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OSCAR WILDE REDIVIVUS

by Joseph O. Baylen

Since Oscar Wilde’s unsuccessful court action against the Marquess of Queensberry in April, 1895, and Wilde’s subsequent trial and conviction for homosexual practices provoked an unprecedented torrent of abuse in the press, only a few friends and even fewer journalists rallied to the side of the celebrated wit and dandy.1 Ironically, among those who refused to join in the “orgy of Philistine rancor” against the unfortunate Wilde was the man whose “crusade” ten years before had forced the enactment of the law under which Wilde was prosecuted.

Oscar Wilde was arraigned for offenses against Section XI of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which penalized public and private indecencies between adult males. It was a section added almost as an afterthought to a bill which was designed to make the seduction of young girls under thirteen years of age a criminal offense and raised the age of consent for females to sixteen. The Act, passed by Parliament in August, 1885, as a result of the “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” agitation sparked by the editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, W. T. Stead,2 was extended in committee at the insistence of the Radical M. P., Henry Labouchere, to make Section XI apply to males indulging in familiarities and indecencies in private.3 Such conduct in public had always been proscribed by the law, which was now extended to include intimacies in private and made the accused liable to a maximum punishment of two years imprisonment.4 While Frank Harris’s assertion that Labouchere’s action was motivated by a de-

sire to make the Act of 1885 "ridiculous"⁵ is open to question, it is clear that Section XI contributed to the jurists’ misgivings concerning the import of the Act. Some critics dubbed the new law a potential "charter" for blackmailers, and others, with good reason, predicted that it would be impossible to convict persons for acts committed in private and not visible to the public.⁶

When Wilde’s libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry, in reply to the latter’s charges of Wilde’s corruption of his son, Lord Alfred Douglas, backfired into a case against Wilde for a violation of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the London press turned on him with a vengeance. In spite of Wilde’s assertion that he was prepared “to bear on [his] . . . own shoulders whatever ignominy and shame might have resulted from [his] . . . prosecuting Lord Queensberry” rather than pit Lord Alfred against his father on the witness stand, the press pilloried Wilde unmercifully.⁷ Worse yet, “Scarcely a man dared to raise his voice in his defense . . . .”⁸ Frank Harris was certainly not guilty of chronic exaggeration when he asserted that “The hatred of Wilde seemed universal and extraordinarily malignant.”⁹ Nor did the abuse and vituperation cease until the gates of the gaol, to which Wilde was sentenced for two years of hard labor, closed behind him in June, 1895. During and after the trials, Labouchere, in his journal, Truth, led the assault on Wilde and, upon Wilde’s conviction, announced his regret that the original maximum penalty he had proposed for Section XI had been reduced from seven to two years.¹⁰ And, when Lord Alfred Douglas presumed to defend Wilde and homosexuality in a letter to Labouchere, the latter dismissed the communication with the comment that he was sorry that Douglas was not afforded the opportunity to meditate on his moralistic views “in the seclusion of Pentonville” gaol.¹¹

To the surprise of Labouchere and other contemporaries, W. T. Stead, now editor-publisher of the Review of Reviews, took a more sympathetic view of Wilde’s predicament. Stead had known

⁵Harris, Oscar Wilde, p. 157.
⁶Hyde, Trials of Oscar Wilde, p. 6.
⁷Broad, Friendships and Follies of Oscar Wilde, p. 266; also The [London] Echo, Apr. 5, 1895, as cited in Ibid., p. 267.
⁹Harris, Oscar Wilde, p. 178.
¹⁰Hart-Davis, Letters of Oscar Wilde, p. 519n.
¹¹Truth, June 13, 1895, as cited in Ibid., p. 350n.
Wilde and respected the articles, literary notes, and book reviews he had contributed to the *Pall Mall Gazette* from 1884 until Stead's departure from the paper in 1890. Their relationship, although never close, was always amicable. While Wilde defended Stead against charges of boycotting the work of certain literary figures, he disapproved of Stead's efforts to make literary productions of his crusades on behalf of women suffering from the wrongdoing of men. The fact that they moved in different circles and often differed in their views on social issues did not prejudice Stead against Wilde's art. Thus, in August, 1893, Stead wrote to Wilde: "It is ages and ages since I saw you, but, of course, like everyone else, . . . you compel the attention even of those who occupy the court of the gentiles."

Stead's attitude towards Wilde during the ordeal of his trials and conviction was conditioned by several factors. In addition to Stead's distrust of Labouchere's deviousness (which was reenforced by information from Stead's friend, the ubiquitous Reginald Brett), there was his personal knowledge of the unsavory reputation and character of the Marquess of Queensberry. Brett was, therefore, not telling Stead anything new when he wrote: "How about that . . . beast Queensberry who has ruined three women's lives — and possibly many more . . ." To Stead, whose ardent advocacy of women's rights and defense of female virtue were a reflection of the Nonconformist outlook, of the Victorian exaltation of chastity, and of his life-long work as a knight-errant defender of womanhood, such "seducers" as Queensberry and his ilk among

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14Cf. [W. T. Stead], "The Langworthy Marriage; or, A Millionaire's Shame, a 'Strange True Story of Today'," *Pall Mall Gazette* "Extra" No. 35, May 25, 1887.


16W. T. Stead to Wilde, Aug. 4, 1893. The University of Texas Manuscript Collection, University of Texas Library.

17"As for Labby," wrote Brett, "perhaps he had better see how many of his intimate friends would be implicated before he encourages disclosures! I can see what is at the bottom of his mind." Reginald Balfol Brett to Stead, April 9, 1895. Stead Papers.

18Ibid.
the aristocracy were a far greater threat to the morals of the nation than sexual inverts such as Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, and their circle. Indeed, it was Stead who took the lead among the Non-conformists in driving Sir Charles W. Dilke and Charles Stewart Parnell from public life when they were judged guilty of adultery and breaching the Victorian code of morality. Stead never forgave Dilke and made every effort to block Dilke’s attempts to resume his political career. In fact it was not only the immorality of Queensberry, but more the Dilke case, which largely motivated Stead in his attitude towards the Wilde tragedy.

Equally significant was the advanced thought of Stead and other Victorians as Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis on the role of sex in human behavior and relationships. It was, in a sense, part of “the Late-Victorian revolt against established authority in all aspects of life and thought . . .” and its emphasis upon the concept of “the mature love relationship [as] . . . one of genuinely free and equal association . . .” between the sexes. Although Stead often disagreed with the more advanced ideas of such late Victorian social critics as Grant Allen, Stead shared Allen’s hope “to see mature love relations firmly established in the family and fellowship outside the family, [and like Allen] . . . recognized the need to reconstruct the entire system of human relationships within and without the family.” This was certainly an important aspect of the Late-Victorian revolt which created tensions, conflicts, and “deviant social characters” like Wilde and “plunged the Respectable Social System into a . . . crisis that reached a climax in 1894-95.” I submit that one facet of the climax of this crisis was the Wilde “affair” and that it was within this frame of reference that Stead viewed the tragedy of Oscar Wilde.


22Ibid.

23Ibid., p. 66.
Immediately after the conviction and sentencing of Wilde, Stead published his editorial comments on the case and expressed a point of view much at variance with those of Wilde's critics and detractors. "The heinousness of the crime of Oscar Wilde and his associates," declared Stead, "does not lie . . . in its being unnatural . . . . It is natural for the abnormal person who is in a minority of one . . . ."24 He then went on to say that

If the promptings of our animal nature are to be the only guide, the punishment of Wilde would savour of persecution, and he might fairly claim . . . sympathy as the champion of individualism against the tyranny of an intolerant majority. But we are not animal. We are human beings living together in a society, whose aim is to render social intercourse as free and as happy as possible . . . and it would be a fatal blunder at the very moment when we are endeavouring to rid friendship between man and woman of the blighting shadow of possible wrong-doing, were we to acquiesce in the re-establishment of that upas shade over the relations between man and man and man and woman.25

But even more important to Stead was the fact that the trial and sentence of Wilde "brought into very clear relief the ridiculous disparity between the punishment meted out to those who corrupt girls and those who corrupt boys." Indeed,

If . . . Wilde, instead of indulging in dirty tricks of indecent familiarity with boys and men, had ruined the lives of half a dozen innocent simpletons of girls, or had broken up the home of his friend by corrupting his friend's wife, no one could have laid a finger upon him. The male is sacrosanct: the female is fair game. To have burdened society with a dozen bastards, to have destroyed a happy home by his lawless lust — of these things the criminal law takes no account. But let him act indecently to a young rascal who is very able to take care of himself, . . . then judges can hardly contain themselves from . . . inflicting the maximum sentence the law allows . . . .26

Then, recalling the failure of his fight to prevent Sir Charles

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25Ibid., p. 492.
26Ibid.
Dilke’s return to political life in 1891-92, Stead emphasized the inconsistency “which sends Oscar Wilde to hard labour and places . . . Dilke in the House of Commons” and drew attention to the “remarkable” contrasts “between the universal execration heaped upon . . . Wilde and the tacit acquiescence of the very same public in the same kind of vice in [the] . . . public schools.” In fact, said Stead,

If all persons guilty of Oscar Wilde’s offences were to be clapped into gaol, there would be a very surprising exodus from Eton and Harrow, Rugby and Winchester, to Pentonville and Holloway [gaols] . . . . But meanwhile public school boys are allowed to indulge with impunity in practices which, when they leave school, would consign them to hard labour.27

In the same issue of the Review of Reviews, Stead and his editorial staff reviewed some of the periodical comment on the fall of Oscar Wilde as “The Innings of the Philistines.” After observing “how virtuous . . . people . . . became the moment vice is locked up . . . ,” they scored Wilde’s critics with the statement that “It is neither a manly nor a noble practice to exult over the bodies of the slain . . . .”28

Stead’s bold defense of Wilde immediately drew letters from Edward Carpenter and Lord Alfred Douglas. Carpenter, the longtime friend of Havelock Ellis and “a congenital sexual invert,”29 had published a pamphlet on Homogenic Love in January, 1895,30 as an attempt “to deal publicly with the problem of the Intermediate Sex.”31 Like John Addington Symonds, Carpenter believed that sexual inverts were “perfectly normal individuals” of an “Intermediate Sex,” and he anticipated the Wolfenden Committee report in Britain by over sixty years with his contention that “Sexual practices between man and man in private should be a matter not for the law but for individual conscience.”32

Although the publication of Carpenter’s pamphlet agitated Fleet

27Ibid.
32Calder-Marshall, Havelock Ellis, pp. 146-47.
Street, it might have accomplished some good in stirring discussion on the “Intermediate Sex” had it not been for the trials of Wilde and the subsequent “panic” which enveloped the question of sexual inversion.\(^3^3\) In view of the almost irrational hostility exhibited by the public towards Wilde and the problem of homosexuality, Carpenter welcomed Stead’s sympathetic treatment of the Wilde case. On June 20, 1895, Carpenter wrote to Stead expressing his appreciation of the “larger view” Stead had taken of a forbidden question and drew his attention to the short study of *Homogenic Love*.

I have long thought [wrote Carpenter] that the tendency, which in the case of Wilde has been so fatally misdeveloped, is really capable under proper direction of being cultivated into an ennobling love. The feeling has, in one form or other, been a factor of human life in all times and countries — and that would be a reason for supposing that it requires wise guidance to its proper expression rather than blind extinction.\(^3^4\)

In his reply to Carpenter, Stead promised to read the pamphlet (“as I do everything you write upon a subject which is so extremely important and so very little understood”) and attempted to clarify his attitude towards the “Intermediate Sex.” But what Stead wrote was something more than an opinion on sexual inversion. It was also a statement of the changing view of “Sexual Respectability and the Social System” during the late Victorian era.

My view about this question roughly stated, [declared Stead] is as follows: — The ideal of human society towards which we should work is that in which no barrier born of suspicion of wrong doing, should be interposed between the freest possible inter-communication of human beings whatever their sex. In other words, the family is the ideal unit, and to establish between all men and women in the world, the same frank and friendly relations which exist between brothers and sisters of a family, would represent an enormous gain of human happiness.


\(^3^4\)Edward Carpenter to Stead, Jun. 20, 1895. Mrs. Adelaide Anning Tickell Collection. Mrs. Tickell was Stead’s private secretary during the mid-1890’s. I am indebted to Mr. Brian Tickell, Chiswick, London, for permission to study and use the papers of his mother.
The question is, how can this be done? how can we preserve monogamic fidelity between two persons, who from united affection and utter and entire confidence, decide to unite for the purpose of propagating the species, with the freest possible communication on the nonphysical plane between men and women. At the present we have this between men and women and women and women, for the existence of Oscar Wildes and its counterparts in the female sex are very few, hence a few more cases like Oscar Wilde’s, and we should find the freedom of comradeship now possible to men, seriously impaired to the permanent detriment of the race, and yet if we remove all legal penalty, we more or less proclaim such relations venial [sic]. This is what takes place in the case of women, the law is absolutely indifferent to any amount of indecent familiarity taking place between two women, but it interferes with preposterous severity when it takes place between men, and the result is that many women give themselves up to this kind of thing without any consciousness of it being wrong; they are governed solely by their natural instincts, and to talk about it being unnatural, while perfectly true for the immense majority, is not true so far as [they] themselves are concerned. These so-called unnatural sex relations seem to me always the assertion of the nature of the individual as opposed to the nature of the species or race, and, therefore, is not rightly open to the censure which is heaped upon it by the unthinking.

These are but a few fragmentary observations which, no doubt, seem trite to you, but they represent fairly enough the thought that is at the back of my mind. Believing as I do, that in sex lies the divinest elements of our nature, I deeply deplore the wicked waste of a lever which might move the world, but so far I have been able to do little more than confine myself to protests against those, who by its abuse make its use almost impossible.35

It was within the context of his view of homosexuality as “the wicked waste” of sex, “the divinest element of [human] nature,” that Stead judged the letter he received from Lord Alfred Douglas

in late June, 1895, concerning his remarks in the Review of Reviews. While complimenting Stead as “a man of conscience” who had deprecated “the common cant about ‘unnatural’ offences,” Douglas repudiated Stead’s approach to the problem. He criticized Stead for upholding “the barbarous law which condemns a man who is guilty of these so-called ‘offences’” on the basis of the argument that “if these laws did not exist a taint or suspicion might be thrown on friendship between people of the same sex . . . .” Similarly, Douglas wrote: “Why on earth in the name of liberty and common sense a man cannot be allowed to love a boy, rather than a woman when his nature and instinct tell him to do so, . . . is another question . . . [to] which I should like to hear a satisfactory answer . . . .” Indeed, argued Douglas, the man who brings illegitimate children into the world and seduces girls or commits adultery does great harm whilst “the paederast does absolutely no harm to anyone.” A case in point, said Douglas, is Wilde and the Marquess of Queensberry: Wilde seduced no one and did no one any harm, while Queensberry was guilty of seduction, fornication, and base cruelty to his family. Yet, it is the Marquess who has been lauded as a hero and Wilde who has been reviled by the English people and the press.36

Stead neither published nor replied to Lord Alfred’s letter. Aside from the fact that not even Stead could have dared to publish Douglas’s frank defense of homosexuality in such a serious journal as the Review of Reviews, Stead’s obvious dislike of Douglas as “the young rascal” who was the author of Wilde’s misfortune precluded a reply to Douglas.

Meanwhile, with Wilde’s entry into gaol, “the curtain came down on the public life [and career] of Wilde . . . .”37 His name and his work became taboo in “polite” society, and he was forgotten by all except a few faithful friends such as Robert Sherard and Robert Ross. Stead, however, always remained sympathetic to Wilde. Thus, when Robert Ross published Wilde’s De Profundis posthumously, five years after Wilde’s death in 1900, Stead was very much moved by what he had read of Wilde’s mea culpa. Not long after the publication of De Profundis in early 1905, Stead

37Broad, Friendships and Follies of Oscar Wilde, p. 209.
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wrote to Ross thanking him "for having permitted [the public] . . . to see the man [Oscar Wilde] as he really was . . . ."

I think De Profundis [Stead averred] will live long after all that the rest of us have written will be forgotten.

I am glad to remember when reading these profoundly touching pages that he always knew that I, at least, had never joined the herd of his assailants.38 I had the sad pleasure of meeting him by chance afterwards in Paris and greeted him as an old friend. We had a few minutes talk and then parted, to meet no more, on this planet at least . . . .39

Stead could not have penned a more fitting tribute to Wilde nor a more sensitive appreciation of the tragedy of Wilde than when, in his review of De Profundis, he wrote:

The whole book is a prose poem, which for . . . pathos and radiant hope, will be cherished long after all his other works and those of his contemporaries are forgotten. For here is the true cry of the heart de profundis, which will find an echo in all hearts that have been awakened by the touch of sorrow.40

38Wilde apparently knew little of the generous treatment he had been accorded by Stead until after he had completed his gaol sentence in 1897. See Wilde to Robert Ross, Apr. 6, 1897. Hart-Davis, Letters of Oscar Wilde, p. 519 & n.