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## OSCAR WILDE IN CONTEXT

Oscar Wilde was a courageous individualist whose path-breaking life and work were shaped in the crucible of his time and place, deeply marked by the controversies of his era. This collection of concise and illuminating articles reveals the complex relationship between Wilde's work and ideas and contemporary contexts including Victorian feminism, aestheticism and socialism. Chapters investigate how Wilde's writing was both a resistance to and quotation of Victorian master narratives and genre codes. From performance history to film and operatic adaptations, the ongoing influence and reception of Wilde's story and work is explored, proposing not one but many Oscar Wildes. To approach the meaning of Wilde as an artist and historical figure, the book emphasizes not only his ability to imagine new worlds, but also his bond to the turbulent cultural and historical landscape around him – the context within which his life and art took shape.

KERRY POWELL is the author of *Acting Wilde* (2009), preceded by *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* and *Women and Victorian Theatre*. He edited *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* and is Professor of English at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

PETER RABY is the author of a study of Oscar Wilde, and the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* and *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*. Among his other books are biographies of Harriet Smithson, Berlioz, Samuel Butler and Alfred Russel Wallace. He is a Fellow Emeritus of Homerton College, Cambridge.

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*To Merlin Holland  
in warm appreciation*

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## *Notes on contributors*

JAMES ELI ADAMS is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He is the co-editor, with Andrew Miller, of *Sexualities in Victorian Britain* (1996), and the author of *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (1995) and *A History of Victorian Literature* (2009), as well as numerous articles on Victorian literature and culture. From 1993 to 2000 he co-edited the journal *Victorian Studies*.

JOSEPH BRISTOW is Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. Among his many edited volumes on Wilde are *Wilde Discoveries: Traditions, Histories, Archives* (2013), and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2005) for the Oxford *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*.

OLIVER S. BUCKTON is Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, where he teaches Victorian and twentieth-century British literature, theory and film. He is the author of *Secret Selves: Confession and Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Autobiography* (1998) and *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson: Travel, Narrative, and the Colonial Body* (2007). He is a contributor to the volume *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend* (ed. Joseph Bristow, 2009).

BARBARA CAINE is Professor of History and Head of the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry at the University of Sydney. Her books include *Victorian Feminists* (1992), *English Feminism 1780–1980* (1998), *Bombay to Bloomsbury: A Biography of the Strachey Family* (2005) and *Biography and History* (2010).

RICHARD CAVE is Professor Emeritus in Drama and Theatre Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London. His publications extend from Renaissance to modern theatre. He has edited the plays of Wilde and Yeats and written about many aspects of their dramaturgy, particularly



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their use of stage design, movement and dance. His most recent monograph is *Collaborations: Ninette de Valois and William Butler Yeats*.

DAVID CLIFFORD is Fellow in English at Homerton College, Cambridge, working in Victorian literature, the history of science, and contemporary literature. He has published on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific writing and has edited a collection of essays on the Rossetti family.

HARRY COCKS is Lecturer in History at Nottingham University. He is the author of *Nameless Offences* (2003), *The Modern History of Sexuality* (with Matt Houlbrook, 2006) and *Classified* (2009).

MATT COOK is Senior Lecturer in History and Gender Studies at Birkbeck, University of London, and co-director of the Raphael Samuel History Centre. He is the author of *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914* (2003) and editor of *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men since the Middle Ages* (2007). *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth Century London* will appear in 2013.

JOSEPH DONOHUE, a theatre historian and textual scholar, is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he taught for thirty-four years. He is currently editing a group of Oscar Wilde's plays, including *Salomé* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for the Oxford *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. His translation of Wilde's French *Salomé*, with illustrations by Barry Moser, was published in 2011.

RICHARD DORMENT wrote his doctoral thesis for Columbia University on Burne-Jones's mosaics for the American Church in Rome. His books and exhibition catalogues include *Alfred Gilbert* (1985); *British Painting 1750–1900* (1986); *Alfred Gilbert: Sculptor and Goldsmith* (Royal Academy, 1986) and *James McNeill Whistler* (with Margaret Macdonald, Tate Gallery 1994–5). He is a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books* and has been art critic for the *Daily Telegraph* since 1987.

SOS ELTIS is a Fellow and Tutor at Brasenose College, Oxford University. She is the author of *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (1996), *Acts of Desire: Women and Sex on Stage, 1800–1930* (2013) and of a range of articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century drama, gothic fiction and Oscar Wilde.

HELEN FRESHWATER teaches at Newcastle University. She is the author of *Theatre and Audience* and *Theatre Censorship in Britain: Silencing*,

*Censure and Suppression* (both 2009), and has contributed articles to *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Performance Research*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Theatre Research International* and *The Lion and the Unicorn*, among other journals. She works as a dramaturg and was awarded a Philip Leverhulme Prize in 2011 in support of her research.

JOSEPHINE M. GUY is Professor of Modern Literature at the University of Nottingham. In collaboration with Ian Small she has published *Oscar Wilde's Profession* (2000) and *Studying Oscar Wilde* (2006), and she is a member of the editorial team for the Oxford *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (her edition of Wilde's criticism appeared in 2007 and she is currently working on some of his plays). Her most recent publications, in collaboration with Ian Small, include *The Routledge Concise History of Nineteenth Century Literature* (2011) and *The Textual Condition of Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2012).

ELLIS HANSON is Professor of English at Cornell University and the author of *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997) and other works on sexuality and late Victorian literature.

MERLIN HOLLAND, the only grandson of Oscar Wilde, is an author living in France. He has spent the past thirty years researching his grandfather's life and works. Publications include *The Wilde Album* (1995), *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (co-edited with Rupert Hart-Davis, 2000), *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess* (2003) and *Coffee with Oscar Wilde* (2007), a series of imaginary conversations with his grandfather. He is now working on another book provisionally entitled *After Oscar: A Legacy of Scandal*.

RUSSELL JACKSON is Allardyce Nicoll Professor of Drama at the University of Birmingham. He edited *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* in the New Mermaids drama series and *Plays by Henry Arthur Jones* for the Cambridge series 'British and American Playwrights'. Recent publications include *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* (2nd edition, 2007), *Shakespeare Films in the Making* (2007) and *Theatres on Film: How the Cinema Imagines the Stage* (2013).

JARLATH KILLEEN is a Lecturer in Victorian literature in the School of English, Trinity College Dublin. He is the author of *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* (2005) and *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (2009), and editor of *Oscar Wilde: Irish Writers in Their Time* (2010).

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LEON LITVACK is Reader in Victorian Studies at Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland. He has published widely on the life and work of Charles Dickens, and is currently completing the Clarendon edition of *Our Mutual Friend*. He is a former president of the Society for the Study of Nineteenth-Century Ireland.

RUTH LIVESEY is Reader in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Thought in the Department of English, Royal Holloway, University of London. She is the author of *Socialism, Sex and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880–1914* (2007), co-editor of *The American Experiment and the Idea of Democracy in British Culture, 1776–1914* (2013) and an editor of the *Journal of Victorian Culture*. She has been awarded a Leverhulme Research Fellowship to complete her next book, *Writing the Stagecoach Nation, 1780–1870*.

JERUSHA MCCORMACK'S early work on Wilde focused on his disciple, John Gray, first through an academic biography, then through a fictionalized account in *The Man Who Was Dorian Gray* (2000). She has edited *Wilde the Irishman* (1998) and *China and the Irish* (2009; Mandarin edition, 2010), for which her essay explores the relationship between Wilde and a fourth-century Chinese sage, Zhuangzi (Chuang Tsū). Currently, she acts as Visiting Professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University.

MICHÈLE MENDELSSOHN is the author of *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (2007), as well as several articles on Wilde. She is University Lecturer and Tutorial Fellow at Oxford University, where she teaches British and American Literature.

SUSAN OWENS is Curator of Paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Her PhD thesis was on the satirical agenda of Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations to *Salome*. She has written widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century British art, and recently contributed chapters on literature and the aesthetic movement and on Oscar Wilde to the exhibition catalogue *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860–1900*. Her new book, *The Art of Drawing: British Masters and Methods since 1600*, is scheduled for publication in 2013.

KERRY POWELL is the author of *Acting Wilde* (2009), preceded by *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* and *Women and Victorian Theatre*. He edited *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* and is Professor of English at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

STEVEN PRICE is Senior Lecturer in English at Bangor University. With William Tydeman, he is the author of *Wilde: Salome* (1996). He has published widely on British and American drama, film and screenwriting, including *The Plays, Screenplays and Films of David Mamet* (2008) and *The Screenplay: Authorship, Theory and Criticism* (2010), and is currently completing *A History of the Screenplay*.

PETER RABY is the author of a study of Oscar Wilde, and the editor of the Cambridge Companions to Oscar Wilde and to Harold Pinter. Among his other books are biographies of Harriet Smithson Berlioz, Samuel Butler and Alfred Russel Wallace. He is a Fellow Emeritus of Homerton College, Cambridge.

MARK RAVENHILL is a playwright. His play *Handbag*, written in 1998 as a response to Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was first produced by Actors Touring Company. His plays have been produced at the National Theatre and Royal Court Theatre in London, New York Theatre Workshop, the Schaubuehne and the Berliner Ensemble in Berlin, the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, and in theatres all over the world. He is the Royal Shakespeare Company's resident playwright.

JOHN PAUL RIQUELME, Professor of English at Boston University and Co-chair of the Modernism Seminar at the Mahindra Humanities Center (Harvard), has written essays on Wilde for *The Centennial Review*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, the *Hopkins Review* and *The Wilde Archive*, primarily concerning his relation to Victorian precursors and first-wave modernist writers, with particular attention to *Salome*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's influence on T. S. Eliot, and the genetic poetics of *An Ideal Husband*.

ANTHONY ROCHE is Associate Professor in the School of English, Drama and Film at University College Dublin. Recent essays have appeared in *Yeats in Context* (2010) and Cambridge Companions to Harold Pinter, J. M. Synge and Brian Friel, the last of which he also edited. His *Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics* (2011) was published in paperback in 2012.

SEAN RYDER is Established Professor of English at National University of Ireland, Galway. His publications include *James Clarence Mangan: Selected Writings* (2004) and numerous essays on aspects of nineteenth-century Irish culture and nationalism. He is co-editor of *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (1998) and *Gender and Colonialism* (1995). He is currently project director of the digital *Thomas Moore*

*Hypermedia Archive*, and of other projects involving textual editing with new technologies.

JAN-MELISSA SCHRAMM is a Fellow at Trinity Hall and a University Lecturer in English at the University of Cambridge. She is the author of *Testimony and Advocacy in Victorian Law, Literature, and Theology* (2000) and *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative* (2012), as well as a number of articles on representations of the law in the works of Dickens and Eliot, Victorian satire and first-person narration. In 2012–13 she held a Leverhulme Research Fellowship to complete a monograph provisionally entitled *Democracy, Censorship, and Nineteenth-Century Sacred Drama*.

IAN SMALL is Professor of English at the University of Birmingham, England. He is general editor of the Oxford *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (including his edition of *De Profundis*). His other publications include editions of Wilde's society comedies and his short stories, as well as *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (1991). With Josephine M. Guy he has also published *Oscar Wilde's Profession* (2000), *The Routledge Concise History of Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2011) and *The Textual Condition of Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2012).

PHILIP E. SMITH II is Associate Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. He edited *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Oscar Wilde* (2008) and, with Michael S. Helfand, he co-edited *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making* (1989). He has also written articles and chapters on Wilde, Constance Naden, Robert Heinlein, Ursula Le Guin, Brian Aldiss, August Wilson, John Galsworthy and Charles Olson, and on issues of curriculum, staffing and teaching in the profession of English studies.

MARGARET D. STETZ is Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women's Studies and Professor of Humanities at the University of Delaware. She has published numerous works on the world of Oscar Wilde, including books such as *Gender and the London Theatre, 1880–1920* (2004) and *Facing the Late Victorians* (2007), based on exhibitions she has curated on turn-of-the-century art and print culture; and essays in *Women and British Aestheticism* (1999), *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies* (2004), *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle* (2007) and *The Cult of Beauty* (2001).

JOHN STOKES is Emeritus Professor of Modern British Literature at King's College London and Honorary Professor of English and Drama at the University of Nottingham. His books include *Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles and Imitations* (1996) and, together with Mark W. Turner, he has edited two volumes of Wilde's journalism for the Oxford *Complete Works* (2013).

MARK W. TURNER is Professor of English at King's College London. He is the author of *Trollope and the Magazines* (2000) and *Backward Glances* (2003). With John Stokes, he is co-editor of Wilde's journalism for the Oxford *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (2013).

LYNN VOSKUIL is Associate Professor of English at the University of Houston, where she teaches Victorian literature, gender studies and empire studies. She is the author of *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (2004) and a number of essays in journals and collections.

MARCUS WAITHE is Senior University Lecturer and Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge. He is the author of *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers: Victorian Medievalism and the Ideal of Hospitality* (2006), and has published articles on John Ruskin, William Barnes, William Empson and Geoffrey Hill. In 2010 he launched a web-based reconstruction of Ruskin's St George's Museum: [www.ruskinatwalkley.org](http://www.ruskinatwalkley.org).

## *Preface*

It is possible that Oscar Wilde would have recoiled from the title of this book, because in one of many moods he saw himself as towering above rather than standing within ‘context’ – as one of the poets who triumphantly express themselves rather than literary, social or historical contingency. Reimagining the world and themselves, these artists successfully resist contextual conditions and precedent; they realize Gilbert’s pronouncement in ‘The Critic as Artist’ that ‘the one great duty we owe to history is to rewrite it’.<sup>1</sup> ‘Remember,’ Wilde remarked to his friend Will Rothenstein, ‘*dans la littérature il faut toujours tuer son père*.’<sup>2</sup> Indeed, referring to his own writings, Wilde advanced the claim that ‘my works are dominated by myself’, adding that no dramatic author, and by implication no author of any kind, had ever influenced him even ‘in the smallest degree’.<sup>3</sup> By this account the work of art *is* the artist, and therefore, as Gilbert puts it in ‘The Critic as Artist’, ‘those great figures of Greek or English drama that seem to us to possess an actual existence of their own [are] simply the poets themselves . . . for out of ourselves we can never pass, nor can there be in creation what in the creator was not’.<sup>4</sup>

This formulation of the poet’s mind as a sealed chamber – sealed once ‘*son père*’ has been dispatched – is very much indebted, in both thought and expression, to the radical subjectivity articulated some years earlier in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* by Walter Pater, who was already an established figure as a fellow of Brasenose when Wilde entered Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1874. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is itself saturated by the presence of Pater, who in turn wrote an admiring review of the novel; but this interchange with Pater is only one instance of Wilde’s participation in the criss-cross traffic patterns of late Victorian literature and culture. Although uniquely his own in important ways, Wilde’s work, and indeed his remarkable life, was carried on in perpetual dialogue with the social conditions of his time and the creative work of his contemporaries, especially in Britain and France – notably Ruskin (another Oxford

influence) and Morris, Swinburne and Rossetti, Whistler and Beardsley, Flaubert and Balzac, Mallarmé and Huysmans, James and Shaw, to mention only a few whose names figure prominently in *Oscar Wilde in Context*.

Nevertheless, the myth of Wilde the autonomous actor and author has outlived him by far, and in recent times we find Wilde being credited, for example, with the invention of homosexuality in the tortured course of his courtroom trials and with the invention of an entirely new genre of literature in what is perhaps his finest achievement as an artist, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Such claims are dubious at best, as this book richly demonstrates, but in the final result Wilde remains not simply undiminished, but a more complex and interesting figure than ever and more vitally connected with his age. The varied and concise chapters that follow reveal an Oscar Wilde with deep roots both in the classical past and in his Irish heritage, and intersecting with a host of contemporary social and aesthetic developments – in the law, politics, science, religion, and gender and sexuality; in poetry, fiction, the theatre, the visual arts and aesthetics. This Oscar Wilde was never a mere quotation of past or present; rather, he stood in creative tension with both, and with wherever life took him – from Ireland where he grew up, to the criminal court and an anonymous cell in Reading Gaol near the end, a journey illustrated by, for example, his statue in Merrion Square, by Sarony's 'aesthetic' New York photograph, and by the anonymous uniforms of the prisoners on the platform of Wandsworth station.

Our book begins with an introductory appreciation by Mark Ravenhill, the contemporary playwright whose work displays many important points of connection and sympathy with Wilde. Part I, 'Placing Wilde', follows on with a group of essays that examine the author in relation to the cities most integral to his career: Dublin, New York, London and Paris. Part II, 'Aesthetic and Critical Contexts', places Wilde in the context of those who influenced him the most, beginning with his parents and including a number of contemporaries from Ruskin and Gautier to Swinburne and Flaubert. Faulted by some critics for wholesale plagiarism of other writers, Wilde has also been blamed for not following these precursors closely enough, misreading and distorting them – Pater, for example – even as he incorporated their ideas and stylistics into his own work. The truth appears to be somewhat more complicated – that he regularly absorbed the influence of others, but in a form that made the resistance and rewriting of influence his defining artistic imperative. As several essays explore, Wilde's contemporaries – for example, Beardsley, Whistler, James, Shaw – actively



challenged Wilde's own definition of himself and his achievements; and these definitions, we are reminded, unfolded themselves not just in the more or less polite columns of literary magazines, but in the full glare of Victorian public life: the theatre, the salon, the daily newspaper and the courtroom of the Old Bailey.

Part III, 'Cultural and Historical Contexts: Ideas, Iterations, Innovations', brings together a group of essays that concern Wilde's engagement with the ideological forces, aesthetic movements and styles of living that defined his experience and moment in time. Our authors discuss an array of such encounters – for example, with socialism, religion, Darwinism, censorship, the classical tradition, dandyism, aestheticism and decadence, journalism, poetry, fairy tales and the oral tradition, Victorian poetry, popular drama, fiction, feminism and the Victorian criminal justice system. Everywhere in these diverse essays one discerns Wilde's transforming individualism at work, registering the impact of influences but always producing something greater than the sum of its contextual parts. Part IV, 'Reception and Afterlives', incorporates chapters on the performance history of Wilde's major plays as well as their reincarnation in other modes, such as film. An essay on Wilde and 'performativity' demonstrates his uncanny anticipation of current critical theory as well as his connection with Victorian currents of thought, and a chapter on editions and texts draws attention to the highly incomplete presentation of much of Wilde's work to date, pending completion of the exemplary Oxford *Complete Works*.

If not with the title itself, Wilde might have been pleased with the way this book makes visible the multiplication of his personality into a dazzling array of selves, each communicating a particular self-realization that also made it possible for his epoch – so Wilde believed – to realize itself through him. 'I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age', he asserts in the long letter from prison, and for this he found no precedent except a faint one in Byron.<sup>5</sup> Our book, while not underwriting the grandiosity of Wilde's claim, argues with emphasis for many 'Oscar Wildes' that combine in revelations of his multiplex self and the turbulent period in which he lived. This large scope as an artist and man helps to explain why Wilde has emerged in our own age as one of the Victorians who matter most; and certainly that bold self-assessment in *De Profundis* – 'I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age' – is a fitting epigraph for the chapters that follow.

**Notes**

- 1 Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 359.
- 2 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 365.
- 3 Quoted from an interview of Wilde in the *St. James's Gazette*, 18 January 1895, pp. 4–5.
- 4 Wilde, 'Critic as Artist', p. 389.
- 5 Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Volume II: De Profundis and Epistola in Carcere et Vinculis*, ed. Ian Small (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 162.

## Chronology

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|---------|---|--|
| 1835    |   | Théophile Gautier, <i>Mademoiselle de Maupin</i> .   |
| 1839–47 |   | Honoré de Balzac, <i>Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes</i> .   |
| 1843    |   | First volume of John Ruskin's <i>Modern Painters</i> (1843–60).  |
| 1851    |   | First volume of Ruskin's <i>Stones of Venice</i> (1851–3).   |
| 1853    |   | Gautier, <i>Emaux et camées</i> .  |
| 1854    | 16 October Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde born at 21 Westland Row, Dublin, the second son of oculist and ear-surgeon Sir William Wilde and Jane Francesca Elgee, Lady Wilde, who wrote under the name 'Speranza'. |  |
| 1855    | Family moves to 1 Merrion Square, Dublin.   |  |
| 1857    |   | Charles Baudelaire, <i>Les Fleurs du Mal</i> .   |
| 1859    |   | Charles Darwin, <i>On the Origin of Species</i> .  |
| 1864–71 | Attends Portora Royal School, Enniskillen.  |  |
| 1864    |   | Matthew Arnold's lecture 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'.<br>[also 1864] John Henry Newman, <i>Apologia pro Vita Sua</i> .<br>Algernon Charles Swinburne, <i>Poems and Ballads</i> . |
| 1866    |   | William Morris, <i>The Earthly Paradise</i> .<br>D. G. Rossetti's <i>Poems</i> .   |
| 1868–70 |   |  |
| 1870    |   |  |
| 1871–4  | Undergraduate at Trinity College Dublin, where he wins many prizes, including the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek.  |  |

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*Chronology*

- 1871 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*.
- 1873 Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*.
- 1874 *October* Enters Magdalen College, Oxford, with a scholarship.
- 1875 *June* Travels in Italy with J. P. Mahaffy, Professor of Ancient History at Trinity College Dublin.
- 1876 *July* Awarded a First Class in Honour Moderations, the first half of his classics degree. *19 April* Death of Sir William Wilde. Gustave Moreau's paintings, *The Apparition* and *Salome Dancing before Herod*.
- 1877 *March–April* Travels in Italy and Greece with Mahaffy, returning via Rome.
- 1878 *June* Wins Newdigate Prize at Oxford with poem 'Ravenna'. *July* Completes his degree with a First in Greats.
- 1879 *Autumn* Takes rooms at 13 Salisbury Street, London, with Frank Miles.
- 1880 *August* Moves with Miles to Keats House, Tite Street, Chelsea. *September* Wilde's first play, *Vera; or the Nihilists*, is printed privately.
- 1881 *Emile Zola, Nana.*  
*March* Assassination of Tsar Alexander II.
- 23 April* Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* opens in London. The two aesthetes Bunthorne and Grosvenor are associated with Wilde.  
*June* *Poems* published.  
*17 December* *Vera*, scheduled for performance at the Adelphi Theatre, is withdrawn.  
*24 December* Wilde sails to the USA for a lecture tour arranged to coincide with the New York production of *Patience*.

## Chronology

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- 1882 Carries out an extensive tour of the USA and Canada, lecturing first on 'The English Renaissance' and later on 'The House Beautiful' and 'The Decorative Arts'.
- 1883 *February–May* In Paris, at the Hôtel Voltaire, where he completes his play *The Duchess of Padua*.  
*August–September* Visits New York for the first production of *Vera*.  
*September* Lectures in UK, an activity which continues sporadically for two years.  
*26 November* Becomes engaged to Constance Lloyd.
- 1884 *29 May* Oscar Wilde and Constance Lloyd are married in London.
- 1885 *January* The Wildes move into 16 Tite Steet, Chelsea.
- May* 'The Truth of Masks' published in the *Nineteenth Century* as 'Shakespeare and Stage Costume'.  
*5 June* First son, Cyril, is born.  
 Wilde begins to be extremely active in journalism, writing both signed and unsigned articles, as well as critical essays and stories.
- 1886 Meets Robert Ross.  
*3 November* Younger son, Vyvyan, is born.
- 1887 Accepts the editorship of *Woman's World*.
- 1888 *May* *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* is published, illustrated by Walter Crane and Jacomb Hood.
- 1889 *July* 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.' is published in *Blackwood's Magazine*. Resigns as editor of *Woman's World*.
- J. K. Huysmans, *A Rebours*.  
 Fabian movement founded.
- 20 February* Whistler's 'Ten O'Clock' lecture.
- Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*.  
 Criminal Law Amendment Act.
- Jules Laforgue, *Moralités Légendaires*.
- Maurice Maeterlinck, *La Princesse Maleine*.  
 Cleveland Street scandal.

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*Chronology*

1890

*June* *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is published in *Lippincott's Magazine*.

Henry James, *The Tragic Muse*.  
 William Morris, *News from Nowhere*.  
 Morris founds Kelmscott Press.

1891

Meets Lord Alfred Douglas.  
*January* *The Duchess of Padua* – 'Guido Ferranti' – is produced in New York.  
*February* 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' is published in the *Fortnightly Review*.  
*April* The extended version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is published, the title-page and binding designed by Charles Ricketts.  
*May* *Intentions* is published in book form.  
*July* Lord Arthur Savile's *Crime and Other Stories* is published in book form.  
*November* *A House of Pomegranates* is published, designed and decorated by Ricketts and Charles Shannon.  
*November–December* Wilde visits Paris, where he works on *Salomé*.

G. B. Shaw, *Widowers' Houses* produced.

1892

*20 February* *Lady Windermere's Fan* opens at the St James's Theatre, produced by George Alexander.  
*June* *Salomé* is in rehearsal, with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role, when it is banned by the Lord Chamberlain.

*August–September* Wilde works on *A Woman of No Importance* in Norfolk.

1893

*February* Publication of *Salomé* in French.  
*19 April* *A Woman of No Importance* opens at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, produced by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree.  
*October 1893 – March 1894* Wilde writes *An Ideal Husband* in rented rooms in St James's.  
*November* *Lady Windermere's Fan* is published; Shannon designs the binding for this and subsequent comedies.