

An appreciation
Oscar Wilde: the art of the somdomite
Mark Ravenhill

I first came across the work of Oscar Wilde when I was about eight years old. I saw a 1974 television cartoon of Wilde's 'Happy Prince'. I didn't know who the author of the story was but I was immediately struck by the tale of the golden statue and the little bird who strips him of his gold leaf to rescue the city's poor and the cruelty of the city's authorities who then destroy the bare statue. I wasn't quite sure what the story was telling me. But I knew it was something melancholy and profound. And I can still replay in my head, some forty years later, many of the images of that animation. I'm still not sure what the story is telling me. Did the little bird do the right thing? Is it necessary to destroy the beautiful in an attempt to save a corrupted world? Or should beauty be allowed its solitary splendour, independent of the cruelty around it?

As I got a little older, I became aware that, from time to time, one adult would turn to another and, assuming an august voice and a rising inflection, would say: 'A handbag!' At this, the other adult would then almost inevitably laugh. What was this strange adult code, I wondered, and why did it cause so much merriment? Clearly there was something powerful and joyful about this word 'handbag'. But equally I remembered that I'd once asked an aunt (with the very unWildean name of Hazel) if I could play with her handbag. Hazel turned to my mother and said, 'Oh dear, do you think he's one of those?' She then made a sort of limp, flicking motion with her wrist. My mother stiffened like a tigress protecting her young and said 'And so what if he is?' I had no idea what they were talking about but I was confident that the mysteries of the handbag would be explained to me once I was allowed in to the secrets of adult life.

When I was a teenager, I saw the 1952 film of *The Importance of Being Earnest* on the television. I was delighted to discover where 'A handbag!' came from and immediately started to use Edith Evans's reading of those three syllables whenever I thought it might amuse the assembled company.

There's something about the English character which is revealed by the fact that the two most famous phrases from our drama, the two phrases that almost everybody knows from a young age, are 'To be or not to be' and 'A handbag!'. One is the most profound, essential question about our life and the other is the most seemingly trivial utterance. But which is which? Somewhere in their collision lies the truth about the English. With Hamlet, it's a visual image that the words bring to mind, of a black clad figure from some nineteenth-century production staring at a skull (in folk memory, 'To be or not to be' has become conflated with 'Alas, poor Yorick'). But with Lady Bracknell's 'handbag' the folk memory is aural: generations have imitated the music of Edith Evans, without often knowing who they are imitating or from what source.

It wasn't just the one line: as soon as I saw it, I was enthusiastic about all of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I think what first appeals to the English child brought up on *Alice in Wonderland* is the seeming absurdity of a drama played out over cups of tea and cucumber sandwiches – it's the Mad Hatter's Tea Party for grown-ups. There's a delicious sense of artifice, that no one quite means or feels anything, although there also seems to be a great deal at stake. We might recognise this now as a camp sensibility. It probably is. But when I was growing up *The Importance of Being Earnest* was one of the most popular choices for school groups, amateur companies and small regional theatres. Which seems to suggest that at the time the camp sensibility ran very deep, right into the roots of English life. Nobody suggested at the time that there was anything remotely scandalous or subversive about the play or its author. In England in the 1970s, Oscar Wilde and *The Importance of Being Earnest* had become as cosy as toasted muffins.

A little bit later in my teenage years, I came across adults complimenting each other from time to time and saying: 'You look great. You haven't aged a bit. I bet you've got a portrait stuck up in the attic, haven't you?' By this time, I'd lost the natural inquisitiveness of a child and just assumed that this was some sort of folk saying or hand-me-down joke. So when I saw the film of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, again on the television (life was very dull in England in the 1970s so there wasn't much to do but watch television), I was surprised to discover that the saying had a source, an adaptation from literature. But it was only several years later, in a library, that I realized that these three stories – 'The Happy Prince', *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – were by the same author. Three works, each of which had imprinted themselves on my sensibility with the power of myth, I now realized were by the same man.

I was amazed. They were all so different. It seemed impossible to think that the same person could have written all three.

I believe that this is the most important thing to understand about Wilde: the diversity of his work. From *Salome* to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* to 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', from *Dorian Gray* to *Lady Windemere's Fan* to 'The Canterville Ghost', what is fascinating is how different each piece is from the other – each its own powerful myth, almost impossible to ascribe to the same authorial voice. And, through cartoons and film and TV adaptations, the stories have escaped their author and entered deep into the British popular consciousness. So it is either ironic or inevitable, and probably both, that we also have such a strong sense of Wilde's voice, of the 'celebrity author'. We've summoned up such a strong personality for Wilde (and he was complicit in this) that we are able to reconcile the different and sometimes totally contradictory voices in his work and identify them all as 'Wildean'.

I was a young adult of eighteen or so and with a developed sense that I was, as Hazel predicted, 'one of those' when I saw (on television, of course) the 1960 film *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*. It was a huge surprise and quite a thrill to discover that the author of something as seemingly cosy as *The Importance of Being Earnest* had lived such a scandalous life. And like many gay men before and since, I started to re-read Wilde as 'one of ours', as part of an attempt to create a personal gay canon. But Oscar's work is too varied and too contradictory for him to be read as a gay or a queer author. Perhaps Queensbury came closest to capturing the complexities of Wilde's identity in that phrase 'posing as a sodomite'. Editors usually put a [sic] after that 'sodomite', assuming that the 'm' was added to sodomite in error, but perhaps Queensbury knew exactly what he was doing. Perhaps he was suggesting that Wilde was too slippery to pose even as a regular 'sodomite' but was a completely unique, perverse creature, the 'sodomite'. Perhaps.

Today I feel content to accept that Wilde fits no single narrative. His life is just one of the many narratives that he generated. We cluster them together for convenience's sake under the name 'Oscar Wilde'. But they will always spin away from the centre, each narrative creating a world of its own. Maybe that is what 'sodomite' means.

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PART I

Placing Wilde

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CHAPTER I

*Son and parents: Speranza and Sir William Wilde**Sean Ryder*

In an agonized passage in *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde writes that his parents ‘had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured, not merely in literature, art, archaeology and science, but in the public history of my own country, in its evolution as a nation. I had disgraced that name eternally. I had made it a low by-word among low people. I had dragged it through the very mire. I had given it to brutes that they might make it brutal, and to fools that they might turn it into a synonym for folly.’¹

Throughout his life, Wilde had been deeply proud of his parents’ achievements, and the legacy they had bequeathed him, a fact that makes the self-lacerating passage above seem all the more poignant and painful. The context for the passage was of course his own humiliating trial and imprisonment, and the recent death of his mother while he was in Reading Gaol (having been refused permission to visit her during her final illness).

At the time he was drafting the long autobiographical letter that became *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde had become one of the most famous (and infamous) writers in the world. But his parents – Sir William Wilde and Jane Francesca Elgee (‘Speranza’) – were fascinating personalities in their own right, and it has been tempting for readers and critics to see them as catalysts for Oscar’s own talents and behaviour. Twenty years after his death, W. B. Yeats admitted that ‘of late years I have often explained Wilde to myself by his family history’.² He was not the only major Irish writer to do so. James Joyce wrote that the ‘atmosphere of permissiveness and prodigality’ that prevailed at the Wilde household during Oscar’s youth may have contributed to ‘the sad mania (if it can be so called) that would later drag him to his ruin’.³ Since then numerous literary critics have sought, often persuasively, to link Wilde’s formative years in Dublin with his subsequent aesthetics and politics.⁴

To see Oscar in the lights of his parents’ lives and careers is to firmly locate him as an Irish writer, or, more specifically, as the product of an

emergent and vibrant nineteenth-century Dublin-based middle class. The culture of this class had much in common with the bourgeois culture of Victorian Britain generally. Indeed, the standard biography of Sir William Wilde is entitled *Victorian Doctor*.⁵ Yet the cultural world of the Wildes was also shaped by Irish nationalism, by colonial political and economic structures, and by the complications and paradoxes that marked the 'Anglo-Irish' in general. In many ways Wilde's parents reflected the full range of these complexities.

Oscar Wilde was the second son of Dr (later Sir) William Wilde (1815–76) and Jane Francesca Elgee (1821–96). They had married in 1851; a son, Willie, was born in 1852 and Oscar two years later. A daughter, Isola, was born in 1857 but was to die of fever at the age of nine. At the time of their marriage, Jane and William were already well-known public figures in Dublin. Oscar's mother had achieved popularity and notoriety as 'Speranza', the pen-name she adopted as the fiery poet of the influential *Nation* newspaper of the late 1840s. It was widely known that she had been the author of the unsigned editorial for the *Nation* on 29 July 1848 that finally provoked the government into suppressing the newspaper for sedition. Her fame as the heroine of the 'Young Ireland' movement continued long after she abandoned militant nationalism; twenty-five years later, Wilde was more recognisable to some American audiences as 'Speranza's son' than he was under his own name.⁶

William Wilde at the time of his marriage to Jane was the most celebrated ophthalmic surgeon in Ireland, having established the pioneering St Mark's Hospital and Dispensary for Diseases of the Eye and Ear in 1844. As well as editing the highly respected *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science*, and publishing a volume on the literary, scientific and medical institutions of Austria, William Wilde had gained a literary reputation based on his narrative of a youthful journey through the Mediterranean and near East (the royalties for which had funded his medical studies in Austria) and a monograph on the last years of Jonathan Swift, which mixed literary criticism with medical diagnosis in attempting to determine the causes of Swift's final illness.⁷ Perhaps most noteworthy was his much-acclaimed antiquarian tourist volume *The Beauties of the Boyne and its Tributary, the Blackwater*, whose first chapter includes a quotation of lines from a poem by his future wife, Speranza, and was favourably reviewed in the revived *Nation* newspaper in 1849 by Speranza herself.⁸

It is almost certain that Wilde and Elgee would have met before the publication of that review, given the relatively narrow social world of

Son and parents: Speranza and Sir William Wilde 9

the Dublin bourgeoisie. Both were members of the privileged Protestant minority – Wilde the son of a physician from County Roscommon and Elgee the daughter of a Dublin barrister – and both were intelligent, ambitious, gregarious socialites. Upon their marriage, Jane moved into William's house at 21 Westland Row. Four years later they relocated to the fashionable corner residence nearby at 1 Merrion Square, where they employed a German governess, a French maid and six servants, and entertained frequently. Their soirées became a who's who of the Dublin cultural scene, often stretching to more than a hundred guests, who might include Yeats's father and grandfather, or George Bernard Shaw's father (like several others, he was also a patient of Sir William). When visiting celebrities like Dion Boucicault were in town, they frequently made their way to the Wildes' famous gatherings.

Oscar told an early biographer that '[t]he best of his education was obtained from [the] association with his father and mother and their remarkable friends'.⁹ Yeats was later to remark that '[w]hen one listens to her [Lady Wilde] and remembers that Sir William Wilde was in his day a famous *raconteur*, one finds it no way wonderful that Oscar Wilde should be the most finished talker of our time' (though ironically, Oscar recalled that as children at the dinner table, he and his brother were not permitted to speak!).¹⁰ One of Oscar's biographers noted that conversation at the Wildes' was one in which wit and verbal skill were more important than consistency of position or verifiability of fact, a phenomenon their son would both illustrate and explore so brilliantly in his own writings.¹¹

The activities of reading and writing pervaded the atmosphere of the Wildes' house. Both William and Jane had contributed articles to the *Dublin University Magazine* during the 1840s, and they were both acquainted with Irish literary figures like Charles Lever, Sheridan LeFanu, Samuel Ferguson, Bram Stoker and William Carleton. They had other significant literary connections: Maria Edgeworth had written letters of introduction for young William Wilde that opened doors for him in Berlin, Prague and Munich. The Dublin novelist Charles Maturin had been an uncle of Jane Elgee (and his famous gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* was to provide the source of the pseudonym 'Sebastian Melmoth' that Oscar adopted in his final wanderings in France). Jane's own literary ambitions were high. At the time of her marriage in 1851 she had contributed more than forty poems to the *Nation* newspaper, and had published a well-regarded translation of the German terror-tale *Sidonia the Sorceress* (1849), along with two volumes of translations from the French historian and poet Lamartine.

The two parents remained productive writers throughout Oscar's youth. William would continue to write articles and publish books up to his death in 1875, most famously his *Lough Corrib: its Shores and Islands* (1867) which was based on his detailed knowledge of the County Galway landscape where he had built his rural retreat, Moytura House, in 1863. A labour of love as well as scholarship, the Corrib book mixes antiquarian, archaeological and historical discourse with scenic description and tourist advice. Perhaps surprisingly, the work of which he was most proud was his three-volume *Descriptive Catalogue of the Antiquities . . . in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy* (1857–62) which enumerated and illustrated the academy's large collections of historical artefacts, ranging from prehistoric tools to Iron Age swords, to fabrics, coins and ornaments.¹²

These antiquarian interests made William a key figure in the lively cultural nationalist movement that characterized early nineteenth-century Dublin. To an extent, Wilde is a bridge between the impressionistic Celticist theories of earlier writers like Vallency and Henry O'Brien, and the emerging Victorian spirit of scientific analysis and classification. He reproduces some elements of romantic pseudo-science (for instance, his continual reference to skull shapes as evidence for racial and psychological characteristics). But he is also keen to bridge the worlds of the modern and pre-modern in terms of scientific knowledge. He tries to prove the value of legendary, mythic and folk material by showing how it can be mapped against the historical and archaeological record, attempting to give value and dignity to the 'primitive' oral culture of the peasants at the very moment when science threatens to discard all such knowledge. Wilde was no mere cultural tourist; he had learned such stories and folklore during his childhood in rural County Roscommon, and later, as a practising physician in Dublin, he often asked for patients to provide him with tales and charms in lieu of monetary payment.¹³ Wilde recognized that for all the benefits of modernity and modernization, these developments frequently entailed serious kinds of loss. In a remarkable address to the natives of the Aran Islands during an 'ethnographical expedition' to the prehistoric fortress of Dun Aenghus in 1857, Wilde combined elegiac (and highly romanticized) evocations of the ancient Firbolg people making their last heroic stand on the island cliff-top with prescient and practical exhortations to the present-day islanders to maintain their heritage and preserve the huge stone ruins as a valuable source of tourism income in the future.¹⁴ This attitude is found also in volumes like *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852) where Wilde notes that the gradual disappearance