

# OSCAR WILDE

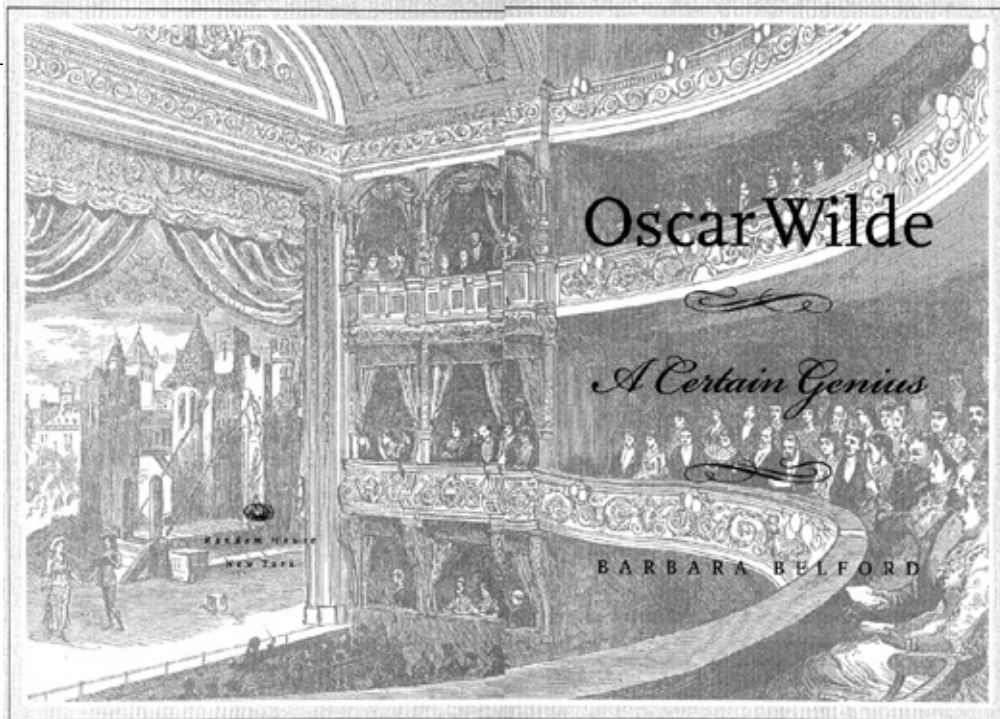
A Certain Genius

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Barbara Belford



R A N D O M   H O U S E



Oscar Wilde

*A Certain Genius*

BARBARA BELFORD

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## INTRODUCTION



Oscar Wilde was a dazzling conversationalist: once heard never forgotten. His life was the triumph of flippancy over genius, and sometimes the triumph of genius over flippancy. He needed a paradoxical nature to create his brilliant antithetical views on the English and the Irish, male and female, truth and artifice, good and evil—and himself. By writing about serious issues that are still relevant—the corrosive effects of power, the quest for status, and class pretensions—he sums up what is past, embodies what is passing, and intimates what is to come. By flaunting the right to his own sexuality, Wilde catapulted Uranian passion out of adolescence and into maturity and gave birth to a homosexual consciousness. Anticipating modernism, he saw the value of interpreting and criticizing culture through one's personal visions. His life impinges on us still.

Wilde experimented with all literary forms: journalism, criticism, poetry, fiction, and biography; along the way he illuminated Aestheticism, Decadence, and Symbolism. He taught us that style not sincerity is what matters. As the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the wittiest comedy of all time, rivaling even the works of Molière and Shakespeare, he changed the sound of laughter. His dramas taunted the English with the folly of their ideas and their hypocrisy. Once attacked as derivative, his words now make the unoriginal enlightened; present-day writers plunder his work searching for an epigram to say what they cannot about contemporary life. Noël Coward, Terence Rattigan, Ronald Firbank, P. G. Wodehouse, and Evelyn Waugh owe as much to Wilde as do the dramatists Joe Orton and Tom Stoppard, Paul Rudnick, Tony Kushner, Terrence McNally, and Larry Kramer, who like Wilde attack the certainties and presumptions of the so-called normal life.

Any new biography brings Wilde, and his age, before another jury to be retried and judged. In his lifetime the end of “Victorianism” and all that it had come to represent was approaching, but nothing had evolved to take its place. It was Wilde who defined the conscience and the consciousness of the artist at a time when all other values were thrown into doubt. My aim has been to reclaim Wilde in all the brilliant details of his contradictions as he appeared to his contemporaries and to argue that his writing as well as his life has a certain genius.

Hundreds of books have been written about Wilde. Most have stumbled when it came to humanizing the arrogant poseur. The first to succeed in capturing his extraordinary charisma and conversational abilities was *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Wit* (1946), written by Hesketh Pearson, a former actor who was ten years old when Wilde was released from prison. Early Wilde scholarship was dominated by H. Montgomery Hyde and Rupert Hart-Davis. A lawyer, Hyde edited *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* in 1948 from newspaper sources since there were no official transcripts and wrote a biography in 1975. Hart-Davis published a collection of

Wilde's letters in 1962 and a supplement in 1985.

Modern Wilde scholarship begins with Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* (1987), the comprehensive biography against which all subsequent works will be judged. Recent books have tended to take specialist views. We have the Irish Wilde, the gay Wilde, and the Freudian Wilde. Ellmann's approach, in many ways critically astute, suffers from a reticence about discussing his subject's homosexuality as more than a private matter: it is divorced from contemporary politics and culture. Strong on the facts but weak on cultural context, particularly the conditions and personalities of the contemporary theatre that had so much of an impact on Wilde, it is not a dramatic biography or one that provides a sense of time and place. Ellmann wrote the tragedy of Wilde, not the life.

As much as I am indebted to Ellmann's scholarship, I must disagree with his thesis that Wilde contracted syphilis from a female prostitute at Oxford, that it influenced his work and hastened his early death. Those aspects of Wilde's life and personality that did not fit the argument were glossed over. One wonders whether Ellmann's insistence on syphilis was an effort to give Wilde some heterosexual patina to make him more sympathetic. Indeed, Wilde himself said that each biography is its own fiction because at best it takes a stance oblique to the truth. When one looks at the facts anew, Wilde's medical history makes syphilis difficult to substantiate.

The problem in writing any new biography of Wilde is that he comes to us with his life already written, so much of his anecdotal history precedes specific knowledge of any actual details of it. The first mythologizing and fictionalizing was by Wilde himself. So why another book about him? And why now? Because his life is a continual allegory and his social, political, and artistic views, which went right to the heart of Victorian society, are no less threatening today. Because his obsessive love for Lord Alfred Douglas is one of the nineteenth century's extraordinary love stories. He is a major figure in world culture and needs a fresh look. What better time to publish a new life than the centenary of his death, November 30, 2000?

I came to know Wilde through the women he loved. My first biography was of Violet Hunt, who claimed that she nearly became his wife in the 1880s. Her life introduced me to the Pre-Raphaelites, who inspired Wilde's own brand of Aestheticism. My next biography was of Bram Stoker, who brought me to Dublin and Trinity College, where he and Wilde were born and studied. Stoker ended up marrying Wilde's college sweetheart, Florence Balcombe. Better known as the author of *Dracula*, Stoker was business manager for Henry Irving and the Lyceum Theatre for three decades. His life initiated me into the West End, its theatres, clubs, and restaurants. Finally, "The Happy Prince," a childhood story that awed me with its themes of love, hope, and death, pulled me into five years of getting to know the inner Wilde. I discovered that his childlike nature extended to all his works—from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

What I want to show is how different stories can be embedded in the same factual material, depending on the perspective of the biographer's approach. I cannot boast of being the first to consult unsealed caches of letters or of discovering a lost diary. But everything is freshly culled, because everything that Wilde wrote bears the closest psychological inspection. If I manage to recapture his ebbs and flows, his duplicity, loyalty, and mendacity,

to penetrate the magic of his conversation—for his authentic voice was never recorded—the reader will have entered into the 1890s and I will have written a good book.

My research took me to Ireland, England, France, and Italy to see Wilde's homes and experience his favorite restaurants and cafés. I felt closest to him when I entered the atmosphere of the places where he wrote. Wilde was a reluctant writer and a great procrastinator when it came to carving out the solitary hours needed to compose. He suffered from writer's block and bouts of depression. But when he put pen to paper, he wrote quickly because the story was already in his head. Wilde started with an idea, an epigram or paradox, which he told as a story or a parable, polishing it in the retelling and committing it to memory. His intellectual work done, he needed only an interlude in the pursuit of pleasure to put words on paper. But was he a genius? This question was persistently asked. How could he be considered a genius when he wrote the first draft of his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in three weeks? To be a genius, the reasoning goes, a writer must suffer, each word written in torment; a writer must take years, not a matter of days, to produce innovative ideas. But Wilde's work habits defined a different kind of genius.

His last years are too often told as a dark tragedy, piled on top of the infamy of two years in prison. I found a brighter story to tell. Wilde lived as he wanted, old age was never far from him; he had had a wonderful life and he was content to leave it on his own terms. Following his dictum that the "one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it," I hope this biography revokes the myth of Wilde as a tragic figure.



PART ONE  
(1854–1878)

*Becoming*

*I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colours of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder.... I awoke the imagination of my century so that I created myth and legend around me. I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.... I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy.*

—*De Profundis*

*Lord of Life*

*There is nothing like youth. The middle-aged are mortgaged to Life. The old are in Life's lumber-room. But youth is the Lord of Life. Youth has a kingdom waiting for it.*

—A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

Oscar Wilde's first public performance was in the drawing room of his Dublin home on Merrion Square, where the two-year-old entertained guests by reciting his name—Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde—over and over. Savoring the vowels, trilling the fricatives, he gulped for air, chanting away, faster and faster like an intelligent windup toy, precocious, brazen, and insecure, until applause quieted him. Wilde was later to assert: "Everyone is good until they learn to talk." His mother called him a genius, and he agreed but others misunderstood. "The public is wonderfully tolerant," Wilde said. "It forgives everything except genius."

He mocked himself and society and made the world laugh at destiny. "My name has two O's, two F's and two W's," he later observed. "A name which is destined to be in everybody's mouth must not be too long; besides it becomes so expensive in the advertisement." Following his birth, Wilde's mother wrote a friend: "He is to be called Oscar Fingal Wilde. Not that grand, misty and Ossianic?" "Names are everything," says Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Oscar, who believed that his cradle was rocked by fate, had more than his share.

"I envy those men who become mythological while still living," W. B. Yeats once remarked to Wilde, who replied, "I think a man should invent his own myth." That he did. The name Oscar was an auspicious beginning, for it honored the son of Osín of the Gaelic epics, who was born in the Land of Eternal Youth.\* Like his namesake, Wilde loved youth, even more than art. "The soul is born old but grows young," he wrote. "That is the comedy of life. And the body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy." Fingal, Gaelic for "fair-haired stranger," goes back to Viking times and identifies a coastal region between the Liffey and Boyne Rivers.

With the addition of O'Flahertie, recalling the Galway heritage of his father, whose ancestors had married into the clan of the pre-Norman kings of West Connacht, Oscar was linked to an ancient Celtic family. His father had been given the name Wills as a tribute to a leading Roscommon family that included the playwright William Gorman Wills. In fact, Wilde's father dedicated his first book, *Madeira*, to Wills, a notable eccentric who filled his room with abandoned animals he rescued. The name was passed on to Oscar, who used it when it suited his fancy.

His mother called him "Oscar," with an imperious accented *a*; his relatives preferred "Ossie." At public school he was "Grey-Crow," and at Oxford "Hosky" or occasionally "O'Flighty." In London, the American artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler dubbed him

“Oscarino.” Henry James referred to him as “Hoscar.” Identity begins—and sometimes ends—with nicknames.

“How ridiculous of you to suppose that anyone, least of all my dear mother, would christen me ‘plain Oscar,’ ” Wilde later said. “When one is unknown, a number of Christian names are useful, perhaps needful. As one becomes famous, one sheds some of them.... I started as Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde. All but two of the five names have already been thrown overboard. Soon I shall discard another and be known simply as ‘The Wilde’ or ‘The Oscar.’ ”

Brilliance and daring created “The Oscar,” which led to C.3.3., his prison cell number, and finally to Sebastian Melmoth, his nom de plume in exile, when, without an identity, Wilde was deprived of his currency in everyday life. Before his death, he decided that he wanted to be known as “the infamous St. Oscar of Oxford, Poet and Martyr.” How far had he traveled from those jovial evenings when grown-ups applauded his recitations!

His Parents were brilliant and eccentric—bohemian characters often manipulated by biographers into the cause of Wilde’s errant sexuality. Far more than the sum of their excesses, they lived in the next century while other mid-Victorians still grappled with industrialism. William Wilde became a notable eye-and-ear surgeon with a still-resonating legacy of scientific and folkloric research. He fathered at least three illegitimate children before marriage and was accused of rape after marriage. His wife, an inflammatory poet of nationalism and an innovative translator, became Dublin’s most gossiped about hostess—known for her bizarre dresses and bawdy talk.

“Man is least himself when he talks in his own person,” Wilde wrote in “The Critic as Artist.” “Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” In the art of masks, Wilde’s mother was a skillful teacher. Jane Francesca Elgee was born on December 21, 1821. Births were not registered then, but she gave this date in 1888, when she applied for financial aid from the Royal Literary Fund and it was in her interest to be older. At other times she was five years younger. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Lord Illingworth speaks for her when he says, “One should never trust a woman who tells one her real age. A woman who would tell one the truth would tell one anything.” Oscar started to grow backward before he reached twenty-four, and by the time of his trials, when he was forty-one, he admitted to thirty-nine.

As a young woman, Oscar’s mother was slender and stately, with glistening black hair, a perfect model for a statue of civic virtue. Although she ballooned into an ungainly, large-boned woman in her later years, she never lost the ability to enter a room with a savoir faire that silenced conversation.

Outfitted in multilayered skirts over numerous petticoats, her face masked by a black-lace mantilla, she looked every inch a *donna* of the aristocracy, which she claimed as a putative descendant of Dante. To enhance this subterfuge, she may have Italianized her middle name from Frances to Francesca. Oscar learned that reality can be improved and that life should be a series of beautiful lies—maternal verities that he turned into a philosophy of life.

Her Irish background was Protestant and, on her mother’s side, prosperous; all in all respectable, but Jane would have preferred Dante. Her father, Charles, an attorney descended from a bricklayer with roots in the Northumberland area of Durham; her mother Sarah Kingsbury, was the daughter of the vicar of Kildare and the granddaughter of the archdeacon of Wexford. Her maternal great-grandfather, Dr. Thomas Kingsbury, a friend of

Jonathan Swift, was president of the Royal College of Physicians.

By far the most impressive relative was a maternal uncle by marriage, an eccentric melancholy character who died before Oscar was born. His name was Charles Maturin, and he was a clergyman and the author of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, a classic gothic tale of sin and redemption that was published in 1820, two years after Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Maturin was a dandy whom Oscar would have adored. A contemporary recalled how he "was the first in the quadrille—the last to depart. The ballroom was his temple of inspiration and worship. When he entertained, the shutters were closed and candles lighted even on sunny days, and an atmospheric touch Oscar's mother imitated. Maturin liked to write surrounded by people and placed a red wafer on his forehead to indicate he was working; if a conversation intrigued him, he sealed his mouth shut with a homemade paste. It impressed Wilde that his great uncle was respected by Baudelaire and that Balzac included Maturin with Goethe, Molière, and Byron as a genius of European letters, even writing a sequel to his novel called *Melmoth Réconcilié*.

Jane Elgee's father died when she was three. Within six years, her older sister and brother made advantageous marriages and left home. She lived with her mother and came of age at 34 Leeson Street, in a middle-class neighborhood located south of Dublin's Grand Canal. A lonely girl, she found solace in reading and teaching herself foreign languages. Fortunately, her widowed mother had family money to provide home tutoring.

In her twenties, she was drawn into politics through the Young Irelander poets, who had aligned themselves with Charles Gavan Duffy's *Nation*. Between 1846 and 1848, she published poetry there, under the nom de plume of John Fanshawe Ellis, later signing herself "Speranza," Italian for hope. (Her notepaper bore the motto *Fidanza, Speranza, Costanza*.) Speranza saw herself as "the acknowledged voice in poetry of all the people of Ireland."

In 1849, while Duffy was arrested for sedition and awaiting trial, she wrote two editorials ("The Hour of Destiny" and "Jacta Alea Est," or "The Die Is Cast"), which declared—a bit prematurely—that Ireland was at war with England. She admitted authorship of "Jacta Alea Est," but Duffy was tried anyway. In court she may—or may not—have stood up in the gallery and proclaimed: "I, and I alone, am the culprit, if culprit there be." Four juries failed to convict Duffy. *The Nation* was suppressed, and the wounded Young Irelanders dispersed. Speranza's fleeting arc from unknown poet to political celebrity ended, but she retained her pseudonym.

Unmarried at Twenty-Eight—and with no burning desire to find a husband—Speranza decided to translate books and poetry. Some accounts claim she mastered twelve languages, but the record shows fluency in Italian, French, and German; her translations of Russian, Turkish, Spanish, and Portuguese poetry for *The Nation* demonstrated an ability to look words up in a dictionary. Her first major translation (she would do six from 1849 to 1863) was Johann Wilhelm Meinhold's sadomasochistic seventeenth-century fantasy, *Sidonia the Sorceress*. The poet Edmund Gosse observed how "this German romance did not begin to exist until an Irishwoman revealed it to a select English circle."

The novel's heroine, Sidonia von Bork, Abbess of the Convent of Marienfliess, tortured

geese, whips young men, and dances on coffins. She fascinated Dante Gabriel Rossetti as well as his Pre-Raphaelite colleague Edward Burne-Jones, who painted her portrait in 1861. Speranza said she did the translation only for money and refused to have her name on the title page. Even so, *Sidonia* established her reputation, and her next project was Alphonse Lamartine's *Pictures of the First French Revolution*.

Wilde said that Lady Duff-Gordon's translation of Meinhold's *The Amber Witch* and her mother's *Sidonia* were his "favourite romantic reading when a boy." Certainly *Sidonia* and *Melmoth* were literary legacies worthy of emulation. In both novels, paintings compete for characters, not an original concept but one Wilde used ingeniously in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* and ominously in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In *Melmoth*, the portrait of the ancestor who bargained with the devil to live 150 years without aging is hidden in an old lumber room similar to the nursery where Dorian Gray conceals his picture when it becomes grotesque and disfigured.

Speranza lived the intellectual and unromantic life of a spinster; she translated French and German books, wrote poetry, attended lectures and concerts, and cared for her ailing mother. She would have been a commonplace figure had she not embarked on a secret correspondence with a young man met during a trip to Scotland in 1847. They wrote to each other for fifteen years. Only fifty of her letters survive, and his identity remains a mystery. She was clearly infatuated with this Scotsman—her letters are candid about love and marriage but lacking the intimacy of the postal flirtations between Ellen Terry and George Bernard Shaw or George Sand and Gustave Flaubert.

In one letter she describes her ideal mate as "a Baronet of £5,000 a year with the Athenian's soul and your good heart." She flirts a bit: "I don't care for a friendship unless fringed with—not quite love perhaps—but something that is always on the point of becoming so," and shares her fantasies: "In love I like to feel myself a slave—the difficulty is to find anyone capable of ruling me. I love them when I feel their power." Lord Henry similarly observes in *Dorian Gray*: "I am afraid that women appreciate cruelty, downright cruelty, more than anything else.... We have emancipated them, but they remain slaves looking for their masters all the same. They love being dominated."

Jane shocked guests at her salons with offhand comments about sin being the only thing worth living for, but such talk was a mask, a calculated performance. Her recent biographer Joy Melville maintains that her "sense of morality was strong, and not being a woman with a strong sexual nature she was not tempted to stray." Except in letters. After corresponding for three years, her Scotsman wrote that he planned to marry. "Do forgive me if I am not very enthusiastic," she wrote him in 1850. "I shall have to wait ten years now I suppose before your ardour is sufficiently cooled down to find a rational opinion on any point literary or psychological." And she bitterly noted, "I hate men in love, the heart holds but one at a time."

The following year, her mother died. She could live either alone, which would be considered improper, or with relatives. Instead she married, but not with the thought of being a traditional wife. Her brother observed that "Jane has some heart, she has good impulses, but the love of self is the prominent feature of her character." When Oscar inherited this love of self, he transformed it into the first celebrity art form.

Blessed with a tenacious nature, William Robert Wills Wilde could find scientific wisdom in nursing porpoise or a mummified dwarf. The plaque at One Merrion Square in Dublin distinguishes him as an “aural and ophthalmic surgeon, archaeologist, ethnologist, antiquarian, biographer, statistician, naturalist, topographer, historian, folklorist.” On another level, he was an unabashed sentimentalist who played Pygmalion to young Galateas, enjoying (like his son) being the older, cultured man who tutors the unsophisticated.

Oscar’s father was born in March 1815 in the village of Kilkeevein near Castlerea, in the western county of Roscommon; his Irish ancestors were merchants, farmers, and clerics. His father, Thomas Wilde, was a kindly man, a physician who treated the poor and billed the gentry. Trained in his image, young William learned to dress head wounds after blackthorn fights and to set broken arms, and, as he matured, he developed that rare talent of being able to put patients at ease. When it was time for formal schooling, he put on his one good suitcase, hefted a suitcase weighted with books, and made his way to Dublin.

The physicians there were among the best in Europe and included William Stokes, often credited with the creation of the first stethoscope: a rolled-up sheet of paper. This technique allowed doctors to listen to the heartbeat without getting too close to the stench. Medical students had a steady supply of cadavers stolen from paupers’ graves. Any prick with a dissecting knife led to infection, sometimes amputation of fingers. Bleeding, blistering, and purgation were used to treat most diseases. There were no anesthetics except hot baths and tobacco-smoke enemas (surgical anesthesia was introduced in 1846 at Boston’s Massachusetts General Hospital); if patients did not faint, they were strapped down, and the surgeon who cut the fastest was considered the best. A bloodstained coat was a badge of honor.

In the midst of his studies, William Wilde was asked to accompany a recovering patient on an eight-month cruise to the Holy Land. He was only twenty-two when he boarded the 130-ton topsail schooner yacht *Crusader* on September 24, 1837, and sailed to Madeira, Algiers, Sicily, Egypt, Rhodes, Cyprus, Syria, Palestine, and Greece—a voyage that led to an international reputation outside medicine. The winter seas were rough, and he was frequently seasick, but not too indisposed to dissect porpoises flung onboard. He published his findings on how these mammals nurse their young and turned his diary into a two-volume book.

Most compelling was Egypt.\* Few Europeans had traveled there since Napoléon occupied the country from 1798 to 1801. Following withdrawal of the French Army, ancient Egyptian sites were unprotected and easily plundered. Like many who came after him, Wilde found the thrill of illicit acquisition irresistible. During a tour of Sakara, he discovered a looted tomb with the mummified remains of a young male dwarf scattered on the sand. He salvaged the torso to bring back to Dublin, then wanted to add some embalmed ibises, the sacred, long-legged, white wading birds. When the guide led him to the tomb with urns of desiccated ibises, Wilde had forgotten the lantern. They decided to go on in the dark, crawling through the blackness. “I do not think in all my travels,” he wrote, “I ever felt the same strong sensation of being in an enchanted place so much as when led by this sinewy child of the desert through the dark winding passages.” Together they dragged six urns into the light.

A fearless risk taker, Wilde was determined to scale the pyramid of Chephren at Giza, second in size to the Great Pyramid of Cheops. This meant a 707-foot ascent up the side over a forbidding slippery face, a climb that discouraged all but a handful of travelers. Two guides

pushed and pulled until Wilde made it to the six-foot-square peak. As he looked down from 471 feet at his friends waving their hats and cheering, he was overcome with euphoria. "I began to think something wonderful had been achieved," he wrote in *Madeira*, "and some idea of my perilous situation broke upon me."

Returning to Ireland, Wilde published an article in the *Dublin University Magazine* advocating removal of Cleopatra's Needle to England.\* Founded independently of Trinity College in 1833, and affectionately called *DUM*, the publication attracted the important Irish writers of the early and middle Victorian periods. The editor was Isaac Butt, a champion of Home Rule and future chief prosecutor for the Mary Travers libel trial that would tarnish Wilde's reputation.

William Wilde's appearance was undistinguished. To many he looked ordinary, like most of the men seen walking along Sackville Street every day. But women observed the short, scruffy figure with pale mischievous eyes and a mustacheless beard emphasizing a wide, sensuous mouth differently. He had charisma, charm, and a gift for storytelling in a land with a proud oral tradition. Seventy-year-old Maria Edgeworth, who first used social realism in her novel *The Absentee* to expose English landlords, became his patron. She encouraged Wilde to study abroad, to take a physician's Grand Tour, and provided letters of introduction, and probably some financing. Wilde went to Moorfields Hospital in London—then as now a center for ophthalmology—spent six months in Vienna, visited Munich, Prague, and Dresden, studied at Heidelberg, and in Berlin worked with Johann Friedrich Dieffenbach, one of the pioneers of plastic surgery.

He returned a trained specialist burnished with continental patina, a notebook filled with medical hypotheses, and useful ideas such as writing the patient's temperature and pulse rate on a slate, using flour and water, the early form of chalk. Wilde opened a surgery at 1 Westland Row, at the back of Trinity College; his mother and sister, Margaret, kept house for him. He started writing what became a guide to Austria's literary, scientific, and medical institutions, still a valuable reference work. *DUM* praised it as "another of the many instances of how agreeable a book can be made on apparently the least amusing topics, by a clever man, particularly when that clever man is a clever physician." With his appointment as editor of the *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science*, a publication with the contemporary prestige of *The Lancet* in England or the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in the United States, Wilde moved from son of a rural doctor to prominence in Dublin's medical and intellectual circles. What he lacked was an income to match this position.

This would have been the appropriate time for William Wilde to marry and prosper as a private physician to the rising middle class, but he could not ignore those Dubliners who slept on St. Stephen's Green or begged outside the Shelbourne Hotel. Following his father's charitable example, he founded a hospital for the destitute. Once Oscar proudly told a friend how his father had built St. Mark's "when he was only twenty-nine and not a rich man."

As an eligible bachelor, the young doctor should have been attending balls and parties, but that would have taken time away from his patients and his writing—and he wrote every day, often into the evening. His one indulgence was the theatre, where he became infatuated with



Helen Faucit, Ireland's leading actress, known for her *Antigone* at the old Theatre Royal. But he had little patience for the courting process demanded by beautiful and famous women and probably concealed his admiration. That there were intimacies was known only by his acknowledgment of three illegitimate children.

A son, christened Henry Wilson, was born in 1838, at the time Wilde was exploring Egyptian tombs. Wilde educated him, took him into his surgery, and made him an heir to his estate. Two daughters, Emily and Mary, born in 1847 and 1849, were adopted by his elder brother, the Reverend Ralph Wilde, and grew up as Wildes. By taking responsibility for his out-of-wedlock children, Wilde was being a proper Victorian, and in no way was his situation unusual or shocking. It did seem, however, that he wanted to avoid the responsibilities of marriage. Repeatedly, Oscar used the caprices of birth in his plays. "A family is a terrible encumbrance, especially when one is not married" appears in *Vera*, his first.

Speranza and Wilde could not have known each other very long before they wed. They may have met when she reviewed his book *The Beauties of the Boyne and Blackwater* in *The Nation*. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lady Bracknell says that she does not favor long engagements. "They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable." Speranza was thirty and Wilde was thirty-six. She needed a home and respectability after her mother's death. And it would have been reckless for Wilde to conceive more children outside marriage. She accepted the existence of his thirteen-year-old son and two young daughters. At their age, it mattered less whether the proposal was motivated by passion, intellectual kinship, or resignation. Speranza might have broached the question. Lord Henry tells Dorian that "it is always the woman who proposes to us, and not we who propose to women."

The wedding ceremony on November 14, 1851, in St. Peter's Church, Dublin, was attended by a small gathering, as the bride was still in mourning and, to judge from the dispatch from Scotland, more submissive than aroused. "For myself I died long ago—the old original English that you used to know," she wrote. "I love and suffer—this is all I am conscious of now and thus at last my great soul is prisoned within a *woman's destiny*—nothing interests me beyond the desire to make *him* happy—for this I could kill myself."

Speranza brought to the union not only Kingsbury money but influential friends such as William Rowan-Hamilton, the astronomer and mathematician, and the poet Aubrey De Vere. The couple moved up the street to 21 Westland Row, a Georgian terrace house with a fanlight and wrought-iron balconies. Wilde's mother and sister stayed on as part of the household. The front room on the ground floor was the surgery; the first-floor drawing room had the usual clutter of overstuffed chairs with antimacassars, flickering gas lamps, and heavy mahogany furniture.

The year of his marriage, Wilde was appointed census commissioner, with the arduous task of compiling the first statistics on the incidence of deafness, blindness, and eye and ear diseases. He traveled throughout Ireland, accumulating medical histories as well as regional tales of superstitions, legends, and charms. *Irish Popular Superstitions* was published in 1852 and expanded thirty-five years later by Speranza in *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland*. Without Wilde's ability to tease the past from his patients, a bygone oral history would have vanished.



The Wildes were members of the generation for whom the discovery of Irish history and literature came as a revelation. “If ever there was a nation that clung to the soil, and earned patriotism by the love of the very ground they walk on,” Oscar’s father wrote, “it is (or was) the Irish peasantry.” Like other scholars who worked to preserve the old traditions, he believed that the Irish language should be cultivated by the upper classes. In his book on Lough Corrib, he warned that “spoken Gaelic is hourly dying out” and predicted that in twenty years it would cease to be used. But Gaelic survived and still is heard in parts of the west of Ireland.

Speranza held that the “Saxon basis is the rough block of the nation, but it is the Celtic influence that gives it all its artistic value and finish.” But Oscar grew up seeing original creativity suffocated. During his American tour he told an audience: “With the coming of the English, art in Ireland came to an end, and it has had no existence for seven hundred years. I am glad it has not, for art could not live and flourish under a tyrant.” He concluded, “I am Irish by race, but the English have condemned me to speak the language of Shakespeare.”

Dublin was changing. Since the union of 1801, when the aristocrats departed for London, the middle class, particularly physicians, lawyers, scientists, and academics, had forged new alliances, taking up residence around the Georgian squares. But Westland Row, where the Wildes started their family, was outside this orbit. Impatient and ambitious, they planned to improve their rank and address.

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\*Osín, a favorite of the Irish *seanchaí* or storyteller, rode off with Niamh Cinn óOir, daughter of the king of Tír na nÓg, to the enchanted land of emerald fields and silver streams, where no one worked and no one grew old and time was endless. The mythical Oscar was born into this paradise. One night Osín dreamed of his father, Fionn MacCumhaill, leader of the Fian and decided to return to Ireland. Niamh warned him not to step on Irish soil. Three centuries had passed, and while he rode along comprehending this truth, he saw men trying to move a boulder with crowbars. He leaned down and shoved it on his way. His saddle strap broke and he fell to the ground. Like Dorian Gray, Osín turned into a wrinkled old man.

\*Unlike his father, Oscar never saw Egypt but was fascinated by its art (particularly the Sphinx) and symbolism. He wore an emerald scarab ring on the little finger of each hand; he said the ring on his left hand was the cause of all his happiness and the one on the right all his unhappiness. When a friend suggested he remove the right-hand ring, he replied, “To live in happiness, you must know some unhappiness in life.”

\*Wilde had seen the two red granite Cleopatra’s Needles lying as they had for centuries at Heliopolis. His campaign was successful two years after his death: in 1878 the obelisk was transported—not without great difficulty—and erected on its present site, the Thames Embankment. And two years later the other needle was raised in New York’s Central Park.

*Merrion Square*

*Children begin by loving their parents; after a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.*

—A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

Two sons were born at 21 Westland Row: William Charles Kingsbury, called Willie, on September 26, 1852, and Oscar, with his carefully selected mantra of names, on October 1, 1854. Isola Francesca Emily Wilde had her beginnings on April 2, 1857, at Merrion Square, an address Wilde later appropriated for himself as a more elegant birthplace.

Few books about Wilde omit the photo of him at the age of two posing in a dress of cobalt blue velvet trimmed with lace; he wears white stockings with bowed shoes on his small feet; his hair is rolled into sausage curls, swept off a high forehead with a ribbon, revealing thick, heavy-lidded eyes.

Early biographers seeking to explain Wilde's homosexuality decided that his mother was disappointed that her second child was not a daughter, dressed Oscar in frills, which aroused his interest in men. Present-day wisdom discards such notions, but in the Ireland of the mid-eighties there was a reason: dresses protected little boys from the *dreg due*, or blood fairies, who, according to myth, ignored little girls but abducted little boys.

Speranza delighted in Oscar, but like so many mothers favored her firstborn, as Oscar would favor Cyril over Vyvyan. Physically, Oscar and Willie resembled the large-boned Elgees: tall and lanky when young, towering and overweight when older. They had the father's sentimentality and mystical blue eyes, their mother's narcissism and alabaster skin. A letter to Scotland described Oscar as "a great stout creature who minds nothing but growing fat," while Willie "was slight, tall and spirituelle [*sic*] looking, with large beautiful eyes full of expression. He is twined round all the fibres of my heart." There would always be more affection and sympathy for Willie, the lovable but undisciplined prodigal. Both sons competed for the mother's love; neither won, and childhood conflicts followed. "At every single moment of one's life," Wilde wrote in *De Profundis*, "one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been."

William Wilde's voluntary hospital, St. Mark's, flourished, as well it should have: it was the only hospital in Ireland or England offering instruction on diseases of the ear. Wilde published *Practical Observations in Aural Surgery and the Nature and Treatment of Diseases of the Ear*, the first textbook on the subject in English, in 1855\* and completed a six-hundred-page history of Irish medicine collected during the census of 1851.

Speranza realized that her husband was special but found the reality of living with a genius on a day-to-day basis uninspiring. Physically and intellectually, he was not the dominating man of her fantasies. Marriage and motherhood distracted her from writing and translating. Often she seemed to be competing with her husband to publish frequently and first. A

impatient woman at best, Speranza found life at Westland Row inadequate to her ambitions.

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The Family moved in 1855 to One Merrion Square, a large Georgian house on the sunn north-side corner (or, as Lady Bracknell might say, the fashionable side). There were fe better addresses. Not the oldest but the largest and the most elegant, Merrion Square wa built in 1762, twenty-two years after Mountjoy and Rutland Squares. The peers and membe of Parliament who had lived there when the British ruled at Dublin Castle were now replac by doctors and lawyers in frock coats and peg-top trousers and their wives in poke bonne and crinolines.

Number One was the only house on the square with three steps—rather than one—leadin up to the entrance, a glassed-in conservatory, and a wrought-iron balcony overlooking Merrion Street, where the family viewed parades and processions. Wilde saw most of h patients at St. Mark's but also had a small surgery at the back of the house with a separa entrance for private consultations. Speranza held her salons in the first-floor drawing roo overlooking the square's private garden.

Used during the famine as a soup kitchen, the garden was locked during Wilde's childhoo to exclude outsiders, much like the garden in his fairy tale "The Selfish Giant." Speranza fondness for Neoclassical sculpture survives in stucco bas-reliefs in the foyer, where a bust o Maturin once had the place of honor. (It was in front of Number One in 1904 that Jame Joyce vainly waited for his first date with Nora Barnacle.)\*

Employing her various languages, Oscar's mother ran an efficient international househo that included a staff of six servants and a series of German, Swiss, and French governesses. I the fourth-floor nursery Willie and Oscar took the measure of each other—and declared wa Dark furies bred in the hothouse atmosphere of the nursery were later recalled in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. One day Oscar tried to appease Willie and gave him his stuffe bear. Unimpressed, Willie continued to tease him until Oscar shouted, "You don't deserve m bear. You must give me back my bear." But when poetic letters and engraved silver cigaret cases replaced toy bears to fetter love, he never asked for their return. Another time, th brothers were bathing in front of the fire when a nightshirt burst into flames. Oscar clapp his hands with delight while Willie shouted for the governess to extinguish the blaz Afterward Oscar cried with rage that tragedy was averted. "I don't care for brothers," Bas Hallward says in *Dorian Gray*. "My elder brother won't die, and my younger brothers see never to do anything else."

. . .

RISING AT DAWN, William Wilde walked to St. Mark's, made his rounds, and consulted o operated at other hospitals. In the evening, he was often invited to present antiquarian pape at the Royal Irish Academy or the Royal Dublin Society. If he dined out, it was usually wi colleagues from the Medico-Philosophical Society or the Mystics, an eating club where foo drink, and laughter were more valued than lofty philosophical talk.

Despite a work-centered life, he spent more time with his sons than many Victorian father Important events—birthdays, high marks, awards—were recognized by the Wildes' friend with evening celebrations for which Willie and Oscar were awakened and brought downstai

for a brief appearance. Children's parties seemed absent from Merrion Square. Both parents used their sons as extensions of themselves.

Oscar fondly remembered his father's deep voice doing justice to the cadences of Walt Whitman and his mother's whispers and squeals when she told the old stories of witches and blood fairies. His father retold the folktales collected from patients during the medical census and sang the Irish lullaby "Athá mé in mu codladh, agus ná dúishe mé" (I am asleep, and do not wake me), which he taught his sons.

Oscar's fairy tales have rather friendly antagonists, considering the many macabre ones that marched over his bedcovers. Before they went to sleep, the boys were taught to recite their mother's poems and the poetry of the Young Irelanders "as a Catholic child [does] the saints of the calendar." If Wilde had not been Irish and raised in such a fertile storytelling atmosphere, he might have become a writer who used pen and paper more and conversation less.

Speranza was overly ambitious for her boys. "Willie is my kingdom," she wrote to Scotland a month after Oscar's birth. "I will rear him a Hero perhaps and President of the future Irish Republic. *Chi sa?* I have not fulfilled my destiny yet." She envisaged Willie "ready to spring forth like another Perseus to combat evil." She had the leisure for such daydreams: eating breakfast in bed, reading or napping until noon; by two she was at her desk to sort through the morning mail, accept invitations, and receive visitors.

From the nursery window on the fourth floor, Oscar and Willie watched the horse-drawn carriages circling the square. It was at this time that Oscar embraced superstitions, which he later called "opponents of common sense." Like his mother, he believed in the evil eye, and he never hailed a hansom with a white horse, which he believed unlucky. (His mythic father, Osín, left the Land of Eternal Youth on a white stallion.)

Seldom did the Wildes dine at home alone. Fathers of future famous sons, John Butler Yeats and George Henry Moore, known for their wit and erudition, were frequent guests. Willie and Oscar ate with their governess in the nursery and then joined the adults. Since bedtime were not rigorously enforced, it was routine for the boys to fall asleep at their father's feet. On the drawing-room carpet, Oscar learned important lessons about the art of charming society, breeding in him a disdain for ordinary talk; he would suffer fools sooner than bores.

When Oscar was almost three, his sister, Isola (Gaelic for Iseult) Francesca Emily, was born, and her brothers were led into the nursery to greet her. Like siblings everywhere, Willie and Oscar were astonished that Isola was so small and were skeptical when told they were once the same size and in the same cradle.

Speranza had borne three children in five years and was impatient to return to a life of the mind. She began translating the German romantic novel *The First Temptation* by Wilhelm Canz, whose plot involves the tragic death of an aesthete. At the same time, her husband published the first of three volumes cataloging antiquities in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy. Even with a grand home and rewarding work, Oscar's mother was nostalgic for the bygone days of turmoil, when she had lived on the edge, when she was Speranza, the voice of freedom.

She wondered to her Scottish confidant: "I look back at my own self that then was. Now I have gone forth into another life with nothing but memory to make me aware of the identity."

for all true identity has vanished.” She complained as much as any latter-day feminist: “Alas, the Fates are cruel / Behold Speranza making gruel!” Being married to a genius meant keeping out of the way. “The best chance, perhaps, of domestic felicity,” she wrote in the essay “Genius and Marriage,” “is when all the family are Bohemians, and all clever, and all enjoy thoroughly the erratic, impulsive, reckless life of work and glory, indifferent to everything save the intense moments of popular applause.”

Eventually, Speranza took up the mantle of martyrdom. “A Joan of Arc was never meant for marriage,” she complained. “Life has such infinite possibilities of woe” was another favorite expression. Oscar would also agree that life is “a very terrible thing” and “the tragedy in one’s soul.” In “The Remarkable Rocket,” a tale of how vanity distorts reality, he observes: “As for domesticity, it ages one rapidly, and distracts one’s mind from higher things.” Speranza consistently passed discontent on to her sons. She manipulated Oscar by signing letters as La Madre Devotissima, La Madre Dolorosa, or La Madre Povera. Never was she devoted, sad, and poor at the same time. Her favorite salutation was Caro Oscuro, Figli Mio Caressimo, or Mio Caro Figlio (my dear son).

Despite anti-British sentiments, she attended balls and levees at the Viceregal Court; her entrance curbed all trivial gossip. What was she wearing this time? She often designed her costumes by assembling this and that from her closet. There was always a political message for Dublin Castle pinned on her skirt or bodice: bits of Limerick lace and Irish poplin or brooches copied from the ornaments of Ireland’s early queens. La Madre makes a brilliant appearance in *Dorian Gray* as Lord Henry’s wife, “a curious woman, whose dresses always looked as if they had been designed in a rage and put on in a tempest.”

On St. Patrick’s Day, 1859, the British ladies inhaled when she curtsied to the lord lieutenant wearing three skirts of white silk ruched with white satin ribbons looped with bouquets of gold flowers—and one large green shamrock. A plumed-feather wreath with white tulle veil bordered in gold encircled her black hair. In the gentle blush of gaslight Speranza looked like a bride; more unkindly she was seen as a wedding cake. “Am I not fallen to a mere woman?” she teased her Scotsman. “How marriage changes one.... We no longer live in glorious ideas and majestic abstractions.”

William Wilde may have suffered manic-depressive episodes. Speranza described cycles of agitated work followed by “strange” and “hypochondriacal” periods when he wrapped himself “in a black pall” and was “stern, mournful and silent as the grave itself.” Neither partner was easy to live with. Both needed mutual understanding beyond sexual intimacy but were not modern enough to discuss their marriage; in this respect they were conventional Victorians. Speranza had her unburdening letters to Scotland; her husband had his illegitimate son, Henry Wilson, now working for him, as trusted confidant.

In 1862, Wilde received the Swedish order of the Polar Star, and the following year Queen Victoria appointed him surgeon oculist to the queen in Ireland, not a demanding responsibility considering her dislike of visiting Ireland. In 1864, Wilde was knighted, not in recognition of his professional reputation, which was European, but for his work on the Irish Census, which annoyed Speranza, who saw the census as the least of his accomplishments. But she willingly retired Speranza for the title of Lady Wilde. The rank did not indicate that the Wildes had reached the upper classes; a peerage might have been different but an unlikely honor for a doctor.

At the investiture, *The Irish Times* reported, Lady Wilde's dress and train were of the "richest white satin, trimmed handsomely in scarlet velvet and gold cord, with bouillonnes of tulle, satin ruches and a magnificent tunic of real Brussels lace lappets." Regarding fashion, Lady Wilde wrote that a woman should match her personality and decide to be "either superb Juno, or a seductive Aphrodite, or a Hebe, blooming and coquette, or a Pallas Athena grand, majestic and awe inspiring." Lady Wilde preferred the last: goddess of wisdom, peace and war.

"In this world there are only two tragedies," Oscar wrote in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. "One not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is much the worst, the last a real tragedy!" Perhaps he was remembering what happened to his father shortly after the announcement of the knighthood, when he was accused of alleged sexual advances—rape was hinted—with a young patient, Mary Travers. This convoluted story proves the wisdom of the line from *Earnest* that "the truth is never pure and seldom simple."

The daughter of a law professor at Trinity, Travers was impressionable, highly strung, and, as she demonstrated, obsessive. She was eighteen when she became Wilde's patient in 1857. Welcomed at Merrion Square, she took Willie and Oscar on outings. Sir William escorted her to lectures, bought her books and clothes, and, as a gifted cicerone, introduced her to a more cultured world. Eight years after they met, he tried to sever the association, offering to send her to Australia, where she had relatives.

First hysterical and then vindictive, Travers was not about to be dismissed and went public with her version of the relationship. One evening as Wilde lectured at the Metropolitan Hall, a pamphlet entitled *Florence Boyle Price: or a Warning by Speranza* was sold outside for a penny. Newsboys hawked it, shouting it contained letters written by Sir William. Travers told a parable about a woman called Florence (her alter ego), who is chloroformed and seduced by a Dr. Quilp (Sir William), who had "a decidedly animal and sinister expression about his mouth, which was coarse and vulgar in the extreme."

Drawing on the fanaticism that made Speranza's notoriety at the Duffy sedition trial, Lady Wilde reacted quickly and defensively. She attempted to buy up all the pamphlets and when that failed wrote to Mary Travers's father. His daughter was using unfounded threats to extort money from the Wildes and furthermore, she informed him, "consorts with low newspaper boys," which implied prostitution. The letter provided sufficient reason for Travers to sue for libel. Sir William was also charged because a husband was considered responsible for his wife's civil offenses.

Forgotten stories of past liaisons were repeated in pubs and drawing rooms so that all Dublin soon knew of the *other* children; with each retelling the number grew until Wilde had populated whole villages. Isaac Butt, his former editor at *DUM* and leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster, was on the prosecution team. The court heard testimony that Sir William had sexually violated the plaintiff in 1862, but after a two-year interval such an accusation could not be taken seriously.

Lady Wilde took the stand and played to the gallery. When the prosecution inquired, "When Miss Travers complained to you of your husband's attempt upon her virtue, why did you not answer her letter?"

"Because I was not interested," she replied.

Butt emphasized Lady Wilde's apparent indifference to the allegations. As the loyal wife she made a dignified witness, answering questions without a trace of malice toward either party. After all, she was a lady and no longer the Speranza who had disturbed the court in the Duffy trial. Since Sir William was not the defendant, he refused to take the stand and confront embarrassing questions. The court upheld the libel charge on the basis of incriminating letters (one inquired whether Travers needed underclothing or pajamas) but ignored the plaintiff's pleas of outraged innocence.

Travers was awarded a farthing (a quarter of a penny) in damages. Wilde had to pay more than two thousand pounds in costs. An expensive escapade, to be sure, but Lady Wilde was energized by the attention and publicity. She kept the occasion freshly minted by sending out letters reiterating that no one in Dublin took the charges seriously, explaining that Travers was "mad" and the "sneering" English newspapers inaccurate.

Of course this was untrue. Among the detractors was Sir William's medical rival, Dr. Arthur Jacob, who was envious of his colleague's self-advertising ways and seized the opportunity to denounce him in the *Medical Press* for not testifying and clearing his name—a reasonable criticism. *The Medical Times and Gazette* was supportive, even printing an aphorism—"Genius has its penalties as well as its privileges"—with which Oscar would concur. The trial did not significantly jeopardize Wilde's professional reputation, but the stress damaged his health. He had a chronic cough and appeared much older than his fifty years.

As Oscar would say, "All trials are trials for one's life." His father spent more time away from Dublin, indulging his mania for acquiring property and building houses. He already had four rental houses facing the sea at Bray, a resort south of Dublin. In 1853, he leased a fishing lodge on a wooded peninsula called Illaunroe (Irish for "little red island") on Lough Feeagh, Connemara and in 1865 acquired fifteen acres from the estate of his maternal ancestors, the Fynnes of Ballymagibbon. The land, located near Cong in County Mayo, was on an elevation overlooking Lough Corrib, with a distant silhouette of the Moycullen Hills. There were magnificent views of the lake and its numerous islands, some 365, one for each day of the year; on leap year an additional one was said to appear. It was an area rich with antiquities, particularly Cong Abbey, which Wilde helped to restore.

Within the property's boundaries was the location of the mythological battle of Magh-Turra where Babor of the Evil Eye was slain. As near as possible, Wilde located the cairn-studded site of the battle and built a two-story peaked-roof house, which he called Moytura. When it was completed in 1866, he affixed a stucco medallion over the doorway with entwined W and the date. Traveling to Moytura was not difficult, even in the 1860s. A train left Dublin at 8:30 A.M. and pulled into Galway station at 1:45 P.M. There was time for lunch at the Grand Southern Hotel before boarding the three o'clock steamer to Cong. Thirty-one miles separated Moytura from Illaunroe, an arduous journey along a winding dirt road if made by cart or on horseback.

Thereafter the family spent their holidays in the west rather than Bray. Oscar preferred the seclusion and sport of Illaunroe, then—as now—a place of mists and purple shadows, of clouds and sudden rains. There, as at other water-fringed sites, he could "hear things that the ear cannot hear and see invisible things." Like a Wildean paradox, Connemara is a dreamscape where light and shade and color and shape are never the same. Oscar found it magical, a place of renewal, which made him "years younger than actual history records



Yeats, whose mother's family was from nearby Sligo, recognized in Wilde the same "half-civilized blood," which comes from areas rich in heroic and supernatural lore.

Oscar would ridicule upper-class country life in England, where there were no Connemara. The *bons mots* in *A Woman of No Importance* were easily struck: "I feel sure that if I lived in the country for six months, I should become so unsophisticated that no one would take the slightest notice of me" or "The English country gentleman galloping after a fox—the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable." It was true: Oscar did not sit a horse well, but he thoroughly enjoyed fishing and shooting. At Illaunroe he rose at 5:00 A.M., anticipating dawn over the Atlantic, the air filled with millions of minute prisms and shattered into rainbow colors over Lough Fee. His enthusiasm for the outdoors spills over in the letters he wrote to Oxford classmates during the long vacations. It was the duty of the individual, especially the artist, to develop his personality to the fullest, and Oscar made baiting a hook a sublime act. He passed fishing lore on to his children, telling them stories about the "green melancholy carp" that had to be called from the bottom of the lake with Irish songs.

Willie and Oscar accompanied their father during his explorations of ancient sites when he gathered material for a historical guide. Written with an explorer's enthusiasm, *Lough Corrib: Its Shore and Islands* urges readers: "Westward, ho! Let us rise with the sun and be off to the land of the West—to the lakes and streams, the grassy glens and fern-clad gorges—the blue hills and rugged mountains—now cloud-capped, then revealed in azure, or bronzed by the evening's tints."

Oscar enjoyed excavating enough to apply for an archaeological studentship—which he did not receive—after Oxford. In the application, he explained that from his boyhood he had "been accustomed, through my Father, to visiting and reporting on ancient sites, taking rubbings and measurements and all the technique of *open air* archaeologica—it is of course a subject of intense interest to me." The family's outdoor classroom stretched from Lough Corrib to the Atlantic. Willie and Oscar sketched caves, cairns, monoliths, stone circles, and holy wells. Willie recorded Oscar and his father exploring Hag's Castle on the island of Inishmaan in Lough Mask.

One day they came upon an unmortared building containing two arched crypts; it measured five feet by three feet wide and resembled a lime kiln but was of the wrong construction. Sir William, who had never seen anything like it, was fascinated; he made several visits to Inishmaan and spent considerable time studying the structure. When he determined that conversations could be heard between the two crypts, he speculated that the ruin was an ancient prison or sweathouse once used by the nearby abbey. At the age of thirteen, Oscar had his first look at how a person was confined in a small space. That the experience could ever become personal would have surprised him.

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\*This book describes surgical experiments for a mastoid or middle-ear abscess. Ironically, it was this condition, which may have originated from a fall in prison, that led to meningitis, the cause of Wilde's death in Paris at the age of forty-six.

\*One Merrion Square has been restored by the American College, Dublin, following nearly a quarter century of neglect. William Wilde's built-in mahogany bookcases survive in the ground-floor study and plaques honor Oscar and his father. In the darkness a stained-glass window illuminates the Happy Prince, with Wilde's face. The garden, now open to the public,



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