Gyles Brandreth

– Introduction –

I have more than a hundred books about Oscar Wilde on my study shelves. I could have many more: there are thousands to choose from. 'Oscar Wilde Studies' has become one of the academic industries of our time. But of all the biographies I know, there are two to which I return most often.

One is *The Wilde Album*, a small book, beautifully written by Merlin Holland, Wilde's only grandchild, the son of his second son, Vyvyan Holland, and illustrated with fascinating material drawn from the family archive. Within the book are two pages from an American 'Confession Album', filled out by Wilde some time in 1877, the year in which he turned twenty-three. Some of the answers Wilde gives are the ones we would expect. Almond blossom is young Oscar's favourite fragrance, the lily is his flower of choice. His preferred season is the beginning of autumn and for his 'Object in Nature' he chooses 'The sea (when there are no bathing machines)'.

Some of the answers provoke a smile: 'What is your favourite occupation? Reading my own sonnets'.

'If not yourself, who would you rather be? A Cardinal of the Catholic Church.'

And several make us ponder: 'What are the sweetest words in the world? Well done!'

'What are the saddest words? Failure!'

'What is your aim in life? Success: fame or even notoriety.'

The other biography I consult on a regular basis is, predictably, Richard Ellmann's magisterial *Oscar Wilde*, first published in 1987. Ellmann concludes his book with an assessment of his hero's place in the modern world. He quotes Wilde on a fellow Victorian of note and notoriety, the Irish nationalist leader, Charles Stewart Parnell: 'There is something vulgar in all success . . . The greatest men fail, or seem to have failed.' Ellmann goes on:

> . . . what was true of Parnell is in another way true of Wilde. His work survived as he had claimed it would. We inherit his struggle to achieve supreme fictions in art, to associate art with social change, to bring together individual and social impulse, to save what is eccentric and singular from being sanitised and standardised, to replace a morality of severity by one of sympathy. He belongs more to our world than to Victoria's. Now beyond the reach of scandal, his best writings validated by time, he comes before us still, a towering figure, laughing and weeping, with parables and paradoxes, so generous, so amusing, so right.

That is wonderfully put, though I might quibble with that final 'so right'. Wilde is occasionally 'so wrong'. And he is sometimes quite absurd. As he

admitted in a letter to Arthur Conan Doyle, 'Between me and life there is a mist of words always. I throw probability out of the window for the sake of a phrase, and the chance of an epigram makes me desert truth. Still I do aim at making a work of art . . .' And, right or wrong, rational or absurd, Oscar Wilde is always fascinating. He is the man you hope will walk into the room and come to sit at the spare place at your table.

The creator of Sherlock Holmes met Wilde first, over dinner, in 1889 and was immediately charmed: 'His conversation left an indelible impression on my mind. He towered above us all, and yet had the art of seeming interested in all that we could say. He had delicacy of feeling and tact . . . He took as well as gave, but what he gave was unique.'

George Bernard Shaw, Wilde's near-contemporary and fellow Irish playwright, said of him: 'He was incomparably the greatest talker of his time – perhaps of all time.' Laurence Housman, English playwright and poet, brother of A.E., described Wilde's unique speaking style: 'The smooth, flowing utterance, sedate and self-possessed, oracular in tone, whimsical in substance, carried on without halt, or hesitation, or change of word, with the queer zest of a man perfect at the game.'

There are no known recordings of Oscar Wilde speaking, but you can hear his voice very clearly in the pages that follow. These essays illustrate his remarkable way with words and reveal both a range of his

opinions on things that mattered to him and a flavour of his 'philosophy' of art – and life.

If you are looking for the company of Oscar Wilde 'on song' you are in for a treat. If you are hoping to find a Wildean world-view that holds together at all times, you will be disappointed. As he says in 'Aristotle at Afternoon Tea' (and elsewhere: if he borrowed liberally from other writers, he borrowed most liberally from himself): 'Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative.'

Wilde is ashamed neither of intelligent plagiarism nor of self-contradiction. As he put it in one of the effusive letters he wrote to the twenty-year-old undergraduate, Harry Marillier, in 1885: 'I myself would sacrifice anything for a new experience, and I know there is no such thing as a new experience at all. I think I would more readily die for what I do not believe in than for what I hold to be true. I would go to the stake for a sensation and be a sceptic to the last! Only one thing remains infinitely fascinating to me, the mystery of moods.'

'What is truth?' Wilde liked to ask. 'It is . . .' he would answer, smiling, '. . . one's last mood.'

The material in this collection reflects his 'last mood' at the time of writing. It also reflects the variety of his interests and enthusiasms, the breadth of his reading (*Oscar's Books: A Journey Around the Library of Oscar Wilde*, Thomas Wright, 2009, is another of my favourites), the quality of his questing and quixotic

mind, as well, of course, as his particular, not to say peculiar, upbringing.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde did not spring into the world fully formed. Born in Dublin on 16 October 1854, he was the remarkable son of remarkable parents. His mother, Jane Elgee (1821–96), was a formidable figure: six foot tall, Junoesque in build, assertive in temperament. She came from an achieving family: her cousin discovered the North-West Passage, her brother became one of America's most noted jurists. A gifted linguist (she translated novels from French and German) and a prolific poet, under the pen-name of Speranza, she was celebrated for her nationalist writings and zeal.

Oscar's father, William Wilde (1815–76), if some inches shorter than his wife, was no less remarkable and no less committed to Ireland's heritage and integrity. He, too, was a prolific author (in 1851, the year of their marriage, he published *Irish Popular Superstitions*) and, like his wife, was a notable figure in Dublin society. Widely travelled, deeply read, he was a surgeon by profession: he ran his own hospital, St Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital for Diseases of the Eye and Ear, and in 1863 was appointed Surgeon Oculist in Ireland to Queen Victoria. In 1864 he was knighted.

Respected as a doctor (Bernard Shaw's father was one of his patients), William Wilde was also noted as a ladies' man. Before his marriage, he fathered three children out of wedlock: Henry Wilson (as in 'Will's

son'), born in 1838, who later became his medical partner, and Emily and Mary Wilde, born in 1847 and 1849. He acknowledged paternity of these illegitimate children and provided for their education. The girls died in a tragic accident in 1871, when their ball dresses caught light by an open fire. William Wilde by his wife Jane had three children: Willie, born in 1852, who trained as a lawyer but became a journalist and a drinker (and died as a consequence in 1899, aged 46); Oscar; and a daughter, Isola, born in 1857, who died of 'an effusion of the brain' just short of her tenth birthday.

Oscar was much affected by his young sister's death. The family doctor at the time described him as 'an affectionate, gentle, retiring, dreamy boy whose lonely and inconsolable grief found solace in long and frequent visits to his sister's grave'. We do not know how affected Oscar was by another cloud that hovered for a time over the Wilde family – or even if, at the time, he was aware of it. In 1864, a young woman – a former patient of Sir William's, with whom he had become intimate – published a scurrilous pamphlet accusing him of rape. When Lady Wilde wrote to the girl's father protesting that his daughter was making 'unfounded' allegations, the young woman sued for libel. She won her case and a farthing in damages. The Wildes were left to pay costs of £ 2,000.

Whatever their shortcomings, Oscar was proud of his parents and of their contribution to Irish life and

letters. When Sir William died, Lady Wilde moved to London. When she died, Oscar was in prison. 'Her death was so terrible to me,' he wrote in Reading Gaol, 'that I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame.'

The Wildes were proud of their sons and right to be. They were both clever boys. Oscar was the more academically brilliant. At the Irish Anglican Portora Royal School at Enniskillen, he took the top prize in Classics (and the second prize in drawing) and won a scholarship to Trinity College, Dublin. There he won a further scholarship, as well as the College's Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek and, finally, a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford.

At Oxford, he was awarded the Newdigate Prize for Poetry and a double First. Legend has it that at his *viva voce* his examiners spent more time congratulating him on his brilliance than they did questioning him about his written papers.

Indeed, it is at Oxford that the 'legend' starts to form. This is where Oscar the aesthete begins to emerge from the crowd, dressing the part, advocating 'Art for art's sake' and confessing: 'I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china.' He is mocked by some and ragged by others, but he holds his own. (He is over six foot tall, well-fleshed and useful with his fists.) At Oxford, when asked what the future might hold for him, he told a friend what he had told others: 'I won't be a dried up Oxford don, anyhow. I'll

be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. I'll be famous, and if not famous, notorious.'

He delivered on this prospectus, in every particular and in that order. He came down from Oxford and set out to make his mark, as a 'personality' and as a writer. From time to time over the years, he looked for a proper job (in the fields of education and social reform). For twenty months, until his interest and its circulation flagged, he was editor of the magazine *The Woman's World*, but essentially between leaving Oxford in 1878 and his imprisonment in 1895 he earned his living as a freelance author and lecturer.

He made a play of indolence, but his output was considerable. His play *Vera* was published in 1880. His *Poems* appeared in 1881. He got himself noticed, written about and lampooned. In 1881, when the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience* satirised him and his fellow aesthetes, its producer, Richard D'Oyly Carte, persuaded Oscar to go to America on a lecture tour to promote himself and, *inter alia*, the operetta.

The first of the 'essays' in this collection is one of the lectures he delivered on that tour. Its first version was delivered in Chicago on 11 March 1882, when Wilde called it 'Interior and Exterior House Decoration'. He changed the title to 'The House Beautiful' when he delivered it in April in California. The text here has been collated by Kevin O'Brien from sixteen newspaper reports of the lectures and is included at the suggestion of Merlin Holland, who reckons it is as representative

of his grandfather's words as we are going to get without benefit of the original manuscript. Indeed, the only manuscript fragment included by Kevin O'Brien is one paragraph. The rest of the manuscript disintegrated as Wilde carried it rolled up in his hand as the months on the lecture circuit rolled on. What was planned as a fifty-lecture tour lasting four months stretched to 140 lectures delivered in 260 days, criss-crossing the United States with two forays into Canada.

In 1883, Wilde spent several months in Paris, working on his play *The Duchess of Padua*; he returned to America for the first production of *Vera*; and he began an extensive lecture tour through the British Isles. In November 1883 he became engaged to Constance Lloyd, the daughter of an Irish QC. The couple were married on 29 May 1884 and set up home at 16 Tite Street, Chelsea. Their sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, were born in 1885 and 1887.

Wilde's most active period as a journalist and reviewer was the mid-1880s, the untroubled early-married years when he was writing for periodicals such as the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Dramatic Review*. The tone of 'Dinners and Dishes' (1885) is mellow and good-humoured. 'Shakespeare on Scenery' and 'Hamlet at the Lyceum' (1885) give us Wilde on Shakespeare – and on Henry Irving, the titan of the Victorian stage. 'Count Tolstoi's *War and Peace*' (1886) is an elegant example of Wilde the literary critic and 'American Invasion' (1887) has Wilde engaging in one of his lifelong amusements:

teasing the Americans, while secretly admiring them. 'Aristotle at Afternoon Tea' (1887) is a review of a book by J. P. Mahaffy, Wilde's mentor at Trinity College, Dublin, and an excuse for Wilde to explore the art of conversation. 'London Models' (1889) gives us his thoughts on the male and female form in art.

The two substantial essays in the collection are 'The Decay of Lying' (1889) and 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' (1891). The first, published in *The Nineteenth Century*, is presented as a Socratic dialogue in which Cyril and Vivian (*sic*) debate notions of Romanticism and Realism, and Vivian speaks for Oscar when he declares: 'Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.' The second is the essay that sprang from Wilde's reading of the Russian writer and anarchist Peter Kropotkin, and reveals to us Wilde the libertarian socialist. (Do not be put off: it is more concerned with art, individualism and happiness than fermenting the Revolution.) On either side of these substantial dishes are served what seem like sorbets: the 'Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray' (1890), 'A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated' (1894) and 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young' (1894). These are not strictly essays: they are 'one-liners', but they are ur-Wilde and bear as much consideration as the meatier material.

Wilde's essays give us his voice and his views, but they represent only a portion of his literary output. His story 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' appeared in 1887,

followed, in 1888, by *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and, in 1889 and 1890, more controversially, *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The first of his successful social comedies, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, was produced in London in 1892, followed by *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

It has been said that, just as all actresses want to play Hamlet, all actors want to play Lady Bracknell. Well, I am one who has done so and, as a consequence, I know *The Importance of Being Earnest* by heart. It is a perfect comedy and, I would say, the finest play written in English during the long Victorian age.

The London production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the spring of 1895 marked the apogee of Wilde's success and the moment of his downfall. His biographers agree that Wilde did not act on his homosexual impulses until his affair with Robert 'Robbie' Ross in the autumn of 1886, when Robbie was seventeen and Oscar thirty-two. Robbie was a Cambridge undergraduate who came to stay with the Wildes in Tite Street as a paying guest. Once Oscar had embraced his homosexuality (and Constance, after two difficult pregnancies, had lost her boyish allure) there was no turning back. In 1892, Wilde embarked on the affair with Lord Alfred Douglas (1870–1945) that led, eventually, to his undoing. When Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, left a card 'for Oscar Wilde posing somdomite' (*sic*), Oscar initiated libel proceedings that

failed and were followed, inevitably, by his own prosecution for gross indecency. He was accused of paying rent boys for sex, found guilty and sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour.

When Arthur Conan Doyle met Wilde in the early 1890s he said 'he gave me the impression of being mad'. Oscar's infatuation with Bosie (as Lord Alfred Douglas was known) was certainly a kind of madness. 'Poor Oscar was not as bad as people thought him,' said his brother Willie in a letter to their mutual friend, Bram Stoker. 'He was led astray by his Vanity – & conceit, & he was so "got at" that he was weak enough to be guilty – of indiscretions and follies – that is all . . . I believe this thing will help to purify him body & soul.'

In fact, it broke him. From the time of his imprisonment until his death, in Paris, in exile, six years later, on 30 November 1900, his only writings of note are his extraordinary confessional letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, *De Profundis*, his poem 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', and two letters to the *Daily Chronicle* based on his experience of incarceration – the first of which appeared in the newspaper under the heading 'The Case of Warder Martin: Some Cruelties of Prison Life' on 28 May 1897 and features here as the final essay in this collection.

The letter to the *Daily Chronicle* reminds us of Wilde's compassion, and of the kindness within him, and of his moved response to kindness in others. Of course, his behaviour and the way in which, in 1895,

he brought the pack of cards down upon himself, had cruel consequences. He brought ruin on his wife and family as well as on himself. (Constance died in exile also, in Genoa in 1898, following a botched operation, aged just 39; her boys did not see their father after his imprisonment.) To many today Oscar is a gay icon who can do no wrong, but, in truth, he was human, multi-faceted and no saint. Part of the tragedy of Oscar Wilde is that it is now almost impossible to view him except through the prism of his downfall.

In 1931, in his autobiography, the painter and illustrator W. Graham Robertson (1866–1948), famous as the subject of one of John Singer Sargent's finest portraits, suggested that the real Oscar Wilde had disappeared beneath the tomb, 'a ponderous crag of stone', erected to his memory at Père Lachaise in Paris. Forgotten were 'the boyish good-humour, the almost child-like love of fun, the irresponsible gaiety and lightness of touch in which lay his unquestionable charm; the nimble-witted Irishman has vanished with the fastidious stringer of lovely words upon long melodious phrases, and gradually has been evolved a sinister figure, half sinner, half saint, unrecognisable to anyone who had known him, a creation of pure fiction, wholly foreign and mythical . . . The actual Oscar Wilde is no longer remembered.'

My hope is you will find him again here, in his prime, at his best, entertaining and diverting us with beautiful and impossible things.