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Wild About Wilde

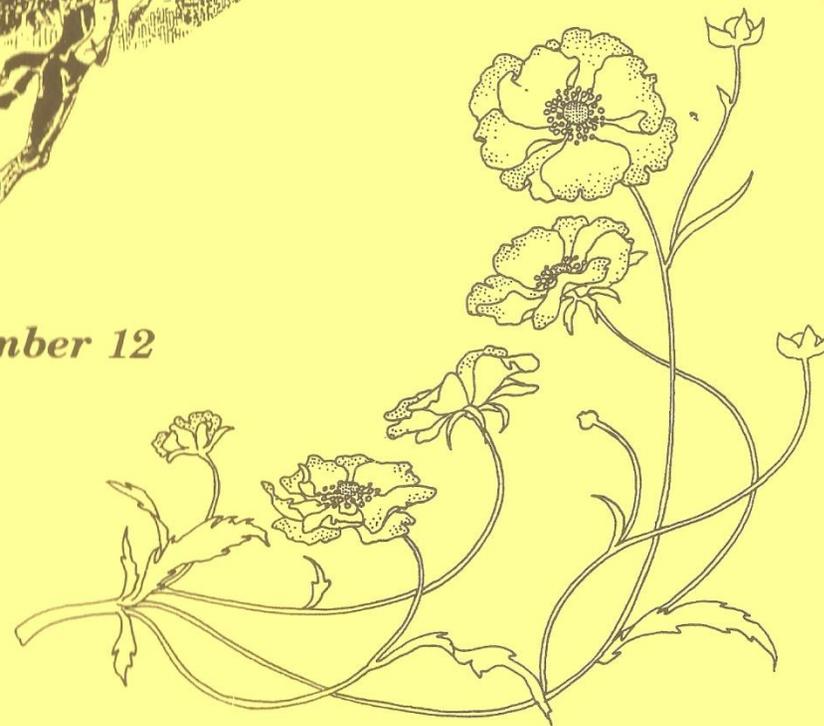
Newsletter



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Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Mills Wilde

WILD ABOUT WILDE

ISSN:1068-9737

Dear Wild Wildeans,

Welcome to another edition of WAW!

Something very exciting is happening at last in Dublin, Ireland concerning Oscar Wilde's birthplace at 21 Westland Row in that city. Trinity College, which owns the property, has formally agreed to turn over the house to a committee who are now working on having the house refurbished and plan, sometime in the not too distant future, to open the house to the public as a museum of Wilde memorabilia. The house itself is worth a visit! It has a lot of character and seems full of ghosts from the past. Of course, fund raising is an absolute necessity and the people in Dublin are trying all channels to get some funding for the project. Should anyone be interested in getting involved in this wonderful work turn to page 4 of this publication to get full details. Maybe you have something to donate? Or perhaps you know someone who might be interested? Pass the word along! And remember, as Oscar once observed, generosity is the essence of friendship. So, be a friend to Oscar. Help cherish his memory with your generosity.

Another form of recognition for Wilde came from the Modern Language Association who are now listing *Wild About Wilde* in the *MLA International Bibliography* and in the *MLA Directory of Periodicals*

Of course, as I repeatedly say in these volumes Wilde's work- is the most important promotion of all. An interesting and fascinating new book entitled *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea* which contains Wilde's essays, reviews and lectures has been published in Britain and Manus Nunan has reviewed it on page 3. This book contains the sort of things that any Wildean would love to read but in the past would have had great difficulty in locating. Well, here it is. Edited by John Wyse Jackson it is a luxurious adventure through the lesser publicized, but totally fascinating, works of Wilde.

Also, in Britain the Oscar Wilde Society is getting off to a good start and plan to have their first newsletter in print shortly. They have also announced the dates for the Oscar Wilde Annual Literary Memorial Prize competition. Details on page 15

of this issue. Oscar would be so thrilled with all this fuss! But, after all, moderation *is* a fatal thing. Nothing succeeds like excess.

It really is good to see such interest in Wilde and his genius thriving in spite of the modern mania for mediocrity and the perennial search for the lowest common denominator. Or as Oscar would have it:

"To have been well brought up is a great drawback nowadays. It shuts one out from so much." Well, what a blissful shut-out!

Hope you all enjoy this issue.

All the best,



Carmel



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ARISTOTLE AT AFTERNOON TEA

The rare Oscar Wilde

Edited by **John Wyse Jackson**

Published by Fourth Estate Ltd. Price £14.99

Review by **Manus Nunan**

The essays, reviews and lectures of Oscar Wilde produced in the 1880s at a time when he had to earn a living as a writer and lecturer have not been readily available to the general reader. Mr. Wyse Jackson's selection fills a gap. The title is taken from Wilde's review of a book on the art of conversation by Mahaffy who was his tutor at Trinity College Dublin. Mahaffy held that a consummate liar is a better ingredient in company than a stickler for accuracy. Wilde agreed: "The liar at any rate recognises that recreation, not instruction, is the aim of conversation." He was preaching to the converted. In the Trinity common room Mahaffy once told a gathering of Fellows that as a boy he had been caned only once, and that was for telling the truth. "It certainly cured you, Mahaffy" observed Provost Salmon.

The writings contained in this volume, with one exception, are all from between 1882 and 1889, a period just before Wilde's plays started to dominate the London stage. They range from a lecture on the English Renaissance of Art delivered to an audience in New York to a review criticising the English translations of Balzac's novels. One expects Wilde to speak in dispraise of translations as one expects him to delight in the original Balzac. "A steady course of Balzac reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shadows of shades. It is pleasanter to have the entree to Balzac's society than to receive cards from all the duchesses in Mayfair."

The title "English Poetesses" for one review might well have been in the Singular as the 'one great poetess' is Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Later he compared his mother to her in *De Profundis*. The review of Lily Langtry's role in a stage play presented in New York concentrates on her beauty and is wisely silent about her acting. His touching account of a visit to the tomb of Keats in Rome (the mean grave of this divine boy) omits to mention the exasperation of David Hunter Blair who was with him at the time and trying to convert him to the Church of Rome, but had to endure the sight of Wilde on his knees worshipping a Protestant poet.

The editor's introduction includes two contrasting glimpses of Wilde, the man. One is an account of his life in Reading Gaol written by his warder. The other is an interview for the *Sketch* which shows the conversational powers of Wilde at his best. Also included are the impressions of Edith Somerville (later the co-author

of *The Irish Rm* stories) when she tried unsuccessfully to sell articles to the editor of the *Woman's World*. Mr. Wyse Jackson's conclusion gets it right. "What shines through almost all his work, however, and it is easily overlooked, is his gentleness. He did not hurt people gratuitously, or even when they might have deserved it."

Manus Nunan is an Irishman who lives in France. He travels extensively with his lecture on Oscar Wilde.

WAW Editor's note:

For a copy of *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea*, not published in the United States, you may write to John Sandoe (Books) Ltd., 10 Blacklands Terrace, Chelsea, London SW3 2SR, England. Visa or Mastercard accepted. Cost of book is £14.99. Surface postage £3.00.

A catalogue of some of their other books is available on request.



DUBLIN OSCAR WILDE SOCIETY NEWS

The Dublin Wilde Society, known as the Trinity Oscar Wilde Society, was founded in 1991 to honour the memory of Wilde, his family and the Dublin community to which they belonged. In particular it will endeavour to preserve and restore the buildings associated with Wilde. It is actively collaborating with Trinity College in preliminary planning of the establishment of an appropriate centre in Wilde's birthplace which is 21 Westland Row and which is due for redevelopment for the College.

The society is not exclusive to members of the college and welcomes the interest, support and participation of all. There are plans to organize a number of special events in 1992 to raise funds for the above project.

For further information the society can be contacted through Deirdre Byrne, 1 Martello Terrace, Sandycove, Co Dublin, Ireland. Tel: 280 8788, or you may contact this publication.

THE VALUE OF THE DOUBLE FOR WILDE

An Opinion

Roger Lathbury

The works of Oscar Wilde often make dramatic and thematic use of doubling. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* plays on doubles: Basil Hallward and Lord Harry Wotton, the portrait of Dorian and Dorian himself - and each of these has a double life. The ideal husband is not ideal (and should not be, according to the play). In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algy and Jack are brothers, with double identities; Lane in town is Merriman in the country; Lady Bracknell in London becomes, in Hertfordshire, Miss Prism.

The concept of doubling easily includes other characters if their doubleness consists of leading a life that pretends their past never occurred. Lady Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance* conceals her relationship to Lord Illingworth. Lady Windermere lives by a double standard. The conclusion to *Lady Windermere's Fan* makes clear that Lady Windermere's future life will also be double in some ways that she will not know.

Wilde understands identity by the doubleness of opposition. His characters are redefined by becoming that which they seem not to be but actually are. Algy is Jack's brother, the portrait is Dorian Gray, and the most important character of the play is "a woman of no importance."

The moment of identification with the buried double self provides the climax in Wilde's work. At that instant, the dramatic tension between self and anti-self dissolves. It is a temporary dissolution, as *Lady Windermere's Fan* suggests and *Earnest* points out: even while he is courting Cecily and before he knows who he is, Algernon introduces the story of Bunbury. The merged identity cannot remain merged but will move toward some other opposition. In this sense each play and story is a protest in the name of the development of the self.

This protest applies to the creator as well. Wilde was about Wilde. The author was able to renew his own self by using as the subject for his writings the very forces that would have suppressed him - and eventually did suppress him. The Victorian age may have jailed Wilde, but without the chance of persecution, Wilde would not have been able to write with the power that he did. In this light it seems not so surprising that before his trial, in spite of the urgings of George Bernard Shaw and of his friends, Wilde elected to remain in England. The double life - the "feasting with panthers" - gave him the psychic energy necessary for thinking and composing

and for the wit as well, where paradoxes, puncturing of the pompous and puns - all of which work on doubling - abound.

The post-prison period illustrates this theory further. Its occasional felicities notwithstanding, the only imaginative literature Wilde was able to produce after 1897, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, is a cul de sac. It lacks the alternative life and thus irony that animates the plays, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and "The Decay of Lying." The closest relative of *Gaol* among Wilde's works is, I think, "The Soul of Man under Socialism." However, in the essay the "intensified individualism" that justifies sin demands a life lived in opposition, in duplicity - a point straightforwardly put but not likely to lead to much straightforwardness. The result is an essay in Wilde's voice; it informs us that "we have been able to have fine poetry in England because the public do not read it" and "the popular novel that the public call healthy is always a thoroughly unhealthy production" - in short, vintage stuff: paradoxical, penetrating, scintillating ironic. The voice of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, where Wilde comes closest that I know of to making a straightforward affirmation- "each man kills the thing he loves"- is that of Coleridge.

The tragedy of Wilde's life was not that he was put in prison but that prison reduced him to being only what he was.

*Roger Lathbury is an Associate Professor of English at George Mason University, (Fairfax, Virginia) as well as the proprietor of Orchises Press which publishes the facsimile first edition of **The Importance of Being Earnest**.*



TOULOUSE-LAUTREC AND OSCAR WILDE

Gordon Blackwell

Honouring celebrities with commemorative postage stamps is an international enterprise. Oscar Wilde was depicted on a stamp issued by his native Ireland in 1980. The illustration used was a painting by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, who, like caricaturists of the time (1895), exaggerated the writer's jowls. Working from memory, he narrowed Wilde's full eyes and wide mouth, made his straight nose aquiline and turned his dark hair golden.

Toulouse-Lautrec had met Wilde a few times in Paris. Before the third trial the artist visited Wilde in London and asked him to pose for a portrait. The diminutive crippled painter had an "air that commanded respect and, generally, obedience" but Wilde was under such stress that he had to decline. He did talk to his friend about his trials and they parted amicably.

Did Wilde also suspect that the Frenchman would not represent him favourably? He had defined an artist as "a creator of beautiful things" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), which did not apply to this man. Wilde also stated that "most of our modern portrait painters are doomed to oblivion. They never paint what they see" (*The Decay of Lying*). The Frenchman's interest in Wilde presumably was connected with *La Revue Blanche*, which had scheduled an article in Wilde's defence for the forthcoming issue of May 15.

Toulouse-Lautrec represented Wilde four times: (1) The colour portrait reproduced on the Irish stamp; (2) a lithograph of this pose for a Paris theatre program of the first production in 1896 of Wilde's *Salomé*; (3) a sketch of him in court, holding gloves; and (4) a Wilde-like spectator in a painting of the dancer La Goulue.

In the portrait, the locale of London is established by a background of fog swirling over the Thames River and the clock tower of the Houses of Parliament. This portrait has been praised for the swift telling strokes and stark economy of details. Masterful as it is, its subject IS undeniably an effete old man with rouged tiny lips and bleached hair. Certainly the artist was not shocked by Wilde's life, having previously painted two women dancing romantically together. Mack (page 297) asserts that the artist did not visit bars where gay men congregated, which seems to be merely lack of interest.



Irish Postage Stamp issued in 1980
to honour the memory of Oscar Wilde

In 1898, Toulouse-Lautrec held his first important London Exhibition. By then Wilde had served two years in prison and had fled to the continent. He was so reviled in London that displaying his image would have created scandal. Of course the critics knew that Lautrec had depicted Wilde. Guilt by association did not help his reputation and many critics called his subjects vulgar, monstrous, ugly and revolting. One opined that they were "unlikely to commend themselves to old ladies." His technique garnered some praise.

The following year found the unhappy fellow drinking heavily. He was sent to a clinic for a cure. Wilde, now in Paris, thought kindly of him, and included his name on a list of 15 people for whom he ordered copies of his newly published play, *An Ideal Husband*. Whether Toulouse-Lautrec ever received the book is unknown. He drank to excess and died at the age of 36 in 1901, a year after Wilde's demise.

No doubt the Irish postal service chose this portrait of Wilde for the 1980 stamp to honour both the French artist and the Irish writer. Let us hope that another stamp bearing an excellent photograph of Wilde's face is released in the future.

References:

Toulouse-Lautrec. Gerstle Mack. (New York, 1938) Plates 19, 55; pp 295-298. 313-314.

The Letters of Oscar Wilde. Rupert Hart-Davis, ed. (New York, 1962) ,805 fn.; 814 fn.

Scott Catalogue numbers the Wilde stamp A158. Collectors can order it from philatelic specialty companies. Its denomination of 13 Irish pence was the cost of a first-class letter then. Its size is comparable to U.S. commemorative stamps.

SANTA DECCA

The Gods are dead: no longer do we bring
To grey-eyed Pallas crowns of olive-leaves!
Demeter's child no more hath tithes of sheaves,
And in the noon the careless shepherds sing,
For Pan is dead, and all the wantoning
By secret glade and devious haunt is o'er:
Young Hylas seeks the water-springs. no more;
Great Pan is dead, and Mary's son is King.

And yet - perchance in this sea-tranced isle,
Chewing the bitter fruit of memory,
Some God lies hidden in the asphodel.
Ah Love! if such there be, then it were well
For us to fly his anger: nay, but see,
The leaves are stirring: let us watch awhile.

OSCAR WILDE



ON THE SALE BY AUCTION OF KEATS' LOVE LETTERS

These are the letters which Endymion wrote
To one he loved in secret, and apart.
And now the brawlers of the auction mart
Bargain and bid for each poor blotted note,
Ay! for each separate pulse of passion quote
The merchant's price. I think they love not art
Who break the crystal of a poet's heart
That small and sickly eyes may glare and gloat.

Is it not said that many years ago,
In a far Eastern town, some soldiers ran
With torches through the midnight, and began
To wrangle for mean raiment, and to throw
Dice for the garments of a wretched man,
Not knowing the God's wonder, or His woe?

OSCAR WILDE

OSCAR WILDE'S POETRY

An Appreciation

Sylvia Day

Not all the muses attended the birth of Oscar Wilde but there were a sufficient number to assure him a place in the annals of poetry. Yet, except for the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, few readers are familiar with the singular body of Wilde's poetry, one that compares with the best in the English language.

The above opinion was not shared by Wilde's biographer, Richard Ellmann. Wilde's poetry, Ellmann averred grudgingly " ... offers some evidence of feeling." Ellmann appears to have taken relish in discrediting it, a strange stance for a biographer who, it is claimed, spent 20 years in the completion of his task. Nothing more clearly illustrates the biographer's indifference to Wilde's poetry than the comment he made on *Ravenna*, the poem for which Wilde was awarded the Newdigate Prize, the first time in over 50 years that it was won by Magdalen College. The poem, Ellmann stated is "a clear hodge-podge of personal reminiscences, topographical description, etc." Knowledge of the work makes it difficult to take such criticism seriously.

The editors of *The Norton Anthology of Literature* are no more kind to Wilde. In the introduction to the four poems anthologized Wilde is reviewed as being influenced by "Elizabethan, Romantic, Pre-Raphaelite and 17th century French poetry," thereby implying that Wilde was derivative and not original. Pater too is invoked as an influence an influence that Wilde acknowledged but which makes little mark on Wilde's creativity. If influences are sought in Wilde's poetry it is in Homer and not in Pater wherein they may be found. In any event the various influences that ostensibly have shaped Wilde's poetry, including that of "Romanticism" are not odious.

Wilde was moved to write about Ravenna upon his return from early travels in Italy. Ravenna was once an important Roman port and in the 14th century had a brief revival. The poem, far from being a "hodge-podge" is remarkable for a young man in his early twenties, as the few lines below attest:

O how my heart with boyish passion burned,
When far away across the sedge and mere
I saw that Holy City rising clear,
Crowned with her crown of towers! - on and on
I galloped, racing with the setting sun
And ere the crimson after-glow was passed,
I stood within Ravenna's walls at last.

The work that followed on Wilde's leaving Oxford confirm the young scholar's immense gifts. That he remained dazzled by his love of Greece is incontrovertible. The Greece that came to life for him during those early studies inform much of his work. Lyrical and exquisitely cadenced, he wrote sonnets to lovers, to his various heroes, ballads and longer poems all bearing a style inimitably his own.

Typical is the passionate and sensuous work *Charmides*. In it a handsome sailor overcome at the sight of the goddess Pallas Athena, spends a night in worshipful adoration of her. Upon arising he returns to his ship and after several days he beholds her again. Enraptured he plunges into the sea where he drowns. Neptune brings the young man's dripping body to land where a Dryad perceiving the beautiful youth falls in love with him and seeks to arouse him. With beguiling words of love she urges him to awaken and while doing so, Artemis, jealous of the two, pierces the Dryad's heart and kills her. Venus is angered at Artemis and prevails upon Proserpine to allow one brief encounter between the two. The lines that follow need no further comment.

And all his hoarded sweets were hers to kiss
And all her maidenhood was his to slay
And limb to limb in living and rapturous bliss
Their passion waxed and waned - O why essay
To pipe again of love, too venturesome reed!
Enough, enough that Eros laughed upon that flowerless mead.

Wilde's poetry is in greatest contrast to considerable of the didactic and pedestrian character of much of modern poetry. For Wilde, lyricism and rhythm prevail while his love of and description of natural phenomena are unparalleled. But all is subject for him and all are permeated by his profound understanding of the human spirit. Wilde was gentle, compassionate, without malice.

He never accommodated himself to the modern world. Perhaps this is one reason why he was so misunderstood and mocked. He felt too deeply, a state that often terrifies others. This is apparent in *The Garden of Eros* where he depicts the

Greek meadows in all their sunniness, and muses about the Gods and their ways.
He laments the age with the cry -

What profit if this scientific age
Burst through our gates with all its retinue
Of modern miracles! Can it assuage
One lover's breaking heart?
What can it do
To make one life more beautiful, one day
More godlike in its period?

In his work Oscar Wilde defied his critics. His poetry was classical in nature but it was as modern as today. In the stunning villanelle, *The Harlot's House*, Wilde brings to life a startlingly impressionistic scene. It is suffused with musicality and would make a splendid masque. One can imagine it with a background of music by Stravinsky. It bears total inclusion but space forbids. The following gives a sense of that remarkable work:

Then turning to my love, I said
"The dead are dancing with the dead
The dust is whirling with the dust."
But she - she heard the violin
And left my side, and entered in;
Love passed into the house of lust.

The poets distill ideas and images from a reservoir of experience and erudition. In Wilde's case that erudition was awesome, but it was more; he saw life as a vast drama and brought to bear upon that universal stage his own wondrous visions, his love for beauty and a gentle nature. It is a mark of the timelessness of Wilde's poetry that it continues to speak to the heart and the mind. The ballads, the sonnets, the couplets, the villanelles, the longer poems - all various, all bearing his mark as the "lord of language" entrance the reader.

Only in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* do we find the horror and ignominy he suffered yet he retained his dignity and his ideals. Indeed, the gods loved him too well and during the halcyon days he was indeed their piper. In his poetry he shepherded readers and devotees into the gods' enchanted isles. When he forays elsewhere the melodies are no less insistent.

HOFSTRA GETS *EARNEST*

Vito A. Lanza

In suburban New York where classic revivals are at a premium, *The Importance of Being Earnest* made a rare visit to Long Island for three lively, well-attended performances (December 12-14, 1991) at Hofstra University, Hempstead.

OW's most popular play remains a moderate staple of college offerings despite its checkered history - the original production in 1895 last only 66 performances after the author's notorious first trial. Posterity gave it a more lasting place.

At a private academic institution which is known for its active "official" drama department and which supports at least five different theatre groups in as many divergent spaces, it seems unfortunate that *Earnest* should receive its putative Hofstra premier in the small (80 seat) Black Box Theatre at New College, its three-year bachelor's degree program for advanced students.

Luckily, the show was directed by Jeff Romano who previously performed and directed at several local community theatres before joining the New College faculty a few years ago. Under his sure hand, OW's genius thrived.

The young, all-student cast seemed to be having a great time with OW's famous epigrams, all of which were punctuated with vigour. For once, this carried through to the audience which chuckled and guffawed noticeably throughout the evening.

Using the standard three-act version without the Grisby episode and with one intermission after Act II, the evening was unexpectedly brief. The uncredited scenery consisted of several white modules situated against black walls on a black floor with the audience seated on all four sides of the action. A large tray of artificial flowers provided some needed colour for the garden in Act II (here, Scene Two) as did the costumes by Catherine Smith and Shannon Davis. It looked as though most of the apparently small budget went for them.

As for the acting: as usual, Lady Bracknell (in a sterling performance from Amy Elmore) dominated all her scenes. This seems to be OW's intention. Jack Canfora's vigorous Algernon gave her the most competition. With a thick English accent, he seemed to relish each word and provided some of the evening's largest laughs.

Kevin F. McEaney's earnest John, Katherine Clifford's winsome Gwendolen and Mitchell Tiger's innocent Cecily all contributed to the fun. It was not an evening for people looking for a darker, heavy-handed ego trip. Yet it was with Christine Lee Kinsey's Miss Prism and Vinnie Spina's Dr. Chasuble, that the director's light intentions came to the fore and showed that OW's play is capable of a broad as well as a subtle interpretation. The two young actors, playing geriatrics, panted and drooled over each other with such aplomb that the audience members roared mightily at almost every turn.

Even though no dialect coach was listed, the English accents remained relatively convincing and consistent, which is a rarity even in professional theatres. Although Romano's direction emphasized the laughs, he did not neglect the social commentary about class distinctions. After all, OW subtitled his work "a trivial play for serious people." Each important line received its due. In such a small space with all its intimacy and good acoustics, the primarily middle-class, middle-brow audience which Hofstra attracts, seemed to get each point right on cue. Talent abounded.

OW is always welcome, but it looks as though only this area's academics will give him a chance. It was good to see him finally get his due at Hofstra.



SOTHEBY LONDON SALE RESULTS, DECEMBER 1991

Lot 38 Letter concerning Wilde, from the Bankruptcy Court, signed by C.A. Pope, Assistant Official Receiver, to the publisher David Nutt, concerning the financial arrangement between Wilde and Nutt relating to the publication of *The Happy Prince*. Dated 25th September 1895. Sold for £550.

Lot 39 Oscar Wilde. Autograph letter signed to the portrait painter Jacques-Emile Blanche. No date. ?9-10 April 1883. Sold for £990.

Lot 40 Oscar Wilde. *Poems*. Author's edition, number 98 of 220 copies. Signed by the author. Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892. Sold for £550.

Lot 41 Oscar Wilde. *Poems*. Third edition. David Bogue, 1881. Also included an unpublished autograph letter signed by Wilde to the owner of this copy, Thomas Hutchinson. Unsold. Valued at £1,500 - £2,000.



OSCAR WILDE ANNUAL LITERARY MEMORIAL PRIZE

Awarded by the Oscar Wilde Society (U.K.)

The first annual Oscar Wilde Literary Memorial Prize competition is about to get under way in the United Kingdom. The competition is open to all. It is the intention of the society to select a different category for each year's contest and that the whole range of Wilde's work will be covered. The first year's category will be Children's Stories. Entries will be accepted until January 1993 and the results are expected to be announced by about April of 1993.

For further information please contact:

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England

from **The Soul of Man Under Socialism**

Oscar Wilde

... Art is the most intense mood of Individualism that the world has known ... And it is to be noted that it is the fact that Art is this intense form of Individualism that makes the public try to exercise over it an authority that is as immoral as it is ridiculous, and as corrupting as it is contemptible. It is not quite their fault. The public has always, and in every age, been badly brought up. They are continually asking Art to be popular, to please their want of taste, to flatter their absurd vanity, to tell them what they have been told before, to show them what they ought to be tired of seeing, to amuse them when they feel heavy after eating too much, and to distract their thoughts when they are wearied of their own stupidity. Now Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic ...

Of course, we have to a very great extent got rid of any attempt on the part of the community, or the Church, or the Government, to interfere with the individualism of speculative thought, but the attempt to interfere with the individualism of imaginative art still lingers. In fact, it does more than linger; it is aggressive, offensive, and brutalising.



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