

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Mills Wilde

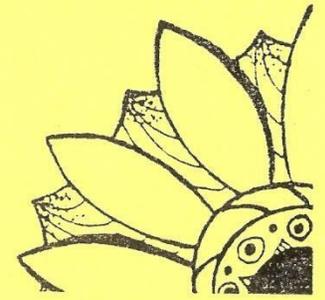


Number 1

Wild About Wilde
Newsletter

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Dear Wild Wildeans,

Here we go in our embryonic state beginning a newsletter on the adorable Oscar. Hopefully we shall grow in number and enthusiasm as time progresses. As the more astute of you will see the date on the cover, October 16th, is Oscar's birthday. I could not resist using that date!

Let me say straight away that I would be very happy to hear from any of you about ideas you might have for future editions and I urge everyone to submit something, however humble you might consider the effort, for inclusion.

In this our first edition we have two articles. The first, I am very honoured to say, is from the author Robert Reilly whose novel on Oscar's life, *The God of Mirrors*, is a real delight. I asked him how he got interested in Oscar and his answer appears here. The second article is from Sylvia Day who absolutely insists that she is "not a scholar" but who nevertheless writes a very effective piece on *Lady Windermere's Fan*. I hope you will all enjoy reading these and that they will inspire you to submit your own thoughts and ideas on Oscar and share them with us.

That is what I hope to accomplish with this newsletter: a sharing of our love and admiration for Oscar Wilde.

The cover design is by a very clever artist Jyll Kossoris who is an admirer of Aubrey Beardsley and whose style is reminiscent of him. I like her delicate lines, don't you?

Now I must tell you about a very exciting thing that happened to me this past summer when a bid I submitted to Sotheby's was accepted and I became the proud owner of one of Oscar's letters.

It is a small petit bleu written from the Hotel d'Alsace, the hotel Wilde died in, to Carlos Blacker. I was, as you can imagine, absolutely thrilled to bits when I called Sotheby's after the auction and learned that I had been successful in getting the letter. Things however, were not as simple as they seemed and I had to wait an agonizing three months for them to obtain an export license before the precious letter could be sent to me! Of course I adore it and in the words of Oscar when speaking with justifiable pride of another letter of his said, "A man who was not an artist could not have written that letter".

Nonetheless the story was not without a funny enough ending. When the wonderful day dawned at last and I went to the post office to pick up my prize I couldn't contain my joy and blurted out to the postmaster that there was one of Oscar Wilde's letters in the package I was signing for. He gave me a blank stare and muttered, "Oh yeah?". Realizing the obviously limited experience of this dear man I attempted to jog his memory and added, "You know,

the author, the poet". He continued to give me a blank stare but humoured me with "How about that?"

Well Wildeans, how about that, and how about this newsletter? Write and let me know your reaction. Again, I want to encourage you to join in and submit something for future editions.

We all have something to say and something to bring to others. As the charming Oscar himself said, "the basis of literary friendship is mixing the poisoned bowl". Welcome to our literary group!

Carmel McCaffrey

And remember.....

Give me the luxuries, and anyone can have the necessities.

Misfortunes one can endure- they come from outside, they are accidents. But to suffer for one's own faults - ah! there is the sting of life!

You can't go anywhere without meeting clever people. The thing has become an absolute public nuisance. I wish to goodness we had a few fools left.

Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

I sometimes think that God in creating man, somewhat overestimated His ability.

When people agree with me I always feel that I must be wrong.

Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast.

The old believe everything; the middle-aged suspect everything; the young know everything.

It is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.

The public is wonderfully tolerant. It forgives everything except genius.

Industry is the root of all ugliness.

Experience is the name men give to their mistakes.

I keep on building castles of faerie gold in the air; we Celts always do.

.... there is no end to Oscar, he is a constant delight.

WRITING THE GOD OF MIRRORS

Robert Reilly

Critics have been kind to *The God of Mirrors*. They have called it powerful, subtle, exquisite, well researched, a true picture of Oscar Wilde and his times.

Nevertheless, there is one question I am asked repeatedly. Why, instead of a fictionalized version of his life, did I not write a bona fide biography of Wilde?

Behind the question is an unspoken judgment: biographical fiction - even if it should be deemed excellent - is in some way less “real”, less accurate than biography. I am intrigued by this distinction, because it recalls the soul-searching I had to do before I undertook to write *The God of Mirrors*.

I was living in Paris at the time, and happened by chance one day to walk past the hotel where Wilde had died. I noticed on the plaque there that the anniversary of his death was a few weeks away, and decided to do a short piece on Wilde for the *International Herald Tribune*.

When I began researching the article, I was astonished at how many biographies had been written, and the way they often contradicted each other. Many of the personalities in the Wilde legend - his wife Constance and the Marquess of Queensberry in particular - seemed, on the evidence given, unfathomable.

The thing that struck me, reading all those biographies, critiques and memoirs, was that there were aspects of Wilde's life too rich, too monumental, to be contained within the boundaries of conventional biography.

Again and again I was put in mind of tragedies of Shakespeare. The grandeur of Wilde's rise, the solemn inevitability of his fall, seemed to cry out for dramatic expression. Surely Wilde fits the A.E. Bradley definition of a classic Shakespearean hero: an extraordinary person with a tragic flaw that eventually brings about his destruction.

Again, as in the best of Shakespeare's plays, Wilde's rush towards doom has about it an innate quality of suspense. It “builds”, accelerates, very much like *Othello's*.

Then why not write a play about him? Because I felt that an essential element of the Wilde legend is decorative. He loved the surfaces of things - rooms, chinaware, costumes. The limited possibilities for recreating the excesses of late Victorian England on a stage discouraged me.

Also I wanted to engage as far as possible the reader's imagination. I wanted people to be not only affected by Wilde's life but as far as possible drawn into it, to experience it for themselves. I wanted them to stand in the dock beside Wilde, forced to question their own

moral standards, their own capacities to condemn or condone. The solitary, hermetic experience of reading a novel seemed the ideal way to make this happen.

And so, after much thought, I chose the novel form not, certainly, because I wanted to stretch the truth,. but because I wanted as far as possible to compress it. I had learned long before that fiction is not something “unreal”, that good fiction is, in fact, reality distilled.

A biography sets up between reader and story the mediating figure of the biographer. In fiction - especially since the models set by Flaubert and Joyce - a cardinal law is that the writer must become invisible. Readers must confront characters exactly as if they were meeting them, and form their own judgment of their actions.

In this I feel I have had some success, since each reader of *The God Of Mirrors* seems to come away with a different impression of it. One critic finds my Oscar Wilde powerful and seductive, another sees him as fragile and neurotic; for one he is a corruptor of society, for another a victim of it; some see him falling helplessly into the coils of his destiny while for others he blazes the trail of his own self-destruction. The other major characters, too, have aroused contradictory responses. Nothing could please me more.

Thomas Mann once said that a relationship between any two people always involves a third: a new person they create between them. This third person, Mann said, is what the relationship is really about.

I believe the same is true for fiction. A reader reacts to a character in a book with all the strengths and weaknesses of the reader's own personality. In effect, readers create from fictional characters new people who are part fiction and partly themselves. Our response to an authentic novel is as complex as our reactions on meeting a new set of people.

And so, when people make comments to me about *The God of Mirrors*, I am not interested so much in the observations they are making about Oscar and Bosie and Constance and Robbie and all the rest - but rather in what they are saying about themselves.

And maybe the thing that makes Oscar Wilde such a perennially interesting figure is that everyone, negatively or positively, sees some aspect of their own personality in his.

SOME NOTES ON LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN

Sylvia Day

However we unsatisfactorily describe the genius, there is merit in the view that whatever it is that enables an individual to endow his age with a fresher insight and a seeming change by virtue of the creative distillation of imagination, knowledge and experience, which he transforms into the visionary, must constitute an acceptable definition of that much debated word. Yet in providing us with glimpses into new realms of knowing and feeling, it is a commonplace that too frequently the genius is not only misunderstood but made the object of censure and even scorn.

Oscar Wilde, although hailed for his genius by many of his contemporaries at the height of his powers, had long been the object of much censure and even later, self-appointed critics, their perception blunted by the commonplace, have had the temerity to pass judgment on an individual whose work will prevail long after his detractors have perished. Wilde has been deplorably misunderstood in later years and textbooks on drama have failed to consider him more than a dilettante. In *Aspects of Drama* (Holt Rhinehart, 1960) in an introduction to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde's plays are perceived as merely "symbolizing a fin-de-siecle decadence".

In an earlier collection, a dubious critic in his forward to *Lady Windermere's Fan* (Great English Plays with Three Representative Plays of the 19th Century, Harper, 1928) dismisses Wilde with even poorer judgment through a series of preposterous phrases such as "... (there is) something in him (Wilde) we do not trust ..." or that in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde ".....merely grafts a sentimental interest on a comic theme..." Surely it can only be presumed that such an uncritical mind, arrogant rather than objective, prefers phrasemaking to thoughtful analysis.

This critic, too, further attempts to belittle Wilde by comparing him with the "then" upcoming George Bernard Shaw who, it is insisted, will eclipse Wilde. Posterity has not yet given its judgment and it is a fact that since Shaw's death his work, admirable a body of writing that it is, has failed to hold the interest it did in his lifetime.

Inappropriate as it is to make a comparison between Shaw and Wilde, in any reading of the works of both writers, the genius of Wilde is clearly established. This is clearly exemplified in the manner in which both dramatists deal with the theme of the "wayward" mother who, for one reason or another, is separated from her daughter during the young woman's early years. Shaw, in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* treats the matter in an almost banal manner. When Mrs. Warren finally admits her unsavory past, she succeeds in destroying all that she had sought to gain by her long silence.

Wilde, on the other hand, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, executed this difficult subject with a delicacy and sentience that lifts the play to the height of tragedy. The “comic overtone” the critic claimed to find in the play merely exhibits his failure to read the work with the seriousness it demands. It is moot here to labor the point that Shaw was incapable of creating a Mrs. Erlynne. She lies outside the range of Shavian womankind. There is a certain androgynous quality about his men and women which blots the necessary shadings of his characters.

In Mrs. Erlynne we have a woman who truly gave up all for love but she does not cloy us with a predictable sentimentality. Few women can leave their children and few do, but for those who are swept away by a passion, the pain of the loss of child or children becomes inevitably devastating. If our critic fails to perceive the profound nature of maternal love beneath the verbal sparring between Mrs. Erlynne and Lord Windermere in the monumental last act it is only because the critic accepts the sole cliché of Wilde's wit as the determining factor in his work and has no ear for its subtleties.

This act of *Lady Windermere's Fan* remains as powerful and great in its delineation of mother love as any in literature. The dialogue between Mrs. Erlynne and Lord Windermere offers a rare coupling of wit and heroic renunciation. What seems so superficial and lighthearted is the art of a genius who draws inspiration from the awesome depths of feeling and imagination. In Mrs. Erlynne's response to Lord Windermere, imploring him not to reveal her relationship to her daughter, Wilde puts aside levity; here he demonstrates the rich strata of feeling that underlies this work.

Lady Windermere's Fan is not a period piece as has been claimed; its charm and humor relieve it from datedness. Rather it has a recognizable universality, even in the “age of feminism”. Women leave their children from time to time. Those with conscience will eventually suffer remorse; for those without conscience the children will suffer. In this beautifully conceived play we observe the lineaments of the timelessness of maternal love exquisitely portrayed with the grace that distinguishes Wilde above all others. The play needs no defense but rather ought to be performed frequently and brought to the attention of modern audiences. And certainly read!

SOME RESULTS FROM THE JULY SOTHEBY'S SALE

One of the most interesting items was a previously unpublished poem of Wilde's called "Heart's Yearnings". It was written while he was at Magdalen College, Oxford and the catalogue gave the first stanza as:

Surely to me the world is all too drear,
To shape my sorrow to a tuneful strain,
It is enough for wearied ears to hear The
Passion-Music of a fevered brain,
Or low complainings of a heart's pain.

It was withdrawn at \$13,000. It had an expected range of \$28,000 to \$35,000

Another unique item was a water colour painted by Wilde called "View from Moytura House". It is believed to be the oily water colour that he painted. Moytura House was the Wilde family holiday house in rural Ireland.

It was withdrawn at \$9,000 and had an expected range of \$14,000 to \$21,000.

A hand written autograph copy of his poem called "The Harlot's House" met with some success.

It sold for \$22,000

A series of six original photographs of the first production of "Lady Windermere's Fan" with George Alexander as Lord Windermere and Lily Hanbury as Lady Windermere.

They sold as a unit for \$2,500

Programmes for the first and last performances of the original production of "The Importance of Being Earnest" one dated Thursday, February 14th, 1895 and the other reading "Tonight at 9, Last Night of The Importance of Being Earnest, 1895".

They sold as a unit for \$1,400

Twelve page letter to Carlos Blacker written less than two months after his release from Reading Gaol. In this letter Wilde expresses his constant concern about money and outlines his literary intentions. He also gives Blacker his adopted name: Monsieur Sebastian Melmoth. It is printed in "The Letters" edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, pp. 621-622.

It sold for \$28,000

First edition, "The Happy Prince and Other Tales". Number 55 of 75 on hand-made paper, signed by Wilde.

It sold for \$5,000

"The Ballad of Reading Gaol", third edition, number 3 of 99 signed by Wilde and inscribed "To Carlos Blacker from his friend the author, Paris 98. Oscar Wilde".

It sold for \$5,600

Visiting card used by Wilde after his release from prison: "Mr. Sebastian Melmoth, Berneval-sur-Mer, pres Dieppe.

It sold for \$600

Newdigate Prize poem. "Ravenna". Recited in the Theatre at Oxford, June 26, 1878. First edition, Oxford 1878. Also in this lot a first edition of "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young". Number 54 of 75 copies, 1894.

sold as a unit for \$280

These are just some of the more interesting results of the auction. As you can gather a lot of the articles, though by no means all, were previously the property of the Carlos Blacker family. The water-colour is owned by the granddaughter of Mrs. Bram Stoker who was an early love of Oscar's.

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