

*PUBLISHED TWICE YEARLY SINCE 1986:  
19th MAY (WILDE'S RELEASE FROM GAOL)  
16th OCTOBER (WILDE'S BIRTHDAY)*



# Wild About Wilde

## Newsletter

ISSN :1068-9737

19th May 1994



Number 16

*"Something to 'Live Up' to in America." Thomas Nast in "Harper's Bazaar," June 10, 1882, celebrates Oscar Wilde's tributes to the Western miners as the "only well-dressed men I have seen in America."*

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Mills Wilde



# WILD ABOUT WILDE

ISSN: 1068-9737  
19th May 1994

Dear Wild Wildeans,

The references to Oscar Wilde met almost daily in the newspapers and on radio (many unacknowledged) reached a pinnacle of hilarity recently in the *Washington Post*. Over a large painting of President Bill Clinton ran a headline: **The Picture of Dorian Clinton**. The article, however, failed to live up to even cracked blue china as Bill Clinton predictably proved to be a far less fascinating subject than the original Dorian.

The best subject of all, it need hardly be said, remains Oscar Wilde himself. And in the name of this endless fascination we once again have a variety of articles dealing with many aspects of his life and work. A new biography of Ada Leverson, published in Britain, is reviewed on page 7 and is something that students of the 1890s will welcome.

I am also very happy to bring you Wilde's 1889 review of W. B. Yeats' collection of Irish fairy tales. In the next few issues I shall be publishing some other reviews that were printed in newspapers and journals during the 1880s and early 1890s. These book reviews of Wilde's show perspicacity and the compelling insight of the great artist that he himself was. As they not easily accessible to readers and scholars and never included in his usual works I have decided to publish some of them here.

Once again, enjoy the pleasure that Oscar Wilde always brings!

All the best,

Carmel

## IN THIS EDITION

<b>Housman and Wilde:</b> Horst Schroeder.....	2
<b>Wilde's Skin Disease:</b> Johan Nater .....	4
<b>New book on Ada Leverson:</b> Manus Nunan.....	7
<b>The Sacking of 16 Tite Street:</b> John Albert .....	8
<b>Wilde's influence on Noel Coward:</b> Vito A. Lanza .....	10
<b>Lord Alfred's Lover:</b> Michael Bertin .....	12
<b>Oscar Wilde on W.B. Yeats:</b> .....	14
<b>Contact Information:</b> .....	16

## ECHO DE LAURENCE HOUSMAN

### Horst Schroeder

In his *Echo de Paris*, "A Study of Life", Laurence Housman has given us a fascinating account of his last meeting with Oscar Wilde in Paris late in 1899. More fascinating still, from an editor's point of view, is the sketch set forth in the Foreword of his first meeting with Wilde at the beginning of the 1890s:

He (O.W.) was then at the height of his fame and success, and I an unknown beginner ( ... ). But I had recently published a short story ( ... ) in the *Universal Review*, a few minutes after our introduction Mr. Wilde turned and, addressing me for the first time, said: "And when, pray, are we to have another work from your pen?" ( ... ) I learned later that a certain descriptive phrase, "The smoke of their wood-fires lay upon the boughs, soft as the bloom upon a grape,"<sup>1</sup> had attracted him in my story; he had quoted it as beautiful, adding that one day he should use it himself, and, sure enough, in *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (sic), I came upon it not long afterwards, slightly altered.<sup>2</sup>

Memory played Housman a trick, for there is no echo of his "descriptive phrase" in *Dorian Gray*, published 24 April 1891. But there is one at the very beginning of "The Decay of Lying", the first essay of *Intentions*, published a week later, on 2 May 1891. In the original magazine edition of 1889 the essay had opened:

My dear Vivian, don't coop yourself up all day in the library. It is a perfectly lovely afternoon. Let us go and lie on the grass and smoke cigarettes and enjoy nature."

In the revised book edition of 1891 the passage is identical with the magazine version, except for the following two references inserted before the concluding sentence:

The air is exquisite. There is a mist upon the woods, like the purple bloom upon a plum."

The echo from Laurence Housman needs some qualification, however; for Wilde had come across the attractive "descriptive phrase" once before, namely in Alfred

Hayes's long narrative poem *David Westren*, as can be seen from his review (April 1888) in which he selected the phrase for laudatory quotation:

( ... ) there is a great deal in Mr. Hayes's poem that is strong and fine, and he undoubtedly possesses a fair ear for music and a remarkable faculty of poetical expression. Some of his descriptive touches of nature, such as

In meeting woods, whereon a film of mist  
Slept like the bloom upon the purple grape,

are very graceful and suggestive( ... ).<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Laurence Housman was the *causa vera* rather than the *causa causans* for the beginning of the revised version of "The Decay of Lying".

#### Notes:

1. The exact words of the sentence in Housman's short story "The Green Gaffer" are: "Above and behind the village street rises the curved slope of the woods, and the blue smoke of the wood-fires lies upon their dark boughs soft as the bloom on a grape." (*Universal Review*, vii <May 1890>, 313).
2. *Echo de Paris* (London, 1923), 13.
3. *Nineteenth Century*, xxv (Jan. 1889), 35.
4. *Oscar Wilde*, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford, 1989), 215.
5. *Reviews* (London 1908), 313.

*Dr. Horst Schroeder is a senior lecturer for English literature at the Technische Universität Braunschweig in Germany and has been working and publishing on Oscar Wilde for many years.*

## THE CAUSE OF OSCAR WILDE'S SKIN DISEASE, A NEW THEORY

### Johan Nater

During his two years in prison (May 1895 - 1897) Wilde developed ear complaints. Exact data are not available, since they were not taken seriously, but in any case he was dizzy, fell down on the floor of his prison cell and damaged his right ear. This ear kept aching, bled occasionally, discharged for several months afterwards and gradually became deaf. Wilde's medical condition remained unchanged till the end of September 1900. He developed severe headaches, evidently in combination with a worsening of his ear complaints. His physician advised an ear operation which was performed on 10 October by a surgeon in Wilde's hotel room in Paris. The relief however, was only temporary. His condition worsened from day to day, and he died on 30 November 1900. Wilde biographer Richard Ellmann believes that Wilde had syphilis and supposes that his fatal ear disease was due to tertiary syphilis. The improbability of this theory has already been discussed in a previous article, published in the October 1993 issue of this Newsletter.

In the last years of his life Oscar Wilde also developed a skin disease. It remains unclear when this dermatosis started, possibly in the Spring of 1900. During his life no diagnosis ever was made. His biographers use vague words like 'rash' and 'irritation of the skin.' Wilde himself attributed his skin problems to mussel poisoning. As he told to his friend and biographer Frank Harris; "I ate some mussels and oysters in Italy, and they must have poisoned me for I came out in great red blotches all over my arms and chest and back." The eruption itched intensely. Wilde apologized to his friend Robert (Robbie) Ross for scratching himself: "Really I'm more like a great ape than ever; but I hope you'll give me a lunch Robbie, and not a nut." An accidental witness of Wilde's skin disease was Armstrong an American college freshman on vacation in Paris. He met Wilde in the Spring of 1899 and noticed that he had powder or ointment on his face.

Summarizing these data, Wilde apparently suffered from a heavily itching skin disease, localized on his face, arms, chest and back. As has been postulated in the previous article, this skin disease was not due to a possible syphilis infection. Wilde's own diagnosis of mussel poisoning was also wrong.

In the opinion of this author a reasonable solution to this diagnostic riddle is possible. This solution is based on a footnote in a letter of Wilde's friend Robert

Ross. This footnote apparently up till now escaped attention. The letter was published in an appendix to Harris's biography of Wilde. In this letter from Ross to Harris an account is given of Oscar's last days. In Ross's report on Wilde's condition on 29 October he notes: "I noticed for the first time that his hair was

lightly tinged with grey, I had always remarked that his hair had never altered its colour while he was in Reading; it retained its soft brown tone. You must remember he jests he used to make about it, he always amused his warders by saying that his hair was perfectly white." In a reaction to this observation Harris remarks: "I noticed at Reading that his hair was getting grey in front and at the sides but when we met later the grey had disappeared. I thought he used some dye. I only mention this to show how two good witnesses can differ on a plain matter of fact."

Grey hair of course does not disappear spontaneously. Wilde, about 40 years of age, was the most famous playboy of the nineties. He was a dandy, proud of his clothing and his beautiful thick brown hair. It is quite reasonable to assume that his hair was getting rapidly grey under the circumstances of his imprisonment and that he (unknown to his friends) used hair dye to conceal this fact. That also explains his otherwise incomprehensible joke in Reading Gaol about the real colour of his hair. Only the warders knew his secret; he was speaking the truth! (It is interesting, but of course quite coincidental, that in this same period, the author Arthur Conan Doyle published the story "The Tragedy of the Korosko." In this story the cessation of the use of a hair dye by one of the personages leads to a -somewhat-similar confusion among the others. Conan Doyle published this story in 1898).

This author assumes that Wilde, in colouring his hair under primitive circumstances, (in a hotel room or in prison) at a certain moment got sensitized to the dye. Most dyes available in those days were based on p-phenylenediamine (PPDA). PPDA was developed in 1883 by the German chemist Erdmann as a cheap and efficient synthetic dye for the colouring of fur and human hair. In a short time it became very popular. It is easily applied, the colour is formed within the hair cortex and will withstand several washes. The chief drawback of these dyes is their allergenicity. PPDA is a potent contact allergen. It belongs to the top twenty most potent contact allergenic chemicals. Their use nowadays is forbidden. Many users developed a heavily itching, stubborn dermatitis on the place of contact, and in some cases also elsewhere on the body. This is especially the case if the hair is not correctly dyed. Not fully oxidized dye will result in residues of unreacted PPDA, which will enhance the chance of sensitization and the chance of spreading of the eczematous reaction in already sensitized individuals.

In case of sensitization to a chemical not only the place of contact but the entire skin becomes sensitized. Any contact leads to the development of a contact dermatitis: in the case of a hair dye localized on the scalp and spreading to the face, the eyelids, ears, temples, neck, etc. There is also a tendency of spreading to other localizations which have not been in contact with the allergen (so called id reactions) and even generalization, especially in cases in which the cause is not found and the skin remains in contact with the allergen. This "boosters" the skin reactions.

The diagnosis allergic contact dermatitis can nowadays be proven by a skin test on

allergy (patch testing) but this method was still an unknown procedure in those days. An indication in the direction of this diagnosis would be the demonstration of rests of PPDA in a lock of hair, but this is, of course, only possible if there is still some hair of the poet available.

*Dr. Johan Nater is professor of dermatology and venereology (ret.) at Groningen State University (Netherlands). A previous article of his dealing with Oscar Wilde and syphilis appeared in the October 1993 issue of this publication.*



Wonderful Sphinx: The biography of Ada Levenson  
by Julie Speedie

Published in Britain by Virago Press £17.99

### **Review by Manus Nunan**

We have had to wait a long time for a biography of Oscar Wilde's sphinx. Her unique account of the early morning meeting with Wilde in Stuart Headlam's house in Bloomsbury on the day of his release from prison 19 May 1897 gives her an immortal place in the history of literature. "He came in with the dignity of a king returning from exile. He came in talking, laughing, smoking a cigarette .... His first words were 'Sphinx, how marvellous of you to know exactly the right hat to wear at seven o'clock in the morning to meet a friend who has been away. You can't have got up, you must have sat up'."

Ada Levenson was the daughter of a prosperous, cultivated Jewish family and wife of a diamond merchant in the City of London. Her marriage was a disappointment, but her salon was brilliant and enduring and included not only the bright stars of the 'nineties but reached to the time of Harold Acton, William Walton, Somerset Maugham and the Sitwells. It says something for her tact that she was able to maintain friendly relations with both Robert Ross and Alfred Douglas.

Although chiefly remembered for her friendship and unwavering loyalty to Wilde, who called her the wittiest woman in the world, Ada Levenson was in fact a writer and novelist of importance in her time. Osbert Sitwell writing her obituary in *The Times* said: "Her books, for the most part published between 1900 and 1914, are delightful reflections of her witty, sympathetic personality and a lively record of the Edwardian period in which they were written." Her six novels were reissued in the 1950s. The three tales that make up *The Little Ottleys* were reissued in 1982. These humourous lighthearted works make a distinct contribution to the twentieth century novel.

Julie Speedie's book is a beautifully written account of a fascinating woman who was described by Grant Richards as "The Egeria of the whole 'nineties movement." It will be essential reading for the students of that period.

*Manus Nunan is an Irishman living in the French Pyrenees. He travels and lectures on Oscar Wilde.*

## THE SACKING OF 16 TITE STREET, LONDON: 24 APRIL 1895

John Albert

Christians, they crashed down the doors of the infidel. Crusaders, they sacked the shrine of genius and family innocence. Their mood, blazing righteousness, their stance, "See what he's done!" VOX POPULI

With Holy Gospel in attendance and armed escorts of the Law, they looted. Up walkways of travertine, along sage-green walled corridors, believers and bribers, they battered and shattered with tainted curiosity. RES GENTES

Through flaming peacock passageways, past porphyry Adonis pedestalled, they pushed and rushed to where, they thought, each next beautiful mesmerizing Sphinx once did slink to fever his imagination. "See what he's become!" VOX POPULI

Cyril's knights and little Vyvyan's castles crafted of child's dreams turned auction blocks and dungeons of boyhood's horror in one lewd touch. Iron bolts bar nothing when locks to alabaster hearts lie rent. RES GENTES

*Editions de luxe* and love letters to Constance in a leather case of blue, yellow books of prose and verse inscribed, "From the Author to His Bride," "From a Poet to a Poem" taken. "He's no right to privacy now." VOX POPULI

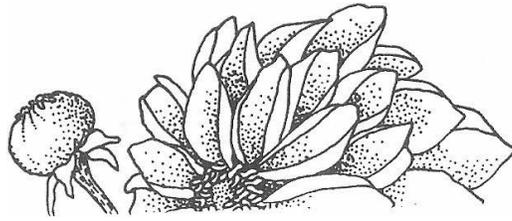
At 16 Tite Street, they brawled and they bartered, they clattered and shattered until Chelsea's sad sun sank wet under webbed silhouettes of Royal Albert Bridge. "He must go in disgrace, and far from the Crown." RES GENTES VOX POPULI

From 16 Tite Street to Reading Gaol, from Dieppe to Berneval-sur-mer, Posilippo to the Alps to Paris, they pressed him with brandished bigotry. Emerald Dublin would not have him alive, nor Golden Oxford. Scarlet Rome, only as he died.

"Do you realize now what Hate blinding a person is?" Morality's out-cast asked. "An atrophy destructive of everything but itself," his remembrance of '95. Christians, keep this Anniversary!

RES GENTES VOX POPULI DE PROFUNDIS

*John Albert is a Trappist monk living in The Monastery of the Holy Spirit, Conyers, Georgia. He submitted this poem to be reproduced with permission from his collection of **Poems** published in 1993.*



### SOME WILDE NEWS

New book on Speranza:

Joy Melville's *Mother of Oscar, the Ufe of Jane Francesca Wilde* is due to be published in Britain in June 1994. It is hoped that further information on this interesting publication will be featured in the next issue of WAW (October 1994).

### Visiting Dublin?

The Oscar Wilde Society would be pleased to hear from anyone planning a trip there. They meet the second Sunday of every month in the museum room of Bewley's Cafe, Grafton Street. Anyone interested should call there on these Sunday afternoons. You may also wish to contact Joan de Freyne, "Aisling", Cuala road, Bray, Co. Wicklow, Ireland. tel: 01 2864005.

## NOEL COWARD AND OSCAR WILDE

**Vito A. Lanza**

Very few Wild Wildeans know Noel Coward's musical adaptation of *Lady Windermere's Fan* called *After the Ball*. It ran for some months on the West End in 1954 and was the last Coward musical launched in London rather than Broadway (where it never played).

Bandwagon of Vintage Musicals (P.O. Box 132/ Times Square Station/ NYC 10108), a 16 year old group specializing in revivals, gave the show its New York premier in a staged, costumed reading as a fund- raiser on June 7, 1993 at the Good Shepherd Faith Church near Lincoln Center.

Veteran performer Tammy Grimes opened the event with her reminiscences of Coward who personally chose her to play the title role in *Look after Lulu*.

Paula Laurence, another vintage stage actress who also know Coward personally, served as host-narrator and played the Duchess of Berwick. She brought down the house with the song "Something on a Tray." Others in the 13 member cast in which *OWs* gossipy party goers became the singing chorus, included young Equity performers. Jerry Bell, the group's indefatigable producer and former Broadway dancer, directed the musical numbers with additional staging by Sheila Smith, another Broadway regular. Paulina Kent Dennis designed the gowns for Lady Windermere (Margaret Burnham) and Mrs. Erlynne (SuEllen Estey). The men wore evening dress, and the remaining ladies donned costumes from Bandwagon's past production of *Florodora*. Buck Bucholz, Edward B. Guttman and C. Colby Sachs alternated ably on the piano.

Writing in his diaries\* about the original production, Coward felt the show "really is up my musical alley" and later termed the enterprise "very good indeed" containing "some of the best lyrics I have ever written."

During the troubled tryouts in the provinces, he noticed "something not quite right" despite "capacity business." The "orchestra was appalling, the orchestrations beneath contempt, and poor Norman (Hackforth) conducted like a stick of wet asparagus." After many rewrites including all the orchestrations the author concluded that "the more Coward we can get into the script and the more Wilde we can eliminate, the happier we shall be."

Things did not actually turn out that way. One third of the score was also jettisoned to Coward's dismay, leaving about 20 musical numbers in three long acts. After finally opening to a favourable press and later closing in London, the production then toured with some success.

At that time there was talk of an American run in a tent in summer stock in the round. Coward expressed some doubts about this in his diaries but made no further mention of it.

The Original-London-Cast recording in Phillips (E) BBL-70005 has been out of print for decades and is very difficult to find in the second-hand stores at any price. There is no CD re-issue yet. Bandwagon's revival, which was intended to honour Coward not Wilde, contained five songs not on the LP. Doubleday published an anthology of most of Coward's lyrics, The long section on *After the Ball* makes no mention of OW at all. For some reason the Bandwagon cast carried photocopies of OWs play instead of Cole Leslie's adaptation, thus making it impossible to judge the book's merits. Most of the dialogue was cut anyway.

Warner Chappell Music Company holds the performance rights in this country, and it is to be hoped that some enterprising organization will give the show a full American staging soon.

\*All quotations are from Noel Coward's Diaries edited by Payne and Morley. published by Little, Brown & Co., 1982.

*Vito Lanza lives in New York and is a regular contributor to this publication.*

**Lord Alfred's Lover:  
written by Eric Bentley**

Review by **Michael Bertin**

It shouldn't strike us as anything but coincidental that Eric Bentley and Richard Ellmann both turned to Oscar Wilde late in their distinguished careers. Yet when we reflect upon their shared beginnings as Yale classmates of the Forties, coincidence begins to look like fate. For it was there that a somewhat shy and confused Bentley made a pass at an undeniably scandalized biographer to be, and it was from there that two men set out in search of Oscar Wilde.

Richard Ellmann was dying in the Spring of 1987 as he struggled to complete the biography his estate would publish the following year as *Oscar Wilde*. In the event, it was unmistakably his; a book of wondrous details elegantly diverted into the rush of the poet's life. His retelling of the trials of Oscar Wilde, however, was unavoidably his sorrow as well, for his identification with the hero led to the deathbed. The cause of Wilde's demise and Ellmann's courage notwithstanding, we cannot accept his final image of Wilde expiring in a syphilitic agony as our own. Against the sentence of history, the vital protest of art restores our self-respect, for we are human and demand a human justification.

It was April 1993 when I wandered down to Miami, Florida and to the New World School of the Arts to attend a Bentley conference. While I was there I had the good fortune to see a staged reading of his play *Lord Alfred's Lover* directed by Phillip M. Church and performed by actors from Florida International University. This was the theatre of commitment with a graceful twist, the actors contributing that special brio of Wildean wit and charm; while Mr. Church, ever the gracious host, established a society which he then introduced to our own. But best of all, he let Eric Bentley act, inviting his performance of, no, not Oscar Wilde, but of Lord Alfred Douglas, the notorious Bosie of Queensberry fame.

Now it is true that the names we assign to artistic forms are often disguises for autobiographies, and if Ellmann sees himself in Wilde, so does Bentley; except Bentley also identifies with Bosie. In other words, he sees them both from inside the homosexual experience; his breathing witness to prejudice being the image of their living hell. His master stroke is to have the aging Bosie "tell" the story of the trials through the expedient of his confession to a priest, and he thereby wins sympathy for the man. The old truant muses nostalgically on his youthful indiscretion, and he reveals some startling news: He and Oscar were not lovers at all but only in love. It gives a whole new slant to the prosecution, which now becomes a savage act directed against all men (Wilde and the rent-boys merely indulging in intercourse and we make too much of intercourse).

The title is ironic, implying that Wilde is not yet himself; while the action forms his decision to be honest come what may. Since the audience reads the title for their definition of Wilde, Bentley establishes Wilde against their reading, for the notorious homosexual is their creation, his notoriety being their contribution to history. They would prefer the portrait of a self-destructive man, which absolves them of guilt. They get the soul of their victim, which does not. Imagine their plea "you must do as I say, not as I do," and you will have the argument in a nutshell. But see them winking as they indulge in the best kept secrets and you will gain an insight into what hit Wilde.

His crime was to expose himself, which in turn exposed the whole rotten fabric of the double-dealing double-life, and as he dragged Mr. Hyde screaming into the light of day, every Dr. Jekyll took aim. Since the Good Doctor's club comprised influential homosexuals, they did not thank him for his pains. Threatened by their association with Wilde, they affected a dissociation of sensibility instead, thinking one thought but feeling another.

Of course it is rash of Bentley to suggest that gay Prime Minister Rosebery conspired against Wilde, but it's a quibble given his fine scene of them at Reading Gaol. We can argue their imaginary conversation never took place, but as the conversation of character and doubt it takes place everyday in the besieged mind.

To have seen the playwright act in his own play was remarkable. His voice halting over the remembrance of trials past, his gift was personal: The freedom to be Wilde, a human right if ever there was one.

*Michael Bertin teaches at New World School of the Arts in Miami, Florida where he recently was dramaturge in a production of The Oresteia which was directed by Jorge Guerra, dean of the school.*

## WILDE ON W.B. YEATS AND IRISH FAIRY TALES

An extract from an article written by Oscar Wilde and first published in *Woman's World*, February, 1889 under the title "Irish Fairy Tales."

"The various collectors of Irish folk-lore," says Mr. W.B. Yeats in his charming little book *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, "have, from our point of view one great merit, and from the point of view of others, one great fault."

*They have made their work literature rather than Science, and told us of the Irish peasantry rather than of the primitive religion of mankind, or whatever else the folk-lorist are on the gad after. To be considered scientists they should have tabulated all their tales in forms like grocers' bills - item the fairy king, item the queen. Instead of this they have caught the very voice of the people, the very pulse of life, each giving what was most noticed in his day. Crocker and Lover, full of the ideas of harum-scarum Irish gentility, saw everything humourized. The impulse of the Irish literature of their time came from a class that did not - mainly for political reasons - take the populace seriously, and imagined the country as a humourist's Arcadia; its passion, its gloom, its tragedy, they knew nothing of. What they did was not wholly false; they merely magnified an irresponsible type, found oftenest among boatmen, carmen, and gentlemen's servants; into the type of a whole nation, and created the stage Irishman.*

*The writers of 'Forty-eight and the famine combined, burst their bubble. Their work had the dash as well as the shallowness of an ascendant and idle class, and in Crocker is touched everywhere with beauty - a gentle Arcadian beauty. Carleton, a peasant born, has in many of his stories a much more serious way with him, for all his humour. Kennedy, an old bookseller in Dublin, who seems to have had a something of genuine belief in the fairies, comes next in time. He has far less literary faculty, but is wonderfully accurate, giving often the very words the stories were told in. But the best book since Crocker is Lady Wilde's **Ancient Legends**. The humour has all given way to pathos and tenderness. We have here the innermost heart of the Celt in the moments he has grown to love through years of persecution, when, cushioning himself about with dreams, and hearing fairy-songs in the twilight, he ponders on the soul and on the dead. Here is the Celt, only it is the Celt dreaming.*

Into a volume of very moderate dimensions, and of extremely moderate price, Mr. Yeats has collected together the most characteristic of our Irish folk-lore stories, grouping them together according to subject. First come *The Trooping Fairies*. The

peasants say that these are "fallen angels who were not good enough to be saved, nor bad enough to be lost"; but the Irish antiquarians see in them "the gods of pagan Ireland," who, "when no longer worshipped and fed with offerings, dwindled away in popular imagination, and now are only a few spans high."

Their chief occupations are feasting, dancing, making love and playing the most beautiful music. "They have only one industrious person amongst them, the *lepra-caun* - the shoemaker." It is his duty to repair their shoes, when they wear them out with dancing. Mr. Yeats tells us that "near the village of Ballisodare is a little woman who lived amongst them seven years. When she came home she had no toes - she had danced them off". On May Eve every seventh year they fight for the harvest, for the best ears of grain belong to them. An old man informed Mr. Yeats that he saw them fight once, and that they tore the thatch off a house. "Had anyone else been near they would merely have seen a great wind whirling everything into the air as it passed." When the wind drives the leaves and straws before it, "that is the fairies, and the peasants take off their hats and say 'God bless them.'" When they are gay, they sing. Many of the most beautiful tunes of Ireland "are only their music, caught up by eavesdroppers." No prudent peasant would hum *The Pretty Girl Milking the Cow* near a fairy rath "for they are jealous, and do not like to hear their songs on clumsy mortal lips." Blake once saw a fairy's funeral. But this, as Mr. Yeats paints out, must have been an English fairy, for the Irish fairies never die; they are immortal...

... Some of the prettiest stories are those that cluster round Tír na nÓg. This is the Country of the Young, "for age and death have not found it, neither tears nor loud laughter have gone near it." "One man had gone there and returned. The bard, Oisln, who wandered away on a white horse, moving on the surface of the foam with his fairy Niamh, lived there three hundred years, and then returned looking for his comrades. The moment his foot touched the earth his three hundred years fell on him, and he was bowed double, and his beard swept the ground. He described his sojourn in the Land of Youth to Patrick before he died." ...

... Mr. Yeats has certainly done his work very well. He has shown great critical capacity in his selection of the stories, and his little introductions are charmingly written. It is delightful to come across a collection of purely imaginative work and Mr. Yeats has a very quick instinct in finding out the best and the most beautiful things in Irish folk-lore.

from *De Profundis*

... Of late I have been studying the four prose poems about Christ with some diligence. At Christmas I managed to get hold of a Greek Testament, and every morning, after I have cleaned my cell and polished my tins, I read a little of the Gospels, a dozen verses taken by chance anywhere. It is a delightful way of opening the day. To you, in your turbulent, ill-disciplined life it would be a capital thing if you would do the same. It would do you no end of good, and the Greek is quite Simple. Endless repetition, in and out of season, had spoiled for us the *naïveté*, the freshness, the simple romantic charm of the Gospels. We hear them read too often, and far too badly, and all repetition is anti-spiritual. When one returns to the Greek it is like going into a garden of lilies out of some narrow and dark house ...

OSCAR WILDE



\*\*\*\*\*

Copyright © 1994 Carmel McCaffrey  
Editor and Publisher

Except for reference purposes no reproduction of any kind without the permission  
of the publisher

<https://carmelmccaffrey.com/>

*Wild About Wilde Newsletter* is listed in the *Modern Language Association [MLA]*  
*International Bibliography* and the *MLA Directory of Periodicals* under the  
acronym WAWN.