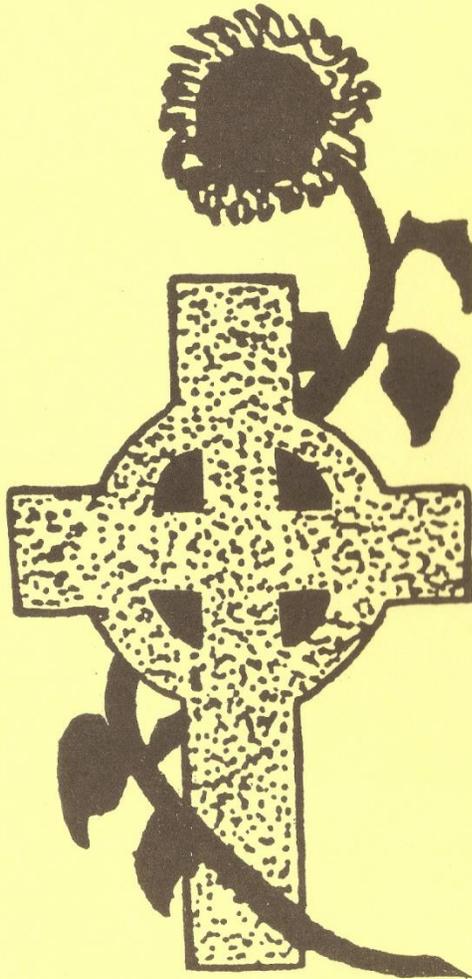


Wild About Wilde

Newsletter

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19th May 1987

No. 2



Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde

Dear Wild Wildeans,

Many thanks to many of you who responded positively to our first newsletter last October. To those of you still not venturing to express opinions on Wilde I urge you to do so now in response to this edition. You may submit anything you wish from literary comment to a letter telling of your adoration of Oscar and his work. I repeat, everyone is invited to partake in the newsletter and anything you have to say is considered of value. Oscar would love the fuss - as he himself said "There is only one thing worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about".

The date on this edition, the second of two yearly editions, commemorates Oscar's release from Reading Gaol, the 19th May 1897. Although broken in spirit and health he left us the "The Ballad of Reading Gaol". He himself had expressed the desire to create at least one more work of art. Alas, that was all he was to do. We can only mourn the loss of what more and what greater works of art he would have given us had he not been imprisoned.

In February of this year I paid a visit to my native Dublin and managed to get inside of 21 Westland Row (Oscar's birthplace). The house is now owned by Trinity College, which Oscar attended, and is used as study rooms by graduate students. One of the students, who was opening up as I passed, let me in to take photographs. The inside of the house is not exactly elegant - the ceilings are peeling and the windows are tarnished. A plaque on the outside wall, which has been familiar to me since childhood, proclaims in Irish "*Oscar Wilde Do rugadh sa teach seo*". Oscar Wilde born in this house. A son of a proud Ireland. The photograph is one I took of the house.

Also when I was there I visited with Richard Pine whose book *Oscar Wilde* published by Gill as part of their *Gill's Irish Lives* series, is an excellent study of Wilde's life. In his book Richard took a lot of trouble to document practically every statement about Wilde and put in a reference for it. As someone who has read so much on Wilde I can only admire his scholarship.

For the newsletter he gave me a chapter of the book (Step-Children of Nature) which was omitted because of space difficulties and I have included a part of it. I have also included a small excerpt from the actual book. His book is available in the United States from Irish Books & Media, College of St. Thomas, 21-15 Summit Ave., St. Paul, Minnesota 55105 (Tel. 612 647-5545)

There is another book coming out shortly that should also be of interest to all. Richard Ellmann's* biography of Wilde is scheduled to be published this autumn in Europe. It has been in preparation for eight years and promises to be very interesting indeed. We can expect to find much that is new in this work and I myself can hardly wait to read it. I have been told that it is in the publishers right now so it should be soon available. I have as yet not heard about when it will be published in the United States but that should be very shortly after the European publication.

By the way, Robert Reilly's book *The God of Mirrors* is now available in paperback. If you have not already read it, you should do so now.

So, Wildeans, I hope you all enjoy this newsletter and that it will inspire you to start making plans to submit something for the next issue. I look forward to hearing from you all. If any of you wish to contribute to a "Notes and Queries section" please do so. Ask any question you may have on Oscar's work or life and somehow we shall try to come up with the information! It might prove very challenging.

As I shall be spending the summer in Ireland I am including my Irish address for those of you who might wish to contact me there.

Carmel

*Richard Ellmann died in Oxford, England on 13th May. I have written a short biography on the last page.

BIRTHPLACE OF OSCAR WILDE: 21 WESTLAND ROW, DUBLIN



STEP-CHILDREN OF NATURE

Richard Pine

Oscar Wilde had been accused, in the public press and in the dock, of systematic corruption of youth and while it is clear that this view on the part of authorities was misinformed, he himself did later admit:

I used to be utterly reckless of young lives. I used to take up a boy, love him passionately - then grow bored with him, and often take no notice of him. (Wilde, Letters. p. 616)

Pathologically his sexual appetite, like his artistic temperament, hungered for new sensations. Under the increasingly transparent cloak of the 'High Priest of the Decadents' (as W. E. Henley labelled him) Wilde was able to indulge these appetites, while Society accepted him as their court-jester, the creator of charming, if ridiculous, comedies. But once he began to seduce the sons of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and to mock the double standards of their parents in his farces, tolerance decreased and police vigilance, particularly since the Cleveland Street male brothel scandal of 1890 (involving younger members of the aristocracy) increased. ¹

Laboucher, who framed the clause which became Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 under which Wilde was convicted, expressed prevailing opinion saying "in view of the mischief that such a man does, the sentence (two years with or without hard labour, in the discretion of the judge) compares but lightly with those almost every day awarded for infinitely less pernicious crimes" ²

Wilde's defeat meant that attitudes towards homosexuality hardened: frivolity, irresponsibility or disdain for convention, became synonymous with immorality, the dandy became an ogre. Those such as Gosse, Henry James and John Addington Symonds who had worked patiently and quietly- for the cause of those whom Krafft-Ebing had called "these step-children of nature" ³ were horrified. (On the appearance of Dorian Gray, Symonds, who found the book "psychologically interesting" said "if the British public will stand this they will stand anything" adding "I resent the unhealthy, scented, mystic, congested touch which a man of this sort has on moral problems." ⁴

The prevailing trend in the literary development of 'Uranism' as it has been called ⁵ had been in the expression of tenderness between an older and a younger man. (Symond's translation of Michaelangelo's Sonnets in 1878 had given it a major impetus, as had the appearance of Pater's collected essays on the Renaissance in 1873.) Visually, photographers such as Baron von Gloeden and artists like Henry Scott Tuke had also celebrated the beauty of youth which Symonds eloquently expressed in his Greek Poets as early as 1873:

If we in England seek some loving echo of this melody of curving lines, we must visit the fields where boys bathe in early morning, or the playgrounds of our public schools in summer or the banks of the Isis when the eights are on the water, or the riding-schools of young soldiers. (*Greek Poets*, First Series. 1873, p. 408)

Wilde himself in his early poems had written many ambiguous lines (especially the transformation of 'Wasted Days' into 'Madonna Mia', Works p. 732) but with his increasing morbidity he introduced hermaphroditism into English literature (closely following Rachilde's *Monsieur Venus*) forty years before the appearance of *Orlando* and the prosecution of *The Well of Loneliness*. Dorian Gray, Mr. W. H., even the Sphinx, are hero-heroines, while Lady Bracknell's callous disregard for any niceties other than those of blatant profiteering make the men in *Earnest* merely wilting sissies: perhaps this is what Joyce meant when he identified a 'sexless instinct' as one of Wilde's distinctive qualities. ⁶ Gender became unimportant to Wilde as he imagined an irresponsible socialist utopia based on the 'new Hellenism/hedonism, the 'higher philosophy'. Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* had suggested it in 1885; Foster's Maurice re-discovered it in the Phaedrus in 1913 - "he saw there his malady described exquisitely, calmly, as a passion which we can direct, like any other, towards good or bad. Here was no invitation to licence "⁷, yet to explain his 'malady' he is forced to blurt out "I'm an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort". ⁸

Notes

1. H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Cleveland Street Scandal*.
2. H. Pearson, *Labby*, 1936 p. 243.
3. Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 12th edn. p. 383.
4. Quoted in Beckson, K. ed. *Oscar Wilde, the Critical Heritage*, p. 78.
5. See Timothy d'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest*, 1970.
6. Quoted in Ellmann, R. ed. *Oscar Wilde, Twentieth Century* 1969, p. 60,
7. E. M. Forster, *Maurice*, 1971, p. 67.
8. *ibid.*, p. 189.

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OSCAR WILDE

An excerpt from the book by Richard Pine

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Wilde arrived in London in 1879 as a self-styled 'Professor of Aesthetics'. It was a brave move, although he had gained much in confidence among English society from his university contacts; with some help from Ruskin and the Duchess of Westminster (sister of his homosexual friend Lord Ronald Sutherland-Gower) and a natural flair for self-advertisement common among Oxford graduates from Shelly and Byron to Tynan and Frost, he gradually achieved invitations to artistic, aristocratic and bourgeois houses. 'We live in an age of inordinate personal ambitions,' Wilde wrote, 'and I am determined that the world shall understand me.' (Letters 146)

There was little to exercise Wilde's 'immeasurable ambition' (Pearson 64). His father had at his death left some unfinished work which Wilde expected to complete; 'It is a great responsibility,' he wrote, 'I will not be idle about it' (Letters 20) but his sense of duty appears to have been short-lived, for the task was eventually undertaken by his mother. He discussed a project to translate Herodotus and Euripides for Macmillians, but nothing came of it, nor of his desire to translate Flaubert's *La Tentation de St. Antoine*, nor of a project to adapt Verdi's *Luisa Miller* for the fashionable Polish actress Helena Modjeska. He was little known outside the university, and had published only a few poems and minor art criticism (in the course of which he had said of Whistler's 'The Falling Rocket', in a Ruskinian vein, that one looks at it 'for about as long as one looks at a real rocket, that is, for somewhat less than a quarter of a minute': Misc. 18)

A WILDE-EYED VIEW

David Sigler

When I first heard the name "Oscar Wilde", I thought, who was he? A first baseman for the Mets? A candidate running for President?! I really had no idea who he was or what he did. I had taken a painting class and Carmel, our dear editor-in-chief, was in the class too. We soon developed a friendship and I was telling her about my Elton John and Bernie Taupin collecting (they by the way are two songwriters, in case you didn't know). Meanwhile, Carmel was informing me on Wilde and consequently, we both found a genuine bond throughout respective interests. Oh, we actually did learn something in the class besides Elton and Oscar! Being introduced to Wilde for the first time, I had a very wilde-eyed approach to his work (a pun I just couldn't resist!).

Quite impressed upon some of his sayings and quotes, I found I had an interest in him and would like to educate myself a bit more. Carmel, who eagerly "took me under her wing", was more than glad to help.

I've now read *The Importance of Being Earnest* and recently saw the BBC production. What a delight! I thoroughly enjoyed the play and found it to be very funny. The idea of "bunburying" was hilarious and as a result, I've experimented with it somewhat myself! Fortunately I don't think my situation will get as out of hand as Algernon's did. At least I hope not! Regardless, I was very impressed with the style and wit that was constantly evident throughout the play. It was like if you blinked, you might miss something. And Lady Bracknell! Oh, was she a character! She was my second favourite next to Algernon.

Currently I am reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The premise is just fascinating. The idea of one's portrait aging and the human staying youthful is quite extraordinary. I saw a movie (Italian, 1970) loosely based on the concept of Wilde's book. Carmel quickly assured me that the movie was quite modernized and far from Wilde's original work. I saw a BBC production on Wilde's life and found it to be an excellent, if not sad tale of his life. I find it hard to believe the reason for which he was imprisoned. Anyway, I thought his later life one of unfair heartache and pain.

I have a book called *The Wit and Humor of Oscar Wilde* which I like very much. The wide variety of subjects he talks about is impressive. I find that once I start reading it, I can't put it down. It can be habit forming! For those of you who are experts in the Wilde field, I hope you found my first impressions somewhat enjoyable. I'm still very new to Wilde and will continue to read and enjoy his talents. I also would like to thank Carmel for the opportunity to express my thoughts.

RICHARD ELLMANN

Richard Ellmann died on May 13, 1987 at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, England. He was 69 years old. From 1970 to 1984 he was an English literature professor at Oxford University.

He was born in Highland Park, Mich., the son of a lawyer. While an undergraduate at Harvard University, he was influenced by Yeats' poem, "The Cold Heaven" and chose the poet as his thesis subject. In 1945 he went to Dublin and in 1948 published *Yeats: the Man and the Mask*. Yeats led him to Joyce, (and his wildly acclaimed biography), and other Irish authors. He edited *Oscar Wilde A collection of Critical Essays* and recently published *Four Dubliners* (1986), a compilation of essays on Wilde, Joyce, Yeats and Beckett.

Last year he completed a biography on Oscar Wilde which is expected to be published shortly.

Richard Ellmann is survived by his wife, Mary Donahue; one son and two daughters.

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