



## BLIND AMBITION

As my name denotes, O’Keeffe and I are related.

My research on O’Keeffe spans several years and has earned the support of academic and national institutions, and theatre professionals. The Irish writer Niall Williams has been a major player in pushing me forward and giving me the confidence to tell this remarkable story, and my friend, the late Elizabeth Jane Howard, proffered encouragement in her own forthright manner.

### **Synopsis**

*Blind Ambition* is a historical drama based on the life and works of the blind Irish playwright John O’Keeffe, the most prolific and significant playwright of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – now somewhat forgotten.

Within this poignant true story, the reader will meet his influential friends, hear his theatrical anecdotes, and meet the actors, musicians and courtesans who inhabit the world of Georgian theatre.

It is a demonstration of human strength, family love, resilience, and defiance in the face of adversity - the human condition. Whilst being insightful, uplifting, and inspiring, his take is served with an ample dollop of gentle humour.

The year is 1826 when we call upon a small house in the market town of Chichester. There resides an elderly irascible blind man, who for over half a century had reigned supreme over the London stages - John O’Keeffe, the world-renowned playwright - the epitome of celebrity.



An unexpected visit from the Bishop of Chichester throws John into a state of turmoil. Tempers flare and emotions are high. The outcome of the visit, results in O’Keeffe, who is of a naturally reserved character, to embark on a ‘tell all’ memoir.

With his daughter, Adelaide as his scribe, she records his stories as they converse over many cups of tea interspersed with fruit cake and soda bread. With the honed skills of a master storyteller – he tells Adelaide of his successful career in theatre, his beliefs and advocacies on disability, the abolition of slavery, equality, and poverty.

Woven throughout the story, Adelaide interrupts with her own strong personal narrative and wit, and for the sake of amusement educates the reader on various subjects including, the language of beauty spots – *les mooches*. Her personal thoughts on marriage and loss of independence, and the latest fashion trends including not to panic if you happen to overpluck your eyebrows as they can be, *fixed up with mouse fur cut into any shape or size*.

John retrieves amusing anecdotes from a muddy river of memory, involving the likes of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Olaudah Equiano, Gertrude Mahon (aka Bird of Paradise), Joshua Reynolds, Elizabeth Inchbald, Dorothea Jordan and Ann Catley.

He relives the tragic night that he refers to as, *my unholy baptism*, an accidental fall into the river Liffey which led to the loss of his sight; and the subsequent unsuccessful treatments including the holding of electric eels watched on by an audience of curious friends. He regales in his memories of Charles Macklin teaching him, how NOT to buy a cauliflower; and recalls with sadness the futility of trying to dissuade Richard Brinsley Sheridan from a duel.

John’s blindness was a major contributing factor to many of his personality traits, his character could change in the blink of an eye. His disability made him distrustful, and dependent on his close



friends and brother, Daniel. He never displayed his own mental torture and the bouts of depression which devoured him, he defiantly braved the world.

A glimpse into his indomitable character, lies here in a quote by O’Keeffe:

*The effort to be envied, rather than pitied,  
often proves a successful stimulus to the greatest actions of human life.*