

Son and parents: Speranza and Sir William Wilde

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In an agonized passage in *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde writes that his parents ‘had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured, not merely in literature, art, archaeology and science, but in the public history of my own country, in its evolution as a nation. I had disgraced that name eternally. I had made it a low by-word among low people. I had dragged it through the very mire. I had given it to brutes that they might make it brutal, and to fools that they might turn it into a synonym for folly.’¹

Throughout his life, Wilde had been deeply proud of his parents’ achievements, and the legacy they had bequeathed him, a fact that makes the self-lacerating passage above seem all the more poignant and painful. The context for the passage was of course his own humiliating trial and imprisonment, and the recent death of his mother while he was in Reading Gaol (having been refused permission to visit her during her final illness).

At the time he was drafting the long autobiographical letter that became *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde had become one of the most famous (and infamous) writers in the world. But his parents – Sir William Wilde and Jane Francesca Elgee (‘Speranza’) – were fascinating personalities in their own right, and it has been tempting for readers and critics to see them as catalysts for Oscar’s own talents and behaviour. Twenty years after his death, W. B. Yeats admitted that ‘of late years I have often explained Wilde to myself by his family history’.² He was not the only major Irish writer to do so. James Joyce wrote that the ‘atmosphere of permissiveness and prodigality’ that prevailed at the Wilde household during Oscar’s youth may have contributed to ‘the sad mania (if it can be so called) that would later drag him to his ruin’.³ Since then numerous literary critics have sought, often persuasively, to link Wilde’s formative years in Dublin with his subsequent aesthetics and politics.⁴

To see Oscar in the lights of his parents’ lives and careers is to firmly locate him as an Irish writer, or, more specifically, as the product of an

emergent and vibrant nineteenth-century Dublin-based middle class. The culture of this class had much in common with the bourgeois culture of Victorian Britain generally. Indeed, the standard biography of Sir William Wilde is entitled *Victorian Doctor*.⁵ Yet the cultural world of the Wildes was also shaped by Irish nationalism, by colonial political and economic structures, and by the complications and paradoxes that marked the 'Anglo-Irish' in general. In many ways Wilde's parents reflected the full range of these complexities.

Oscar Wilde was the second son of Dr (later Sir) William Wilde (1815–76) and Jane Francesca Elgee (1821–96). They had married in 1851; a son, Willie, was born in 1852 and Oscar two years later. A daughter, Isola, was born in 1857 but was to die of fever at the age of nine. At the time of their marriage, Jane and William were already well-known public figures in Dublin. Oscar's mother had achieved popularity and notoriety as 'Speranza', the pen-name she adopted as the fiery poet of the influential *Nation* newspaper of the late 1840s. It was widely known that she had been the author of the unsigned editorial for the *Nation* on 29 July 1848 that finally provoked the government into suppressing the newspaper for sedition. Her fame as the heroine of the 'Young Ireland' movement continued long after she abandoned militant nationalism; twenty-five years later, Wilde was more recognisable to some American audiences as 'Speranza's son' than he was under his own name.⁶

William Wilde at the time of his marriage to Jane was the most celebrated ophthalmic surgeon in Ireland, having established the pioneering St Mark's Hospital and Dispensary for Diseases of the Eye and Ear in 1844. As well as editing the highly respected *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science*, and publishing a volume on the literary, scientific and medical institutions of Austria, William Wilde had gained a literary reputation based on his narrative of a youthful journey through the Mediterranean and near East (the royalties for which had funded his medical studies in Austria) and a monograph on the last years of Jonathan Swift, which mixed literary criticism with medical diagnosis in attempting to determine the causes of Swift's final illness.⁷ Perhaps most noteworthy was his much-acclaimed antiquarian tourist volume *The Beauties of the Boyne and its Tributary, the Blackwater*, whose first chapter includes a quotation of lines from a poem by his future wife, Speranza, and was favourably reviewed in the revived *Nation* newspaper in 1849 by Speranza herself.⁸

It is almost certain that Wilde and Elgee would have met before the publication of that review, given the relatively narrow social world of

the Dublin bourgeoisie. Both were members of the privileged Protestant minority – Wilde the son of a physician from County Roscommon and Elgee the daughter of a Dublin barrister – and both were intelligent, ambitious, gregarious socialites. Upon their marriage, Jane moved into William's house at 21 Westland Row. Four years later they relocated to the fashionable corner residence nearby at 1 Merrion Square, where they employed a German governess, a French maid and six servants, and entertained frequently. Their soirées became a who's who of the Dublin cultural scene, often stretching to more than a hundred guests, who might include Yeats's father and grandfather, or George Bernard Shaw's father (like several others, he was also a patient of Sir William). When visiting celebrities like Dion Boucicault were in town, they frequently made their way to the Wildes' famous gatherings.

Oscar told an early biographer that '[t]he best of his education was obtained from [the] association with his father and mother and their remarkable friends'.⁹ Yeats was later to remark that '[w]hen one listens to her [Lady Wilde] and remembers that Sir William Wilde was in his day a famous *raconteur*, one finds it no way wonderful that Oscar Wilde should be the most finished talker of our time' (though ironically, Oscar recalled that as children at the dinner table, he and his brother were not permitted to speak!).¹⁰ One of Oscar's biographers noted that conversation at the Wildes' was one in which wit and verbal skill were more important than consistency of position or verifiability of fact, a phenomenon their son would both illustrate and explore so brilliantly in his own writings.¹¹

The activities of reading and writing pervaded the atmosphere of the Wildes' house. Both William and Jane had contributed articles to the *Dublin University Magazine* during the 1840s, and they were both acquainted with Irish literary figures like Charles Lever, Sheridan LeFanu, Samuel Ferguson, Bram Stoker and William Carleton. They had other significant literary connections: Maria Edgeworth had written letters of introduction for young William Wilde that opened doors for him in Berlin, Prague and Munich. The Dublin novelist Charles Maturin had been an uncle of Jane Elgee (and his famous gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* was to provide the source of the pseudonym 'Sebastian Melmoth' that Oscar adopted in his final wanderings in France). Jane's own literary ambitions were high. At the time of her marriage in 1851 she had contributed more than forty poems to the *Nation* newspaper, and had published a well-regarded translation of the German terror-tale *Sidonia the Sorceress* (1849), along with two volumes of translations from the French historian and poet Lamartine.

The two parents remained productive writers throughout Oscar's youth. William would continue to write articles and publish books up to his death in 1875, most famously his *Lough Corrib: its Shores and Islands* (1867) which was based on his detailed knowledge of the County Galway landscape where he had built his rural retreat, Moytura House, in 1863. A labour of love as well as scholarship, the Corrib book mixes antiquarian, archaeological and historical discourse with scenic description and tourist advice. Perhaps surprisingly, the work of which he was most proud was his three-volume *Descriptive Catalogue of the Antiquities . . . in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy* (1857–62) which enumerated and illustrated the academy's large collections of historical artefacts, ranging from prehistoric tools to Iron Age swords, to fabrics, coins and ornaments.¹²

These antiquarian interests made William a key figure in the lively cultural nationalist movement that characterized early nineteenth-century Dublin. To an extent, Wilde is a bridge between the impressionistic Celticist theories of earlier writers like Vallency and Henry O'Brien, and the emerging Victorian spirit of scientific analysis and classification. He reproduces some elements of romantic pseudo-science (for instance, his continual reference to skull shapes as evidence for racial and psychological characteristics). But he is also keen to bridge the worlds of the modern and pre-modern in terms of scientific knowledge. He tries to prove the value of legendary, mythic and folk material by showing how it can be mapped against the historical and archaeological record, attempting to give value and dignity to the 'primitive' oral culture of the peasants at the very moment when science threatens to discard all such knowledge. Wilde was no mere cultural tourist; he had learned such stories and folklore during his childhood in rural County Roscommon, and later, as a practising physician in Dublin, he often asked for patients to provide him with tales and charms in lieu of monetary payment.¹³ Wilde recognized that for all the benefits of modernity and modernization, these developments frequently entailed serious kinds of loss. In a remarkable address to the natives of the Aran Islands during an 'ethnographical expedition' to the prehistoric fortress of Dun Aenghus in 1857, Wilde combined elegiac (and highly romanticized) evocations of the ancient Firbolg people making their last heroic stand on the island cliff-top with prescient and practical exhortations to the present-day islanders to maintain their heritage and preserve the huge stone ruins as a valuable source of tourism income in the future.¹⁴ This attitude is found also in volumes like *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852) where Wilde notes that the gradual disappearance

of folk knowledge is accompanied by the elimination of valuable social and ethical practices. Wilde deals with these issues even in a quintessential instrument of modernization itself – the 1851 Census of Ireland. When completed, Wilde's work as census commissioner included not merely the presentation of a vast array of statistics, but also detailed accounts of Irish medical and climatological history, and lengthy sections written by Wilde himself that describe in forensic detail the human, familial and social devastation caused by famine and disease over the period 1845–50.¹⁵

Interestingly, the 1851 Census provided one of the events around which the writings of William and Jane Wilde converged. One of Speranza's most powerful and best-known poems, 'The Exodus', dates from the post-Famine 1850s, and connects her poetry to her husband's work by commenting on the danger of taking a purely statistical approach to the appalling record of deaths and emigration found in the census tables. Speranza's poem opens:

'A million a decade!' Calmly and cold
The units are read by our statesmen sage;
Little they think of a Nation old,
Fading away from History's page;
Outcast weeds by a desolate sea –
Fallen leaves of Humanity.

The subsequent stanzas register the human and social costs of the Famine, and directly attach the 'crowned and crownless rulers of men' who have abrogated their moral responsibilities in allowing this to happen. As in many of Speranza's poems, the tone ultimately mixes the political and sacramental:

Have ye trod in the pure and perfect way,
And ruled for God as the crowned should do?
Count our dead – before angels and men,
Ye're judged and doomed by the Statist's pen.¹⁶

In general, Lady Wilde's engagement with Irish popular culture developed along different lines to William's. Her nationalist poems from 1846 to 1850 display less interest in history or folklore than they do in the possibilities for Ireland's present and future. The poems are poems of engagement, agitation and exhortation, with titles like 'The Voice of the Poor', 'The Stricken Land', 'Courage', 'The Supplication', 'Forward!' and 'The Fall of the Tyrants'. They describe an Ireland on the verge of disaster owing to political oppression and famine, but with hope for rebirth and restoration.

The language is frequently evangelical, invoking prayer, salvation, apocalypse, justice and retribution. Her verse is conventional in structure and form, but its ringing calls for justice and its graphic imagery of blood and tears proved immensely popular in the heated nationalist atmosphere of the time. At its height, the *Nation* newspaper was reaching perhaps a quarter of a million readers weekly. But Speranza's call for revolution and redemption became increasingly unreal and unsustainable with the death of Daniel O'Connell, the relentless impact of famine and disease, and the collapse of the Young Ireland movement following the failed rebellion in the summer of 1848.

Speranza's poems would be collected in 1864 and 1871, and she would go on to publish translations from Dumas *père*, Swedenborg and Schwab. Later, after her move to London, she published a lively account of her travels in Scandinavia with Sir William (*Driftwood from Scandinavia*, 1884), and two collections of essays that drew from a variety of her periodical articles.¹⁷ The essays range from literary essays to historical and biographical sketches, to discussions of gender politics, Irish emigration and social manners. On the whole the essays give a picture of a wide-ranging, curious mind. Lady Wilde's essays on women's lives and gender politics demonstrate an occasionally paradoxical mixture of feminist assertions of equality with conventional assumptions about women's subordinate domestic role – perhaps a reflection of the contradictory pressures she experienced in her own life. She was, however, outspoken on the issue of women's education (arguing for the need to establish women professorships, for example) and the need for progressive legislation like the Married Women's Property Act. Oscar's career was to overlap for a time with the world of his mother's periodical writings when he took up the editorship of the *Lady's World* in 1887, which he renamed the *Woman's Weekly*.

To the public, Sir William and Lady Wilde made a striking and eccentric couple, and were the subjects of occasional satire. William was renowned for his dishevelled and hirsute appearance (Yeats recorded the malicious 'old Dublin riddle', as he called it: "Why are Sir William Wilde's nails so black?" Answer, "Because he has scratched himself").¹⁸ Speranza was statuesque – over six feet tall – and flamboyant. Sometimes her personality and behaviour provoked a certain pettiness: Frank Harris wrote grudgingly that she was 'abnormally vain, a verse-maker and not a poet, [but] she was still a talented woman of considerable reading and manifold artistic sympathies'.¹⁹

It seems clear that the relationship between Oscar's parents was emotionally difficult. William suffered from bouts of depression; Jane confided

to a correspondent that 'he has a strange, nervous, hypochondriacal *home nature* which the world never sees – only I and often it makes me miserable'.²⁰ What's more, he had a reputation for infidelity – a character defect of 'excessive sensuality and lack of self-control', in Frank Harris's words.²¹ William had fathered a son with an unknown woman in 1838 who was given the name Henry Wilson and was raised by William's brother, though William kept in close contact and supported him in his medical studies. Oscar and Willie spoke of him as their 'cousin'. William also fathered two girls prior to marriage who were raised by Rev. Ralph Wilde in County Monaghan until their tragic deaths as a result of fire in 1871.

In fact, William's hidden life eventually led to a conjunction of sex, celebrity and courtroom drama that uncannily prefigured Oscar's own traumatic experience years afterwards. The year 1864 ought to have been a celebratory year for the Wildes. In January William was knighted in recognition of the service 'rendered to statistical science, especially in connection with the Irish Census'.²² Speranza's volume of collected poems, dedicated to her two young sons, was published in February. Then in April, William Wilde gave a public lecture on 'Ireland Past and Present' for the Dublin YMCA, later published as a short book. Even as he delivered the lecture however, high drama was unfolding outside the hall; newsboys were distributing pamphlets containing compromising letters purporting to be from Wilde to a younger woman named Mary Travers, and a pamphlet authored by Travers telling the thinly disguised story of a Wilde-like character, Dr Quilp, who had seduced one of his patients. Mary Travers had been a patient of William since 1854, and had developed an inappropriately close relationship with the surgeon and his family, often visiting the house at Merrion Square. By 1862 the situation had become extremely tense, and Wilde paid for Travers to emigrate to Australia – though having got as far as Liverpool, she returned. She began sending scurrilous rhymes about the Wildes to the papers, and published a fake notice of her own death which came to William Wilde's attention while supervising building works in Moytura in the summer of 1863. Following her public campaign against William at the YMCA lecture in February, Travers followed Jane and the two boys to the Wildes' seaside house in Bray, south of Dublin, in May 1864, where she continued the placard and pamphlet campaign. Jane in turn sent an angry letter to Travers's father, to which Mary Travers responded by issuing a writ of libel against Lady Wilde.

The case came to trial in December 1864. For the week of 12 December, crowds thronged the court and newspapers gave extensive and titillating coverage. The case hinged on the accusation that Wilde had raped Travers

while she was under the influence of chloroform. The evidence was full of salacious revelations and references to love notes, presents, quarrels, suicide attempts and laudanum use. Speranza was called as a witness and delivered a staunch defence of her husband, denying vehemently that he was capable of wrongdoing of any kind. The fact that William himself declined to appear as a witness was seen by many as an act of cowardice. In the end Travers won her libel case, though the jury awarded her damages of only one farthing. The charge of rape was never prosecuted. Speranza's defiant courtroom performance perhaps helps explain her threat to Oscar thirty years later when he was being advised by some friends to flee England before his own trial. Yeats reported that Lady Wilde had said, 'If you stay, even if you go to prison, you will always be my son, . . . but if you go, I shall never speak to you again.'²³

Speranza's defence of William's character was an act of courage and protection, but also represented a capacity for profound denial. In a poignant way, the pattern was to be repeated at the time of Sir William's death in 1875. Speranza's correspondence from the period movingly describes the constant ministrations of herself and her sons at William's sickbed. Yet Oscar's own recollections are of the appearance of a mysterious veiled woman every morning, never mentioned by Lady Wilde, 'who used to come to our house in Merrion Square, and unhindered by my mother, or anyone else, used to walk straight upstairs to Sir William's bedroom and sit down at the head of his bed and so sit there all day, without ever speaking a word or once raising her veil'.²⁴

Eighteen sixty-four, the year of the scandal, was also the year that Oscar and his brother, Willie, were sent to Portora Royal School in Enniskillen. Willie, the elder son, seems to have been his mother's favourite during the boys' youth. How Oscar responded to the favouritism shown to Willie is unclear. Yet later, as Oscar's fame grew and Willie descended into alcoholism, poverty and dysfunction, these roles were to be reversed, and Jane was to become essentially dependent on Oscar. After Sir William's death, the family discovered that their properties were heavily mortgaged, and that William had been thousands of pounds in debt. Financial precariousness haunted Lady Wilde and her sons for the remainder of their lives. Jane was eventually granted a literary pension by the British government in 1890, ironically in recognition of Sir William's census work rather than her own writing.

Four years after the death of Sir William, Lady Wilde moved to London to be near her two sons, never to return to Dublin. For some years she maintained her social role, and her Saturday afternoon 'At Homes'

in London were attended by a wide variety of Irish and other celebrities like Oliver Wendell Holmes and the suffragist Millicent Fawcett, as well as her sons and their friends. Her extravagant manner, her old-fashioned dress and her predilection for candlelight and closed drapes drew ridicule from some, but others like Yeats and Shaw remembered her kindness and solicitude towards the numerous Irish expatriates and aspiring writers who turned up at her house. In a last act of collaboration with her late husband, she organized and published his enormous collection of folk material as *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* (1888) and *Ancient Cures, Charms and Usages of Ireland* (1890). These volumes were highly praised by Yeats, and became important resources for the Irish Literary Revival.²⁵

Although distressed by her son Willie's directionless career and disastrous relationships, Oscar's growing fame and theatrical triumphs proved a source of great pride and delight for Lady Wilde through the late 1880s and early 1890s; correspondingly, Oscar's trial and imprisonment were severe emotional and psychological blows to her. Jane's last months seem almost Miss Havisham-like in terms of her seclusion and pain, culminating in the humiliating refusal by the prison authorities to allow Oscar to visit her. She died of bronchitis on 3 February 1896.

The plaque now outside the house at 1 Merrion Square in Dublin commemorates Sir William Wilde as a Victorian polymath: 'aural and ophthalmic surgeon, archaeologist, ethnologist, antiquarian, biographer, statistician, naturalist, topographer, historian, folklorist'. There is no equivalent plaque for Speranza, though her own contribution to the formation of her remarkable son Oscar was probably much greater, and her impact on Irish cultural history just as significant, if different in nature. Still, the house at Merrion Square remains a reminder of the world from which Oscar Wilde emerged, a transitional Irish culture that his energetic and talented parents had played no small part in shaping.

Notes

- 1 Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamlyn, 1963), pp. 781–2.
- 2 W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 137.
- 3 James Joyce, *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*, ed. Kevin Barry (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 148.
- 4 See, e.g., Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Cape, 1995); Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (Dublin: Town House, 1994); Richard Pine, *The Thief of Reason:*

- Oscar Wilde and Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1995); and Terence de Vere White, *The Parents of Oscar Wilde* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967).
- 5 T. G. Wilson, *Victorian Doctor* (London: Methuen, 1942).
 - 6 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), pp. 186–7.
 - 7 *Austria: Its Literary, Scientific and Medical Institutions* (1843), *Narrative of a Voyage to Madeira, Teneriffe, and Along the Shores of the Mediterranean* (1840) and *The Closing Years of Dean Swift's Life* (1849).
 - 8 See *Nation*, 15 September 1849, p. 12.
 - 9 Quoted in Coakley, *Importance of Being Irish*, p. 26.
 - 10 Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 20.
 - 11 See Coakley, *Importance of Being Irish*, p. 45.
 - 12 Lady Wilde remarks on Sir William's pride in the work in her memoir of him published as an appendix to Sir William Wilde, *Memoir of Gabriel Beranger: and his Labours in the Cause of Irish Art and Antiquities, from 1760 to 1780*. With 'Concluding Portion . . . by Lady Wilde, reprinted from the "Kilkenny Archaeological Journal"' (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1880); see p. 134.
 - 13 According to W. B. Yeats; see *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, ed. Robert Welch (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 55.
 - 14 See Martin Haverty, *The Aran Isles: or, a Report of the Excursion of the Ethnological Section of the British Association from Dublin to the Western Isles of Aran, in September 1857* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1859).
 - 15 See *The Census of Ireland for the Year 1851, Part 5: Table of Deaths*, vol. 1 (Dublin: Thom, 1856).
 - 16 *Poems by Speranza (Lady Wilde)* (Dublin: Duffy, 1864), pp. 55–7.
 - 17 *Notes on Men, Women and Books* (1891) and *Social Studies* (1893).
 - 18 W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 137.
 - 19 Frank Harris, *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (New York: Frank Harris, 1916), vol. 1, p. 22.
 - 20 Quoted in Joy Melville, *Mother of Oscar: The Life of Jane Francesca Wilde* (London: John Murray, 1994), pp. 57–8.
 - 21 Harris, *Oscar Wilde*, vol. 1, p. 22.
 - 22 Gerard Hanberry, *More Lives than One: The Remarkable Wilde Family through the Generations* (Cork: Collins, 2011), p. 126.
 - 23 Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 289.
 - 24 Melville, *Mother of Oscar*, pp. 128–9.
 - 25 See W. B. Yeats, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, ed. Robert Welch (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 5.