireland in the years after independence and this may explain the lack of any coherent or visible lesbian community in Ireland between 1922 and the late 1960s. Kate O'Brien moved to

London in 1923, where, at the age of 26 she married a Dutch journalist, Gustaav Renier in Hampstead Registry office. However her marriage was short lived and from 1926 onwards, as I will demonstrate, her emotional life was exclusively women loving. It is worth noting that an important factor in her sustaining her lesbian cultural identity was the fact that she lived in an urban centre – London. As I will suggest, Ireland offered her no such parallel cultural context.

Kate O'Brien's first play, *Distinguished Villa* was performed in London in 1926 and then her first novel, *Without My Cloak* was published in 1931. From 1931 to 1950, she lived in London, publishing novels, working as a free-lance critic and reviewer and living within a sub-Bloomsbury London lesbian community. This grouping of independent lesbian women, painters, teachers, writers and translators lived in flats around Gordon Square, Great James Street and Bloomsbury and they were the social context for Kate O'Brien's working life in London between 1925 and 1949. The meeting point for many of these women was the Minerva club, the Bloomsbury based University Women's Club and for all her time in London, Kate O'Brien and many of her friends were members of this club. (For valuable social background on early 20<sup>th</sup> century English lesbian culture, see Laura Doan's *Fashioning Sapphism*).

As O'Brien's sense of her own sexuality was clearly women loving, this influenced her mode of dress and self-presentation all through her time in London and then in Ireland. From 1926 onwards, her habitual dress was distinctly non-'feminine' and moved away from hetero-

normative dress encoding for women of her class and historical context. She always wore business-like jackets, blouses and skirts and kept her hair short; adopting a slightly severe but practical style that differed from the dominant feminised style for women of her class. Sometimes she went even further in dressing differently from the codes of correct feminine attire and wore capes, cloaks and trouser suits. O'Brien never compromised on this distinctive style of self-presentation. In a letter to me, the biographer Violet Powell remembers meeting her at a cocktail party at the Savoy Hotel in London and remarked on her disarming disregard for any form of dress except her working clothes, her tweed suit.

After the end of her marriage in 1924 and before she began publishing in 1926, Kate O'Brien's life was clearly evolving as woman-loving but she never identified herself publicly as lesbian at any time during her life. In fact none of the Irish figures I've mentioned, Casement, Gore-Booth MacLiammoir, Edwards ever did identify themselves as gay Irish cultural discourse simply didn't accommodate any public sexual identity outside the heterosexual consensus. Only once did Kate O'Brien ever write directly about homosexuality in her critical writings. Of the painter, El Greco, in *Farewell Spain*, she wrote: "*He is said to have been homosexual, but that suggestion can be of little use to us in considering his work. More mighty than he have been touched with that peculiarity but the residue of all emotional experience tends in spirits large enough to be at last of natural and universal value, whatever the personal accidents of its accretion.*" (O'Brien 1937, 146.)

So, I would argue that she did have an identified lesbian lifestyle and dress code but she never defines herself openly as lesbian because of her education in Irish Catholicism and her own Limerick family's conservatism. Although her parents were both dead by 1916, when she was in her late teens, her sister Nance and her brother Gerry remained living in Limerick all during Kate O'Brien's life. O'Brien returned to these family homes again and again and the good opinion and approval from these siblings and their spouses was very important to her, especially at times of tension over her banned novels.

In a wider sense, at this particular time, broader cultural perceptions of love between women were becoming increasingly uneasy and even hostile. In the nineteenth century, romantic friendships between women had been accepted because they were seen as physically chaste but profoundly emotional. As Faderman suggests, these romantic friendships were love relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital'. (Faderman 1981, 16) However, with the increasing interest in psychology and sexology towards the end of the nineteenth century, these relationships became suspect from the outside. Classified by sexologists as lesbian in the year of Kate O'Brien's birth, 1897, lesbians were often viewed as having a morbid medical condition rather than a viable sexual identity. Thus women who loved other women found that they had lost the protection of this ideal of romantic friendship. Faderman notes: "*Openly expressed love between women for the most part ceased to be possible after World War I. Women's changing status and the new medical knowledge cast such*

affection in a new light.” (Faderman 1981, 20). The publication of Radclyffe Hall’s 1926 novel *The Well of Loneliness* and its subsequent trial for obscenity in 1928 intensified this demonising of the lesbian, as Laura Doan and Terry Castle attest.

Given this cultural difficulty with lesbian sexuality, it is not surprising that Kate O’Brien never publicly defined herself as lesbian. Therefore the webs of interconnected relationships in her life are now our only reliable biographical material available for an evaluation of her emotional life. From the late 1920s until her death, she was sited within an extended circle of professional, university-educated and independent women academics, painters, writers, translators all of whom chose to end their marriages or not to marry at all. (All of this information on her private life comes from personal interviews with her sister-in law, Rosemary O’Brien and with Elizabeth Hall, the sister of Mary O’Neill and Ruth, Orlaith and Caroline Whitehead, the daughter, niece and grand daughter of Stephanie Stephens. All of these interviews were conducted during the writing of my literary biography) this circle provided Kate O’Brien with her main source of companionship and support. The Irish novelist Edith Somerville has written of her life partner, Violet Martin: “*The outstanding fact, as it seems to me, among women who live by their brains, is friendship*” (Somerville & Ross 1917, 326).

Three women were central to Kate O’Brien’s life in London, Stephanie Stephens, Mary O’Neill and Anna Wickham. Margaret Stephanie’ Stephens was the woman that O’Brien dedicated her first novel, *Without My Cloak* in 1931. Stephanie

Stephens lived with Kate O’Brien at Ashurst Bank outside London during the writing of *Without My Cloak* in the late 1920s and she was clearly her first female partner. The daughter of missionaries, Stephanie Stephens was born as Margaret Gadney in India in 1886. She graduated from Royal Holloway College, London in 1910 with a degree in languages. With the birth of her daughter, Ruth, in 1916, Margaret Gadney changed her name to Mrs Margaret Stephens, to protect herself and her daughter from the social stigma of single parenthood. At one point in her career, Stephanie Stephens worked as secretary to John Maynard Keynes, the celebrated economist, but otherwise she made her living as a freelance translator. Stephanie Stephens was friends with Veronica Turleigh; a student friend of Kate O’Brien’s from Dublin University and so came into her life in the mid-1920s. By May 1928, Kate O’Brien, Stephanie Stephens and Ruth had made a home together at a place called Ashurst Bank in the Home Counties outside London. The three, as a household, were gradually integrated into the O’Brien Irish family circle, visiting Nance O’Mara, O’Brien’s married sister in Limerick in 1930, though not perhaps openly perceived as a lesbian couple, given the O’Mara’s strict Catholicism.

In 1934, Kate O’Brien and Ruth Stephens spent the summer travelling to Spain, where they saw their first bullfight in Santander. The memory is recorded in *Farewell Spain*: “*I had never been to one until then [...] Ruth, English and seventeen, begged me to let her come, too. I wondered what her mother, a very dear friend, would think. Nowadays, however, that is a quaint sort of wonder. I agreed that she should come.*” (O’Brien 1937,



39). Stephe Stephens also travelled with Kate O'Brien to Spain and, in *Farewell Spain*, Kate O'Brien recalled going to a bullfight with Stephe Stephens, too. "Stephen said, as everyone says, that she thought she ought to see one. I was very doubtful about that [...] at the end she was unhappy and profoundly exhausted but she admitted, reluctantly indeed, that she saw seductive beauty in the ring and inexplicable nobility. But I don't want to see another,' she said and looking at her exhausted face one felt that that was the best" (O'Brien. 1937, 136). It's interesting that O'Brien called her by the masculine Stephen' rather than Stephe Stephens', her usual name. Perhaps the character Stephen Gordon', the female protagonist of *The Well of Loneliness*, was in her mind.

Kate O'Brien left Kent in 1930 and moved back to live in Bloomsbury, Gordon Square to be precise, but Stephe Stephens remained an important figure in her life. They were no longer a partnership but Stephe Stephens was known as the only person O'Brien feared. This relationship continued for the rest of Kate O'Brien's life; as Stephe Stephens died in 1982. Her daughter Ruth, niece Orlaith and grandchildren all maintained close ties with Kate O'Brien.

thread of affection and admiration. Kate O'Brien refers to her by various pet names, all allusions to Mary O'Neill's beauty and fairness, calling her or La Rubia' and she appointed Mary O'Neill her literary executor. They were clearly life partners.

By 1934 Kate O'Brien was living in a flat at 33, Great James Street and her life was connected with other lesbians, with gay men and with heterosexual bohemian friends. She has

left an account of her life there. "In the 1930's, I was tenant of a topfloor flat at No 3, Great James Street, Bloomsbury. I for one remember them all in vivid light for they were vivid and my impression was that there was much summer weather in our street. Music from non-stop gramophones, Mary O'Neill running up the stairs likes The Angel of the Lord, as Anna Wickham called her, Anna Wickham herself, her arms full of wild rhododendrons, stolen as she crossed the Heath. Anna writing sudden wonderful satires on the paneling and John, her Boswell, flying to copy it down. Anna on sentry duty up and down outside no 33, lest any of us refusing to open doors to her at 8am should escape her excessive need of us. Anna crying out, a propos of a novel of mine that she was reading *I am lonely for the Irish Bourgeoisie*" (O'Brien 1962).

The poet Anna Wickham, with her *excessive need* of Kate O'Brien was a vivid presence in this lesbian urban bohemia of the 1930s. Born Edith Harper in 1884, she was a friend and admirer of the Paris based lesbian writer Natalie Barney. Kate O'Brien told friends of Anna Wickham's first encounter with Barney where she threw her arms around Natalie Barney in passionate greeting, accidentally smashing two bottles of wine she had brought in tribute and thereby drenching them both. Wickham lived nearby on Parliament Hill in London in the 1930s and from there sent Kate O'Brien's poems and letters of great devotion, calling her Madonna Berg. This relationship, unlike the lifelong relationships with Stephe Stephens and Mary O'Neill didn't last beyond the 1930s.

There is evidence of real interconnections between the women in Kate O'Brien's life and also with her family in Ireland but my sense is that Kate O'Brien was never direct

about her lesbianism, an Irish discretion around sexual matters facilitating such an arrangement. Mary O'Neill painted a portrait of Stephe Stephens's daughter Ruth in 1932 and even received a copy of Kate O'Brien's former husband, Gustaav Renier's book *Oscar Wilde* directly from Renier. Theodora Bosanquet, Kate O'Brien's friend and literary collaborator, paid for Mary O'Neill to travel to Spain with Kate O'Brien in 1934. Whenever Mary O'Neill visited Dublin, Kate O'Brien's sister, Nance O'Mara would meet her. Mary O'Neill's friendship with Stephe Stephens's family led to a close relationship with Stephe Stephens's grand-niece, Orlaith Kelly.

Many of Kate O'Brien's friends had religion in common. English Catholicism was part of this world of woman-centred relationships because, at this time, many women-loving women were turning to Catholicism for spiritual support and affirmation. The Catholic Church in Britain was marginal, elitist, ritualised and pre-modern in its liturgy and its music. This aesthetic version of English Catholicism influenced Kate O'Brien's own fiction. Her imagined Irish Catholics characters, particularly in novels like *The Ante-Room* and *The Land of Spices*, owe much more to Kate O'Brien's adult experience of Catholicism in England than to her childhood in Laurel Hill. Thus she was able to write about believing Irish Catholics who managed to be both sexually dissident and spiritually independent. This made her freer to write of unable to travel home to Ireland because of restrictions on freedom of movement during the course of the hostilities. In 1941 she published her novel *The Land of Spices* and because of a single sentence describing an act of love between two men,

the novel was banned in 1942 in Ireland. This led to an outcry in Ireland, a public campaign against repressive censorship and then a parliamentary debate against the injustice of such a banning. This made Kate O'Brien something of an emblematic figure for liberal dissenters in Ireland and with Irish lesbians and gay men. The novel was finally un-banned in 1943. By the time the Second World War was over, Kate O'Brien was able to return to Ireland and she found herself celebrated in artistic and liberal circles in Dublin.

In 1950, with the money from her successful novel *That Lady*, Kate O'Brien made the surprising decision to return to Ireland permanently, not to her native Limerick but instead to a small village on the West coast of Ireland called Roundstone. By her friend Lorna Reynolds's account, it was she who influenced Kate O'Brien's decision; at this time. Reynolds remembered that Kate O'Brien was "staying in the Shelbourne Hotel, enjoying the success of her latest novel and spending the money she was making from its sales like wildfire. Though no business woman myself, I thought this reckless [. . .] so I advised her to buy a house, in Ireland of course, since she seemed to want to live in Ireland. I also, I remember, suggested Connemara, thinking it a suitably romantic place for a romantic novelist. It was years before I realised I had given her the wrong advice." (Reynolds 1987, 83).

Kate O'Brien's house in Roundstone was called The Fort and had been a doctor's dispensary before she bought it. It needed substantial re-decoration and furnishing and cost her a great deal to repair, but it was large and set

right out on the Atlantic. The house was around £56 per month. The cost of living was lower in Ireland than in England and so, counting on the success of *That Lady* and her many journalistic commitments, she planned to live with some style in Roundstone. It was rumoured that The Fort was haunted, a rumour that gave Kate O'Brien great pleasure, and she was to grow very fond of her new home. In reality, she enjoyed being the chatelaine of a large house. Many of her friends from London, like Mary O'Neill and Stephie Stephens and her daughter Ruth, visited Roundstone and her new Irish friends, like MacLiammoir and Edwards were constant visitors.

Kate O'Brien's renewed interest in Ireland was partly due to a number of new friendships she had made in Dublin, with young writers like John Jordan and Paul Smith. This artistic grouping of younger gay men interconnected with her when she moved back to live in the West of Ireland at the age of 55. The banning of her book, *The Land of Spices* would have been a rallying point for these younger gay men. These men John Broderick (1927–1989) John Jordan and Paul Smith were all writers and actors and academics, all younger and living in Dublin. These men were part of a gay men's sub culture where writing and alcohol was the primary driving forces and Kate O'Brien fitted right into this. It is worth noting that none of these men ever identified themselves publicly as gay. The man who was responsible for introducing her to these new young Irish male friends was Michael MacLiammoir. Michael MacLiammoir, who had started life in London in 1899 as Alfred Willmore, had moved to Ireland in the late twenties. He Gallicized his

name, reinventing himself as an Irishman, and, with his life partner Hilton Edwards, had set up the Gate Theatre in Dublin. Michael's theatre presented a programme of European and experimental Describing her as *the most interesting woman I've ever met*, Paul Smith was sensitive to her class prejudices and her idealisation of the bourgeoisie: "*She was a tangled fishnet of contradictions. She liked the rich because she liked the way they spoke.*" (Smith 1994, 103) This was a radical class departure for Kate O'Brien, contact with a man who was working class in origin. Kate O'Brien found the friendship of younger gay men enjoyable, especially if they had literary interests, and she encouraged Paul Smith's ambitions to write novels. His first novel, *Esther's Altar*, set in a Dublin tenement during the Easter Rising of 1916, was published in 1959 to great critical claim. His most successful novel, *The Countrywoman*, published in 1962, caused some confusion when he dedicated it to his mother, who also happened to be called Kate O'Brien. Like Kate O'Brien, Paul Smith's work was banned in Ireland and remained so until 1975. His 1972 novel, *Annie*, was reviewed by Kate O'Brien, who said it went straight home to one's central nerves. He accompanied her to the Dublin production of her bestselling novel *That Lady*, with the Irish actress Sheelagh Richards in the role of Ana de Mendoza and remembered: "*At the dress rehearsal the day before, Kate O'Brien had voiced her objection to the heavy ornamentation the leading lady was giving the part. On the first night, she was to sit white-faced and appalled in her dress circle seat and watch Dublin's answer to Ana de Mendoza exit through the dead centre, up-stage fireplace and hear the audience*

*bellow its gutty laughter.*” (Smith 1994, 103).

Interestingly, there is no evidence of Kate O’Brien making connections with other Irish lesbians at this time, as she always had done in London to me; this is a strong indication that Ireland simply had little or no lesbian community. When writing about her time in Connemara, Kate O’Brien makes a clear distinction between the writers and artists who visited her and the villagers of Roundstone: however the local village people provided copy for her journalistic sketches of Connemara, while the artists found in her a figure of patronage and encouragement. Paul Smith stayed in Roundstone in the summer of 1952, using it as a setting for his 1963 novel *Stravaganza!* a novel of bohemian life in Connemara. He spent much of the summer in Kate O’Brien’s company: “*On the very evening of our arrival, there was an invitation to a party in her house where she was entertaining, among others, Joyce Grenfell and her husband.*” (Smith 1994, 103) As part of her role as house-owner, Kate O’Brien took up driving a secondhand Fiat, but, as Lorna Reynolds remembered, this was not a success: “*Once, driving by Ballinacfad, she misjudged the second curve in the road and, instead of continuing on the road, jumped the bridge and landed on the ground below. A lorry-driver coming from the opposite direction was petrified by what he saw and thunder-struck when the driver emerged unscathed from the car [. . .] I remembered, she said, the advice of my father. He always said ‘if your horse is inclined to bolt with you, throw your weight back in the saddle’. So I threw my weight back in the saddle and, as you have heard, landed on all fours.*” (Reynolds 1987, 87.)

Connected to her sense of self in Connemara was her

writing about the village and the people in Roundstone. The Fort was run with lavish hospitality, as John Jordan recounted: “*her house there was a perhaps over-hospitable centre for personal friends, transient writers and (it is I who am saying this) nuisances.*” (Jordan 1973, 12) In her representations of Irish middle-class life, Kate O’Brien always made a clear distinction between the Irish bourgeoisie and their servants, and she presented these servants as loyal upholders of a civilised Irish existence. Something of this difference surfaced in her stories of village life in Roundstone that were produced for radio broadcasts or magazines. No other Irish woman, especially one living exclusively in Ireland, is known to have created such a social formation. Kate O’Brien was able to do this because of her London friends, her artistic status and her financial independence.

Another close friend of Kate O’Brien’s during this period was the young Irish poet and shortstory writer, John Jordan. Born in Dublin in 1930, John Jordan was a writer of some precocity who made a point of introducing himself to famous writers. As a teenager, he began a correspondence with the drama critic, James Agee, and he met Kate O’Brien by making his way backstage in 1945 at the Dublin production of *The Last of Summer*. He was embarking on an academic career, so Kate O’Brien introduced him to Enid Starkie, who assisted him when he went to Oxford to study English in the mid-fifties. Throughout this time, John visited with Kate O’Brien in Connemara, not always happily, as their correspondence records. Kate O’Brien often found herself playing the older, wiser woman of the world to this callow young man, including correcting his



social behavior. John admired her fiction and wrote about her work for *The Bell* and other journals and Kate O'Brien, in turn, influenced John Jordan's writing, as this poem demonstrates: "*poor Anna Wickham / Hung herself on Haverstock. / Lesbos, burning Sappho, / And the tonic sea.*" (Jordan 1991a, 114) (It is unlikely that John Jordan would have known Kate O'Brien's friend, the lesbian poetess, Anna Wickham, except through Kate O'Brien's recollections.) In one of his short stories, 'First Draft', a middle-aged writer appears, a Mrs Rose MacMenamin, who has piercing blue eyes and the forwardness and charm of a dedicated drinker. At one point, she announces that she will write her memoirs: "*Well, Dotey, you know the sort of thing, my childhood in South Tipp, and then school and College in Dublin, and then being a Miss in Spain, and my marriage with poor Joe and she finished quite shyly, the men I've known.*" (Jordan 1991b, 242). This is clearly a version of Kate O'Brien, modified through the heterosexualising lenses of John Jordan.

Curiously, given her life in London, there is no record of any lesbian life in Roundstone or Dublin around her circle of Irish friends. It is true that all of her London lesbian friends visited

her in Roundstone and she did befriend one or two younger Irish women writers but all of these younger women were straight. My conclusion, after researching her life, is that, at this period of time Irish lesbian history is even more invisible than Irish gay men's history and only recently can contemporary Irish scholars like Ailbhe Smyth, Katherine O'Donnell, Emma Donoghue and Tina O'Toole begin a process of literary and historical recovery. Like Kate O'Brien herself, most of the Irish women who had identified as women loving or lesbian had left Ireland in their younger years. By 1950, Ireland lacked any visible or cohesive lesbian social formation and the circle of friends around Kate O'Brien in the 1950s in Roundstone was, to a certain extent, created by her own personality, her London contacts and her links with younger gay literary culture. This West of Ireland lesbian and gay bohemia was short-lived and when Kate O'Brien sold her home in Roundstone in 1960 and went back to live in England, it was the end of this particular social formation and of this brief gay sub-culture.

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