



Wild About Wilde

Newsletter



16th OCTOBER 1987

No. 3

ISSN :1068-9737

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Mills Wilde

Dear Wild Wildeans,

Many thanks to all of you who responded so warmly to our previous newsletter and a special warm welcome to a new member who wrote to me from Katmandu! She is, without doubt, the farthest flung among us (I can't help wondering if she knows the Little Yellow God!). Anyway, her devotion to the god Oscar is obvious, and appreciated.

My summer in Ireland was wonderful and made much more delightful by seeing a really terrific production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Patrick Mason, who directed the production, gave the audience something that they may not have experienced before with *Earnest*. Instead of emphasizing the comic aspects of the play he heightened the tone of avarice and shallowness in the characters and gave us a production much more in line with what Oscar had in mind when he wrote it. Moreover, as the final scene came to a close he gave us a voice-over of Mr. Justice Will's summing up sending Oscar to prison for two years hard labour. It was a stroke of genius on his part in combining his interpretation with the harshness of Will's words. This is what a shallow, grasping society does with one who violates its rules or dares to mock them! I loved it! The truth about masks! The gentlemen from the press, however, were not amused and said so. Oscar would have been in his element reading the reviews. One prominent playwright spoke on a radio show saying that the director had destroyed the play because he explained, "Oscar Wilde wrote light comedy" and that the play could not hold the weight that Mason was placing on it. I could almost hear the porphyry tomb in Pere Lachaise rumbling! I am also quite certain that Robbie Ross must have had to caution him to "let us pretend we do not hear it"!

Well now the really good news is that Richard Ellmann's "Oscar Wilde" has been published in Europe and is due to be published in the United States in January 1988. I am very happy to be able to bring you a really interesting and I think insightful review of the book by Senator David Norris (member of the Irish Senate and also of The Department of Modern English at Trinity College, Dublin). I think he catches not only the essence of Oscar's art, style and humanity but he also makes some interesting observations about how Richard Ellmann relates, or fails to relate as the case may be, to that very humanity. But read what he has to say for yourselves. I hope you like it as much as I do and I am very happy that he allowed me to share it with you. As I have not as yet read the entire book (my copy just arrived, owing to the fecklessness of a young woman in a Dublin bookshop) all I can say with authority is that it is a very large book - not the sort of slim volume to be easily pulled out in your local fast-food joint over lunch! Of course, Oscar would never approve of such conduct anyway!

And so Wildeans I leave you to the influence of Ellmann. I would be very interested in hearing from you about reactions to the latest biography. Oscar himself was most dubious about the merits of such works "Each man has his disciples, but it is usually

the Judas who writes the biography". I think Oscar's biographers have loved him more than that.

It was suggested to me that I ought to include a piece of Oscar's work in each newsletter. I thought this a marvellous idea and shall do so in future. If there is anything in particular anyone might wish to see I am open to requests. I have chosen two poems for this edition.

A special thanks Jyll Kossoris for the front cover artwork.

Good reading. All the best,

Carmel

RICHARD ELLMANN'S OSCAR WILDE

David Norris

Department of Modern English, Trinity College, Dublin

The publication of this book has been awaited with eager anticipation, bringing together as it does two great literary reputations, that of its subject - Oscar Wilde synonymous with tragedy and scandal - and of the gently meticulous scholar Richard Ellmann whose "Life of James Joyce" re-established critical biography as an important art form. The high expectations raised can now be seen to have been largely if not quite totally met.

This is a very good and very full account of Wilde's life, and interestingly suggests that in treating his own life as a work of art, Wilde was deliberately creating a subversive negative analogue of Victorian society and its values. As Ellmann says, "He knew all the secrets and could expose all the pretence". In so doing of course he both provoked and exposed himself to the full malignity of 19th century hypocrisy. It is appropriately paradoxical that this man - the greatest comic dramatist in English since the Restoration- should live to see his achievements in art overshadowed by his projection into notoriety as tragic hero of his own life's drama.

As a result of the sensationally prurient details, elicited especially during the final two trials, Wilde's name became permanently linked with homosexuality and public revulsion against its practice. E.M. Foster for example, who was a boy during this period, has his character Maurice in the novel of the same name, reveal his sexual identity to the family doctor by saying, "I'm an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort." But as this book damningly demonstrates it was not Wilde but his accusers who were unspeakable - unspeakably cruel, unspeakably vengeful, unspeakably narrow, unspeakably vicious and above all stupid and blind in the moral sense to an unspeakable degree.

He was personally harassed, and hounded from refuge to refuge, a pack of thugs hired by the maniacal Marquess of Queensberry baying mercilessly at his heels. Male prostitutes were bullied, bribed and suborned into testifying against him, and chambermaids in the Savoy Hotel gave evidence concerning faecal stains on bed linen. How can one read such stuff without being moved to indignation and shame? I speak not of the shame of Wilde but shame for minds so gross that they could not only permit, but solicit and gloat over the introduction of such material. Wilde emerges with extraordinary grace from these contemptible proceedings.

As Max Beerbohm writes in a contemporary account, "his speech about the love that dares not tell his name was simply wonderful and carried the whole court right away, quite a tremendous burst of applause.

"Here was this man, who had been for a month in prison, and loaded with insults and crushed and buffeted, perfectly self-possessed dominating the Old Bailey with his fine presence and musical voice." Ellmann in fact makes the remarkable claim that "he was not cowed, his imagination was secretly triumphing over the proceedings."

It is a novel and convincing interpretation and palliates somewhat the outrage and horror of the trials. This all happened over 90 years ago, but we would be foolish to affect superiority over Mr. Justice Will's moral imbecility, considering how much of his odious muppetry has regurgitated in recent years. It is strange that those who set-out 'to defend the family', a familiar piece of hypocrisy, should have acted in such a way as to separate a man irreparably from his wife, break up his home, and ultimately orphan his children. For no one who reads this book can doubt that Wilde was effectively murdered at the behest of the establishment with the active collusion of the legal system.

It is difficult to read the catalogue of offences committed against Wilde without revulsion, and impossible to disagree with his sadly prophetic remark that "one is absolutely sickened, not by the crimes that the wicked have committed, but by the punishment the good have inflicted".

Forced to attend Chapel while still seriously ill, he fainted and fell, damaging his ear and causing the injury that would ultimately prove fatal.

He was forbidden to write, a fiendishly cruel infliction for a man of his imaginative genius, forced to walk for six hours daily on a treadmill, and spied upon in his cell because the chaplain thought he had smelt semen and suspected him of masturbating (a far more sensible occupation in the circumstances one would have thought than his official function of picking and unpicking balls of tarred twine.)

There are few revolutionary discoveries in this book, although it does flesh out our knowledge of Wilde's life, especially in the detail of his American tour of 1882. It is clear that Ellmann, who became seriously ill during the preparation of this work and died shortly after its completion, was not able to sustain consistently the full voltage employed throughout his magnificent biography of Joyce.

Writing of Joyce, Ellmann turns over the contents of his pockets with an obsession born of love - he almost becomes Joyce, whereas despite the fact that he understands and celebrates Wilde, it is always from the outside. Moreover, he never quite manages to identify imaginatively with Wilde's sexuality. Of course, unlike the case of Joyce, there are no longer people alive to be interviewed, so that sense of immediate contact proved elusive.

I find it strange that there was no discussion in the book of Wilde's putative authorship of the pornographic novel "Teleny", no detailed account of the harrowing bankruptcy sale, with pathetic items such as "1 bundle children's toys," and, oddest of all, no reference to the horrible and remarkable coincidence that the Henry

Labouchere who turns up repeatedly as a member of Wilde's social circle was the Yellow Journalist and M.P. for Liverpool who was responsible for the very amendment to the criminal- law under which Wilde was sentenced.

There is tragedy here of course, but there is also dignity and greatness. Mahaffy may have behaved disgracefully, deliberately falsifying the second edition of his account of social life in Ancient Greece to suit the prejudices of his time (so much for academic integrity) and abandoning Wilde in his distress- but some, including Shaw, and particularly Yeats, were superbly unselfish in their championship of their fallen fellow countryman.

Wilde, as this book makes clear, has more relevance to us today than we may think. As Ellmann says, "We inherit his struggle to achieve supreme fictions in art, to associate art with social change, to bring together individual and social impulse, to save what is eccentric and singular from being sanitized and standardized, to replace a morality of severity by one of sympathy."

(Courtesy also, Sunday Press, Dublin, Ireland)

And now for some Oscariana

A NEW BEGINNING

Reed Whittemore

(from *The Faculty Voice*, University of Maryland)

It was so hot in August that most days we lay abed with no covers uttering bon mots.

"And as for living," I said unmoving, "our t.a.'s can do that for us." "That applies as well, Professor," she replied wearily, "to thinking. The moment one sits down to think, one becomes all nose, or all forehead, or something horrible."

"That, professor," I said, "is from Oscar Wilde."

"So?"

"You could conceal your sources. The commonest thing is delightful if only one hides it."

"That also is from Wilde."

"Of course. Are we not fin de siecle?"

"I would say more fin d'aout." She raised her right leg from the bed, and together we looked at her toes. I remembered that when I was very young my uncle Josephus on my father's side called me to him and said, "The rich are different from you and me."

"Yes, they have more money," she said.

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

She lowered her leg. "You are a teacher, professor, and are always thinking they have more money."

Soon it was registration day. We arose and moved into September softly, like ocelots in deep grass. We parted in front of McKeldin, she to her department, I to mine. We were perhaps ten paces from each other when she thought of another bon mot, and called,

"Professor?"

"Yes?"

"Don't squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common and the vulgar."

"Are you saying professor," I queried, "that what our country needs is a new Hedonism?"

"No, professor, it was Wilde who said that. I am being ironic. What I am saying is that I do not believe what I have been quoting Wilde saying. We must now go to our labours, n'est ce pas?"

"Your French is terrible, professor," I told her grimly.

REQUIESCAT

Tread lightly, she is near
Under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow.

All her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust,
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust.

Lily-like, white as snow,
She hardly knew
She was a woman, so
Sweetly she grew.

Coffin-board, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast,
I vex my heart alone,
She is at rest.

Peace, peace, she cannot hear
Lyre or sonnet,
All my life's buried here,
Heap earth upon it.

Oscar Wilde

HELAS!

To drift with every passion till my soul
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,
Is it for this that I have given away
Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control?
Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll
Scrawled over on some boyish holiday
With idle songs for pipe and virelay,
Which do but mar the secret of the whole.
Surely there was a time I might have trod
The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance
Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God:
Is that time dead? lo! with a little rod
I did but touch the honey of romance -
And must I lose a soul's inheritance?

Oscar Wilde

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