

## INTERVIEWS



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## An Interview with Joseph Bristow on *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings from Arrest to Imprisonment* (New Haven, Yale U.P., 2022), and Other Views on Wilde

JOSEPH BRISTOW is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. His most recent books are *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings from Arrest to Imprisonment* (Yale U.P., 2022) and an edited collection, *Extraordinary Aesthetes: Decadents, New Women, and Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (University of Toronto Press, 2023). He is (with Charlotte Ribeyrol and Rebecca N. Mitchell) co-editor of *Studies in Walter Pater and Aestheticism*.

EB: Good afternoon, Professor Bristow. I have had great pleasure of reading *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings from Arrest to Imprisonment* and it's impressive, really. I was wondering how you could have written such a detailed and exceptionally well-researched volume.

JB: The pandemic had much to do with the concentrated period of writing that I dedicated to *Oscar Wilde on Trial*. Towards the end of 2019, I had a working draft, and once we reached March 2020, when we weren't supposed to be moving around at all, I was polishing each chapter. Eventually, at the end of summer 2020 I'd produced an enormous manuscript of 366,000 words, including 40 illustrations and 9 appendices. I sent it off to Yale University Press, where the editor looked at it in despair. "It's far too long," he said. "You've got to find a way of stripping it down." So, I devoted many hours doing my best to reduce it in size, and by the following summer, in 2021, I had removed 100,000 words. I submitted the radically revised draft, which was promptly sent out for review. There were, a few months later, several helpful suggestions for revision. By the autumn of 2021, the manuscript was formally accepted.

Still, it took a long time for such a lengthy study to make its way through production, since books for some presses moved fairly slowly during the pandemic. In any case,

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given the length of the book, it was rather complicated to get through the copyediting process. To be sure, I had considerable copyediting support. However, when the first set of proofs came through, which must have been at the end of 2021, there were no fewer than 800 corrections. We kept going through fresh sets of proofs all the way through March or April 2022. My hope is that scarcely any errors remain.

EB: I have enjoyed your writing style. You have a way of telling stories that is really engaging.

JB: It's very kind of you to say so. Besides taking pleasure in writing *Oscar Wilde on Trial*, I learned so much from working on it. I began researching the project in the early 2010s, knowing only the bare outlines of the Wilde trials. Assuredly, I understood that John Sholto Douglas, the 9th Marquess of Queensberry, left at one of Wilde's clubs a semi-literate visiting-card that accused Wilde of "posing as a sodomite." (Queensberry's misspelling of 'sodomite' is notorious.) And I also knew that Wilde's subsequent libel case against Queensberry foundered once the Marquess's defence counsel Edward Carson made it plain that his client's accuser had indeed enjoyed sexual intimacies with young men. (Wilde's counsel, Sir Edward Clarke, withdrew the case, which resulted in £677 in legal expenses that pretty much bankrupted Wilde.) Still, I didn't understand that much about the Crown's rapid decision to prosecute Wilde for sexual conspiracies and misdemeanours on the basis of the inculcating evidence that had been aired during the libel trial. I was unaware, too, of the technical reasons that the first Crown prosecution resulted in a hung jury, and I had little knowledge of the unfairness of the second Crown prosecution, which was spearheaded by the aggressive Sir Frank Lockwood, who wanted a conviction at any cost. I also had to find out about the procurer Alfred Somerset Waterhouse Taylor, a 33-year-old son of a cacao manufacturer who had squandered a large legacy. Taylor made money by providing Wilde with sexual contacts, and he likely had other well-off clients who benefited from his services. (Wilde, during the first criminal prosecution, was tried alongside Taylor. In the second trial, since the charges of conspiracy had been withdrawn, the two men were tried separately.)

So, I spurred myself into action by preparing a plenary talk on the trials, with a focus on "Oscar Wilde's Sexual Practices" – just to share what my research had so far taught me about the pleasures Wilde enjoyed with other men. It was my first foray into this area. The talk took place at a conference called *Taking Liberties*, which was held at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and I remain extremely grateful to the organisers for that opportunity. This was in 2012. An essay based on the conference presentation appeared in *Feminist Theory* in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

As I started developing my talk for *Taking Liberties*, I consulted the three published records of the trials. The first, which appeared in 1906, was issued anonymously in

<sup>1</sup> See J. BRISTOW, "The Blackmailer and the Sodomite: Oscar Wilde on Trial", *Feminist Theory*, 17 (1), 2016, pp. 41-62.

Paris. Called *The Trial of Oscar Wilde*, it was brought out by Charles Carrington, who had originally run a clandestine erotica business in London. The volume claims to be based on a shorthand record, and, in all truth, it's a very messy edition, and it's never been taken very seriously. It is certainly from a shorthand record of some kind, and I would imagine the shorthand had been transcribed by people who were either not native speakers or writers who had a good command of English but didn't have much knowledge of London, because proper names, especially the names of streets, are spelled phonetically. Still, *The Trial of Oscar Wilde* contains some very intriguing features. One vital point that emerges from this document is that it shows that the word 'sodomy' was articulated during the criminal proceedings by the young male prostitutes who were what we call 'suborned witnesses', ones who were undoubtedly manipulated by the Crown prosecution. The 1906 volume, then, is significant because the countless newspaper reports tend not to refer to sodomy, since there was great reluctance, especially towards the end of the Victorian period, for newspaper editors to print such a sensitive word.

The second volume is *Oscar Wilde: Three Times Tried* (1912) by Christopher Sclater Millard, a great Wilde scholar who completed the excellent *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (1914) under the pseudonym 'Stuart Mason'.<sup>2</sup> The 1912 book, which was issued anonymously, is far longer and much more dependable than its erratic 1906 predecessor. The study, which run to almost 500 pages, emerged from Millard's meticulous compilation of newspaper cuttings. This part of his newspaper clipping collection was bought at a major sale of Wilde-related materials at Dulau & Co., London, in 1928. These albums, which formed part of some seventeen scrapbooks that Millard maintained, were purchased by a Japanese collector, Hisao Homna, and they have recently become available in digitised form at Jissen University, Tokyo.<sup>3</sup>

Now, what is interesting about the 1912 volume is that it doesn't contain the word 'sodomy'. For this reason, Millard sanitises some of the proceedings. I think Millard wanted to make quite sure that there was nothing written down in the book that would make it liable to prosecution for obscenity. Millard had to exercise caution for other reasons as well. His study of the trials, it is worth remembering, was published not long before a terrible court case that was brought by Lord Alfred ('Bosie') Douglas, who had been intimate with Wilde since 1891 and who had suffered harassment from his father, John Sholto Douglas, for his involvement with Wilde. At the time that Millard's book volume appeared, Douglas's personal life had gone through a massive transformation. He was now a Catholic convert, a married man, a father, and a truly reactionary conservative. Even more to the point, he had renounced his homosexual past and (at least publicly) abominated his notorious association with Wilde, although his position changed in the 1920s through the time of his death in 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Millard's bibliographical research on Wilde's *oeuvre* was aided by another scholar, Walter Ledger.

<sup>3</sup> Millard's albums of press clippings on the trials are held at Jissen University, Tokyo: [https://www.jissen.ac.jp/library/info\\_collection/wilde/eng/linkto\\_archives\\_eng.html](https://www.jissen.ac.jp/library/info_collection/wilde/eng/linkto_archives_eng.html)

Douglas began libel proceedings against the various parties that had been involved in issuing Arthur Ransome's *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1912). Although Ransome does not mention Douglas's name, he made a dangerous insinuation. Seven years before, Methuen had published a carefully edited volume containing extracts from the long 40,000-word letter that Wilde composed during his final months in HMP Reading. This letter, in its complete form, is addressed to Douglas, and many of Wilde's remarks about Douglas are scathing. (It took until 1962 before the complete text of the document appeared in Rupert Hart-Davis's monumental edition of Wilde's letters.) Called *De Profundis*, a title taken from Psalm 129 in the Vulgate and applied by the publisher, the slim volume included selected passages from the letter that focus mainly on Wilde's experiences in jail. The editor, who was Wilde's literary executor Robert Ross, took pains not to implicate Douglas anywhere in its pages. (At the time, there were serious tensions already developed between Douglas and Ross.) In many ways, the 1905 edition, which was very well received, marked the first decisive step towards restoring Wilde's literary reputation. Still, in 1912 Ransome boldly stated: "the Letter, a manuscript of 'eighty close-written pages on twenty folio sheets,' was not addressed to Mr Ross but to a man to whom Wilde felt that he owed some, at least, of the circumstances of his public disgrace."<sup>4</sup> Douglas realised that the unnamed "man" was himself. So, the following year, Douglas was in court railing against Ross, Ransome, the publisher, and the Times Book Club for writing, publishing, and distributing the 1912 study. (He lost his case, which involved some very embarrassing scenes for him in court.) Understandably, in the circumstances Millard had to be careful not to say anything untoward about Douglas in *Oscar Wilde: Three Times Tried*. Consequently, Millard's otherwise impressive book suffered from inevitable limitations.

In 1948, the historian, lawyer, and later MP H. Montgomery Hyde brought out his own edition of the court proceedings for a legal series in London. He went back to Millard's 1912 volume and sifted the contents. I don't think Hyde carried out much new work. There was a copyright dispute that took place in the mid-1960s over who owned the transcripts of the trials, and the judge could see that Hyde had essentially re-worked Millard's comprehensive volume. In the early 1960s, Hyde produced for Penguin a freshly edited version of the 1948 book that became the standard study. (The American company Dover issued this new edition as *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* in the United States.) Once again, this revised edition doesn't mention sodomy. It basically does what the Millard book had done, but it contains useful editorial commentary on the law under which Wilde was tried. (This was the eleventh section of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which put a wholesale ban on sexual acts between men. The 1885 law, which for the first time proscribed the unspecified crime of 'gross indecency', sent thousands of men to jail. This punishing legislation, which carried a maximum two-year jail term, was partly decriminalised in 1967.) Hyde's attention to Wilde's trials garnered increasing interest in the 1950s because of the political initiatives

<sup>4</sup> A. RANSOME, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*, London, Martin Secker, 1912, p. 157. Ransome relied on Ross for much of his information.

to bring about homosexual law reform. The detailed Wolfenden Report, which was commissioned by the government and came out in 1957, was central to this movement. Two films about the Wilde trials, both of which premiered in 1960 (the one directed by Ken Hughes, the other by Gregory Ratoff), represented the growing popular interest in the persecution of queer men. Hyde, I should add, was very active in the reform campaign. He lost his seat as an Ulster Unionist MP because of his support for lifting the ban on consensual intimacy between men and also for abolishing the death penalty.

After consulting these three studies, I also started reading many of the recently available digitised newspaper reports that had come available through the British Newspaper Archive. Immediately, I could see that information that one might imagine would have made its way into the three volumes from 1906, 1912, and 1948 didn't appear in them. So, it began to intrigue me, and eventually I decided that I needed to produce a new transcript of the trials based on the newspapers. I had to learn about newspaper history and the different editorial predilections of each section of the press, along with the distinctive ways in which they reported on controversial criminal cases in court. It soon became evident that there were other sources that were not digitised that I needed to investigate. I discovered a couple of newspaper clipping albums in UCLA's William Andrews Clark Library, which contain extensive cuttings from a source that is still not available in electronic form: *The Star*. This radical evening newspaper gained notice as the first to report explicitly on the so-called 'Jack the Ripper' murders in 1888. *The Star* exercised a great deal of latitude when it came to sexual controversies. It reported, for example, quite widely on the Cleveland Street Affair, in which police detectives uncovered a male brothel in London during 1889-1890. And when it focused on the Wilde trials, *The Star* reported not only in detail but also in a largely non-judgmental way. Furthermore, it ran an illuminating exchange of letters about the unfairness of the trial proceedings and the press's involvement in trying Wilde through journalism (that is, condemning Wilde before his trial had come to an end). It was surprising for me to discover that the poet Robert Buchanan, who had been responsible for the disreputable attack on the "Fleshly School of Poetry" in 1871 and who later excoriated the imperial author Rudyard Kipling as a 'hooligan' in the 1890s, defended Wilde's reputation in *The Star*.

The other newspaper that gained increasing significance in my research was *Reynolds's*, a weekly broadsheet that had its origins in the Chartist Movement. It was always left-of-centre. It wasn't progressive on all fronts, and its outlook changed from editor to editor. It went, for example, through an anti-Semitic phase. By the time Wilde stood in court, however, it took a broad-minded and sympathetic approach to his plight.

EB: I'd never heard about *Reynolds's Newspaper*. Could you say something more about it? What kind of position did it take on the Wilde trials?

JB: *Reynolds's Newspaper* was the print medium that was most critical of the very idea that the witnesses who were testifying against Wilde – several of whom were

blackmailers, extortionists, and sex workers – were protected by the police and that their evidence was tainted evidence. (This was a point that Wilde's defence, Sir Edward Clarke, made emphatically in court.) *Reynolds's* contains detailed and measured accounts of the Wilde trials, all the way through from the libel case that Wilde took out against the Marquess of Queensberry to the two criminal prosecutions on behalf of the Crown. Later, *Reynolds's* had no hesitation in publishing an exposé about the widespread scandal of male prostitutes who engaged in blackmailing men in London. Moreover, after Wilde's death in late 1900 *Reynolds's* carried important notices about his modest temporary gravesite at Bagneux in Paris. In 1905, it is worth noting, *Reynolds's* reminded readers of the thoughtful position it had taken on Wilde's ordeal in court. At the start of a compassionate review of *De Profundis*, the newspaper observed: "*Reynolds's Newspaper* was the only journal which had the courage and honesty to say a word for the brilliant and unhappy man Oscar Wilde, and the only newspaper to publish special information as to his career after leaving gaol. Other journals were too Christian-like to imitate Christ."<sup>5</sup>

EB: Could you tell me how your interest in Wilde arose?

JB: I had an interest in Oscar Wilde before I joined UCLA in 1996. In the early 1990s, I completed an edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest* for Routledge. I'd also written an essay on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for a book that also came out more than thirty years ago, called *Sexual Sameness, Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing*, again published by Routledge. The problem for me writing about Wilde at that moment was that I'd never seen any Wilde archives. I didn't really know the secondary literature in great detail, and although I think there are some commendable aspects to this earlier research of mine, it is the case that I'd produced a workaday student's edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and a plausible discussion of *Dorian Gray* with little sense of its surrounding contexts. In 1995, when I was interviewed for the position in Victorian literature at UCLA, it was made clear to me that the search committee was interested in hiring a colleague who would be motivated to work with the Oscar Wilde collections at the Clark Library. I knew a little bit about the Clark Library from reading about other scholars who had visited it, but I didn't know really anything about the scope of the collection. At the time, I was a visiting scholar at Stanford University for a year, and so I made a couple of visits to UCLA during 1995-1996 when I learned that UCLA was interested in appointing me. On one of these visits, I went to the Clark, and I was overwhelmed. I had no idea that the core collection relating to Oscar Wilde contains over 5000 items. And those 5000 items, mostly letters and manuscripts, are augmented by hundreds of items of ephemera, from theatre posters and programmes to advertisements for Wilde's American tour, receipts for groceries and hotel bills, and so on. Wilde tended to keep everything that had ever passed through his hands, including such surprising documents as a uranalysis. They were always stored. I wouldn't call him a hoarder, but he kept everything meticulously. He

<sup>5</sup> [ANON.], "Oscar Wilde's Prison Cry", *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 25 February 1905, p. 2.

retained his manuscripts. He saved pretty much all his correspondence, and he seems to have done so in a systematic way. He also maintained his notebooks, including ones from his university days.

As time went by, I began to understand more about Wilde's working methods. Just over twenty years ago, I was invited to edit the variorum edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for Oxford University Press. It was my first venture into serious textual editing, and through that project I learned more about Wilde than I ever imagined. I was guided through the editorial process by Ian Small, who is very experienced in the field. In the early 2000s, I had some sabbatical leave and worked around the clock every day. It took me about 15-16 months to mark up the variants on the 1890 and 1891 texts as well as complete the introduction and the annotation. I drew the manuscript to a conclusion at the end of 2003, and the volume came out in early 2005. So, these activities have shaped my formation as an Oscar Wilde scholar. Every other major project that that I've undertaken since has enhanced my knowledge of his life and work.

EB: Is there any other project on Wilde you are going to complete – either publications or research – in your near future?

JB: There are a couple of editorial projects. One is finishing up with Rebecca N. Mitchell and Yvonne Ivory what will likely come to two volumes of Wilde's unpublished and uncollected writings, which we might finish in summer 2024. I've edited Wilde's lectures in North America and Great Britain, which were brought together by Millard for the *Collected Works* edition in 1908, although an earlier scholar, Richard Butler Glaenzer, had done significant editing in relation to some of these presentations. I'm also coming towards the end of editing Wilde's somewhat fragmented draft of a review-essay that is usually known as '*The Women of Homer*', which derives from Wilde's engagement with a chapter in John Addington Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets: Second Series* (1876). The other project that I've been developing since summer 2022 is an edition of Wilde's hefty "Philosophy" notebook, in which he prepared notes for his final examinations in Literæ Humanioris at Oxford in 1878. This manuscript contains 143 folios, all of which contain Wilde's reflections on such works as Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, along with a wealth of Victorian sources, including John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic* and Edward Caird's *Critical Account of the Philosophy of Kant*. This is proving to be a very illuminating editorial exercise, which I'm conducting with Sophie Rickless, a doctoral student at UCLA. The notebook reveals Wilde's astounding breadth of reading in ancient literature and philosophy as well as modern social thought.

EB: Now I have quite a broad question. You seem to me to have espoused several approaches as a Wilde critic. Is there any perspective which has suited you the most and about which you think you've been more successful, more impactful, as a scholar?

JB: My graduate education at the University of Southampton, where I was taught by Isobel Armstrong, was very much based on critical theory. We were reading at the time a great deal of Lacan, a great deal in translation – which is in itself quite problematic – Blanchot, Derrida, Foucault, etc. These were all key figures for us when we were engaging with poststructuralism, and then we were also learning about structuralism and its origins in figures such as Saussure. When I look on my intellectual trajectory, it is very clear that by the later 1990s my research became much more historical. I always feel I had a very good intellectual grounding in theoretical approaches as a graduate student, although it didn't really train me much in historical research methods. Since graduating from my Ph.D., I've had a developing interest in social history. And I'm interested in social history not as historical summary, but in the ways in which it assists us in conceptualising what is going on within the culture more largely when we start studying such phenomena as court trials. In other words, I'm interested in the conceptual work that we can do when we're looking at proceedings as complicated as those that Wilde endured.

EB: Do you think this interest in social history is somehow connected to your Foucauldian studies?

JB: Foucault was largely a historian of the social sciences and in some ways the sciences: all his work is, especially the *Lectures at the Collège de France*, which are truly imposing. He was so very well trained himself in thinking about historical processes, especially in relation to what he named as "discourses". And he was very interested in discursive formations that became hegemonic. I still find much of his work a huge resource, though less so his interventions into debates about sexuality, although they provide a theoretical outline about the ways in which sexual discourses can define behaviours and identities. But it's the earlier scholarship, such as *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*, that remains incredibly influential and offers enduring value. So, that part of Foucault's great scholarship stays with me, and, as we know, his amazing corpus has been so influential.

Recently, Foucault has been immensely helpful for me when trying to understand the concept of blackmail. At the moment, I'm thinking about developing a book on queer blackmail. It will take a while to see if it's viable. In Wilde's era, blackmail was a fairly new-fangled word, since it had previously been used to describe payments that were given to robber barons in Scotland. In the 1880s, blackmail becomes a commonly used term for characterising threats that are made to individuals, usually on the basis of some kind of political scandal largely involving the exposure of financial corruption or sexual indiscretions. Why, we might ask, did many men who were blackmailed for homosexual activity feel very nervous about going to the law? Because the law would likely entail further exposure, which might in turn lead to criminal prosecutions – not just for 'gross indecency' (the misdemeanour under the 1885 law) but also (under the provisions of an 1861 law) sodomy, a felony that carried a sentence of up to ten years in jail.

So, as I've said, I'm considering developing a study of queer blackmail, one that broadens out from *Oscar Wilde on Trial*. The study would also enlarge upon the findings of Angus McLaren's fine book, *Sexual Blackmail*, which came out in 2002. Most likely, the project would begin in the mid-18th century and explore the topic all the way through the 1960s. The partial decriminalisation of the 1885 law, under which Wilde was tried, took place through the Sexual Offences Act 1967. Certainly, the 1885 law remained on the statute books until the Sexual Offences Act 2003 but it was removed from the civilian law courts through the 1967 legislation. And that removal was significant because it largely, though not exclusively, brought an end to homosexual blackmail outside the military. (The ban on queer people in the armed forces was at long last lifted in January 2000.)

EB: *Oscar Wilde on Trial* also contains extremely accurate, informative, and innovative perspectives on Wilde's life. I'd like to hear your opinions on the most recent biographical criticism about the author.

JB: Yes, I'm particularly grateful for the recent scholarship of Nicholas Frankel and Matthew Sturgis, both of whom have made extraordinary contributions to our knowledge of Wilde's personal and professional career. In *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (2017), which looks at Wilde's post-prison life in France and Italy, Frankel tackles very impressively such matters as Wilde's regrettable involvement in the Dreyfus affair, his lively sexual escapades in Paris, his painful separation from Douglas in Naples, and the fact that Douglas was perhaps not quite the terrible person certain commentators have made him out to be. As Ransome's 1912 study shows, we've long had a received version of Bosie as the one who manipulated Wilde into taking a needless libel action against Queensberry. Subsequent commentators, such as the unreliable Frank Harris, who produced a sensational biography of Wilde in 1916, assumed that Douglas ignored Wilde during the prison sentence. Certainly, we understand that Bosie was a very headstrong person and that he was also a spendthrift (he squandered a huge inheritance from his father within less than two years), but in later years he wasn't exactly mean towards Wilde, who was equally poor at budgeting. In fact, when Douglas had the funds available, he gave Wilde plenty of money during the post-prison years, and he also made sure that Wilde had cash when the author was in decline at the shabby Hôtel d'Alsace on the rue des Beaux-arts in Paris. (In his 1929 *Autobiography*, in which Douglas makes amends for his previous hostility towards Wilde's memory, he includes an appendix that reproduces from his pocket-book the payments he made to his former lover from February to November 1900. The total is a substantial £332, which amounts to around 40,000 Euros in today's money.)<sup>6</sup> Douglas, too, covered many of the expenses for Wilde's admittedly quite ordinary funeral in early December 1900. For Wilde, of course, no amount of generosity could prevent him from running up debts. By the time of his death, he owed the

<sup>6</sup> See A. DOUGLAS, *The Autobiography of Lord Alfred Douglas*, second edition, London, Martin Secker, 1931, p. 323. Douglas's *Autobiography* first came out in 1929.

forbearing proprietor of the Hôtel d'Alsace, where he had been living for months, the large sum of £112.

By comparison, Matthew Sturgis's magnificent biography, which came out first as *Oscar: A Life* (2019) in Britain and was revised (and reset) as *Oscar Wilde: A Life* (2022) in the United States, is a comprehensive, finely detailed, and thoughtful account. It's now the standard biography and it's largely reliable. Moreover, it is very much a reference work. Sturgis's monumental study doesn't propose a thesis of any kind. Nor should it, in my view. And it's naturally more dependable than Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* (1987) because, as we have known for years, Ellmann's study contains numerous smaller and some larger mistakes from beginning to end. I'm particularly grateful to have Sturgis's biography available on Kindle through Amazon because it's a fully searchable text. I think it will be more than half a century before anybody will choose to surpass it.

EB: Going back to *Oscar Wilde on Trial*, the book offers massive amounts of sources, mainly from the 1890s, to help contextualise the Wilde trials. Would you like to say something more on your method of critical investigation?

JB: One of the aspects of my research for *Oscar Wilde on Trial* involved studying journalism closely and subjecting it to quite an exacting analysis. The searchable British Newspaper Archive led me to many unexpected discoveries. One controversy that I didn't know about until I started looking at the news press from this period was the importance of *Gatty v. Farquharson*, which I mention in the first chapter of *Oscar Wilde on Trial*. In my original, over-length book manuscript, I had a long section on this particular libel trial brought by a Liberal candidate during a parliamentary election in West Dorset. The Tory incumbent Henry Farquharson publicised a disreputable accusation against Charles Gatty, who was a well-connected member of the establishment. Gatty, who won his case, claimed that his opponent had slandered, if not libelled, him for some kind of homosexual misdemeanour when he was a schoolboy. I had no idea that there was a published record of the trial. Much to my amazement, there happened to be a copy in the School of Law Library at UCLA. And so, I started looking closely at the way the trial proceeded, how the threats of sexual exposure were handled, and how Farquharson's language echoed the kind of threats associated with homosexual blackmail. It was also interesting to see that Gatty won his case. (Lockwood acted as Gatty's prosecution, while Clarke defended Farquharson.) Moreover, there was also the case of a Conservative politician Edward de Cobain, who was from Northern Ireland. De Cobain's was an equally well-publicised trial, which resulted in a prison sentence. The more work I did on blackmail cases and on men who had resisted allegations of homosexual criminality in the 1880s and 1890s, the more surprised I was to discover how much of this material came into the public realm, even if the word 'sodomy' wasn't used much in the reports, if at all. There were certainly accusations of 'grossly indecent behaviour', although the precise nature of such indecencies was seldom made explicit. Interestingly, some men who sought to

defend themselves against threatening letters and sexual exposure would go into court, and on occasion they won their cases.

EB: I'm quite surprised that men went to court to defend themselves from such accusations. Thinking about the lives of authors we, as literary scholars, know best, thinking about Walter Pater, for example, who was accused and probably blackmailed for a homosexual relationship he entertained as an Oxford don, but did his best to keep the thing concealed, you wouldn't normally think that men could find the courage to defend themselves in court.

JB: Let's think about Pater's case first. For Pater in the early 1870s, the prospect of his intimacy with a student threatened his university career, and it was in the interest of everyone involved, including the Regius Professor of Greek and Master of Balliol College, Oxford, Benjamin Jowett, to handle the matter with due discretion. Exactly what happened to Pater has involved considerable speculation among modern scholars. Billie Andrew Inman, in a deeply researched essay, has explored what may well have occurred once a handful of Pater's contemporaries at Oxford assumed that he had been engaging in intimate correspondence with William Money Hardinge, an undergraduate at Balliol who later maintained a friendship with Pater.<sup>7</sup> From what we can tell, Pater's sisters, with whom he maintained a home in North Oxford, did what they could to prevent a scandal from breaking. Had Pater suffered any exposure, his position as a tutor at Brasenose College would have been in tatters, and it would also have caused embarrassment to both the college in particular and the university more broadly.

Let's consider the larger historical scope of homosexual blackmail. I've been learning about the various Threatening Letters Acts, which go back to 1757. There's a crucial one in 1825, which Charles Upchurch has discussed in great detail.<sup>8</sup> And then there are the Libel Act 1843 and the Larceny Act 1861. Importantly, the 1861 act says that it is a felony to accuse or threaten to accuse either a person to whom such accusations shall be made, or any other person of any other crimes, with the view or attempt to extort or gain from the person. The law, as I mentioned before, is not using the word "blackmail" yet. Instead, the term is extortion. Blackmail does not appear in English law until the Theft Act 1968.

Extortion was a very serious crime. Still, four months before he passed judgement on Wilde's case, Justice Alfred Wills, who abominated homosexuality, felt obliged to consider whether attempted blackmail was worse than the allegation of committing acts of 'gross indecency'. In early 1895, Wills reluctantly imposed a tough sentence on

<sup>7</sup> See B.A. INMAN, "Estrangement and Connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William M. Hardinge", in L. BRAKE and I. SMALL (eds), *Pater in the 1990s*, Greensboro, NC, ELT Press, 1989, pp. 1-20.

<sup>8</sup> See C. UPCHURCH, *Before Wilde: Sex between Men in Britain's Age of Reform*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2009, pp. 95-100. Upchurch develops his discussion of the 1825 act in "Beyond the Law": *The Politics of Ending the Death Penalty for Sodomy in Britain*, Philadelphia, Temple U.P., 2021, pp. 106-15.

20-year-old Harry Turner for three attempts at blackmailing his former employer, a man called Walter Hughes Silver, who was a member of a well-known firm of London merchants. Now, what is so fascinating about this case is that Wills believed that Silver had likely been committing one of the worst-known offences to the law, and he assumed that, instead of going into court and suffering exposure, perhaps a man like Silver should have committed suicide. Suicide, in Wills's view, afforded the only possible escape for queer men from the persecution of extortion. I'd like to go to the Metropolitan Police records, if they are available, and dig deeper into the background of this astounding case. The other intriguing case that I discovered was a police raid on a gay party that took place in Fitzroy Square in August 1894, which included several people with whom Wilde had connections. Twenty-five men were arrested. I went through the whole list, and I found that several of them had histories of blackmailing other men. My discussion appears in an online Australian journal.<sup>9</sup>

EB: They made a living of blackmail, basically.

JB: Yes, they made a living through blackmail. The other document I consulted at the Clark was very exciting. It was prepared for publication, but it was never published because friends of Wilde's discouraged the writer, J.H. Wilson, from circulating what was a contentious attack on the police and the judiciary. Wilson, a liberal-minded man from Newcastle upon Tyne, was appalled by the injustice Wilde had suffered. In the summer of 1895, he conducted research in London to find out exactly what these blackmailers had been up to and how they had been suborned, and also how they had been shielded from incriminating themselves by the prosecution. In his pamphlet, *Some Gentle Criticisms on English Justice*, Wilson talks about the ways in which the legal setup was such that the blackmailers largely had protection from the authorities.

EB: You say that the piece was never published in its time. So, when was it published?

JB: The copy of *Some Gentle Criticisms* at the Clark Library, in a sense, is a preprint. John Stokes was the first to write about it in the 1990s, after he had discovered it in the Clark Library.<sup>10</sup> I have never seen a copy of it anywhere else. I don't think there's a copy in the Eccles Collection, which is the second largest Wilde archive, in the British Library. More Adey, who did much to safeguard Wilde's legal affairs during the two-year prison term, wrote to Wilson on several occasions and stated that the publication of *Some Gentle Criticisms* would create even more problems for Wilde at the early stage of the jail sentence. During his incarceration, Wilde himself was not happy with any friends or supporters making protests on his behalf in the press. This

<sup>9</sup> See J. BRISTOW, "Homosexual Blackmail in the 1890s: The Fitzroy Street Raid, the Oscar Wilde Trials, and the Case of Cotsford Dick", *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 22 (1), 2018, pp. 1-25, <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/AJVS>

<sup>10</sup> See J. STOKES, "Some Gentle Criticisms of British Justice", in ID., *Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles, and Imitations*, Cambridge, CUP, 1996, pp. 39-64.

was one of the reasons that Wilde didn't want Bosie approaching English and French journals with statements that would draw further amounts of unwelcome publicity. Meanwhile, Douglas had been warned not to visit Wilde in prison – a precaution that Wilde mistook for negligence, which in turn resulted in much of the bitterness he expresses towards Bosie in *De Profundis*.

EB: I'm very much looking forward to reading your work on sexual blackmail. It will open new paths for Wilde studies. Now I have one last question. What are your ideas on Wilde and Italian culture? Most critical attention has been paid to Wilde and French culture, less on Wilde and Italian culture, despite Wilde's deep love for the country and its literature. Having your ideas on the topic would be important.

JB: I think there's more to be done. We've got a newish book which I really like. It's the study by Renato Miracco (*Oscar Wilde. Il sogno italiano*, 2020). He knows about the Italian material in a way that most other readers do not. Now there's much research to be carried out on Wilde, Naples, and Sicily in late 1897 as well as the period that Wilde spent in these places as well as Rome six months before he died. (It was in spring 1900 that Wilde used a Kodak camera to take some memorable photographs in Rome, including several of himself.) The whole field of Wilde's time in Italy remains under-investigated. One of the scholarly tasks that we also need to complete is connect certain elements about Wilde's life in the late 1890s and the various queer communities that had developed in Italy. One such location is Wilhelm von Gloeden's home in Taormina, where he took the famous photographs of young male nudes. (Wilde likely visited von Gloeden in December 1897.) Another is Capri. In this period, Capri brought together a group of bohemian artists and writers as well as queer socialites. Kristin Mahoney has recently published remarkable material on this unique social circle, which largely developed around Compton Mackenzie and Faith Mackenzie.<sup>11</sup> Then we need to consider Posillipo, a place that is supposed to be, as far as I know, still a very chic, luxurious suburb of Naples, correct?

EB: It is, it is. Very upper class.

JB: And very beautiful. So, we have Lord Rosebery, the former Liberal Prime Minister, residing in his villa at Posillipo at the time when Wilde and Douglas decided to settle there in autumn 1897. There had been sensitivities between Rosebery and the Douglas family. Several years before, the truculent Queensberry had threatened Rosebery during a holiday that the politician was taking at Bad Homburg. The conflict focused on the Marquess's anger that the Liberal government had preferred his oldest son Francis for a seat in the House of Lords over and above himself. Rosebery employed Francis, known also as Viscount Drumlanrig, as a private secretary, and also, in 1893, made him a Lord-in-Waiting. In October 1894, during a hunting party,

<sup>11</sup> See K. MAHONEY, "An Extraordinary Marriage: The Mackenzies and the Queer Cosmopolitanism of Capri", in EAD., *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family*, Cambridge, CUP, 2022, pp. 95-125.

the 27-year-old Francis most probably committed suicide shortly before he was to be married. There's always been speculation, as I point out in the book, about Francis's death from a fatal gunshot wound to his mouth. It has been widely touted that Francis feared homosexual exposure. (The evidence is far from conclusive.) There has always been rumour-mongering, too, about Lord Rosebery's sexuality. The homophobic Queensberry counted Rosebery among the 'Snob Queers'. Nonetheless, one matter is for sure: when Lord Rosebery discovered that Douglas and Wilde were at the Villa Giudice, he was nervous about it. Now, it's no accident that Wilde and Douglas chose Posillipo, they went there for a reason, and I don't think Miracco explains that.

The other issue that we really need to know about is the role that the magnificent Grand Café Gambrinus played in queer culture in the 1890s. Now the Gambrinus is glorious; it is like a palace. Incredible vaulted ceilings, beautifully decorated. It must be regarded as one of the finest cafés in southern Italy, if not the greatest. It must have been a place where many artists came together, and I would imagine quite a lot of queer people were gathering around that. I don't think we know very much about the sociability of it all. The Gambrinus appears to be comparable in terms of its cultural significance to the Café Royal on Regent's Street in London. There is one further matter about Wilde and Italy, on which I'd be grateful to know your thoughts. Do we have anything on the Italian commentaries about Wilde's trials, imprisonment, and post-prison life in the newspapers? Because, you know, the Italian news press was very developed.

EB: There is indeed something. There's an article by Matilde Serao, an Italian journalist who wrote for *Il mattino*, the main Neapolitan daily. She was probably the first woman journalist in Italy. She was very critical, even very harshly so, of Wilde and his behaviour with young men. Serao thought it was immoral. This may be unexpected, because she is famous for being quite a modern, advanced woman. Yes, there is something, but I'm sure something more can be found.

JB: Interesting. I'd love to see that. The expatriate English writer Norman Douglas, who moved to Posillipo in 1897, mentions Serao's name, and he recalls that she had confused him at the time with Alfred Douglas.<sup>12</sup>

The other important material on Wilde and Italian culture comes through Rennell Rodd, a very close friend of Wilde's from his Oxford days. Rodd was fluent in Italian, and Wilde obviously took a sexual interest in him. In 1877, he dedicated 4 lines of Italian poetry to his friend, which Rodd inscribed inside his collection *Songs of the South* (1881): "Al tuo martirio cupida e feroce / Questa turba cui parli accorrerà; / Ti verranno a veder sulla tua croce / Tutti, e nessuno ti compiangerà" ("At your martyrdom, the greedy and cruel crowd whom you have been addressing will assemble;

<sup>12</sup> See N. DOUGLAS, *Looking Back: An Autobiographical Excursion*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1931, pp. 376-77.

all of them will then come to see you on your cross, and none will have pity for you").<sup>13</sup> Gideon Nesbit has discovered, Rodd takes these lines from *Postuma* (1877) by Olindo Guerrini.<sup>14</sup> Guerrini also had a strong interest in Vera Zasulich, the Russian political activist whose career forms the loose basis for Wilde's early play *Vera* (1880). (Sadly, like several of Wilde's friendships, the one with Rodd resulted in a breakup. Rodd cut off communications with Wilde in 1882. They parted ways over Wilde's effusive comments about Rodd's poetry in an essay titled "L'Envoi", which Wilde furnished for an American edition of Rodd's poetry titled *Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf* (1882). I sense that Rodd feared that Wilde was suggesting that they were an intimate couple. He went on to be a career diplomat, and his family became noted members of English high society.)

There are some further connections. When Wilde was in jail, he was reading Dante obsessively, in the original. I learned more about that because I went to the National Archives at Kew for about four days in 2017. And it was absolutely extraordinary discovering this material about Wilde's prison reading. I was able to compare the official prison records with the related Robert Ross materials held at the Clark, which also focus on Wilde's incarceration.

EB: Let me close by thanking you for sharing such a range of insights into Wilde's career and his legacy.

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<sup>13</sup> The lines in Italian appear in Rodd's presentation copy of *Songs in the South*, which is held at the British Library: General Reference Collection 11653.c.34. The copy was sold for £11 at Sotheby's on 27 July 1911 (STUART MASON [CHRISTOPHER SCLATER MILLARD], *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde*, London, T. Werner Laurie, 1914, p. 185).

<sup>14</sup> See G. NISBET, *Greek Epigram in Reception: J.A. Symonds, Oscar Wilde, and the Invention of Desire, 1805-1929*, Oxford, OUP, 2013, p. 269; [OLINDO GUERRINI], *Postuma: Canzoniere di Lorenzo Stecchetti (Mercurio) edito a cura degli amici*, Bologna: Presso Nicola Zanichelli, 1877, p. 133. Guerrini's poem contains allusions to Dante's *Purgatorio*, Giacomo Leopardi's *Bruto Minore* (1824), and Ugo Foscolo's *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1798). My thanks to Rita Severi for this information.

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