



The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde

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Oscar Wilde had one of literary history's most explosive love affairs with Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas. In 1895, Bosie's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, delivered a note to the Albemarle Club addressed to "Oscar Wilde posing as sodomite." With Bosie's encouragement, Wilde sued the Marquess for libel. He not only lost but he was tried twice for "gross indecency" and sent to prison with two years' hard labor. With this publication of the uncensored trial transcripts, readers can for the first time in more than a century hear Wilde at his most articulate and brilliant. *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* documents an alarmingly swift fall from grace; it is also a supremely moving testament to the right to live, work, and love as one's heart dictates.

The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde Details

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Author : Merlin Holland

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From Reader Review The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde for online ebook

Evan says

There actually were three trials of Oscar Wilde, of which this book reconstructs only the first, although the introductory and supplemental text fails to make this very clear. Buried deep in the text near the end of the book is the fact that the records of the subsequent two trials have been mysteriously lost.

What *does* become clear in reading this detailed blow-by-blow of Wilde's April 1895 libel action against the Marquess of Queensberry is that the "trials of Oscar Wilde" cannot be made into something so simplistic as the modern/postmodern mind would like. This case was not something as cut-and-dried as "Oh how horrible the world treated the heroic martyred gay hero, Oscar Wilde." It may have been that, but such an assessment would only be tenable if we understood the inner motives of why Wilde chose to take the self-destructive and politically foolish path of pursuing the libel charge against Queensberry. It may be--and there is some indirect evidence of this from other of his writings--that Wilde chose for the sake of posterity to become cannon fodder in the cause of same-sex love. Wilde, as a very self-conscious artist confident in his control of his artistry and believer in the hearty pursuit of one's bliss, might have believed that his trials constituted a kind of public artist creation that he could ultimately control, a sort of outrageous performance art. Or, he might merely have gotten carried away in his indignant need for revenge. Wilde, used to public and critical accolades, may have thought he could control the outcome of this case, but he apparently failed to realize that in a public trial the outcome is as uncertain as in the gladiatorial arena; it is a place where the artist's control of his poetic faculties and powers holds little sway.

In many ways, Wilde was foolish for initiating the libel action against Queensberry because by doing so he invited his opponents to investigate and throw open the doors to not only his own lifestyle but that of the entire British gay underground. It was a gauntlet thrown that the law would pick up with relish, and Wilde's lifestyle/sexual orientation was highly illegal and would remain so under British law all the way until the 1960s.

In a nutshell, Wilde was having a very public love affair with a delicately handsome young man half his age, Lord Alfred Douglas, son of the Marquess of Queensberry and brother of a man who committed suicide under mysterious circumstances very likely related to his own homosexuality. The Marquess, distraught over the death of one son and concerned about the sexual exploits of Lord Douglas and his lack of career progress, tried to get his son away from Wilde, with no success. In desperation, the Marquess left an insulting note at Wilde's gentleman's club accusing him of "posing as a Sodomite." Wilde charged the Marquess with libel over this card, which necessitated the defense's absolute duty to expose Wilde as a "sodomite" (which he was, which is not to say I am condoning that term).

The trial as rendered word-for-word here becomes a seemingly interminable and nitpicky exercise, mainly devoted to the cross examination of Wilde by his opponent's lawyer, Edward Carson. The point of Carson's seemingly petty and irrelevant inquiries of Wilde about his habits and associations becomes abundantly clear once his brilliant and persuasive opening statement for the defense is made. It's pretty clear that Wilde's goose is cooked, leading to Wilde's dismissal of the charges against Queensberry. But by then it was too late. Wilde was arrested after this aborted trial and put on trial twice more, now as the defendant himself on charges of indecency.

This book, which is the first to reconstruct the entirety of the only extant trial record of the Wilde case, is

fascinating and invaluable. I'm very glad to have read this and to finally get a true taste of what really happened at these oft-alluded-to trials. I was actually quite surprised at how persuasive Edward Carson's arguments against Wilde turned out to be, and found myself reading the transcript out loud for maximum appreciation of the text. But of course I am a ham and love movies with dramatic courtroom scenes.

All in all, a solid piece of scholarship and a must-read for anyone interested in the history of gay and lesbian rights.

Steven says

The decline and detached bemusement of Oscar Wilde.

Alexis Hall says

Brought to you courtesy of Reading Project 2015.

I read this for the trial transcripts - which, for them as interested in this sort of thing, I should emphasise are just of the first.

Since I was in it solely for said transcripts, the extensive preamble got in my way, but it's useful context if you're not already achingly familiar with the material.

Carla says

Claro está que es un hecho lamentable lo que ha sido aquel caso de la homosexualidad y que sea multada como si fuera un crimen.

Luego de lo que fue el juicio y la muerte de Wilde varios se beneficiaron hasta se aprovecharon difamar al dramaturgo, como también lo hizo uno de sus amantes que te ganas de tú mismo abofetearlo, pero ya pasaron los años y nada puede hacer —¡Qué hecho tan lamentable!—.

Bastante bien completo, solo que aburre un poco las cosas sobre juicio, pero el nieto de Wilde hizo un buen trabajo al investigar lo que ya estaba armando su padre, Vyvyan Holland, solo que no pudo completarlo.

Sandi says

Fascinating, horrifying, embarrassing, painful--Oscar Wilde's first trial shows what can happen when the audience doesn't get the joke.

This is a reconstruction of Wilde's first trial, where Wilde was the plaintiff, accusing the Marquess of Queensbury of libel for accusing Wilde of "posing somdomite." Even though Wilde was the plaintiff, it was clear from this transcript that Wilde was really the one on trial as he took on the burden of proof to show that he wasn't what the Marquess accused him of.

In that way, Wilde was doomed from the start, and should never have been drawn into what essentially was a spat between Wilde's lover, Alfred Lord Douglas and his father, the Marquess. As the defense trotted out damning letters and put Wilde in a situation where he had to answer directly, accounting for contact with various disreputable figures and places, he was left without recourse to his evasive wit. And, though Wilde's flippancy got laughs in the beginning of the trial, it was clear that it went downhill fast. He seemed to take it for granted that his popularity would carry him through, but ultimately he didn't have a strategy that could work with the Victorian audience.

A particular turning point in the trial was when Wilde responded flipantly to the question of whether he had relations with a particular man, by saying of course he didn't--the man was "unfortunately ugly." Oh, Wilde! The defense leaped on this moment and the implication that physical attractiveness would have more of a determining factor than gender in choosing a sexual partner.

But, more than this moment, what I found most disturbing about the trial was how much it relied on his book, Picture of Dorian Gray, and put him in the position of defending his art as a representation of himself and his moral character. Even though Wilde was the initiator of the trial, that is scary, dystopian-1984-mind police-stuff. The defense took the stance that only someone with an immoral mind could think up the immoral matter in the book, which, by any standards today is supremely tame (which ultimately doesn't matter, I believe, since I agree with Wilde that no work of art is immoral in and of itself). Wilde's defense in trial as well as in a number of letters and reviews was that he merely alluded to Dorian's immorality--it's the audience who has a dirty mind and reads this into the book.

It was a clever but losing strategy because what Victorian lawyer or judge is going to admit that the homosexuality that he sees in a work of art is his own rather than the artist's? Rhetorically, Wilde's strategy assumes that the author has a superior position to the audience, and that doesn't always sit well. The court saw the whole situation as Wilde thumbing his nose at the establishment, because, frankly, he was. He demanded the ability to hide in plain sight, consort with whomever he wanted and address these people as equals if he (not society) deemed them worthy, write unconstrained by prevailing tastes--and--to do all of this while being protected from the harassive speech of others.

I think it's right to see his story as a tragic and very conflicted one--he was proud and committed to a stance that he thought should be, by all the rules of the game, acceptable in Victorian society. He wasn't willing to flee because he thought he could run the show like a dinner party, but he miscalculated, took bad advice, and the public was more than willing to give their Socrates his poison.

This trial led quickly into the next, where Wilde actually was the defendant as charges of gross indecency were brought against him, but that's covered in various other books.

This book is very much worth having for anyone interested in Wilde or Victorian culture. Holland's introduction is fascinating as he is the grandson of Wilde and a scholar; his introduction is easy to follow and extremely interesting. There are several very illuminating supplemental materials in the appendix.

Matthew says

It was fascinating to read Carson's interpretation of the modes of the Aesthetes' style and works as signifiers of a homosexual identity. One can read the transcript of this trial as anticipating/fashioning a modern

homosexual identity. It was also fascinating to follow Wilde as his self-confidence and wit shatters under cross-examination. I share the opinion of many that Wilde foolishly led himself towards self-destruction through his case against Queensberry. What was his reason for doing so? Hubris? Nihilistic joissance a la Decadence? Surely he wasn't trying to become a gay martyr. These questions are not analyzed in great depth by Holland's introduction nor are they really the focus of this text, but after reading the transcript, I can't help but wonder what might have happened had Wilde followed the advice of his friends by not going to trial. On the other hand, I also wonder, given the themes of Wilde and his contemporaries' writings, whether or not Wilde really had a choice in the matter.

Chris says

Unless you have been living under a rock (and if you are, can I join you?) there is whole primary election thing happening here in the U.S. In short, the media tells everyone who to vote for, and every so often a group of people vote for someone different. This person is usually strange and makes the media know it alls stupids plundits scratch thier heads. This is done so the chances of electing someone who know what he/she is doing is small.

At the very least, it does lead to debates that are as amusing as they are depressing or shocking in the stupidity of talking heads. In one of the more recent debates, the moderators, in particular, and, therefore, the candidates seemed obessessed with the idea of homosexual marriage. I'm not sure why, maybe so the homophobic jerk candidate would say something insulting to remind everyone why they voted him out of office in the greatest landslide in history. (They were also focusing on birth control for some reason).

The point here is that despite all our advances as human beings, when you read something like this book, dated from over 100 years ago (the trial not the book), you realize we haven't really come that far.

It's enough to make you take to drinking.

Wilde declared his brilliance, yet like all brilliant people he fell due to a huge step in stupidity (perhaps making up for something). It is hard not to read this and keep quiet. You want to shout "Objection" "Stop talking!" "Let Stephen Fry do it". "Shut up Oscar!" "I don't care if he looked like Jude Law, be quiet".

Sadly he doesn't listen.

If you like Wilde, you should read this transcript of the first trial, the starting point for his jail time and the destruction of his life.

Laura Whichello says

This is a difficult book to review.

Holland (Wilde's grandson) writes an excellent introduction giving a condensed account of the events surrounding the trial and the trial itself, but the greater part of the book is, of course, the transcript of the trial.

Wilde is witty, intelligent and even Artistic in the witness box, and in many ways the reading experience is

like being in the gallery yourself. At times it can be tedious - the repetition of names and dates and particulars, but on the whole it is simply painful and sad. No matter why Wilde foolishly decided to go ahead with the suit and damn himself in the process, this was still an exercise in publicly cornering a man into admitting nothing but his true nature. The image of an animal pinned open on an examining table kept flashing in my mind. Carson (for the defense) methodically turns Wilde's Art and his passions into something ugly. The punishment is heartbreaking, an ignominious and tragic end for one of the brightest lights of the period.

As John Mortimer wrote in the 2002 introduction to the book "The truth had been exposed, but it was still a shameful day for British justice".

Also, I can highly recommend watching this alongside the 1997 film 'Wilde' with Stephen Fry in the title role. Much of the dialogue is taken directly from the trial, and its beautifully done.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Saturday Drama:

Oscar Wilde's courtroom battle with the Marquess of Queensbury. Wilde naturally assumes that he can take on the man who invented the rules of boxing and win. Based on the book "Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess" by Merlin Holland (Oscar's grandson).

Elsa Feiring says

This was extremely interesting. I loved reading the actual transcripts of the trial. But, by nature of it being a transcript, I didn't get into the flow of the story of the events, other than Merlin's lengthy preface at the beginning. After slogging through a while, I realized that pretty much all I needed to know about Oscar's trial had already been accounted for me, and that there was little left for me to gain except for the occasional witty quip in the court room--nice, but generally unneeded. Still, quite a stirring series of events that ultimately doomed one of my favorite writers. This is a real tale of pride and prejudice.

Abigail says

I had a chance to read this book while I was on my anniversary trip at the Sylvia Beach Hotel.

Reading about Oscar Wilde's trial was very interesting and frustrating at the same time. Interesting because Wilde had such an entertaining personality, and he says some really brilliant things about art throughout the trial. But it was also frustrating because the case would never have stood up in court today. Half the trial was "Mr. Wilde writes about men who are gay therefore he's gay, therefore we should punish him." I'm serious. That's what it was. The other half was about how he had friends who were suspected to be gay, and of course there were also his letters. But this is what they condemned him on. It made me so mad.

I fully recommend reading the transcript of the trial. Maybe not all of it, since it did get repetitive in places, the prosecutors went on and on about the same things. But definitely try to read this book. Though equality for the LGBTQ+ still has a long way to go, it's an eye-opening experience to read more about what gay people had to live through in the past. For me it helps me to appreciate how far we've come, and feel

motivated to do more for our community.

Paul Bulger says

Courtroom transcripts are rarely this entertaining.

The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde is not what I expected it to be. I had anticipated this to be an actual book about Oscar Wilde's infamous libel lawsuit, not the literal courtroom transcripts, and while some of the transcripts are a bit dry, uninteresting, and repetitive, the thing that truly stands out and makes this a delightful read is Wilde's wit.

Oscar Wilde seemed a delightful personality, as he nimbly twists around the words of his examiners and spits them back, the way he dances around with his words and refuses to allow himself to be confined to reductive language, is marvelous to watch.

His person is so animated, so character-like, it's easy to be so thoroughly charmed that you momentarily forget this also happens to work as a meditation on what makes art beautiful, as well as a glaring example of one of the justice system's greatest failings.

Now if only this book featured a lot more of Wilde's orations, and a lot less of the prosecuting and defending lawyers, Clarke and Carson, whose drab, reductive words, only manage to detract from the colorful, insightful way in which Oscar Wilde perceives the people and the world around him. But of course, this isn't a real book, but merely a courtroom transcript, so of course the lawyers are going to steal the show from the colorful personalities I'd rather be hearing more from.

Alyssa says

Not much can be said about this book apart from the fact it is wholly what it appears to be. The transcripts are fascinating and at many points vividly entertaining, but they are still transcripts.

Grace says

Wilde's wit is truly captured in this transcript of his 1895 indecency trial

Laura LVD says

Muy interesante libro acerca del juicio por indecencia de Oscar Wilde.

Contiene transcripciones de los juicios, algunas fotos de involucrados en el caso y también material que no había visto antes como fotos de cartas de puño y letra del escritor y personas relacionadas con el juicio.

Por otro lado, es un libro muy triste. No sólo por las implicaciones que tuvo el juicio para Wilde y su familia (el autor del libro es el nieto del escritor por lo cual lo cuenta como testigo privilegiado) sino también me

terminó dando mucha pena Bosie, una persona con la que no simpatizaba. El marqués de Queensberry, por todo lo que se lee en este libro, era evidentemente una persona tiránica que se dedicó a hacer la vida de sus hijos y su mujer lo más miserables posible.

Algunas alusiones a los allanamientos a las Molly Houses victorianas, pero con poco detalle, ya que evidentemente en estos juicios todo se contaba de manera velada y no directa. Increíbles los datos sobre la prostitución masculina en la época victoriana.

Me gustó mucho.
