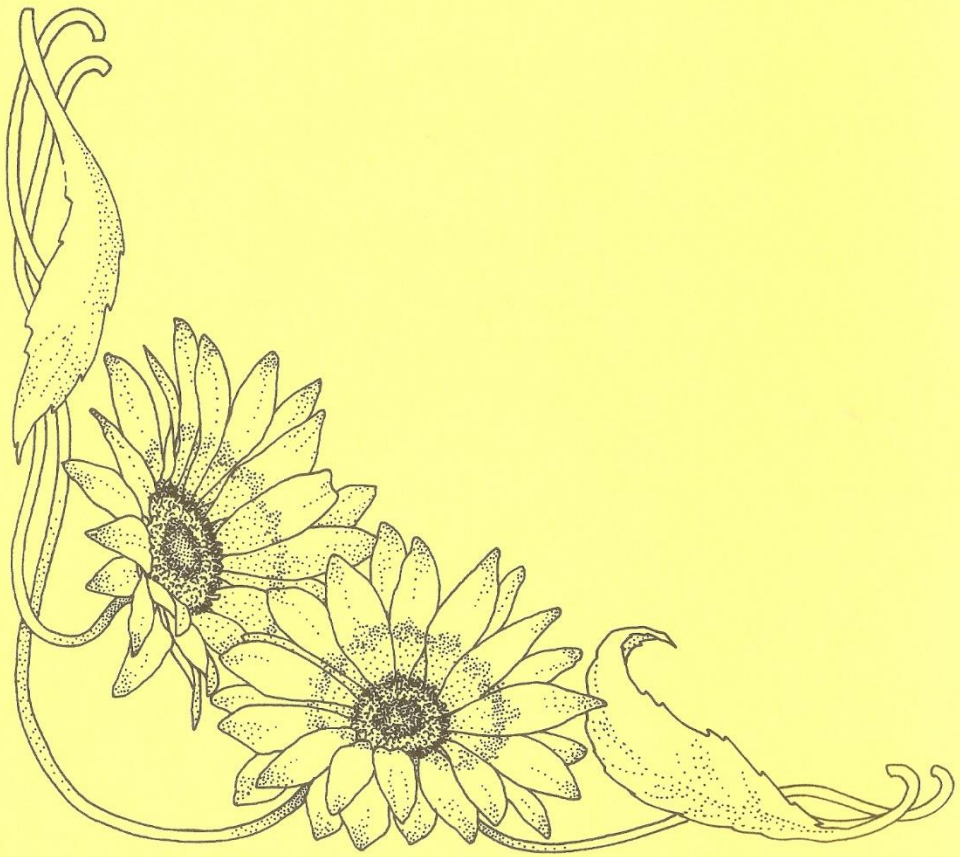
PUBLISHED TWICE YEARLY SINCE 1986:
19th MAY (WILDE'S RELEASE FROM GAOL)
16th OCTOBER (WILDE'S BIRTHDAY)

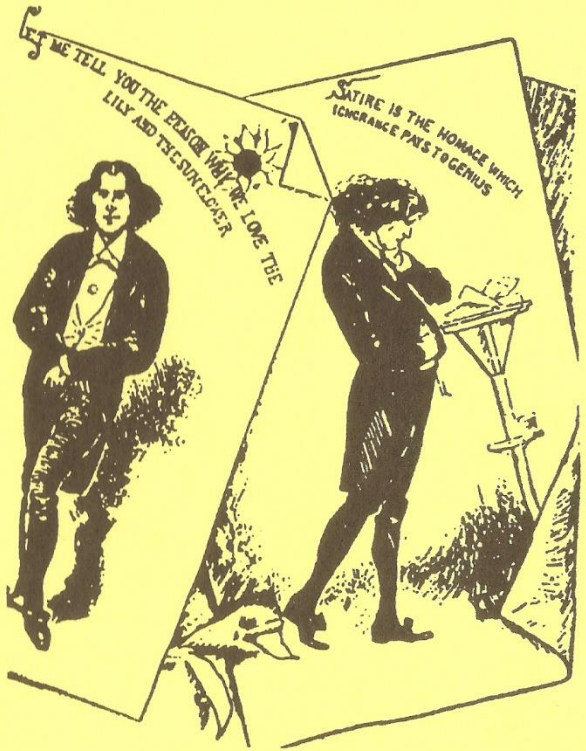


Wild About Wilde

Newsletter

ISSN :1068-9737

16th October 1993



From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York), 21 January 1882

Number 15

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde

WILD ABOUT WILDE

ISSN: 1068-9737

16th October 1993

Dear Wild Wildeans,

The big news over the past few months was of course the mammoth meeting of Wildeans in Monaco during the weekend of 28-31 May to celebrate the genius of Wilde. No less than 37 speakers took part in this event organized by the Princess Grace Irish Library. The conference organizer, C. George Sandulescu wrote that "the clear and deliberate aim of this Event is that of establishing the Irishness and Modernity of Oscar Wilde as a writer artistically belonging to the 20th Century, rather than as a mere Victorian conventionalizer." Many who attended agreed that

IN THIS EDITION

it was a fascinating experience. Various aspects of Wilde were presented and anyone wishing to have a list of the speakers should contact this publication.

To those who asked about the *Reader's Digest* contest and whether Wilde was a winner it now appears from those who know about such things that the whole thing must have been a hoax. The letter was addressed to Oscar Wilde, 34 Tite Street, whereas in fact as any Wildean knows Oscar lived at the house when it was number 16 Tite Street. The house numbers were changed this century sometime after Wilde's death. So someone obviously had to send in the name with the new number to the *Digest*. It is after all, personalities, not principles, that move the age.

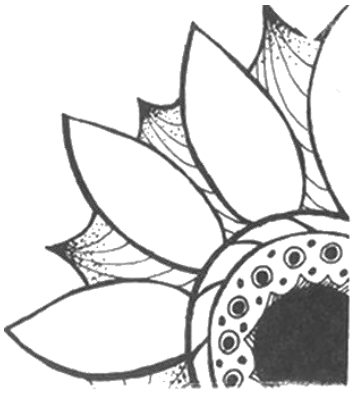
As usual we have some interesting articles in this issue. The question of Wilde's syphilis which was made so much of in the Richard Ellmann biography is addressed by Professor Dr. J.P. Nater in his essay on page 3. Also the Oscar Wilde societies in Ireland and Britain are still as active as ever. In July I attended the Irish society's Sunday afternoon gathering in Bewley's Cafe in Dublin. There were Wildeans from many European countries visiting and the conversation flowed. The society recently planted a tree in memory of Wilde in the Phoenix Park in Dublin. This is Europe's largest public park with vast areas of open space where fallow deer run wild. Did I say Wilde? Oscar would have been very familiar with this wonderful park and it was also the site of some controversial nationalist activities during the 1880s.

Enjoy this issue!

All the best,

Carmel

Carmel



THE QUESTION OF WILDE'S POSSIBLE SYPHILIS

J.P. **Nater**

Undoubtedly the definitive work on syphilis has been written by John H. Stokes, Herman Beerman and Norman Ingraham. In the third edition of their *Modern Clinical Syphilology - Diagnosis - Treatment - Case Study,* which dates from 1944, the following exhaustive definition of this disease has been given: "Syphilis is an infectious disease due to Spirochaeta pallida; of great chronicity; systemic from the outset; capable of involving every structure of the body in its course; distinguished by florid manifestations on the one hand and years of completely asymptomatic latency on the other; able to simulate a large proportion of the entities comprising the field of medicine, surgery and the specialties; transmissible to offspring in man" and, as the authors also remark: "To this range and to this essentially Machiavellian facility in disguise, deceit and malevolence we owe an interest in syphilis among medical and scientific men everywhere."

The essential data in the history of this disease are:

1493 - introduction into the Old World, presumably from America

1530 - the name syphilis appears for the first time; in a poem by Fracastoro.

1905 - Schaudinn discovers the Spirochaeta pallida.

1908 - Wassermann describes the technique of the first diagnostic serumtest.

1910 - Ehrlich introduces the treatment with 'Substance 606' (Salvarsan).

Based on the symptoms syphilis is divided into:

- a primary stage: the development of the chancre about three weeks after infection. This stage falls outside our scope.

- a secondary stage. A generalized symmetrical skin eruption occurs about six to eight weeks after the beginning of the chancre. The eruption consists of small reddish macules. It may last several weeks to months. - a latent stage. Years may lapse without any symptom.

- a tertiary stage wherein the gumma is the typical symptom.

A gumma of the skin begins as a small nodule and slowly enlarges to several centimeters. Central necrosis occurs which leads to the formation of a deep punched-out ulcer. Gummata may develop everywhere, not only on the skin, but also in all internal organs, no part of the body is exempt.

It is clear, that in the case of Oscar Wilde only the possibility of secondary or tertiary syphilis has to be discussed.

As far as the secondary stage is concerned it is well known that Wilde suffered, in the last years of his life, from some kind of skin rash. In the literature the possibility of secondary syphilis has been mentioned. This is not correct. Wilde complained about itching, he writes that he had to scratch his skin "like a great ape." This remark makes it clear that his rash had nothing to do with syphilis, since secondary syphilis does not itch.

Concerning the possibility of tertiary syphilis, a gumma can occur anywhere on the skin or in the body, the ear is not exempt. A diagnosis of tertiary syphilis on morphological grounds without the help of the serological test was often very difficult. Experience in this field was absolutely necessary.

Richard Ellmann, in his authoritative biography, states that Wilde suffered from tertiary syphilis. This assumption was made on statements of his friends Ross and Turner, on the Wilde biographies of Ransome and of Harris and on the report of the doctors who attended Wilde in his terminal stage. None of these (including the doctors!) disposed over any specialized knowledge in the field of venereology. The possibility of asking the opinion of an experienced syphilologist, has apparently never been taken into consideration. This, though in those years well known specialists were available in France. There was, for instance, the famous Dr. Alfred Fournier (1832 - 1914), living in Paris, and one of the leading syphilologists of his time.

It is curious to know, that even if, as Ellmann states, Wilde contracted syphilis in his student years in Oxford, it is by no means certain that he should develop symptoms of syphilis in his later life. A Scandinavian investigation of large groups of persons with untreated syphilis has made it clear that 60 to 70 percent of the untreated persons went through life with

few if any complaints as a result of the disease. Thus, the immune system of a large number of people can apparently triumph over a syphilis infection. On the other side, according to the same investigation, in one of ten persons of this group syphilis was the direct cause of death.

Johan P. Nater is professor of dermatology and venereology (ret.) at Groningen State University (Netherlands). He is interested in the history of medicine, in venereal disease and the great, and author of several articles on this subject.

WILDE AND PIERRE LOUŸS

Fraser Drew

On the walls of my study hang framed photographs and letters of writers - Hemingway, Frost, Eliot, Wilder, Jeffers - and others not addressed to me - Byron Housman, Yeats, Hart Crane, Oscar Wilde. Framed with a letter from Wilde to Pierre Louys are photographs of Oscar as a student at Oxford and on his American lecture tour and a pamphlet which is the first printing of Wilde's first publication, "Ravenna," winner of the 1878 Newidgate Prize for Poetry at Oxford.

Wilde first met the young Pierre Louÿs in Paris in 1891. They admired each other's work, and in 1892 Pierre dedicated to Oscar one of the poems in his collection, *Astarté.* He read early drafts of Wilde's play in French, *Salomé,* acted as middleman with the printer and proposed emendations (largely disregarded) in the final draft. In February 1893 Wilde dedicated *Salomé* to Pierre Louÿs. A telegraphed response did not please Wilde, but the dedicatee later paid him the compliment of a sonnet entitled "Salomé."

The friendship disintegrated when Louÿs came to dislike Wilde's clique, disapproved of his conduct with Lord Alfred Douglas, and chided him for neglect of his wife and children. Wilde was unrepentant and when the French writer broke off their relationship Oscar is reported to have said: "Goodbye, Pierre Louÿs. I had hoped for a friend; for now on I will have only lovers." Louÿs wrote Wilde a final letter on 25th May 1893, but did attend the funeral in December seven years later when Wilde died.

The letter in my study was written in French in Oscar's bold hand on Lyric Club Stationery on 20th February 1893, the date of the opening of *Lady Windermere's Fan.* Constance Wilde attended the first night of her husband's play as did his old friend Lillie Langtry. Several friends and one of the actors wore green carnations at the playwright's request to arouse suspicions of a mysterious confraternity. The Edward Shelley mentioned in the letter was a publishers' clerk with whom Wilde was involved. The letter reads:

*Cher Pierre,

Avant que vous voyez "Lady Windermere" pour la première fois - c'est à dire avec moi - peut-ètre vous consentirez a le voir sans moi. Je vous envoie un billet pour ce soir (evening dress). *Vous* serez à coté d'Edouard Shelley -

Oscar

*Dear Pierre,

Before you see "Lady Windermere" for the first time, that is to say with me, perhaps you will consent to see it without me. I send you a ticket for this evening (evening dress). You will be beside Edward Shelley.

Oscar

Notes:

Richard EJlmann, *Oscar Wilde,* N.Y., 1988 has been consulted for dates and facts.
Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde,* London, 1962, prints six letters written by Wilde to Louÿs between 28th November 1891 and 27th February 1893.

Fraser Drew is Distinguished Professor of English, Emeritus, State University College at Buffalo, New York.

ENDYMION
(For music)

The apple trees are hung with gold,
And birds are loud in Arcady,
The sheep lie bleating in the fold,
The wild goat runs across the wold,
But yesterday his love he told,
I know he will come back to me.
a rising moon! a lady moon!
Be you my lover's sentinel,
You cannot choose but know him well,
For he is shod with purple shoon,
You cannot choose but know my love,
For he a shepherd's crook doth bear,
And he is soft as any dove,
And brown and curly is his hair ...

The falling dew is cold and chill,
And no bird sings in Arcady,
The little fauns have left the hill,
Even the tired daffodil
Has closed its gilded doors, and still
My lover comes not back to me.
False moon! False moon! a waning moon!
Where is my own true lover gone,
Where are the lips vermillion,
The shepherd's crook, the purple shoon?
Why spread that silver pavilion,
Why wear that veil of drifting mist?
Ah! thou hast young Endymion,
Thou hast the lips that should be kissed!

OSCAR WILDE

OSCAR WILDE'S LETTER TO W.E. COMBE

Horst Schroeder

Technische Universität Braunschweig

In Rupert Hart-Davis's authoritative edition of *The Letters of Oscar Wilde,* there is a curious letter (postmarked 15 December 1892) to a certain W.E. Combe (of Oaklands, Battle, Sussex), consisting of just two sentences and showing neither salutation nor complimentary close:

> *It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.* [1]

Since Hart-Davis did not, by any means, include each and every document in his edition, but thought fit to leave out as many as 200 of the 1,298 Wilde letters which he had collected - "brief notes, often to unidentified people, of no literary, biographical or other interest"[2] -, he must have seen some "literary interest" in the above curt communication with the unidentified correspondent. And rightly so; for Wilde's letter, except for one word omitted [3], is a verbatim quotation from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (published April 1891), ch.ii, where the aphorism reads:

> *It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.*
> *The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.* [4]

The identification of Wilde's letter as a self-quotation is probably a clue to its curious impersonal form. It would seem to me that W.E. Combe had been unknown to Wilde and that he had approached him, telling him that he had been discussing *Dorian Gray* with his friends and, there being unfortunately no copy of the book about the place, begging the author to supply him with the exact words of Lord Henry's intriguing aphorism about judging by appearances. Thus understood, Wilde's note was the business-like reply to that query. [5]

References:

1. The letters of Oscar Wilde, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London, 1962), 324.
2.lbid.,xi.
3. I am obliged to Margaret M. Sherry of Princeton University Libraries, the wners of this etter, for checking the autograph and confirming the correctness of Hart-Davis's edition.
4. Oscar Wilde, ed. Isobel Murray (The Oxford Authors), (Oxford, 1989), 64. - incidentally, the aphorism can already be found in the magazine version of the novel, published in July 1890. See *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* ed. Donald L. Lawler (A Norton Critical Edition), (New York, 1988). 188.
5. For another reply in a similar situation, but showing Wilde at his most charming, see his letter of June 1893 to Lady Randolph Churchill *(Letters,* 341 f. and note).

WILDE THE (SOMETIMES) FORGOTTEN IRISHMAN

Carmel McCaffrey

It is a common occurrence outside of Ireland and the Irish to forget that Oscar Wilde was an Irishman with an Irish nationalist family background. Many critics when reviewing his works either discount, neglect or forget this aspect of Wilde. Terry Eagleton in his introduction to his published play *Saint Oscar* says that while teaching Oxford students he found that hardly any of them knew that Oscar Wilde was Irish. The void needs filling.

To view the works of Wilde within the context of his Irishness is to see them in a subtle and more illuminating way. He was, after all, as another Irishman once explained "playing court jester to the English"; an old and honoured occupation held by many Irish, willingly and unwillingly. Wilde's ability to talk and tell stories and make "mean things put on beauty like a dress" [1] while he dominated the dinner tables of London hostesses was, in fact, in the best tradition of the Irish *seanchaí*, the ancient storytellers of Celtic Ireland. Weavers of magic tales and keepers of an ancient lore the *seanchaí*, were powerful people in Celtic Ireland and among the more common ancient Irish forms of expression (and attack) were satire and paradox. Ridiculing a disagreeable or parsimonious Chieftain or Rí (King) was to banish him to social oblivion.

Oscar Wilde once said that the two greatest things that the English had produced in fiction were the train time table and *Burke's Peerage.* [2] In his plays he frequently attacked the shallowness of English upper-class life. It required the talent and genius of an outsider, an Irishman, to fully appreciate the sometimes bizarre and constricted values of that society. Nowhere is this more successful and hilarious than in his drama *The Importance of Being Earnest.* In conversation with Robert Ross in January of 1895 to the question "Do you think that the critics will understand your new play, *(Earnest)?"* Wilde replied, "I certainly hope not."[3] We could conclude that if they understood it the game would have been up and they might have rejected it.

Wilde's own family background in Dublin was flexible by the standards of any day. His father had sired at least three illegitimate children who were a part of the family in Merrion Square. Two illegitimate daughters were raised by Oscar's mother Lady Wilde, a woman with an extraordinary capacity for compassion. The third child, a son, was taken into the father's surgery and trained as a medical doctor. These children received love and care on a scale that many legitimate children never experience. What a scandal it must have been for Wilde to see the

eminent importance of birth and parentage in the upper class society of England in his day. He took the jester's approach to it.

The scene in *Earnest* (Act I) where the formidable Lady Bracknell confronts Jack's lack of social background is funny and absurd and is a direct shot at the English establishment that only an outsider could execute. For a man who would later declare that he wanted to keep love in his heart as he entered prison the lack of love in these families must have seemed strange. "Who was your father?" bellows Lady Bracknell to Jack trying to establish the all important family background and lineage. Wilde, to his eternal credit, came up with the most ludicrous background possible - a handbag. And while audiences everywhere laugh outrageously at this discovery the impish Wilde the Irishman is simply playing the seanchai and hitting back at the very people he knows will not reward and cannot fully appreciate his genius. Earlier in the same scene he has Lady Bracknell, the quintessence of English propriety, declare that "fortunately, in England at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever." What a sly seanchai! What an interesting use of paradox.

One astute critic[4] writing in the *New York Times* on 17th January 1895 described *The Importance of Being Earnest* as "a pure farce of Gilbertian parentage, but loaded with drolleries, epigrams, impertinences, and bubbling comicalities that only an Irishman could have ingrafted on that respectable Saxon stock."

George Bernard Shaw, a fellow Irish playwright, once described Wilde as "a very Irish Irishman." Examining Wilde from the perspective of his Irish background means becoming infinitely more familiar with him and his work but it also means coming to see, in a fuller and essential sense, the complexity of this genius at work.

References:

1 "The Dead Poet," Lord Alfred Douglas. *Sonnets,* Chiswick Press Ltd., 1943. 2 *The Wit of Oscar Wilde,* Sean McCann, O'Brien Press, Dublin, 1991. 69,71.

3 Taken from an interview with Robert Ross published in the *St. James Gazette,* 18th January 1895.

4 Notice in the *New York Times* was signed "H.F." and was sent from London by Hamilton Fyfe drama critic and journalist on the staff of the London *Times. Oscar Wilde The Critical Heritage.* Edited by Karl Beckson. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1970. 188.

Quotations from *The Importance of Being Earnest* are taken from *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde,* Collins Ltd., 1975.

THE ART OF REWRITING

Gordon Blackwell

Some writers never rewrite. One detective novelist claimed, "if I revised, I might make it worse."

Wilde, in spite of his comment "Who am I to tamper with a Masterpiece?" when asked to rewrite part of his drama *Vera and the Nihilists,* knew how to make it better in the rewriting, whether for prose, poetry or plays. This was clear from examining Wilde holographs in the extensive exhibition, "Dandies and Doughties: Writers in Britain 1890- 1900," at the New York Public Library this summer.

Dandies and aesthetes were exceptionally productive at the end of the last century, filling, for example, the pages of *The Yellow Book* (to which Wilde did not contribute in the years it was published - 1894 to 1897). In 1896 Beardsley worked for *The Savoy,* another large literary book. Some of Beardsley's drawings were censored, such as the hermaphroditic Satan, before they were printed.

Besides magazines, books by famous and obscure authors were on display, including poetry by John Gray, a friend of Oscar Wilde's who probably contributed Dorian's last name. Max Beerbohm is there, even to an examination paper on *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* which he denied writing. An example: " Is there any internal evidence to show that the custom of cigarette smoking obtained in the period with which the story deals?" No, "the incomparable Max" (to quote George Bernard Shaw's famous description) could not have been that dull.

Some of Wilde's additions to *Dorian,* Chapter XV, were shown. For example, the parenthetical items in the following sentences were added later: "Lord Henry is very wicked, and I (sometimes) wish (that) I had been; but you are made to be good (- you look so good)." How the additions improved it!

Wilde could add to or delete from his original text. For example, he added these familiar lines to the typescript of *the Importance of Being Earnest* "What brings you up to town?" "Oh! pleasure, pleasure. What else should bring one up?" He deleted this line of Cecily's: "I made special enquiries of Uncle Jack the first evening that he broke to us the painful news of his not being alone in the world, and he told us you had only one Christian name."

In writing epigrams, which were his forté, Wilde deleted these two before 1894: "Friendship is far more tragic than love. It lasts much longer." "Sympathy with suffering is the joy of one leper meeting another leper on the road." These were not

up to the others he wrote then, such as this (again, note the revisions in parentheses): "In the (mode of the) knotting of one's necktie or the conduct of one's cane there IS (the entire ... substituted for 'the whole') creed of life."

The above was in manuscript, but Wilde even revised a 1897 published *The Ballad of Reading Gaol,* changing, for example, this in section 1:

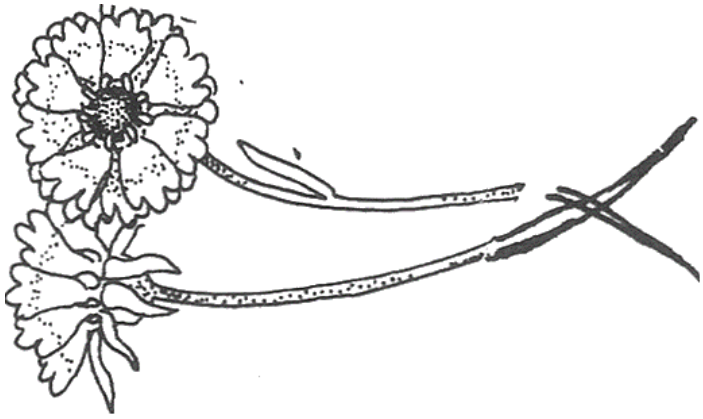
> While the coarse-mouthed Doctor straddles by
> With his flattened bull-dog nose,

to:

> While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes
> Each new and nerve-twitched pose,

On display was an 1898 copy of *Reading Gaol* inscribed to Major J.O. Nelson, the Governor of Reading Prison: "in recognition of many acts of kindness and gentleness." Wilde was also a kind and gentle man, but he could be ruthless with his writing until he got it letter perfect.

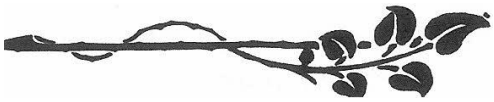
Gordon Blackwell is a frequent contributor to this publication on Wilde topics.



Dublin, Ireland

There is news just in from Dublin as we go to press that the Irish Oscar Wilde Society is awarding its 1993 Oscar Wilde Literary Recognition Award to Irish playwright Frank McGuinness. The award ceremony is being held at the Burlington Hotel in Dublin and is taking place on 16th October, Oscar's birthday. A brass plaque with an inscription is being presented to Mr. McGuinness.

Frank McGuinness is a well know playwright with a list of credits to his name. He has taught at the University of Ulster and at University College Dublin. He is a native of Buncrana, Co. Donegal and now lives in Dublin. Mr. McGuinness' plays have been successfully performed in Dublin at the Gate and Abbey Theatres. He is a great admirer of his fellow Irish playwright Oscar Wilde and describes him as "a man of courage and wit." Frank McGuinness's latest play is entitled *Someone to Watch Over Me.*



Letter from the U.K. Oscar Wilde Society

We had a successful trip to Paris. The group visited the Hotel where the management would not allow them to see Wilde's room. They said it was occupied. So they had tea downstairs instead. The group also visited Père Lachaise, where a suitable floral tribute was left.

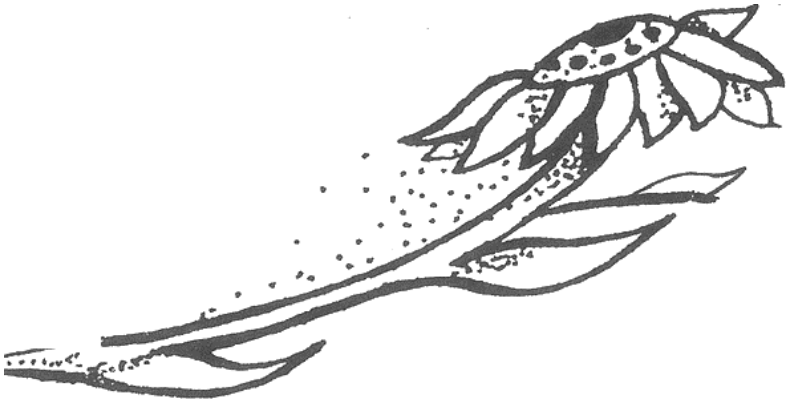
We also had a brilliant trip to Oxford to look at the Robert Ross collection - at the Bodlean Library. It must be one of the best Wilde collections in the world. Saw a plaque from Oscar's first coffin - the one from Bagneux, must have been "taken" presumable by Ross, when Oscar was exhumed for his transfer to P.L.

The British Library have agreed to a centenary celebration in the year 2000 with ephemera coming in from all over the world. We do, however, have to find a major sponsor. Anyone with ideas should contact the society (address below).

Two members are bringing out books shortly. Julie Speedie on Ada Leverson and Joy Melville on Lady Wilde.

Sending best wishes,

Andrew McDonnell
The Oscar Wilde Society
14B Kingston Road
Oxford OX2 6RQ
England



SOTHEBY OF LONDON LITERATURE SALE, JULY 1993

Lot 286 Oscar Wilde. Autograph lecture notes on his impressions of America, comprising a series of jottings denoting headings and subject matter, 6 pages on three double sheets of headed stationery of the Cliftonville Hotel, near Margate. (1883).

Some months after his American lecture tour as a way of raising income in England, Wilde gave at the Prince's Hall on 11 July 1883 a lecture on "Personal Impressions of America." Unsold at £2,800. Valued at £4,000 - £4,500.

(from a letter to the Editor of the Scots Observer, 9 July 1890)

... Your reviewer sir, while admitting that the story (The Picture of Dorian Gray) in question is "plainly the work of a man of letters," the work of one who has "brains, and art, and style," yet suggests, and apparently in all seriousness, that I have written it in order that it should be read by the most depraved members of the criminal and illiterate classes. Now, sir, I do not suppose that the criminal and illiterate classes ever read anything except newspapers. They are certainly not likely to be able to understand anything of mine. So let them pass, and on the broad question of why a man of letters writes at all let me say this. The pleasure that one has in creating a work of art is a purely personal pleasure, and it is for the sake of this pleasure that one creates. The artist works with his eye on the object. Nothing else interests him. What people are likely to say does not even occur to him. He is fascinated by what he has in hand. He is indifferent to others. I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few, I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain. As for the mob, I have no desire to be a popular novelist. It is far too easy ...

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.