

The Gay Nineties: Oscar Wilde Reconsidered

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Sex and hypocrisy have always been bedmates, but never more than in Victorian England. In the "Gay Nineties" promiscuity was widely accepted in all social classes, although the aristocracy hid its lust behind a strict code of propriety. Country house parties catered to infidelities with the approval of the Prince of Wales, himself a notorious womanizer.

The sexual athleticism of His Royal Highness, Albert Edward, has been covered in innumerable books.¹ Protected from women by the vigilance of his mother until he was 20 years old, he was introduced to the delights of the bed in Ireland by an actress/camp follower of the Grenadier Guards. The bevy of mistresses that followed resulted in one court case and several minor scandals. His future queen, Alexandria, withstood his dalliances with dignity, finally sending for Mrs Alice Keppel, his last and firmest mistress, when he was on his death bed, remarking at the same time that "He always loved me the best."

In 1890, the word "gay" was used for heterosexual relationships with prostitutes, today's use not coming into effect until the 1930s, and only into common use in the past ten to 15 years.² The "Gay Lothario" of 1703 was certainly no homosexual.³ So the "Gay Nineties" were very gay indeed, in the old-fashioned sense of the word. As Mrs Patrick Campbell is supposed to have said, "You can do what you like as long as you don't frighten the horses." But sodomy was another matter. This most despicable crime of all—the "abominable crime of buggery"—was the indictment brought against Oscar Wilde in 1895.⁴

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland on 16 October 1854. His father, Sir William Wilde, the son of a doctor, was a pioneer otorhinolaryngologist and ophthalmologist, a combination of specialties which existed well into the twentieth century. Among Sir William's innovations were angled nasal forceps and "Wilde's Incision," a deep opening of the mastoid air cells in the treatment of acute mastoiditis.⁵ He was also a noted Irish antiquary and archaeologist. Unprofessionally, his sexual promiscuity led to several illegitimate children and to a prosecution for molesting a female patient of dubious virtue; she was awarded ¼ d in damages—the smallest possible sum!

Oscar Wilde's mother, known as Speranza, was an accomplished poet and the author of several revolutionary pamphlets, a sufficient reason for her *nom-de-plume*, even if women authors had been socially acceptable in the 1850s.⁶ Oscar was the second of Lady Wilde's children, and his elder brother, William, later known as "Wuffalo Will," became a notorious and intemperate man-about-town.⁷ It is said that Oscar's mother wanted a daughter and showed her disappointment by dressing him in girl's clothes until the birth of her third child, a daughter, Isola, when Oscar was three years old.⁸ Much has been made of a picture of Wilde in a girl's dress at the age of two, the inference being that it was a conditioning factor in his homosexuality, but it is doubtful if it played a significant part in his sexual development as this mode of dressing boys was not uncommon in Victorian Ireland.⁹

After preliminary schooling, Oscar Wilde went to Trinity College, Dublin and thence to Oxford where he acquired two things: a first-class degree—and syphilis from a local harlot by the name of “Old Jess.” The resultant mercury therapy left him with blackened, carious teeth for the rest of his life. From Oxford he went to London, where his flamboyant dress and brilliant conversation brought him notoriety, soon enhanced by a more solid reputation as an author of plays, prose, and poetry.

In January 1882, Wilde came to North America, landing in New York where he was besieged by a curious public and press. When asked by customs officials if he had anything to declare, he said, “Only my genius.” He reached Richmond on 11 July, notice of his lecture appearing for the first time in the *Richmond Whig* on 28 June 1882, and announcing that tickets priced at \$1.00 for seats in the dress circle and front stalls and 50¢ elsewhere were available from Ramos and Moses.

The report of the lecture in the *Daily Dispatch* of 12 July 1882, under the headline, “HOW THE GREAT APOSTLE OF AESTHETICISM LOOKED,” is devoted more to Wilde’s dress than to his words: “Mr Wilde was dressed in the oft-described silk small clothes, including knee-breeches, &t., silk velvet surtout, old style, satin-lined. There was pending from his neck a long array of white dimity corrugated into numerous ruffles and extending some distance down the diaphragm. Mr. Wilde’s appearance was greeted with slight applause . . . His hair, which was of brown texture, was parted in the middle and worn in ringlets over ample shoulders suggesting Buffalo Bill, only the aesthete is by no means so comely a specimen of manhood as the great Indian scout and prairie warrior.”

The critic continued by noting, “An allusion to beautiful women and their influence was recognized . . . as having a personal application to that section of the fair sex present, and was received with vociferous acclaim.”

On his return to England, Wilde continued his career as a brilliant writer and critic, meeting the cream of aristocratic London, including James McNeill Whistler, the American expatriate painter.¹⁰ Whistler’s reputation as a conversationalist equaled Wilde’s, and they became great friends. Wilde, however, extended his criticism to art, and this enraged Whistler

who, with some justification, considered that Wilde’s knowledge of painting did not qualify him as an art critic. Their open hostility led to the famous story of how Wilde, on hearing Whistler make some particularly witty remark, said, “Jimmy, I wish I’d said that.” Whistler replied, “You will, Oscar, you will.”

The Gay 90s

In 1891, Oscar Wilde, at the height of his career, met Lord Alfred Douglas, son of the Eighth Marquess of Queensberry. The Marquess, familiarly known as “Q,” is best known for the Marquess of Queensberry’s Rules, which brought some decorum into the prize ring of the day and remain the basis of modern boxing refereeing.¹¹ Oscar and Lord Alfred, or “Bosie” as he was known, soon became close friends to the disgust of “Q,” who was better known as a bullying sportsman than as a doting father. The Queensberrys were notorious for their sexual escapades, particularly “Old Q,” the Fourth Marquess, who, in his eighties, erected a bow window in Piccadilly so that he could ogle passing girls.

This family failing, however, did not lead to “Q’s” accepting Wilde’s advances to Lord Alfred, and the Marquess, with one of his prize fighters, went to Wilde’s house to order him to leave his son alone. After some angry words, Wilde showed “Q” to the door, telling his servant that he was never to admit this “most infamous brute in London” to his house again. Queensberry, in a frenzy, planned to ruin the first night of Wilde’s play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but was prevented from entering the theatre by a cordon of police, thoughtfully recruited by Wilde.

Frustrated, “Q” stormed into the Albermarle Club and gave his card to the hall porter with instructions that it be handed to Wilde when he next came in; on the back of the card was written, “For Oscar Wilde posing as sodomite.” The usual explanation of the incorrect spelling is that the enraged “Q” misspelt “sodomite,” but perhaps spelling was not his strong point. Wilde received the card about two weeks later and unwisely sued the Marquess of Queensberry for criminal libel.

The trial attracted the greatest legal minds of the day, and by brutal cross examination, “Q’s” counsel showed that the libelous statement was almost certainly true. Wilde’s defend-

ing counsel declared his intention to withdraw from the case, first in private to Wilde, and the next day in court. The Marquess was immediately acquitted, and his lawyers referred the evidence adduced at the trial to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Wilde left the court at noon on the fifth of April, 1895 and was arrested at 6:30 PM that evening. There is no doubt that he could have fled the country, and was indeed advised to do so, but he vacillated helplessly, and the last train for the continent left without him. At his trial, the jury could not agree on a verdict, but on retrial, he was convicted of committing "acts of gross indecency" and sentenced to two years hard labour. In passing sentence, Mr Justice Wills said that it was the worst case he had ever tried, accused Oscar Wilde of being "the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind," and added that he was "expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows" although it was "totally inadequate for such a case as this."¹²

Broken in spirit and health upon leaving prison, Wilde went to France and died there in 1900. The cause of his death has been attributed to neurosyphilis or to an intracranial suppuration from otitis media. He had sustained an ear injury in prison with subsequent and recurrent drainage.¹³ His bones were reinterred in the famous Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris in 1909.

In 1912, Jacob Epstein, then an avant-garde sculptor, was commissioned to create a suitable tombstone for Oscar Wilde; his response was to hew an immense winged sphinx from a 20-ton block of Hopton Wood stone. This was transported to Paris and placed over Wilde's grave, but the nakedness of the sphinx's genitals was considered indecent by the Paris gendarmerie, who refused to let Epstein complete his work.¹⁴ There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that two English ladies were so incensed by the tombstone's offending organs that they stoned them, some of the chips ending up in the cemetery office as paperweights!

Oscar Wilde was bisexual, and his marriage in 1884 was followed by the birth of two sons within two years. No satisfactory explanation of his deviation has been given; and theories still abound to explain it, as indeed they do for all homosexuality. Suffice it to say that in

the 1890s—the decade of "decadence"—licence of all kinds was condoned by the followers of aestheticism, and Wilde, who was no drinker or drug taker, suffered the penalty of being branded with the most heinous offence of all in Victorian eyes. Had he ignored Queensberry's action, he might well have continued his career in peace, as did many of his "decadent" colleagues, despite their excesses.

That Oscar Wilde has been forgiven by society became evident in 1954, the centenary of his birth, when the London County Council unveiled a plaque affixed to the wall of the house he occupied at the time of his trials. Appropriately, the ceremony was conducted by Sir Compton Mackenzie, the flamboyant author, who once said, "All my life I've lived hand to mouth. Damned good hand to mouth, mind you."¹⁵

What is to be learned from repeating the tale of Oscar Wilde? Perhaps only that the unusually harsh penalties imposed on homosexuals must now be redressed by an enlightened humanity. Today, consenting homosexuals may live together openly in Britain; in this country, prosecutions of homosexual offenders have become rare, and as a recent *Time* essay said, "It is true that America has a great deal to be ashamed of in its treatment of homosexual citizens The best public policy toward homosexuals is no policy at all—no sodomy laws, no special interventions pro or con. On matters of consensual adult sex, the law is, or should be, blind."¹⁶

The words that Oscar Wilde wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas from Reading Gaol could today well apply to the world: "Perhaps I am chosen to teach you something much more wonderful, the meaning of Sorrow, and its beauty."¹⁷

REFERENCES

1. The most specific is PEARSON, J. *Edward the Rake*. New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.
2. PARTRIDGE, E. *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. 7 ED. New York, Macmillan, 1970.
3. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Rev. Ivor H. Evans). New York, Harper and Row, 1970. "A gay Lothario . . . a seducer of women . . . from Rowe's . . . *The Fair Penitent* (1703)."
4. The indictment against the Marquess of Queensberry in the first trial said that he had libeled Wilde by ac-

- cusing him "of committing the abominable crime of buggery with mankind to the great scandal and disgrace of the said Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde to the evil example of all others in the like case of-fending and against the peace of our said Lady the Queen Her Crown and Dignity" (Quoted from 12). The entry under "ABOMINABLE CRIME" in a recent reference work reads "Formerly used in Acts of Parliament in Referring to Buggery." (Scott, Sir H. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Crime and Criminals*. New York, Hawthorn, 1961.)
5. STEVENSON, RS AND GUTHRIE, D. *A History of Oto-Laryngology*, Edinburgh, Livingstone, 1949.
 6. The Bronte sisters published their first works under male pseudonyms, and George Eliot's real name was Mary Ann Evans.
 7. Willie Wilde became a journalist and lived in New York after marrying Mrs Frank Leslie, the owner of *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. She soon divorced him and he died in London in 1898.
 8. Isola Wilde died in 1867.
 9. HYDE, HM *Oscar Wilde*. New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975.
 10. Whistler himself was involved in a libel suit against John Ruskin who had written scathingly of one of his works. As in Sir William Wilde's case, he was awarded 1/4 d in damages.
 11. "Q," an accomplished lightweight boxer, drew up his rules in 1866 with another aristocratic sportsman, Lord Lonsdale, and John Graham Chambers of the London Amateur Athletic Club (often confused with Arthur Chambers, lightweight champion of the world).
 12. HYDE, HM *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*. New York, University Books, 1956.
 13. CRITCHLEY, M. Oscar Wilde. A Medical Appreciation. *Medical History*, 1, 299, 1958.
 14. EPSTEIN, SIR J *Epstein: An Autobiography*. 2 ed. London, Vista Books, 1963.
 15. *Daily Telegraph*. London, 29 August 1973.
 16. LEE, J. Homosexuality: Tolerance vs. Approval, *Time*, 113, 48, January 8, 1979.
 17. HART-DAVIS, R. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*. New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962. Wilde's letter was published as *De Profundis* and contains his account of his relationship with "Bosie."