Academic books on Wilde usually come in three forms. There is the academic bibliography, a work designed purely as a research tool for the academic community: bibliographies might tell us, for example, about the location of manuscript material. Such tools are essential for the scholar, but of little use for the general reader. Second, there is the traditional monograph, which is usually (although not always) based on new research, either the kind which displays new information about the work or the life, or which makes new interpretations of existing material. These works typically follow rigorously—or should do—an argument. Equally typically, that argument will be set out in relation to other scholarship or other interpretations—in relation to what, in academic jargon, is called the “field.” It is usual for monographs to come laden with foot- or endnotes as their authors feel obliged to substantiate every critical assertion they make. Once again, however, for the general reader, a traditional scholarly apparatus can be just clutter. Equally off-putting can be the constant reference to other scholars’ work, information which often seems an impenetrable mass; the language of some monographs, too, can be jargon-ridden and often seems specifically designed to exclude nonspecialists.

And then there are introductory or student books; these come in a number of forms. Some are simply anthologies of scholarly essays which give the reader a sample of current research. Others are designed to explain the career and oeuvre of Wilde; these may also include a general overview of critical readings or indicate current research trends. Their limitation, though, is that most of the information contained within them is secondhand, and few out of the critical books designed for students aim to develop original arguments. Others seek to explicate texts—to give readings of particular works. Very few student books actually give the reader a feel of how the researcher works and the kinds of materials he or she has to use.

The present book fits none of these categories very easily, but it tries to combine aspects of all of them, with the aim of providing an accessible but research-based study. One of the challenges facing academic critics is to persuade readers that what they do is relevant to a wide audience. In trying to face up to this challenge this book does not provide a survey or map of past and current research on Wilde; nor does it summarize or evaluate what the totality of academic research has had to say about any particular work by him. Both these tasks have already been undertaken in a number of specialist bibliographical studies, including two
earlier ELT publications by Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde Revalued* (1993) and *Oscar Wilde: Recent Research* (2000). Rather, we are interested in providing readers with snapshots of how specific kinds of academic research—particularly those relating to information which they will not normally possess or have access to, such as details about how Wilde wrote or how he used his sources—can be brought to bear on their own reading experience.

Several decades ago some critics lamented how the popularity of Jane Austen’s handful of novels had persuaded many readers that they “knew” her, her world, its values and its prejudices. As a consequence Jane Austen became a familiar figure in the lives of many readers. The whole cultural phenomenon acquired the label of “Janeism.” Wilde has never made for such a comfortable companion, but nonetheless, as his biography has become increasingly well known, so a comparable phenomenon of “Oscarism” seems to be imminent. Oscar Wilde has become the “Oscar” of popular mythology, and our hope is that we allow some readers to see beyond this mythological icon. We are especially concerned with research which challenges or controverts the appealing but oversimplistic assumption that Wilde’s writings, as one of his most recent biographers, Neil McKenna, put it, are “highly autobiographical, reflecting and revealing … his secret life.” By contrast it is the secrets of Wilde’s texts, rather than those of his life, with which this book is concerned; and our main argument is that unlocking those textual secrets—understanding how and why his literary works were written—requires us to pay attention to elements in them above and beyond their biographical importance.

In order to make the research in this book accessible, we have kept referencing to a minimum. Uncontested facts and statements that are commonly repeated in any number of critical or biographical works have not been sourced. However, lists of works consulted, including those from which we quote, are given at the end of each chapter, thus enabling the interested reader to pursue the ideas rehearsed in individual chapters in more detail. In addition the reader will find distributed throughout the body of the main text a series of “capsules.” These “capsules” contain discrete items of information, indicated by a brief title in a bold typeface, which are linked to the main narrative below which they appear, but which are also designed to be read independently. They cover a wide range of issues ranging from details about Wilde’s habits of composition to often-asked questions of biography such as, why was Lord Alfred Douglas never tried for gross indecency or, did Wilde die from syphilis?

It will be obvious in the chapters which follow that we are not attempting a comprehensive re-reading of Wilde’s *oeuvre*: we have, for example, little to say about either his poetry or his anonymous journalism, even though both forms of writing comprised a significant proportion of his creative output and occupied a great deal of his life in the late 1870s and 1880s. Nor, with the partial exception of some of Wilde’s unfinished and little-known works, do we
offer systematic readings of individual texts. Our concern with the relationship between popular and academic readings of Wilde’s oeuvre has dictated that we focus our attention on the most widely read of his works, and these are, obviously, *De Profundis*, *Intentions*, the society comedies and *Dorian Gray*. Where we do examine less-well-known pieces, such as the unfinished plays and scenarios, or the fairy tales in *A House of Pomegranates*, it is largely with a view to expanding the general reader’s sense of Wilde’s creative interests, and this in turn, we hope, will help to illuminate those works which are most familiar.