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Wild About Wilde

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Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde

WILD ABOUT WILDE

ISSN: 1068-9737
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Dear Wild Wildeans,

The news from Ireland, where I spent part of the summer, is that an Oscar Wilde School was held in September of this year. It ran for two days, September 17 and 18 and consisted of a total of six lectures on Wilde. It was well attended and the organizers plan to have a longer summer school on Wilde in 1995. News about this should be ready for the May WAW.

In this issue there is a review by Merlin Holland of the new book on Speranza, *Mother of Oscar,* by Joy Melville. The book is a very informative and moving account of the life of Oscar's mother and is a valuable source from the paint of view of scholarship. Merlin Holland, who is Oscar's grandson, is working on a book of his own on Oscar Wilde which should be very interesting because of his proximity to the nerve centre of Oscariana.

The Oscar Wilde societies in Ireland and Britain are thriving and full of pep. Membership in both is growing and the word from the British society is that Wilde is to have a place in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. Where would they be without the Irish? As Oscar said, "We took their language and made it beautiful." Of course, it all has its roots in another language or, as our ancestors might have said: *Labhair Béarla liom agus brisfidh mé do phus!*

All the best,

Carmel

IN THIS ISSUE

Goethe or Landor?
An Intriguing Reference in 'The Critic as Artist'

Horst Schroeder

To disprove Ernest's claim that the critic is 'limited to the subjective form of expression' and is thus inferior to the artist, 'who has always at his disposal the forms that are impersonal and objective', Gilbert, the exponent of the new aesthetics in Wilde's great dialogue, reminds his friend that the critic, if he chooses, can bring into play 'the method of the epos' ('narration') and 'the method of the drama':

> He may use dialogue, as he did who set Milton talking to Marvel on the nature of comedy and tragedy, and made Sidney and Lord Brooke discourse on letters beneath the Penshurst oaks [...]. Dialogue, certainly, that wonderful literary form which, from Plato to Lucian, and from Lucian to Giordano Bruno, and from Bruno to that grand old Pagan in whom Carlyle took such delight, the creative critics of the world have always employed, can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression. [...] [1]

There can be no question as to the identity of him 'who set Milton talking to Marvel on the nature of comedy and tragedy, and made Sidney and Lord Brooke discourse on letters beneath the Penshurst oaks'. It is Landor, of course. But what about 'that grand old Pagan in whom Carlyle took such delight'?

In the first annotated (abridged) edition of 'The Critic as Artist', Ian Small offered the suggestion that Gilbert's remark 'is perhaps a reference to Goethe'[2]- a suggestion that Jacqueline Evans took up in her critical edition of *Intentions,* the volume of essays to which 'The Critic as Artist' belongs. [3] In the most authoritative edition of Wilde's essay to date, however, Isobel Murray has laid down that Gilbert's remark is another reference to Landor.[4]

Now, there is a lot to be said in favour of Small's suggestion and, respectively, against Murray's annotation: Firstly, it seems unlikely that there should be two references to one and the same writer so close to one another. Secondly, while the epithet 'pagan' is no doubt applicable to Landor, it is certainly no less applicable to Goethe. Thirdly, it was Goethe, as everybody knows, who was Carlyle's acknowledged idol, whereas Landor usually produced rather mixed feelings in his countryman. Witness Carlyle's letter to Emerson of 1 April 1840:

> Of Landor I have not got much benefit [...). His intellectual faculty seemed to me to be weak in proportion to his violence of temper: the judgement he gives about anything is more apt to be wrong than right,-as the inward whirlwind shows him this side or the other of the object; and *sides* of an object are all that he sees. He is not an original man; in most cases, one but sighs over the spectacle of commonplace torn to rags. I find him painful as a writer; like a soul ever promising to take wing into the Aether, yet never doing it, ever splashing web-footed in the terrene mud, and only splashing the worse the more he strives! Two new tragedies of his that I read lately are the fatallest stuff I have seen for long: not an ingot; ah no, a distracted coil of wire-drawings saleable in no market. [...) Enough of him! Me he likes well enough, more thanks to him; but two hours of such speech as his leave me giddy and undone.[5]

Fourthly, as for Goethe's use of dialogue, we have his discourse 'Über Wahrheit und Wahrscheinlichkeit der Kunstwerke. Ein Gespräch'. [6] And, last but not least: 'the grand pagan', as Heine says on several occasions, was a name by which Goethe was widely known in Germany. See, for example, Heine's treatise *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland,* published in French under the title *De l'Allemagne:*

> Le *grand païen* est en effet le nom qu'on avait donné en Allemagne à Goëthe.[7]

Or see Heine's *Reisebilder* ('Die Nordsee'), which, as we know from Sherard[8], Wilde had studied in the German original:

> diese Menschen [die Philister) haben einen Tugendpöbel um sich versammelt, und predigen ihm das Kreuz gegen den groBen Heiden [Goethe) und gegen seine nackten Göttergestalten, die sie gern durch ihre vermummten dummen Teufel ersetzen möchten,[9]

That settles the matter-or so it seemed to me some years ago when, reviewing Isobel Murray's edition, I took exception to her annotation. [10] And yet it is Murray's seemingly implausible annotation that is the correct one. The evidence for this is a letter which Carlyle wrote to John Forster in 1856 upon the publication of Landor's two imaginary conversations 'Alfieri and Metastasio' and' Menander and Epicurus', in the first of which, as Forster reports in his biography of Landor, the author-

> had Singled out for scornful denunciation the fashionable and thrice-detestable word *pluck,* an example of the very

> worst kind of base corruption of language. 'That utterance of Landor,' Mr. Carlyle wrote to me at the time, referring to this passage, 'did my heart good. Indeed, the first of those two imaginary conversations is. really as good as anything I ever saw from Landor. Do you think the grand old Pagan wrote that piece just now? The sound of it is like the ring of Roman swords on the helmets of barbarians. An unsubduable old Roman! [...][11]

From Murray's reticence it seems to me that her annotation was an inspired guess rather than a reflection of her familiarity with Forster's biography and, respectively, with Carlyle's letter. But be this as it may-what needs to be added is that Wilde's reference is a second-hand one, taken, not from Forster, but from Sidney Colvin, who quoted the epithet under discussion from Carlyle's letter in his own biography of Landor.[12] This follows from the fact that, while there is nothing in Forster's book similar to Wilde's first reference to Landor, the reference is well accounted for by the following passage of Colvin's:

> Lord Brooke and Sir Philip Sidney discourse on letters and morality beneath the oaks of Penshurst. [...] Milton converses with Andrew Marvel on the forms and varieties of comedy and tragedy [...].[13]

And, even more important, it was Colvin who seems to have supplied Wilde with the quotation, towards the end of his essay, from Landor's imaginary conversation 'Alfieri and Salomon the Florentine Jew,[14] an obscure quotation that Small and Murray passed over in silence and that Evans declared herself unable to identity [15]:

> Like the Persephone of whom Landor tells us, the sweet pensive Persephone around whose white feet the asphodel and amaranth are blooming, he [the critic) will sit contented 'in that deep, motionless, quiet which mortals pity, and which the gods enjoy'.[16]

Notes

1. Oscar Wilde (The Oxford Authors), ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford, 1989), 282 f.

2.*The Aesthetes.* A *Sourcebook* (London, 1979), 87 n.3.

3.Unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Birmingham, 1987), ii. 420.

4.Op cit., 611 n.283.

5.*The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle,* ed. Joseph Slater (New York, 1964), 265.

6. Goethes Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe, xii (Hamburg, 1960), 67-73.

7. Heinrich Heine. Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe, viii/1 (Hamburg, 1979), 334. (Italics in the original.) For the German version, see ibid., 100. - Translation: 'The *grand pagan* is in fact the name that has been given to Goethe in Germany.'

8. Robert H. Sherard, *Oscar Wilde. The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* (London, 1909), 156; *The Real Oscar Wilde* (London, n.d. [1915]), 305.

9. Op. cit., vi (Hamburg, 1973), 146.-For further references to 'the grand pagan', see ibid., viii/1, 155 and *Heinrich Heine. Säkulär-Ausgabe,* xx (Berlin, 1970), 307. - Translation: 'These people [the Philistines], having drummed up a mob of virtuous acolytes, expound Christianity in their sermonizing against the grand pagan [Goethe] and his naked deities, which they would sooner replace with their own stupid devils in fancy dress.'

10. *LWU,* xxv (1992), 293 f.

11.*The Works and Life of Walter Savage Landor,* i: *Walter Savage Landor*. A *Biography* (London, 1876), 255 f.-This is not the place to discuss whether Carlyle, with his characterization of Landor, harked back, consciously or unconsciously, to Heine. Suffice it to say that Carlyle was well-read in Heine, as is evident from his remarks made in conversation. (See D.A. Wilson and D.W. MacArthur, *Carlyle in Old Age [1865-1881J* [London, 1934], 23, 218, 347, 358 f. [I am obliged to Professor K.J. Fielding of the University of Edinburgh for drawing my attention to this book.])

12. *Landor* (London, 1881), 203.

13. Ibid., 104.

14.Ibid., 192.-Cf. Landor, *The Complete Works,* ed. T. Earle Welby, iii (London, 1927), 110.

15. Op. cit., ii. 427.

16. Oscar Wilde, 296.

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. Previous works of his have appeared in this publication.*

Mother of *Oscar: The Life* of *Jane Francesca Wilde*
by Joy Melville

Published in Britain by John Murray. £19.99

Review: Merlin Holland

Halfway through his time at Oxford, Oscar Wilde decided to drop his three middle names, Fingal, O'Flaherty, Wills. In answer to a friend who remarked on it, he is said to have replied with a characteristic lack of modesty that he expected one day to be known simply as 'The Oscar'. Not even he, though, could have anticipated what powerful currency either of his two remaining names would become in the marketing of almost anything a hundred years on. That said, *Mother of Oscar* is an honourable exception. The phrase was his own mother's, who, aged 71 wrote to congratulate him of the success of *Lady Windermere's Fan* adding rather wistfully 'I must now pose as the Mother of Oscar!' The book is an account of her remarkable life in which her son is not allowed to hog the limelight as he usually does.

Jane Elgee was born in Dublin but no one has been able to establish when with certainty. Even Oscar at his bankruptcy hearing in 1895 'thinks' she is about 65 when she was undoubtedly over 70. It is a recurrent theme in his plays. 'No woman should ever be quite accurate about her age. It looks so calculating,' as Lady Bracknell remarks. In her early twenties, under the pseudonym Speranza, she wrote rousing poems for Charles Gavin Duffy's anti-Unionist paper, *The Nation,* which later critics have dismissed as 'mere versifying' but which Joy Melville pins firmly in context to the horrific background of the Great Potato Famine and the disgraceful behaviour of absentee English landlords. The figures speak for themselves, some 800,000 people died between 1845 and 1851, almost a tenth of Ireland's population and despite living in modestly elegant surroundings south of St. Stephen's Green she would have been acutely aware of the poverty and depravation on her own doorstep. To accuse her, as some have done, of a degree of champagne socialism, of an intellectual rather than an truly emotional sympathy with her starving countrymen, now seems both unfair and incorrect. At any rate her reputation as the people's poet across Ireland was such that nearly forty years later in America Oscar, when addressing the Irish Americans in San Francisco, would find himself referred to as 'Speranza's Boy' by those who had been lucky enough to escape starvation and emigrate.

Marriage in 1851 to William Wilde, a noted ear and eye surgeon, cooled her revolutionary ardour but not her desire to write nor her thirst for intellectual

company. An uneasy combination for that time of feminist, author, mother and subservient wife, she emerges as the true linchpin of the family. Dublin's sharpest minds take her hospitality at table and her Saturday salon is filled with painters, musicians, lawyers and scientists. Significantly, it was the milieu in which Oscar Wilde spent the first twenty years of his life and it is only now that biographers re starting to realize how important an influence on him they were.

No history of the Wilde family would be complete without some account of Sir William's extra- marital indiscretions but it is pleasing to see, in particular, the Mary Travers case dealt with at length. All too often the story is dismissed in a paragraph or two and simplistic reference made to the foreshadowing of Oscar Wilde's own appearances in court thirty years later. Sir William was obviously not without fault but Miss Travers emerges as the jealous, vindictive and partly unhinged creature that she clearly was.

But in 1876 Sir William, as he had become, died leaving unexpectedly large debts and Jane's life was a sad twenty-year slide to her grave. Devoted as she was to her two sons, Willie and Oscar, she followed them to London. It probably gave her an extra fifteen years of life, but it was a mistake. London society was less forgiving of her eccentricities than Dublin and contemporary accounts dealt cruelly with her attempt to revive her salon in the metropolis.

To her credit, though, she retained her Irish pride to the end. On the death of her husband she should have been entitled to a civil list pension in recognition of his services to the crown but the waters were muddied by her reputation as a nationalist, a fact not likely to have endeared her to the Prime Minister in whose gift it was. A literary pension was even less likely since as she wrote to Oscar, 'He [Disraeli] required the writers to be - loyal - orthodox - moral and to praise the English! *Jamais* - my descending to this level. Fancy! I have stood a priestess at the altar of freedom!' (133). It was not until 1890 that she was finally granted £70 a year. It was the same pride which according to w. B Yeats caused her to remark to Oscar at the time of his trials, 'If you stay, even if you go to prison, you will always be my son, it will make no difference to my affection, but if you go I will never speak to you again' (260).

Joy Melville's skillful use of Lady Wilde's letters, many previously unpublished, bring her vividly and sympathetically to life. We have Oscar's deep affection for her to thank that by some miracle her letters to him survived. His own to her did not. Facts merely touched on previously are fleshed out to unexpected effect, such as Oscar's near- total financial support of Jane in her last years, even finding the means to get money to her from prison; or Willie's

unashamed sponging off his mother which so disgusted Oscar that their once close relationship was soured permanently.

Most important of all, this book shows what a profound effect his family background was to have on Oscar Wilde, whom we all too often regard like his Remarkable Rocket, apparently rising from nowhere and bursting into spectacular display before crashing to oblivion.

Merlin Holland is the grandson of Oscar Wilde. He lives in London and is currently working on a *book about his grandfather.*

A shorter version of this review appeared in the London *Sunday Express.*

The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment **by Alan Sinfield. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.**

(ISBN: 0-231-10167-8)

Review by Bill McCauley

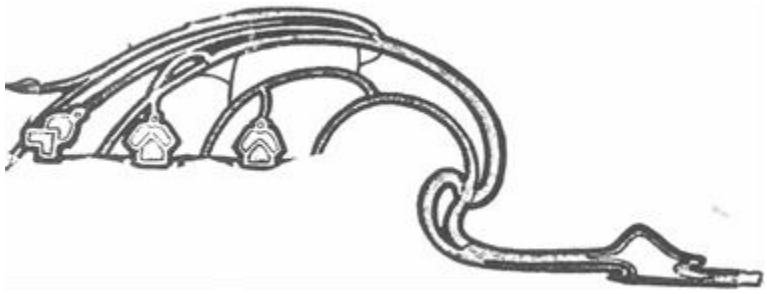
The main thrust of Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century* is to investigate the connection between the Wilde trials of 1895 and the modern conjunction of male homosexuality and effeminacy. Sinfield compellingly argues that this conjunction came into being due to and during the Wilde trials, which happened to take place when a great deal of medical and psychological work on sexual orientation was being undertaken. He sees the modern understanding of gay identity as structured "mainly out of elements that came together at the Wilde trials: effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism" (12). The book examines the importance of this chain of events for the establishment of a gay identity today, and for that reason, it is a valuable piece of scholarship for those interested in gay/lesbian studies.

Just as importantly, however, the book can be looked at "in reverse," meaning that we can follow Sinfield's history of effeminacy backwards to pre-Wilde times. This will supply us with a revealing picture of the way Wilde himself found it necessary to construct his identity. While sexuality is in no way monolithic in identity construction, neither can it be discounted. As current literary theory contends, identity and subjectivity arise from the many interactions of the myriad of discourses in which we engage, both voluntary and perforce. Any effort to understand Wilde's genius must include an investigation of the discourses he had at his disposal.

Sinfield provides substantial historical documentation that the concept of effeminacy was not considered indicative of same-sex desire until the late nineteenth century. In fact, it was considered part and parcel of the "dandy's" mode of operation, often representing "the over-refinement and moral laxness" (69) that was expected from the leisure class. While the coupling of homosexuality and effeminacy has established a discourse that has clearly had dramatic repercussions for the contemporary gay man's ability to construct a healthy self-concept, it is easy to overlook the devastating effect that the *lack* of such a discourse might have had on Wilde. Even a negative sense of identity provides some form of foundation, as opposed to the feeling of free-fall that Wilde may have often experienced.

The most persuasive argument that Sinfield gives it that the masculine/feminine and active/passive binaries are culturally constructed. This is certainly not controversial in today's theoretical and literary arenas, but he continues by demonstrating how concepts of effeminacy and sexual orientation are rooted in the misogyny that is firmly established in these ideologically powerful binaries. By examining the effeminacy and the gender constructs in several of Wilde's works, Sinfield paves the way for further research into the interacting discourses that underwrote Wilde's verbal brilliance. At the same time, he suggests the lack of a psychic foundation and terminology which Wilde could have used to understand his desires. I would suggest that it was the intersection of this brilliance and this lack of an adequate discourse of sexually that allowed Wilde to achieve his most piercing wit and forced him to reach for his most intense self-examination. *The Wilde Century* is a provocative and stimulating investigation of a horrendously complex subject.

Bill McCauley is a teacher of American, English and Irish literature. He is currently working on a Ph.D. in comparative literature at the University of Maryland, USA.



NEWS FROM THE DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL:

A new play on Oscar Wilde called *Oscar* is being presented at the Dublin Theatre Festival. Written by David Norris, Senator and lecturer in English at Trinity College Dublin, it is a one man play performed by Kevin McHugh and started its run at the Andrews Lane Theatre on October 11 th of this year.

SALOMÉ AND THE FIN DE SIÈCLE CULTURE

Carmel McCaffrey

In choosing to write a play on the biblical story of Salomé Oscar Wilde was aligning himself with one of the popular themes of the Fin de Siècle culture. The Salomé paintings of Gustav Moreau described in detail (with embellishments) by Huysmans in *A Rebours* and popularized by the engravings of Bracquemout which were sold in Paris and London had caught the attention of Wilde. Another fascination was the poem of an American named Joseph Heywood whoso *Salomé* Wilde reviewed in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 15 February 1888. The poem was originally written in 1862 but such was the popularity of the subject that it was reprinted by a London publisher in 1888. There was also the great and much talked about unfinished work of Stephan Mallarmé called *Hérodiade* which seemed to hang over Wilde like a challenge.

It was during a dinner with Edgar Saltus in 1890 that Wilde spoke seriously about his intention to write his own Salomé and afterwards, according to Saltus' account, he visited the home of Lord Hope. On the wall of his lordship's library was an engraving of Herodias dancing on her hands (her feet aloft) and Wilde reportedly went up to the picture and said :"La Bella donna delia mia mente*[1] (Beautiful woman in my mind). He, however, would see the play as essentially French in sentiment in keeping with his letter to Edmond de Goncourt in 1891 that "*Français de sympathie, je suis Irlandais de race, et les Anglais m'ont condamné à parler le langage de Shakespeare*."* He forsook the language of Shakespeare for *Salomé* which he wrote in French like another Irishman, Samuel Beckett, was to do in this century.

Wilde had, after all, only recently declared that in writing *Dorian Gray* he was indebted to Huysmans *A Rebours* and could be said to have written a 'French' novel in English.[2] Now with *Salomé* he was writing a 'French' play in French. But whereas in *Dorian Gray* Wilde, according to Richard Ellmann, wrote "the tragedy of aestheticism'[3] in *Salomé* he celebrates it.

**French by affinity, I am Irish by race and the English have condemned me to speak the language of Shakespeare.*

Wilde, unlike W.B. Yeats, who said that works of art beget works of art, believed that works of art murder each other and put this sentiment into a prose poem where he describes a statue of sadness being melted down to create a statue of pleasure.[4] Self contradiction was essential to Wilde in order for his art to grow and find new sensation. This philosophy of finding new sensations, even in the face of self contradiction, was essential to the art of aestheticism. In his play Wilde turns the biblical story around and puts the passion of Salomé for John the Baptist at the centre of the drama. This unrequited passion will be the reason for Jokanaan losing his head and not, as in the original biblical tale, the anger and revenge of Herodias. There are also homosexual overtones between the page and the young Syrian; and Herod, in aesthetic fashion, is craving the sensation of seeing Salomé dance. Critics have pointed out the obvious symbolism of the dance as a symbol for sex but even without the sexual symbolism the craving for the dance of Salomé by Herod would stand alone as a sensation to be experienced at all costs. All sensation was to be experienced fully until one had exhausted the sensation and then had done with it.

Salomé was a subject ripe for the decadence. Herod, a lustful epicurean having seemingly exhausted many pleasures in the mode of Walter Pater, turns his attention on his step-daughter. John the Baptist, the paragon of goodness and morality might be seen, as Wilde perhaps did, as the embodiment of John Ruskin. By killing Jokanaan, Salomé must then pay with her own life, and here we have the triumph and justice of aestheticism. After her dance she is no longer of any interest to Herod. His sensation is satisfied and he is then finished with the "nouveau frisson" (new thrill) as Victor Hugo once described a poem of Baudelaire's[5] and which became a common expression in the decadents' world. The last line of the play is Herod's order to "Kill that woman." A true sentiment of the decadence, an echo of what Wilde described in *The Critic* as *Artist:* "When one has found expression for a mood, one has done with it." It has exactly the effect that Wilde wanted to achieve.

Wilde wrote *Salomé* in tones of rich biblical language in celebration of aestheticism. In spite of what the critics thought at the time, and since, Wilde did not write the play for Sarah Bernhardt and responded in anger in March 1893 to one critic in *The Times* who said that he did. It was absurd to Wilde for someone to claim that a work of art could *be* written *for* an actress and wrote in his letter to *The Times* that "I look forward with delight to seeing Mme Bernhardt present my play in Paris, that vivid centre of art, where religious dramas are often performed. But my play was in no sense of the words written for this great actress." Wilde wrote always for himself

and said so in another letter to a critic concerning *Dorian Gray*. "The artist works with his eye on the object... I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write."[6]

Because the play was banned in England (and actually first produced in Paris) Wilde was concerned to have it published in London and thus secure his copyright. The illustrations were to be done by Aubrey Beardsley who also was asked to do the translation of French into English. When his translation was refused he became furious with Wilde but proceeded to do the illustrations. Beardsley had become enamoured of Japanese art and this influence was to have a major effect on his own art. According to William Rothenstein in his book *Men and Memories,* he gave Beardsley a portfolio of highly erotic Japanese prints and Beardsley was so delighted with them that he taped them to the walls of his bedroom.

The fact that Wilde saw the play in a Byzantine mist meant nothing to Beardsley who proceeded, with true art for art's sake sentiment, to draw what he wanted. As his anger with Wilde grew worse the illustrations became more irrelevant to the play and he boasted as much in a letter to Robert Ross in November 1893[7] which gave future generations of critics grist for the argument that the illustrations were totally extraneous, which they were not. In fact, in spite of their apparent indifference to Wilde's wishes the Beardsley illustrations reflect much of the Fin de Siècle culture with peacock designs showing the influence of James Whistler and, in the "Toilette of Salomé" illustration, Japanese furniture copied from the designs of Edward Godwin, who had designed the interior of Wilde's house in Tite Street. There is also a Pierrot figure who appears frequently, most profoundly in "The Toilette of Salomé" and is also present in the "Tailpiece", her death scene.[8] The Pierrot masked figure had come to represent a meddlesome demon in decadent art and so it could be an indication of how Beardsley felt about the character of Salomé or, of Wilde. But whatever can be said about the illustrations, they were very much in the spirit of the fin de siècle culture.

It is wise and appropriate to let Oscar Wilde have the final words on his *Salomé*. Edgar Saltus reported years later in his book *Oscar Wilde: An Idler's Impression* that he attended a banquet and a reading of the play by Wilde in London in February of 1893. As the banquet and the reading proceeded Saltus says "I experienced that sense of sacred terror which his friends, the Greeks, knew so well. For this thing could have been conceived only by genius wedded to insanity." At the last line "Kill that woman" Saltus

was moved by a "mysterious divinity" and as he applauded, he also shuddered and told Wilde that he had. Wilde, ever the master of a situation, appeared unconcerned but said without hesitation, "It is only the shudder that counts."

Notes:

1 Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde* (London 1987), 321.

2 *The Letters of Oscar Wilde.* Ed. Rupert Hart-Davis. (London 1962), 313.

3 Ellmann, 297.

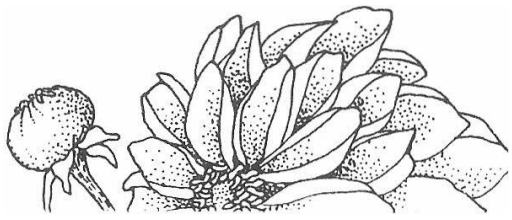
4 Oscar Wilde. "The Artist", *The Complete Works of* 0. W. (Collins, London 1977).

5 Schroeder, Horst. "Oscar Wilde - A Lord of Literature", *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* (Königshausen and Neumann, Germany 1991), 144.

6 *Letters.* Letter to *The Times,* 334; letter to the *Scots Observer, 266.*

7 *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley.* Ed. Maas, Duncan and Good. (Fairleigh Dickinson U.P. 1970), 58.

8 *The Collected Drawings of Aubrey Beardsley,* with an appreciation by Arthur Symons, (New York 1967), 59, 67.



EARLY CHRISTIAN ART IN IRELAND

OSCAR WILDE

(Being an extract from an article written by Wilde for the *Pall Mall Gazette,* December 17, 1887)

The want of a good series of popular handbooks on Irish art has long been felt, the works of Sir William Wilde, Petrie, and others being somewhat too elaborate for the ordinary student; so we are glad to notice the appearance, under the auspices of the Committee of Council on Education, of Miss Margaret Stokes's little volume on the early Christian art of her country. There is, of course, nothing particularly original in Miss Stokes's book, nor can she be said to be a very attractive or pleasing writer, but it is unfair to look for originality in primers, and the charm of the illustrations fully atones for the somewhat heavy and pedantic character of the style.

This early Christian art of Ireland is full of interest to the artist, the archaeologist, and the historian. In its rudest forms, such as the little iron hand-bell, the plain stone chalice , and the rough wooden staff, it brings us back to the simplicity of the primitive Christian Church, while to the period of its highest development we owe the great masterpieces of the Celtic metal workers. The stone chalice is now replaced by the chalice of silver and gold; the iron bell has its jewel-studded shrine and the rough staff its gorgeous casing; rich caskets and splendid bindings preserve the holy books of the Saints, and, instead of the rudely carved symbol of the early missionaries, we have such beautiful works of art as the processional cross of Cong Abbey. Beautiful this cross certainly is with its delicate intricacy of ornamentation, its grace of proportion, and its marvel of mere workmanship, nor is there any doubt about its history. From the inscriptions on it, which are corroborated by the annals of lnnisfallen and the Book of Clonmacnoise , we learn that it was made for King Turlough O'Connor by a native artist under the superintendence of Bishop O'Duffy, its primary object being to enshrine a portion of the true cross what was sent to the king in 1123. Brought to Cong some years afterwards, probably by the archbishop, who died there in 1150, it was concealed at the time of the Reformation, but at the beginning of the present century was still in the possession of the last abbot, and at his death it was purchased by Professor McCullagh and presented by him to the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy. This wonderful work is alone well worth a visit to Dublin, but not less lovely is the chalice of Ardagh, a two-handled silver cup, absolutely classical in its perfect purity of form, and decorated with gold and amber and crystal and with varieties of *cloisonné* and *champlevé* enamel. There is no mention of this cup or of the so-called Tara brooch, in ancient Irish history. All

that we know of them is that they were found accidentally, the former by a boy who was digging potatoes near the old Rath of Ardagh, the latter by a child who picked it up near the sea-shore. They both, however, belong probably to the tenth century... .

There are certain elements of beauty in ancient Irish art that the modern artist would do well to study. The value of the intricate illuminations in the Book of Kells, as far as their adaptability to modern designs and modern material goes, has been very much overrated, but in the ancient Irish torques, brooches, pins, clasps, and the like, the modern goldsmith will find a rich and, comparatively speaking, an untouched field; and now that the Celtic spirit has become the leaven of our politics, there is no reason why it should not contribute something to our decorative art.

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