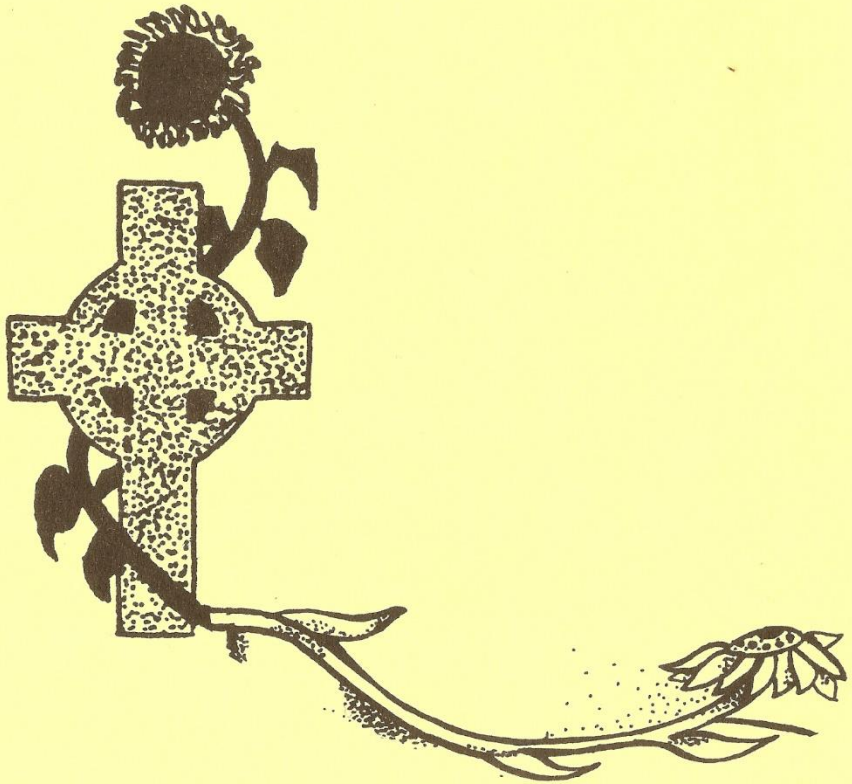

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Wild About Wilde

Newsletter

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Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde

WILD ABOUT WILDE

Dear Wild Wildeans,

Interest in Oscar Wilde seems to be on an upturn judging from the amount of activity both in the production of his work to works about his life going on around the country. Perhaps it is the influence of Richard Ellmann's biography or perhaps the public is at last realizing the genius of a great artist but whatever the reason there seems scarcely enough space here to talk about it all. But let us sincerely hope that the whole thing does not get too far out of control. Oscar would never approve: "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." Well, it would seem from the usual nightly television fare in this country we still do!

In Dublin recently there was a ballet performance in the Gaiety Theatre on the life of Wilde and Steven Berkoff's *Salome* was back at the Gate Theatre by what the management described as "popular demand." The ballet was dream-like and beautiful with a hint of pantomime and Berkoff's *Salome,* which was slow-danced throughout by all the actors, was sensuous, sexual and utterly delightful. *An Ideal Husband* opened at the Gate Theatre at the end of March and is expected to run into the summer months. Of course appreciation and affection for Wilde have always been high in his native city but here in the United States there are also signs that his work is at last gaining in esteem. Reviews carried in this edition reflect some of this Wilde enthusiasm.

Last November the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre in Waterford, Connecticut hosted a play called *Wilde About Oscar* on the life of Oscar Wilde written and directed by Richard Digby Day and performed by the Connecticut College Department of Theatre and I hope in a future edition to have more information on this production and others of Wilde interest put on by the College.

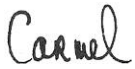
But the most pleasant thing that I have to talk about is that a very special person, Merlin Holland, Oscar Wilde's grandson, has sent me an article which he wrote on the cause of Oscar's death and is in fact a response to the Ellmann view of Wilde's last illness. The article first appeared in *The Spectator* magazine in Britain last December but this is the first time that it is being published in the U.S. I know it is of very great interest to all to read what he has to say because so many people were unhappy with Richard Ellmann's stated opinion on the syphilis question. It is very generous of Mr. Holland to share this with us and I thank him.

Now for some news on recent publications. Last summer I came across a book called *An Angel for a Martyr* dealing with the history of John Epstein's tomb for Oscar Wilde in Pere Lachaise, Paris. For anyone interested in this subject the book is detailed and unique. It

is not available in the United States but can be ordered from Jacqueline Wesley, Antiquarian and Secondhand Books, 75 Camberley House, Redhill Street, London NW1 4AX. A catalogue on 1890s books is available upon request. Also of interest to Wildeans is the news that *Son of Oscar Wilde*, written by Oscar's son Vyvyan Holland, has been reprinted by Oxford University Press in paperback with a new foreword by Merlin Holland. It is available at some bookshops in the United States or by calling OUP in New York toll free tel: 1 800451 7556 or 1 212 796 8000 ext. 5182.

Write or call me with any suggestions for upcoming editions. Send in an essay! Generosity is the essence of friendship!

All the best,



Carmel

IN THIS ISSUE

WHAT KILLED OSCAR WILDE?

MERLIN HOLLAND

Good biography is like good journalism; you have to know just how much fable you can mix with your facts. Richard Ellmann spent 20 years of his life trying to get the proportions right in his Oscar Wilde, hailed on both sides of the Atlantic as a biographical masterpiece and undoubtedly destined to become the definitive work on Wilde. However, there is a point on which the record needs to be set straight before Ellmann's view of it becomes ineradicably canonised. It is one of the matters in which I believe he has misjudged those proportions and where his conjectures go far beyond what proven facts justify. Did Oscar Wilde have syphilis and was it the cause of his death? Ellmann believes he did and bases his belief on statements by Robert Ross and Reggie Turner, Wilde's close friends at the time of his death, on the report of the doctors who attended Wilde and on the biographies written by Arthur Ransome and Frank Harris which Ross supposedly oversaw.

On the face of it, so much evidence looks pretty conclusive, but scratch the surface and flaws in the argument appear at once. In the first edition of *Oscar Wilde* in 1912 Ransome states that Wilde's death was "directly due to meningitis, the legacy of an attack of tertiary syphilis," a straight-forward enough statement but both medically unsound (tertiary syphilis is a slowly progressive disorder; it doesn't come in attacks) and unsubstantiated. Ross, credited by Ransome as having verified certain biographical details from "documents in his possession," was a meticulous keeper of documents and very many of his papers have survived: the one verifying syphilis is curiously absent: unless Ransome was making assumptions from the doctors' report, which Ellmann also calls as evidence, but which simply says that Wilde had cerebral meningitis.

In the second edition of his book, and as a result of the unsuccessful libel action brought by Alfred Douglas in 1913, Ransome omitted the unflattering references to Douglas as having been largely instrumental in Wilde's downfall. But significantly he also left out the reference to syphilis, probably as Ross himself was not altogether happy about it. Far from over-seeing the first edition, from Ross's correspondence it is clear that he answered questions and verified certain facts, but that he did not wish to be personally involved and did not even see the proofs, a fact which he later said he regretted; moreover he was upset to discover that Ransome had dedicated the book to him without his permission. Much the same goes for Ross's involvement with Harris, not best known for his accuracy with facts, and whose knowledge of syphilis from the remarks in *Oscar Wilde, His Life and Confessions*, was even more sketchy than Ransome's.

But what of Turner's and Ross's statements; surely they at least must be reliable? They were, after all, with Wilde when he died and both had consulted the doctors. Ross's statement on page 546 is, as it turns out, simply a direct quotation from Ransome's biography ("the legacy of an attack. of tertiary syphilis") where it is not attributed to Ross at all. That Ransome dedicates the book. to Ross and acknowledges his help in verifying

certain details is surely no justification for Ellmann putting the words into Ross's mouth in an attempt to give them more authority, the more so since they disappear altogether in the next edition.

So far the "evidence" is wearing rather thin and all we are left with is the doctors' report and Turner's statement, made 34 years after Wilde's death, in a letter dated 3 January 1934 to Robert Sherard, great-grandson of Wordsworth and another of Wilde's young disciples:

The ear trouble, which I believe began in prison, was only shortly before his death diagnosed as a tertiary symptom of an infection he had contracted when he was 20. He had had a rash in the spring of 1900 which he thought was due to eating shellfish in Italy but which was supposed to be another symptom.

Clearly Turner was relying on the doctors' diagnosis and had no proper knowledge of the symptoms of tertiary syphilis. A syphilitic tumour of the ear has yet to be recorded and a rash in the tertiary stage is quite against such a diagnosis, which Ellmann himself admits.

The man who made the diagnosis was Maurice A'Court Tucker, the 32-year-old British Embassy doctor, "a silly, kind, excellent man," according to Ross, "although I think he entirely misunderstood Oscar's case." His lack of medical seniority together with Ross's remarks hardly inspire confidence in his diagnosis if indeed he diagnosed syphilis at all; the report signed by him and Dr. Paul Cleiss makes no mention of it: "There were significant cerebral disturbances stemming from an old suppuration of the right ear…The diagnosis of encephalitic meningitis must be made without doubt," they said.

Despite copious source references to almost everything else, Ellmann omits to tell us where he found this report, issued three days before Wilde died; it certainly exists, as it was sold at Sotheby's in 1982. This is a pity, for if anything it reinforces the modern medical theory that Wilde did indeed die of cerebral meningitis, a classic complication arising from a disease or inflammation of the middle ear for which he had been treated some weeks before. There is no mention of syphilitic meningitis and even if there had been, according to one modern venereologist, such a diagnosis probably would not have been worth the paper it was written on. Tertiary syphilis is characterised by the slow atrophy of certain parts of the body, not by the inflammatory symptoms and high fever from which Wilde was suffering.

These medical aspects of Wilde's last illness have been dealt with on several occasions, most notably by Terence Cawthorne in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* (1959) and MacDonald Critchley in the *Medico-Legal Journal* (1962). While exercising caution in making posthumous diagnoses they and other modern doctors have expressed serious doubts that syphilis was the cause of Wilde's death.

Turner's statement should be viewed with caution, the more so as it was made 34 years after the event, and he demonstrates the unreliability of his memory elsewhere in his correspondence. In a bitter exchange in 1935 with T.H. Bell, Frank Harris's secretary, who

was supposed to have been in Paris at the time of Wilde's death, Turner states categorically that there were never any nuns at Wilde's bedside before or after his death. Robbie Ross writing to More Adey in December 1900 describes how, with difficulty, he had found two Franciscan sisters to watch over the body. Who is to be believed? Surely Ross, who is writing two weeks after Oscar's death. Did Turner really remember the diagnosis of syphilis (absent from the medical report anyway) or had the story starting with Ransome by then been around for so long that it had become fact in his memory?

Almost all of Wilde's biographers since Ransome have touched on the question of syphilis. Some have pointed to it as the cause of his death while others have recorded an open verdict. Once Ransome had raised the subject it was impossible to ignore it, but remarkably, none of them until Ellmann had taken the trouble to trace the sources and search for further evidence. It was very much a case, as Rupert Croft-Cooke said in 1972, of follow-my-leader biography. But Ellmann's "evidence" is inconclusive and he is guilty in one instance of the same unquestioning acceptance of the Oscar myths as his predecessors. How on earth can we know that Wilde caught syphilis from a female prostitute in Oxford?

The originator of the story is almost certainly Robert Sherard. Between 1902 and 1917 Sherard wrote three books about Wilde in the last of which hotly defends him against Ransome's accusation of syphilis. But by 1934, having corresponded with Reggie Turner and received his letter of 3 January he has performed an extraordinary volte-face and in a little known pamphlet published the same year from his home in Corsica he claims that Wilde had had hereditary(!) syphilis.

pejorated…by the fact that when a lad at Oxford at the age of twenty he contracted, thanks to the idiotic system which arises from British hypocrisy, a fresh infection which broke out in virulent form in 1886.

The idiotic, hypocritical system to which he refers was the English refusal to license and inspect prostitutes, as it implied the state conniving at immorality.

Although he appears to have kept all the letters about Oscar that he received from Turner (they are preserved in Reading University Library and continue right up to 1938 when Turner died), in no other letter is there anything which could have justified Sherard's embellishments in this way. So from his total fabrication was almost certainly born the story of Oscar and the Oxford prostitute, picked up no doubt by Maggs Bros to catalogue a Wilde poem they offered for sale in 1953 and which in turn is offered as evidence in a footnote by Ellmann.

How Ransome originally came by his information is impossible to say; that it is medically unsound is clear; that it was from Ross, who had cleared Wilde's estate of bankruptcy and had spent 12 years trying to restore his dead friend's literary reputation now seems more unlikely than ever. It may simply have been whispered in the society that had sent Wilde to prison for two years and which could not resist the chance of a final and unanswerable condemnation of his life.

Syphilis was one of the great diseases of the 19th century and like tuberculosis, it was over diagnosed. Anyone who had led a dissolute life and who showed signs of skin eruption, an unsteady gait or brain disturbances was likely to have the accusing finger of the moral establishment pointed at them. In 1870 Samuel Solly, one of the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons went so far as to say, "Far from considering syphilis as an evil, I regard it on the contrary as a blessing, and believe that it is inflicted by the Almighty to act as a restraint upon the indulgence of evil passions." Whether or not Wilde ever had syphilis we shall never know, but it was certainly not the cause of his death.

In the early 1950s when Rupert Hart-Davis was editing Wilde's letters, one of his cardinal rules was never to trust any posthumous evidence about Wilde without concrete proof. It is unfortunate that Ellmann chose to break that rule, and even if one sets against the lack of real proof what his American editor referred to as "the gut feeling of a master biographer who had spent decades with his subject," it still cannot justify putting forward his personal conviction that Wilde had syphilis on page 89 [page 92 in U.S. edition] and treating it as an established fact for the rest of the book.

(First published in *The Spectator*, London, December 1988)

WAW Editor's note. A physician, Dr. H. J. Scott of Montreal gave further support to the idea that Oscar Wilde did not die from syphilis *(New York Times Book Review*, April 17, 1988, pp. 50-51). He also explained that the father could not have given Wilde hereditary syphilis, which must come from the mother. Nothing indicates that Lady Wilde was so afflicted. The often repeated myth that Ellmann prints as fact on page 89 and 91 (pp. 92, 95 US edition) that Oscar Wilde had blackened teeth from mercury drip treatment, which was given in those days for syphilis, is absolutely destroyed by Scott: "Mercury makes a dark line on the gum margin but does not blacken teeth… The rash Wilde had late in his life is not a symptom of the tertiary disease [of syphilis] but occurs in the early secondary stage… lt seems clear that Wilde suffered from suppurative disease of the middle ear, which leads to mastoiditis and often to meningitis. Meningitis may occur in early syphilis but not as an acute cause of death in the tertiary stage of the disease."

TO MY WIFE

with a copy of my poems

I can write no stately proem
As a prelude to my lay;
From a poet to a poem
I would dare to say.

For if of these fallen petals
One to you seems fair
Love will waft it till it settles
On your hair.

And when wind and winter harden
All the loveless land,
It will whisper of the garden,
You will understand.

Oscar Wilde

CHANSON

A ring of gold and a milk-white dove
Are goodly gifts for thee,
And a hempen rope for your own love
To hang upon a tree.

For you a House of Ivory,
(Roses are white in the rose-bower)!
A narrow bed for me to lie,
(White, 0 white, is the hemlock flower)!

Myrtle and jessamine for you
(0 the red rose is fair to see)!
For me the cypress and the rue,
(Finest of all is rosemary)!

For you three lovers of your hand,
(Green grass where a man lies dead)!
For me three paces on the sand
(Plant lilies at my head)!

Oscar Wilde

THE MANY VERSIONS OF THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

GORDON BLACKWELL

The Picture of Dorian Gray was first printed in a shorter version in an 1890 magazine. After revising and enlarging his novel, Wilde published the standard version in book form in 1891. Now for the first time, a book from Norton Publishers includes both texts. Aside from insights that a comparison like this allows, we can gain a deeper understanding of the novel from the numerous annotations and essays in this new book.

Donald L. Lawler, the editor of this intensive study, is professor of English at the East Carolina University. The 462 page paperback was released last year in the U.S. by W.W. Norton (500 Fifth Avenue, NYC. 10110).

Their *Dorian Gray* is a revelation for students of all ages. It dwarfs past explorations of Wilde's longest work. Among the authors who give their appraisals here, Joyce Carol Oats goes into considerable detail and calls it "one of the strongest and most haunting of English novels."

Lawler provides invaluable footnotes and introductions. Alongside the shorter novel, he shows passages that led some reactionary members of the press to attack the author. Atheneum, for example, called the work “sickening" and "vicious." Hostile editorials from three 1890 periodicals and Wilde's brilliant rejoinders appear on pages 329-347. After publicly defending himself, Wilde privately consulted with friends before revising the book. He aimed to modify the controversy and to a great extent he did.

This involved important, if short deletions, particularly references to the slavish devotion of the painter, Basil Hallward, toward his handsome subject, Dorian Gray. With these sentences intact, the closer relationship of the two in the early part of the book intensifies the horror that ensues later when Dorian turns on Basil with such detestation and violence.

Consider these statements which Wilde dropped in the longer novel regarding Basil's love for Dorian: "Don't take away the one person that makes life absolutely lovely to me" (p. 183); "He was made to be worshipped" (p. 184); "I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow I had never loved a woman ... I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was jealous of everyone to whom you spoke. wanted to have you all to myself" (p, 232).

Wilde and his magazine editor altered further statements before the initial publication, such as this one "I would never leave him till either he or I were dead" (tn., p. 177).

Other than these omissions for propriety, Wilde's reworking of the novel improved and expanded it helpfully. One minor passage unwisely shortened a charming portrait of Dorian's housekeeper. Perhaps he gave her some traits of a real woman who was not in service and who might have objected.

Lawler prints the definitive 1891 version of the novel first in his book. Surprisingly, although it is faithful to Wilde's final version, it is not identical to what has been reproduced in the past 90 years. Lawler has commented that even Robert Ross, Wilde's literary executor, showed no authority in his text of *Dorian Gray*. Other publishers have been lax in their adherence to the 1891 original, tinkering with some hand-me-down version and even corrupting it to suit their own prejudices. To take a minor example, two current books change the description of the manager of Sybil's theatre from "Jew" to "man." Thus your handsomely bound volume of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, unless it is the one edited by Isobel Murry for Oxford University Press, is probably a hybrid or abridged text and not the authoritative 1891 version.

On the appropriate pages of the longer text, Lawler supplies over 200 helpful footnotes to explain things that might be obscure today, such as Walter Pater's philosophy; Petit's gallery of French Impressionist painters; antinomianism; Antinous and "Adrian" (the Emperor Hadrian).

Nowadays Dorian's story is continually before the public. It is repeatedly told on film, stage and television (Showtime cable promised an updated version this year). It is read on radio (BBC gave excerpts in February and March, read rather stiffly) and on audio cassettes in cut and complete versions some good, others terrible. *

Currently, at least a dozen publishers keep bowdlerized versions of the novel in print. For the precise texts of 1891 and 1890, with many helpful annotations, the Norton volume is recommended. For further study, you will also enjoy Donald L. Lawler's dissertation, *An Inquiry into the Revisions of Oscar Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray'* printed last year by Garland Publishing Co., 136 Madison Ave., NYC 10016.

* Peter Egan reads a condensed version beautifully on *Listen for Pleasure* tapes.

TWO EVENTS FOR WILDEANS IN NEW YORK

VITO A. LANZA

Two new events of interest to Wild Wildeans opened in Manhattan recently. Uptown at the Metropolitan Opera, a new production of Richard Strauss' operatic version of *Salome* met with mixed-to-scathing press reviews and erratic audience response. Downtown, the Hudson Guild unveiled Thom Thomas' *Without Apologies*, a play which shows the real-life counterparts to the four main characters from *The Importance of Being Earnest* meeting again after 34 years. This also met with mixed reviews, but audiences were reportedly happy with the play. More of that later.

When the Metropolitan Opera offers *Salome*, Wildeans should take note. After all, unlike most opera librettists, Strauss did not extensively rewrite his source. He simply edited out more than half of Hedwig Lachmann's German translation to make room for his sensuous score. The resulting one-act opera runs about the same length as the play and is still a shocker. It is performed much more often than the unjustly neglected play.

In his debut as director, the West German Nikolaus Lenhoff updated events to somewhere between the time Wide wrote the play (1891-92 for Sara Barnhardt) and the time of Strauss' music (1905). This is at once a mistake because Biblical decadence is much more effective than contemporary lechery. Today's Met audiences have seen it all. Jurgen Rose's new setting resembled a hotel backyard complete with a fire escape and a black-tiled sewer for the cistern. His costumes looked as if someone had exploded a pizza onstage.

Vocally and musically, the event was a triumph. Eva Marton made a radiant Salome even though, at first, Marek Janowski's enthusiastic conducting drowned her out. As Herod, Richard Cassilly's tenor voice easily soared over the Met's huge orchestra. Unfortunately he looked silly in a lavender lame business suit with a leopard-skin vest. He and Herodias both entered wearing flowing multi-coloured cloaks that made them and their court resemble refugees from a Fellini film. These were soon discarded while members of the audience chuckled. Herodias, chillingly acted and sung by Helga Dernesh, received the most laughs when she displayed a slinky gold lame evening gown with huge green-feathered shoulder pads. The guards, including Narraboth (Mark Baker), all wore black leather and silver chains. Bernd Weikl's beautifully sung Baptist was inexplicably clad in incongruous Biblical robes.

All of the Wilde-Strauss stage directions including the symbolic moon were eliminated. When Herod stepped in Narraboth's blood, there was no blood. Even when Salome clutched the severed head, there was not a drop in sight. Even the famous Dance of the Seven Veils, often decried as the weakest part of the opera, elicited laughs. This was not because of the dancer's performance, which is usually the case. Marton struggled valiantly with Marianne Manniegel's silly choreography, finally emerging fully clothed in a white shift. Some of the blame for this goes to Strauss because he eliminated Salome's exit to change "raiment." Marton was forced to shed seven petticoats instead of veils, occasionally aided by Herod, while the audience roared. To be fair, the Met's first nighters (February 20)

cheered the singers, as did the critics. On opening nights, the production team traditionally bows with the cast. A vociferous claque booed Lenhoff and crew, and they were quickly forced to flee the cold.

Things took a better turn off-Broadway, February 1 through 26, when the Hudson Guild presented *Without Apologies*. It seems that long after Wilde's play leaves off, a penniless Cecily (Carrie Nye) and Ernie (Peter Pagan) arrive unexpectedly at the unfashionable Camden Road home of Gwen (Pauline Flanagan) and Algy (Kurt Knudson). They soon demand to move in indefinitely. Apparently Ernie left Gwen waiting at the altar and eloped with Cecily. The jilted Gwen and Algie eventually married. By the time the play begins in 1933, spendthrift Cecily and lazy Ernie are broke. Lady Bracknell, who never appears, lives upstairs making her presence felt by incessantly ringing a bell. The play progresses to September 1940, and she eventually dies, also offstage. The author has a mild ear for Wildean wit, but he dilutes this with quite a few sour jokes ("You don't mind if I smoke?" "I don't care if you burst into flames."). The audience seemed to love them and laughed in all the right places.

During the course of the two-hour play, the characters renew old acquaintances and air old grudges. Algy eventually runs off with Cecily to write Western novels in Paris, leaving Gwen and Ernie together at last. The author concocts a farce out of this. Thomas seems to know Wilde's almost never performed plays, *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of no Importance* with their strong female protagonists. Gwen finally becomes a Wildean new woman. In the end she progresses from a long-suffering housewife, who raises chickens in her backyard, to an independent soul. Armed with her inheritance from Lady Bracknell, controlling interest in a munitions factory during the war, she leaves to set out on her own. Cecily quickly follows her. The two men, unknowingly but not unhappily left alone, find a lost checkbook filled with unused money in a chair destroyed onstage by the Blitz. They soon plan to run off without their women. In a funny running gag about the town of Epping, Thomas allows room for another sequel.

Edgar Lansbury (Angela's brother) directed with a flair for laughs and characterization. John Wilp's setting and Karen Hummel's costumes were fine.

Thomas' premise for the play is that the characters were real. In a programme note, he quotes the *Camden Illustrated Intelligentsia* (May 1896) in which one Lady Hotspur filed suit against Wilde alleging that *The Importance of Being Earnest* libelled the Beaumont family. Thomas lists Algy and Ernie as Beaumonts and Gwen as a Hotspur. Most of the New York critics and members of the audience ignored this even though the main characters are never called by their full names. Even Lady Bracknell is called Aunt Augusta throughout.

Manhattan is supposed to have one of the most sophisticated audiences in the world. Unfortunately, the *New York Times* critic is the only one who counts. Mel Gussow thought the play should have been left in a handbag at Victoria Station. This bodes ill for the play's chances for publication and additional productions. With any luck *Without Apologies* will survive. The Met will probably need another *Salome* before long.

A PROBLEM IN BIOGRAPHY?

CARMEL McCAFFREY

The Yellow Barn Press, Council Bluffs, Iowa, has recently published in book form the text of The Lurcy lecture given by Julian Symons delivered at Amherst College on the 7th of April 1988. It is a beautifully done book bound with hand-made paste paper over boards. The text is printed on dampened Frankfurt Cream paper. It is limited to 200 copies. The title, *Oscar Wilde: A Problem in Biography* essentially undermarks Symons' entire point that Oscar Wilde is a biographical problem to be understood only in the context of being what he calls "an Irish sorcerer." Symons is of the impression that Wilde's Irish sorcery has charmed generations of biographers in various ways into treating him as a serious literary figure. He fails to explain, among other things, how Wilde earned a double first at Oxford, a rare feat, and won the Newdigate Prize for Poetry all before he launched himself on London society.

Some of Symons' facts are a bit sketchy and may bespeak a lack of intimate knowledge of Wilde's life. He states, for example, that *De Profundis* was written "shortly before Wilde's release from prison and he sent it to Ross." In fact, Wilde handed the manuscript to Ross after he was released as he was not permitted to send it to Douglas from prison as he had first intended.

There is very little of literary criticism in the lecture in spite of the fact that Symons asks the question "how much of [Wilde's] posthumous fame is owed to the life rather than the work?" This is the same old chestnut that has been hanging around ever since Andre Gide made his famous report and likely to always be dragged out given Wilde's dynamic personality and style. Symons addresses the life but not the work and thus fails to answer his own question.

A point of interest in the lecture is the call to see Wilde in biography as The Great Performer. Philippe Jullian, whose biography on Wilde has been translated into English, declares Wilde to be the greatest actor of his time and catches some of Wilde's intense flair for drama but he also understood how this flair overflowed into his dramatic works. Perhaps this is the reason why biographers, like Richard Ellmann, whom Symons declares to have been "led astray" are consistent in their admiration for Wilde's work: his essays, his dramas, his literary contribution. In “Pen, Pencil and Poison” Oscar Wilde wrote that "the fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose." It is equally true that having a great personal sense of drama is nothing against being a great artist.

For those interested in a copy of the book it is available from The Yellow Barn Press, 710 First Avenue, Council Bluffs, Iowa 51501. Cost is $45 plus $1.50 for postage and handling.

DALLAS STAGES FOUR ACT EARNEST

GORDON BLACKWELL

The Dallas Repertory Theater is to be commended for presenting the longer four-act *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which is rarely performed that way in the U.S. Their founder-director, Ed Delatte, teacher of acting and directing at the University of North Texas, admitted, "I was somewhat apprehensive of the length: over two hours of Victorian dialogue. Audiences of today are inundated with television." He used the Samuel French longer version of Wilde's play and with clever staging, admirable casting and Wilde's wealth of humour, turned the suspected difficulty into advantage. The performances in September and October last year sold out.

The players of the repertory company found that the Wilde humour was different from contemporary comedies, which rely on a phrase or two preparing the audience for the punch line - the so called set-up. Wilde, they found, would launch into a funny line without the set-up and then follow it immediately with another, perhaps even better joke.

By the end of the run, when I saw them, the actors were giving sufficient pause for the many laughs they earned. They exercised restraint when compared to farcical style and relied on only a few sight gags, such as Cecilia Flores, as Gwendolyn, swooning with delight on hearing that Jack was christened Earnest. Jeanne Cairns, playing lady Bracknell seriously and without bombast, drew laughs in expected and unexpected places. Her "How many bedrooms? Well, that can be cleared up later" was calculating and not a throw-away so the audience appreciated it. Garret Hall stripped herself of her warm, discerning personality offstage to project an amusingly prim and absent-minded Prism. Merriment followed when Elaine Pfleiderer as Cecily played against her in appropriate serio-comic manner. When she and Gwendolyn compared diaries, they were like schoolgirls peeking at forbidden books.

Delightful as the women were, the two male leads were excellent - Mario Cabrera as jack and Bob Wasinger as Algernon. The longer play, compared to the cut three-act version usually given in amateur and professional productions, gives equal weight to these two roles. The scene with Phil Gigante as Gribsby, which is missing from the cut *Earnest*, provoked a droll conflict between the male principles and made me realize why Wilde hated to have it deleted at the first performance.

Director Delatte's employment of instrumental music from Arthur Sullivan operettas of that era introduced each act with a fine period feeling. He had Lady Bracknell sing sweetly and faintly when she was offstage and discussing music with Algernon in the first act. Could this be the first time anyone thought of doing that?

As a note of personal preference, I am convinced that the four-act *Earnest* is better than the three-act traditional one, if a dozen or so classic lines from the latter are interpolated, as they did in Dallas.

SOME COMMENTS ON RICHARD ELLMANN'S BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

SYLVIA DAY

There is a mystery about famous and infamous personalities that piques our curiosity. That curiosity has never been so gratified as it is today when media of all types are purveyors of varying degrees of the most personal accounts about persons in the public eye.

On a more serious level, there is a plethora of biographies whose authors often search relentlessly for years for every scrap of information that will, they believe, bring the subject under study into focus and enable us to understand more clearly those factors or influences in his Life which are thought to have shaped his vision. With modern research methods and sophisticated computer scholarship, a biographer may succeed in amassing huge amounts of data. Whether the biographers succeed, beyond providing numerous incidents in the life of the individual under view, is debatable.

Richard Ellmann in Oscar Wilde has done yeoman work. Virtually no source has been overlooked that could have shed light on Wilde. Yet the creative genius of Wilde is not illuminated. This holds true for Wilde as it does for other famed figures in the arts and sciences whose existences come under scrutiny. That bewildering fount out of which imagination and original ideas emerge is unfathomable. It has no physical or spiritual geography. What the biographer gives us are the outward aspects of an individual's existence, the mere observance of which cannot by itself enable us to comprehend the awesome act of his creative output.

No one reading the Wilde biography objectively can disagree with the above. Ellmann has furnished an enormous bounty of data and we are fully informed - often more so than we prefer - of the journey of the Wilde years, yet almost rarely are we made privy to the sources upon which he drew except superficially, and the charm, brilliance, wit and impeccable style remain enmeshed in enigma.

What is chiefly offensive about the Ellmann biography is the emphasis placed upon Wilde's homosexuality. Almost one-third of the book is occupied with it, yet the subject is never exploited in Wilde's own work, and is really irrelevant to his magnificent body of writing. We are no longer living in an age when a man of Wilde's calibre can be exposed to the horror that he was compelled to undergo. It might be presumed that the tragic episode would have been condensed. The appreciative reader of Wilde should not need to be badgered into reading a litany of events that dogged Wilde from the time of his trial and imprisonment to his death. It may be useful as clinical material; it does not add to an understanding of his work which should be the prime object of a definitive biographical study.

Wilde was unique. There is no one in the history of literature who even closely approximates the scintillating personality that was not only evident in his writing but,

according to reliable accounts, in his conversation. Regrettably Ellmann cannot defend himself against criticism but the reader has a right to express opposing views. Indeed, he must.

The surprising omission of a listing of the *Fairy Tales* in the indices of Ellmann's biography of Wilde seems unaccountable. It appears that this is due to the failure of Ellmann to take seriously Wilde's fairy tales, and even to slight them. The account the biographer gives of the lovely story of “The Nightingale and the Rose” is commonplace and dull in contrast to its charm and poignancy. Ellmann is no more partial to the tale of “The Happy Prince”. Here in place of accentuating the compassion and grace that abounds in the dear "lead" heart, and emphasizing the winsome relationship that exists between the Prince and the swallow, Ellmann complains that the stories "suffer from florid figures… " Such a claim is without foundation. So limited a critical sense and so poor an ear for the lyrical quality of Wilde's prose must disqualify Ellmann as a literary critic. Surely it should not be too much to ask that a biographer, at the very least, have some special feeling for the work of the individual that is to be portrayed.

Ellmann's analysis of *Lady Windermere's Fan* must also be questioned. He dismisses Mrs. Erlynne, a marvellously rich character, simply as a "fallen woman." She is that in her milieu, but can hardly be so perceived by Wilde who portrayed her so appealingly. As for young Lady Windermere, she too is a product of an age whose foolish shibboleths about female virtue are simply laughable today. There is little doubt but that Wilde intended the play to render his own personal opposing views of Victorian womanhood enshrouded in ignorance and bigotry.

These few comments on the Wilde biography are not intended to discourage readers. On the contrary, the subject is so endlessly fascinating and Ellmann had so immersed himself in the numerous details of Wilde's life, the book is well worth reading.

Two Irish playwrights dominated the latter part of the 19th century (and into the 20th); Shaw and Wilde. Although Shaw had not yet won the fame he eventually did and long outlived Wilde, the recent biography of him by Michael Holroyd can be usefully read together with that of Wilde.

from **The Decay of Lying**

Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. This results not merely from Life's imitative instinct, but from the fact that the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realise that energy. It is a theory that has never been put forward before, but it is extremely fruitful, and throws an entirely new light upon the history of Art.

It follows, as a corollary from this, that external Nature also imitates Art. The only effects that she can show us are effects that we have already seen through poetry, or in paintings. This is the secret of Nature's charm, as well as the explanation of Nature's weakness.

The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.

Oscar Wilde

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