

A New Picture of Oscar Wilde

David Weir

Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature
The Cooper Union

Nicholas Frankel, *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years*, Harvard University Press, 374pp., \$30 cloth

THE POSTHUMOUS CAREER of Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) continues apace, as it has for many years now. Few fin-de-siècle celebrities—and Wilde was certainly that in his own day—have experienced such sustained success in their cultural afterlife. Not, for example, Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900), another alumnus of the year 1900’s class of dead celebrities, whose operetta *Patience*, written with his collaborator W. S. Gilbert, satirized the aesthetic movement Wilde did so much to foster. And certainly not John Ruskin (1819–1900), even though his neo-Gothic enthusiasms led him to support the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of poets and painters, a clear influence on Wilde’s artistic sensibility. Not even Ernest Dowson (1867–1900), a fellow poet and *absintheur* whose self-destructive lifestyle may have matched Wilde’s, but whose artistic gifts and occasional flashes of wit—“Absinthe makes the tart grow fonder”—seem permanently fixed in the fin-de-siècle.

As for Sullivan and Ruskin, their reputations anchor them to an even earlier era: with their mutton chops, stiff collars, frock coats, and bland respectability, they remain moored to the proper, dutiful world of Victorian England. Of those nineteenth-century notables who also died in 1900, only Friedrich Nietzsche’s cultural afterlife rivals Wilde’s. The philosopher’s aphoristic talents are not dissimilar to Wilde’s epigrammatic gifts, and Nietzsche’s legacy is certainly enduring—thanks partly to his sister Elizabeth, who did more than anyone to keep that legacy alive in the most unfortunate way by encouraging her Nazi pals to misunderstand her brilliant brother, with his idea of the *Übermensch* and the will to power, as a fascist fellow traveler. But not even Nietzsche can equal the cultural legacy of Wilde, whose life and work continue to inspire scholars, playwrights, and filmmakers. *The Happy Prince* (2018), the bio-pic directed by and starring Rupert Everett as Oscar Wilde in his last years, is only the most recent example of the author’s continuing presence in contemporary culture.

The Wilde who is the subject of Everett’s film is also the topic of Nicholas Frankel’s *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (2017),

an excellent examination of the last five years of the author's life. After his 1895 conviction for committing acts of "gross indecency" with other men, Wilde spent two of his remaining years in three different English prisons (four, if you count Newgate, where he spent his first weekend after sentencing): Pentonville, Wandsworth, and finally Reading. The last three years were spent in exile, with Wilde residing immediately after his release in Dieppe and Berneval-sur-Mer on the Normandy coast, then Naples, and, finally, Paris, where he died in a seedy room at the Hôtel d'Alsace on November 30th, 1900. Perhaps the most familiar anecdote of his last days is the mordantly witty remark he made about the "duel to the death" he was fighting with the ghastly wallpaper (brown flowers on a blue background) in his hotel room: "One of us has to go." To be sure, Frankel gets that anecdote in the book (as does Everett in the film), but he gives us so much more than the received myth which by now forms a broad and mostly erroneous understanding of the post-prison Wilde: that he was a ruined man and a pariah of polite society, hated by all save a small circle of faithful friends, a man who had abandoned his art and rejected his former lover Lord Alfred Douglas—the latter point supposedly evident to anyone who has read the long prison letter to Douglas now known as *De Profundis*. A tragic figure, in short.

Part of that myth is true, of course, but like all partial myths it is not the whole truth. In particular, Frankel shows how the letter to Douglas changed over the course of its long composition from a bitter excoriation of the spoiled aristocrat as the agent of the artist's ruin to a deeply reflective spiritual autobiography of the sort that Wilde read in prison (such as Augustine's *Confessions*). Far from being a rationale for rejecting Douglas, the letter actually laid the emotional groundwork for his eventual

reunion with the man Wilde called Bosie. After his release from prison on May 19th, 1897, Wilde dithered a bit about resuming the relationship, but then he and Bosie "eloped" to Naples in September. In addition to making a convincing case that Douglas was hardly the "heartless Iago or Judas figure" he is widely understood to have been, Frankel also shows us something that Everett does not: that Wilde managed to sustain his creative powers, however diminished, over the last two years of his life. Not only did Wilde compose *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, the long poem about penitentiary life that makes a powerful argument for prison reform, he also prepared his most successful society comedies—*The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband*—for publication in the form that we know them today, adding brilliant touches here and there. More generally, as the title of the book suggests, Frankel shows that Wilde in his last years was far from being the tragic martyr or suffering saint that such celebrated biographers as H. Montgomery White and Richard Ellmann have made him out to be. True, Wilde was the victim of a bygone era of homophobic injustice relentless in its viciousness, but, as Frankel puts it, "Wilde did not emerge from prison without ambitions or plans, and he took pleasure where it was to be had. While he faced injury and insult on an almost daily basis, to frame Wilde's story as tragedy or martyrdom is to ignore elements in his makeup at once personal and philosophical that go to the heart of who he was."

Who Wilde was, exactly, is a complicated topic, not least because the language that we now use to describe men who love other men has changed so much since the period when Wilde was hounded and finally brought to bay by the brutish Marquess of Queensbury, Lord Alfred Douglas's father, for "corrupting" his delicate son, who was Wilde's junior by some sixteen years.

Queensbury did not accuse Wilde of being gay, queer, or homosexual: he called him a “posing somdomite [sic]” on the card he left at Wilde’s club, prompting Wilde to sue Queensbury for libel, a charge that backfired once the defense counsel threatened to produce evidence affirming the truth of Queensbury’s allegations, whereupon Wilde withdrew the suit. But given the evidence disproving the libel charge, the Crown itself was obligated to prosecute the charge of gross indecency against Wilde.

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“Gross indecency” was a misdemeanor carrying a maximum sentence of two years in prison (which is what Wilde got). This vague category of sexual offense was added at the last minute to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, legislation primarily intended “for the Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels, and other purposes.” The section of the act covering gross indecency was so ill-conceived that it soon became known as the “Blackmailer’s Charter” because it did not criminalize any specific act, leaving the meaning of “gross indecency” open to subjective interpretation. More important, the Act criminalized private, consensual relations between men, with the result that it may very well have brought into existence a new form of sexual identity: homosexuality. Wilde did not walk around thinking of himself and the men he loved as “homosexual”; in fact, he never used the term. Neither the word itself nor the concept of same-sex desire as a component of one’s inherent character had become established in Wilde’s day, but both were emerging. The word homosexual did not

appear in English until 1892, when the German sexologist Richard Krafft-Ebing’s book *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) was translated into English. As Krafft-Ebing’s title suggests, same-sex love was understood as a form of perversion, evidence of degeneration from “normal” desires. Strangely, Wilde takes precisely this view of himself in a long letter to the home secretary dated July 2nd, 1896 petitioning for early release from Reading. He relies on such medical authorities as the eugenicist Cesare Lombroso and the cultural critic Max Nordau (whose *Entartung* was translated into English as *Degeneration* in 1895) to claim that he should not be punished further for his “sexual madness,” since conditions such as the “erotomania, which made him forget his wife and children,” are “diseases to be cured by a physician, rather than crimes to be punished by a judge.” The petition, of course, was unsuccessful, and while Wilde’s use of the medical discourse of sexual perversion current at the time to describe himself may have been a stratagem to persuade those with power over him to show him mercy, Frankel is right to point out that “there must always be something anachronistic about speaking of any Victorian’s ‘sexual identity.’” At the same time, even though Wilde could hardly have “identified” as homosexual, he clearly “thought of himself as a social and sexual transgressor.” Moreover, despite his petition to the officials that he be released and “put under medical care so that the sexual insanity from which he suffers may be cured,” once he was out of prison and reunited with Douglas, Wilde made clear that he had no choice but to be who he was: “A patriot put in prison for loving his country loves his country, and a poet in prison for loving boys loves boys.”

The comparison of the country-loving patriot to the boy-loving poet reveals a political dimension to Wilde’s thinking that is worth considering in more detail.

Almost certainly, the unnamed country in the comparison would be Ireland, and the patriot an Irish nationalist like Michael Davitt (1846–1906), who was imprisoned on several occasions for his Fenian activities and published a memoir of his incarceration as *Leaves from a Prison Diary* (1885). After his release, Wilde wrote to Davitt, then a member of Parliament, about the inhumane treatment of a prisoner at Reading Gaol known as A.2.11. Wilde's assigned number at Reading was C.3.3. (cell block C, landing 3, cell 3), and when he published *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* he did so under the "name" C.3.3. out of a sense of solidarity with his fellow prisoners. Earlier, Wilde had published a strange political tract titled "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891), advocating a philosophy of "Individualism," a term that at the time was a near-synonym for 'anarchism.' This earlier tract, combined with *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and, most important, the fact of Wilde's prosecution and incarceration by the state, made him an anarchist hero after his death, celebrated by such well-known ideologues as Emma Goldman and Gustav Landauer (who translated "The Soul of Man" into German in 1904). Frankel does not explore the anarchistic aspects of Wilde's posthumous career, but he provides so much information about the experiences C.3.3. endured that we must now understand everything Wilde wrote about those experiences as a major contribution to the cause of prison reform. Indeed, Wilde sent a long letter to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle* very soon after his release (it was published on May 28th, 1897) describing the horrible prison conditions under which children suffered (they were incarcerated alongside adults, often for petty crimes—like snaring rabbits). Wilde wrote a second letter to the *Chronicle* the following year (published March 24th, 1898) with the

hope of influencing the debate in Parliament over the bill that emerged as the 1898 Prisons Act. Wilde's suggestions for reform included an improved prison diet, better medical care, greater access to good books, and more frequent visitation from friends and family. Not all of these reforms were incorporated into the 1898 act, but subsequent legislation early in the twentieth century did include all the changes Wilde had recommended. He proudly signed his letter as "The Author of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*," and during the parliamentary debate the poem was quoted at least twice. One takeaway from Frankel's book is that Wilde's reformist influence on legislation affecting the treatment of English prisoners deserves broader recognition.

But Frankel is careful not to over-revise the closing chapter in the biography of the man his contemporaries called "the High Priest of the Decadents." Another takeaway from Frankel's book, lest we become too impressed with Wilde as the moral crusader for prison reform, is the sense of just how self-destructive Wilde became toward the end. He drank absinthe to excess, ran up sizable debts he could not possibly pay, and sometimes behaved like the "erotomaniac" he once claimed to be. Despite advice from close friends to exercise discretion in his sex life, Wilde remained, to use Frankel's word, unrepentant. When his good friend and former lover Robert Ross suggested that he make himself respectable by marrying again (his wife Constance died in 1898), the 44-year-old Wilde responded that he "was practically engaged to a fisherman of extraordinary beauty, aged eighteen." In the end, there is something admirable about his refusal of redemption and respectability because that refusal entailed the affirmation of the man that Wilde most wanted to be—himself. ◻