Oscar Wilde Revalued

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A REGRETTABLE but unfortunately correct claim made by Wendell Harris (1973) and later by Ian Fletcher and John Stokes (1976) was that all biographies of Wilde had been characterized by their inaccuracy. Fletcher and Stokes, for example, noted that up to Hesketh Pearson's *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1946) there was nothing remotely approaching a "competent and professional" life. They observed little improvement in the succeeding thirty years, drawing attention to shortcomings in the biographies by Louis Kronenberger [1976], Sheridan Morley [1976] and, although to a lesser extent, in Montgomery Hyde's work [1975]. Wilde's life, they so rightly claimed, readily lends itself to "potboilers": it too easily adapts itself to melodrama, and from there inevitably to fiction.

Unfortunately, the melodramatic and fictional "life" of Wilde is also the popular Wilde. In this respect, one of the most seductive, and hence the most dangerous, "biographical" works to emerge over the past ten years has been Peter Ackroyd's novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983). Wilde also figures in other recent fictional works: in Chapman Pincher's *The Private World of St John Terrapin: A Novel of the Café Royal* (1982); in Robert Reilly's *The God of Mirrors* (1986); and in Neil Bartlett's *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (1988). Other, earlier, fictional recreations of Wilde and his milieu are itemized in Fletcher and Stokes [1976], 64-81, and Mikhail [1978] passim. Additional fictional works include Clement Wood, *The Sensualist: A Novel* (1942), Sewell Stokes's

Although this "selling" of Wilde on most occasions has meant trivialization and sensationalism, the main shortcoming of most biographies has not been their attempt to popularize their subject, but rather a failure to discriminate between sorts of evidence: at the simplest level a willingness to take the anecdotal as true, and, at the most serious, a failure to acknowledge that, given the public nature of Wilde's life, some information about him was inevitably suppressed or partial. In recent years, however, several researchers, among them Robert D. Pepper, Joseph Baylen, Robert L. McBath, Kevin H. F. O'Brien, and, most importantly, Richard Ellmann, have added significantly to our knowledge of the simple facts of Wilde's life.

The success of misrepresentations of Wilde in the first part of the century reveals an important point about his biography. As I noted in chapter one, Wilde, more than any other figure in literary history perhaps, comes to the reader with his life already written, in the sense that the "myth" of Wilde precedes specific knowledge of any actual details of it. For a man who claimed to have put his genius into his life and to have stood in "symbolic relations" to his age, such a situation was probably inevitable. Wilde was one of the first public figures consciously to manipulate the media in order to create a public personality. Hence, the first mythologizing and fictionalizing of Wilde's life was by Wilde himself.

To a certain extent, even Wilde's contemporaries encountered the man via the myth. From the late 1870s, figures such as George Du Maurier, W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, and Robert Hichens were instrumental in creating a fiction of Wilde; and, for his part, Wilde—in, for example, his tour of the United States—was happy to be a party to that process of mythologizing. This pattern continued long after Wilde's death; so it is not surprising that we too encounter the life only via the myth. In a review of Richard Ellmann's biography, Andrew Shelley (1988) made precisely this point, noting of Wilde that "his works are really a series of 'exquisite moments' in the myth he
has himself become by now," and observing that in many ways any biography of Wilde is in a sense a retrial: an engagement with, and a refutation of, contemporary reactions to him.

Shelley's comments can be turned into a more general caveat. The student of Wilde's life ought to be wary of the fact that his biographers are never neutral, and indeed rarely try to disguise their lack of objectivity. The moral dimensions of Wilde's career inevitably require the biographer to take sides (and usually it is Wilde's against the forms of established authority which he opposed).

Given the public arena in which Wilde lived, there was, even from the earliest moments of his career, an immense amount of speculation, anecdote, and slander about him. As one would expect, the early biographies are the least impartial. Those by Lord Alfred Douglas and Robert Harborough Sherard, themselves players in the drama they describe, are especially to be distrusted. But they are nonetheless essential to an understanding of the construction of the Wilde myth. All the early biographical material is probably best treated with this caveat in mind. Most of the non-documentary biographical evidence is in the form of recollections or reminiscences, and suffers from all the disadvantages of hindsight—usually pomposity and self-righteousness, the inevitable result of Wilde's acquaintances' attempts at self-justification. The most famous examples are as follows.

Lord Alfred Douglas published four attempts to clarify his relationship with Wilde: Oscar Wilde and Myself (1914), A Letter from Lord Alfred Douglas on André Gide's Lies about Himself and Oscar Wilde (1933), Without Apology (1938) and Oscar Wilde: A Summing-Up (1940): all, of course, are partial in the extreme.

Robert Harborough Sherard, Wilde's pathetic champion, also published copiously, but on Wilde's behalf. See particularly: Oscar Wilde: The Story of an Unhappy Friendship (1902), The Life of Oscar Wilde (1906), André Gide's Wicked Lies About the late Oscar Wilde in Algiers in January 1895 (1933), Oscar Wilde, 'Drunkard and Swindler': A Reply (1933), Oscar Wilde Twice Defended from André Gide's Wicked Lies and Frank Harris's Cruel Libels (1934).

None of these works is to be taken on trust, but all testify to the pervasive presence of Wilde in the memory of his contemporaries. Wilde continued to dominate his friends in death as in life. In this respect it is both surprising and disappointing that a proper study of
the relationship between Wilde and Robert Ross, his literary executor and lifelong friend, especially as it touches upon Ross's textual decisions about his edition of the Works, is still a desideratum. (See, however, Margery Ross, Robert Ross: Friend of Friends, 1952, and Maureen Borland, Wilde's Devoted Friend: A Life of Robert Ross, 1990.)

Frank Harris's Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions (1916) is equally partial although much more readable in the sense that the figure of Wilde which Harris draws is a plausible one, but only if plausibility is understood in fictional rather than in biographical terms. The later editions of Harris's work show the persistence of the controversies surrounding Wilde's life in a different way. The 1938 edition carried George Bernard Shaw's "Preface," an equally interesting document in that it reveals a willingness half a century after the event to enter into the moral debate about Wilde. (See Robert Pearsall, Frank Harris [1970].) Karl Beckson's Critical Heritage volume on Wilde (1970) reprints important material concerning the relation of Wilde and Harris.

As I have indicated, recollections of Wilde by his contemporaries form a study in themselves. Some of the most significant elements in that study would include the following:

- G. B. Shaw. *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* [1907]
- Marc-André Raffalovich. *Uranisme et Unisexualité* [1896]
- Stuart Mason. *Oscar Wilde: Three Times Tried* [1912]
- Grant Richards. *Memoirs of a Misspent Youth* [1932] and *Author Hunting* [1939]
- Ford Madox Ford. *Ancient Lights* [1911] and *Return to Yesterday* [1931]
- André Gide. *Si le grain ne meurt* [1924] and *Journal* [1949]
- Douglas Ainslie. *Adventures Social and Literary* [1922]
- Edmund Gosse. *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* [1917]
- (To an extent, Swinburne's recollections are here, as elsewhere, "sanitized" by Gosse)
- Ellen Terry. *The Story of My Life* [1908] and *Ellen Terry's Memoirs* [1933]
- Lillie Langtrie. *The Days I Knew* [1925]
- Max Beerbohm. *A Peep Into the Past* [1923]

Any study would have to take account of a neglected but spirited, and, given the *mores* of the time, extremely courageous account by
Dalhousie Young, *Apologia Pro Oscar Wilde* (1895). A condensed version of this and other material is contained in E. H. Mikhail’s *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections* (1979), a fascinating study made up of contemporary recollections of Wilde drawn from an wide variety of sources.

Other important evidence includes the recollections of Vyvyan Holland in *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1954), *Oscar Wilde: A Pictorial Biography* (1960) and *Time Remembered After Père Lachaise* (1966). Hart-Davis’s editions of the *Letters* also contain a wealth of contextualizing information.

Biographical material published early in the century by those who had no real claim or access to documentary, anecdotal or other evidence, continued the dual process of trivializing and mythologizing Wilde’s life. But with this caution in mind, the following works will be of use to the student of biography: on Wilde’s Irish background, family and boyhood, see Patrick Byrne, *The Wildes of Merrion Square* (1953); Anna, Comtesse de Brémont, *Oscar Wilde and his Mother* (1911); Harry Furniss, *Some Victorian Women* (1923) [on Wilde’s mother]; Horace Wyndham, *Speranza: A Biography of Lady Wilde* (1951) [but the relationship between mother and son is explained in different terms in Mary Lydon [1981], and in Ellmann’s biography]; Eric Lambert, *Mad With Much Heart: A Life of the Parents of Oscar Wilde* (1967); and, most reliably, Terence de Vere White, *The Parents of Oscar Wilde* (1967).

The usual way in which Wilde’s contemporaries understood his trials and disgrace was to see him as the seducer or corrupter of youth: Wilde was Svengali and Alfred Douglas his victim. Modern versions of the same events tend to reverse this judgement: Douglas becomes the betrayer of Wilde’s generosity. Hence Bosie and his family get, in general terms, a bad press. Patrick Braybrooke’s *Lord Alfred Douglas: His Life and His Work* (1931) and William Freeman’s *The Life of Lord Alfred Douglas, Spoilt Child of Genius* (1948) are improved in all respects by the Marquess of Queensberry and Patrick Colson’s *Oscar Wilde and the Black Douglas* (1948) and by Brian Roberts’s *The Mad, Bad Line: the Family of Lord Alfred Douglas* (1981).

In contrast to the overarching attempts to mythologize Wilde’s career, the American tour tends to be treated as an episode in itself: see Lloyd Lewis and Justin Smith (1936), the relevant parts of Brasol
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(1938), Ellmann's biography and the more recent accounts described below.

The main biographies written between those by Harris and by Ellmann all need to be treated with varying degrees of caution. Boris Brasol's Oscar Wilde: The Man—The Artist (1938) has some interesting information, but given, as it were, by the way—in, for example, the chronology and in the notes. But it is also cavalier in its treatment of evidence. So, for example, the suggestion that Wilde died of syphilis (see below, Merlin Holland [1988]) is accepted as a simple fact.

The lives by Hesketh Pearson (1946) and H. Montgomery Hyde—The Trials of Oscar Wilde (1948), Oscar Wilde: The Aftermath (1963), and Oscar Wilde (1975)—were the best biographies of their time; they are all still very readable and helpful in correcting some of the distortions of other biographies. There are, however, clear gaps in them, and not infrequent simple errors of fact. They have since been superseded in many, but not all, respects by Ellmann's work. So, too, but in a much more emphatic manner, have Phillippe Jullian's Oscar Wilde (1967), Louis Kronenberger's Oscar Wilde (1976) and Sheridan Morley's Oscar Wilde: An Illustrated Biography (1976)—works which are now embarrassingly dated.

Browne, *Sir Travers Humphreys: A Biography*. Fuller accounts of the trials are to be found in H. Montgomery Hyde (1948 and 1951), Edward Marjoribanks and Ian Colvin (1932-6), and Derek Walker-Smith and Edward Clarke (1939). Their work is supplemented by Jonathan Goodman’s *The Oscar Wilde File* (1986), which reproduces material relating to the trials taken from a variety of sources, although not in any systematic manner.

For further details of anecdotal and biographical minor material, see Mikhail (1978, 116-190) and Fletcher and Stokes (1976, 64-81). Von Eckardt, Gilman and Chamberlin (1987) have some interesting information concerning Wilde’s social milieu, although their account of the late nineteenth century tends to be over-schematic.

Many of the details of these and other individual accounts have been subsumed into Ellmann’s biography. It is worth pointing out at this stage, however, that Ellmann’s use of his sources is frequently uncritical, and their errors sometimes find their way into his work.

Ellmann’s biography apart, there have been several other attempts to revalue Wilde’s life. However, as I suggested earlier, most continue to utilize and therefore to endorse the Wilde “myth” in one way or another. A good example of such a process is Richard Pine’s biography (1983) which divides Wilde’s career into four stages: genesis, hubris, nemesis and catharsis: such a reading of Wilde’s life is not at all incompatible with the “tragedy” seen both by earlier biographers and more recently by Ellmann. Pine is informative in documenting Wilde’s Irishness and his early life in Dublin; and interesting, too, on the importance of John Mahaffy in Wilde’s education and development. But nevertheless his emphasis is still upon Wilde as a social figure rather than a writer. He traces the “development” of homosexuality in Wilde and, in keeping with modern concerns with gender, suggests that Wilde presents an exemplary case of late nineteenth-century anti-bourgeois homosexual morality. Unfortunately Pine tells us little about Wilde’s relationship with Douglas.

That relationship is much more fully treated in H. Montgomery Hyde’s biography of Douglas and it is the subject of his 1982 Tredegar Memorial Lecture (Hyde 1984). Hyde describes his meeting with Douglas in 1931 when Douglas spoke to him of his relationship with Wilde. Hyde reports Douglas’s views of his unsuccessful libel action against Arthur Ransome in 1913 and relates Douglas’s descriptions...
of the nature of his and Wilde's sexual relationship, and the details surrounding the typing and publishing of *De Profundis*.

Like Richard Pine, Robert Keith Miller (1982) also gives the general reader a useful account of the life and works. More recently, Norman Page (1991) gives in summary form an outline of the salient details of Wilde's biography. Less concise and less satisfying is a brief, popularizing account of Wilde which bears the unoriginal title of *The Importance of Being Oscar*, written by Leslie Frewin under the pseudonym of Mark Nicholls. (The reasons for such an elaborate disguise are not made clear in the 1986 British reprint of the work under Frewin's real name.) Frewin rehearses very familiar details of Wilde's biography, but his style recalls the excesses of those "potboilers" produced with such monotonous regularity in the early days. Other excursions into biography have certainly been no more successful. As I have noted, Wilde's life has long since presented an irresistible opportunity for the retailers of the familiar; and Anita Roitinger's essay on Wilde's life (1980) draws for the most part upon information which is both readily available and depressingly well-known.

Overshadowing all other studies of Wilde's career is of course the biography by Richard Ellmann. Virtually every page tells us new facts about Wilde. Ellmann moves away from the usual glancing accounts of Wilde's childhood, schooling and subsequent career at Trinity College, Dublin. New information about his relationship with his parents, particularly with his mother (but cf. Mary Lydon [1981], described below), and his career at Portora are given very fully.

For Ellmann, the child is the father of the man, and his Wilde, even in his school days, was already the proto-aesthete. And at Trinity, according to Ellmann, Wilde's aesthetic education was being fashioned: indeed "Wilde can be seen slowly accumulating at Trinity the elements of his Oxford behaviour—his Pre-Raphaelite sympathies, his dandiacal dress, his Hellenic bias, his ambiguous sexuality, his contempt for conventional morality" (32).

In giving a whole new set of emphases to his early life, Ellmann enables us to see Wilde's career as a continuous development. So the pre-Oxford days are described in exacting detail; so too is Wilde's career in the mid-1880s, usually quickly passed over as a stage between the early successes of his Oxford years and of the American
lecture tour and the later triumphs of the society dramatist in the 1890s. So much new information about Wilde's early career is in evidence that by the half-way point in Ellmann's biography, Wilde is only 33, still to meet Bosie and still to write a successful literary work. Each moment in Wilde's career is documented with far greater care and in far greater detail than has hitherto been the case. Facts about Wilde's initial reception in New York and the subsequent tour of the States are given in abundance, but for new information about local details, see Robert D. Pepper (1982), and Richard Harmon and G. A. Cevasco (1987). His commerce with London society in the early 1880s and his extravagant self-advertisement are also fully treated. Ellmann also confirms Wilde's career as a mason (cf. Marie Roberts [1986], described below).

Central, however, to Ellmann's account of Wilde is his rehabilitation of the view that Wilde contracted syphilis at Oxford, a claim which Ellmann made initially in lectures, then in print in the New York Review of Books in 1984, but one subsequently contested in a letter by Macdonald Critchley to the British Medical Journal, and by Merlin Holland (1988). Holland questions Ellmann's claim that Wilde died from tertiary syphilis. He examines and throws considerable doubt on Ellmann's evidence, and argues that the symptoms which Wilde presented in his final illness are not consonant with those of syphilis. Holland suggests that this "fact" like many other "facts" of the biography are simply uncorroborated assertions which have acquired increasing authority with age. In his turn, Critchley argues that Wilde's symptoms were much more consonant with the original diagnosis of meningoencephalitis due to a chronic suppuration of the right ear than with the later diagnosis of syphilis. Patrick Reilly (1989) also provides an account of Wilde's death.

Ellmann had printed other parts of the biography as separate essays: see Ellmann (1987). He claimed quite unequivocally that "homosexuality fired...[Wilde's] mind," and Wilde's entries into the homosexual subcultures of London and Paris are described by Ellmann in great detail. Indeed the whole of Wilde's career in France is fully documented. This is a topic which has been taken up by other critics over the past decade: see, in particular, Worth (1983) and Clements (1985). But the passages which describe Wilde's relationship with Douglas, up to the trials and afterwards on the Continent, turn out to be the most revealing. An enormous amount of new
information about the relationship is given to us. In particular, the last years in France and in Italy are movingly described, but here compare the differing interpretations of the time spent at Posilippo with Bosie given by Baylen and McBath (1985), upon which Ellmann draws.

All in all, however, Ellmann's biography is not the life of Wilde but the tragedy of Wilde: in this sense he repeats, albeit in a modified form, the figure familiar from almost a century of Wilde mythologizing. Moreover there are also errors in the work, both of fact, and of emphasis: there are simple confusions, such as that between Asquith and Balfour, mentioned by Owen Dudley Edwards in his BBC radio tribute to Ellmann after his death; there are some erroneous details, some of which have been noted by Frank Kermode in his review of the book in the London Review of Books (29 October 1987); and there is some disputed interpretation of evidence noted by Paul Chipchase (1987). For example, Ellmann's dramatic description of Wilde's body after his death in 1900 is based on sources discredited for a considerable time. It is worth repeating that these sorts of errors derive not from ignorance or carelessness, but from Ellmann's failure to distinguish between kinds of evidence.

A more substantial criticism has been raised by Joseph Donohue in "Recent Studies of Oscar Wilde." He questions the nature of the biography which Ellmann wrote. Donohue suggests that Ellmann's emphasis on Wilde's public success as he embraced homosexuality fails to take account of his success as a dramatist—that is, as a professional man of the theatre: so, Donohue argues, 'readers gain only an inadequate sense of Wilde's methods as a writer, of his phenomenal facility, but also of his tireless perfectionism.' Detailed corrections of Ellmann's factual errors have been made by Horst Schroeder (1989).

But these criticisms aside, it is clear that Ellmann's work will remain the most authoritative biography for the foreseeable future. Indeed, it has been instrumental in reviving a serious scholarly interest in Wilde.

Some local studies of moments in the life have been significant. Here research into private and public sources has been especially valuable: indeed, as I have indicated, Ellmann incorporated some of this research into his biography. In particular, two documentary
studies, those by John Stokes (1983) and by Baylen and McBat (1985) have been revealing. Baylen and McBat print a letter from the British consul for Southern Italy, Eustace Neville-Rolfe, to the Earl of Rosebery detailing the activities of Wilde and Douglas in Posilippo in 1897. Baylen and McBat suggest that Neville-Rolfe, whose homosexuality was known at the time, would have been aware of—and indeed been a party to—Rosebery’s alleged homosexuality, especially the scandal surrounding his relationship with Viscount Drumanrig (Douglas’s brother) and the latter’s mysterious death in 1894. The authors, following suggestions by Brian Reade (1970) and Vern Bullough (1976), offer some speculation about the alleged connection between the relentless prosecution of Wilde and the possibility of a major homosexual scandal in British public life. In this sense, Baylen and McBat highlight an increasingly fashionable area of interest in Wilde’s life—the relationship between sexuality and politics.

Here it is worth noting in passing that Ellmann’s discussion of Wilde’s homosexuality treats it as a private matter, divorced from contemporary politics. So he uses Baylen’s and McBat’s research, but ignores the wider political implications which they draw from it. In this respect recent critics, such as Ed Cohen and Richard Dellamora, take issue with the implications of Ellmann’s account of Wilde’s gayness. See Dellamora’s *Masculine Desire*, Ed Cohen’s “Legislating the Norm” (1989) and, in the same year, an essay by Lee Edelman which also addresses the topic of identity and sexual difference.

John Stokes (1983) pursues the homosexual context of Wilde’s life in the 90s across an equally difficult terrain: he dives into the diaries, scrap-books and manuscripts of George Ives held at the HRHRC. He describes how Ives knew Wilde from 1892 up to the debacle of the trials. According to Stokes, Wilde “in his turn seems to have regarded Ives as an acceptable colleague in the struggles to establish a climate in which the ‘New Hedonism,’ a new homosexual sensibility, might flourish” (175). Indeed, Stokes points out that Wilde used aspects of Ives’s life for details of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Stokes’s painstakingly thorough search for Ives’s commerce with the homosexual subculture of London in the 90s points to the possibility of further research in this field (especially among the relatively unknown MSS resources at the HRHRC and the Clark Library).
Wolfgang Maier examines the evidence about Wilde's debts in documents held by the Public Record Office after the bankruptcy proceedings. James D. Griffin reassesses the nature of the relationship between André Gide and Wilde and then the reliability of the Frenchman's recollections of that relationship. Griffin takes issue with a whole line of argument in biographies of Wilde—originating in Sherard's pamphlets (1933 and 1934), through Boris Brasol (1938), Hesketh Pearson (1946), Lewis Broad (1954) and Croft Cooke (1972)—that Gide lied about his relationship with Wilde. Griffin then discusses Gide's correspondence with Wilde, distinguishing between the authentic and forged letters, and concludes that, while the acquaintance between the two writers was not great, "when Gide speaks of days passed with Wilde . . . his perspective must be that of a literary acquaintance, and not a confidant" (169). This very fact makes Gide's admiration for Wilde both impressive and arresting.

Elsewhere Zelda Austen (1983) provides a contrastive study of Wilde's and William Morris's careers in the 1880s, suggesting that Wilde's career and that of Morris may be best understood via a set of antitheses: the Celtic and the Germanic; the Hellenist and the medievalist; the performer and the reformer, and so on. Ruth Z. Temple, in "The Other Choice. The Worlds of John Gray, Poet and Priest," explores the relationships between Marc-André Raffalovich, John Gray and Wilde, and suggests explanations for the antagonism between Raffalovich and Wilde.

On a more miniature scale, Karl Beckson (1983) corrects Wilde's (and Wilde's biographers') misapprehensions about Henry Bevan Isaacson, the Governor of Reading Prison when Wilde was imprisoned there in 1895, and describes Isaacson's career before and after his stewardship of that austere building. Elsewhere Horst Schroeder (1985) describes Wilde's trip to Homburg to take the waters in the summer of 1892. He fixes exactly the date of Wilde's arrival, locates the addresses where Wilde stayed and suggests how the dates of some of Wilde's correspondence at the time might be revised and corrected in the light of this evidence.

In a scrupulously well-documented and well-illustrated essay, but one that is probably better informed about local American than about national British culture, Robert D. Pepper (1982) looks at an earlier moment in Wilde's life, his lecture tour of the States, and in particular
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his visit to San José in April 1882. Pepper traces Wilde’s itinerary in northern California and notes that his lecture in San José coincided with the tour of the Comely-Barton Opera Troupe playing Patience in San Francisco in March 1882. Particularly revealing is Pepper’s documentation of the depth of local interest which Wilde’s tour provoked.


Further information about the American tour is to be found in Ellmann’s biography; but recently Terry L. Meyers in “Oscar Wilde and Williamsburg, Virginia” (1991) points out that Ellmann’s suggestion that Wilde lectured in Williamsburg, Virginia, is wrong, and that he in fact lectured in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

John Unrau (1982) examines the nature of the friendship between Ruskin and Wilde, anticipating and usefully reinforcing Ellmann’s information about the influence of Ruskin on Wilde. Unrau cites evidence (in the form of letters from the Revd. J. P. Faunthorpe) that suggests that Oscar and Constance Wilde were better acquainted with Ruskin than has usually been assumed to be the case, and that their friendship survived from Wilde’s Oxford days later into his career than is usually supposed. Unrau observes that Ruskin’s biographers attempted to suppress knowledge of his acquaintance with Wilde, and he goes on to note that the Faunthorpe letters escaped this general suppression of information following Wilde’s conviction and imprisonment in 1895.

Kerry Powell (1986) clears up the confusion over the “invention” of Basil Ward as the model for Basil Hallward. He traces the invention of Ward to a pirated American edition of The Picture of Dorian Gray in 1904 and describes how a succession of biographers, including Kronenberger, Sheridan Morley and Montgomery Hyde, have been
misled since. Powell suggests that while the "inspiration for the novel came from many directions," the painter who influenced Wilde most forcefully was probably Frank Holl. In a larger study of the relationship between secret societies and creativity, Marie Roberts (1986) notes in passing that Wilde may have been a freemason, information, as I have indicated, corroborated and substantially amplified since by Ellmann.

More suggestive is Kevin H. F. O'Brien's account (1985) of the career of Robert Harborough Sherard and his relationship with Wilde. In a well-documented piece, O'Brien describes Sherard's friendship with Wilde in Paris in the 1880s and the circles in which both Sherard and Wilde moved: indeed, an acknowledgement of the importance of Wilde's commerce with things French is one of the real triumphs of recent biography and criticism. O'Brien is particularly interesting on Sherard's and Wilde's involvement with the mad John Barlas, and on Sherard's dogged and in many ways pathetic championing of Wilde during the trials and his imprisonment.

In one of those ironic coincidences with which academic and publishing life abounds, we have been given in the past decade two biographies of Constance Wilde. Joyce Bentley (1983) writes a short work designed for the popular reader. It draws heavily on a narrow range of well-established sources and occasionally deals in reductive truisms. Anne Clarke Amor's life (1983) is better researched, more adequately documented and finally more thorough. Her grasp upon the relevant issues seems altogether more firm. Yet, as John Stokes (1987) points out, both biographies clearly miss important aspects of the private side of Constance's life: the sale at Sotheby's in 1985 of letters from Constance to Arthur Lee Humphreys [described below] indicates a whole new area of undocumented material to be considered in further accounts of her.

The other members of the Wilde nuclear family are discussed elsewhere. George Sims (1984) describes his acquaintance with Vyvyan Holland, Wilde's younger son. In passing Sims reports details of the sales of Wilde's letters and memorabilia, and mentions the suggestion that Holland's birthday had been entered on his birth certificate as 3 November 1886, rather than his actual birthday, 5 November, to "avoid any humorous connection between the Aes-
theatric Movement and Guy Fawkes Day” (53)—a detail mentioned also by Ellmann.

Related, perhaps tenuously, to the general idea of family is Mary Lydon’s “Myself and My/others” (1981), which among other examples, discusses Wilde’s relationship with his mother and locates his jokes about, and representations of, maternity in that context. Lydon quotes Lady Wilde on style and on women and then establishes connections between mother and son by suggesting that the tone of those pronouncements “might be pure Lady Bracknell—or Oscar Wilde. . . . The distinct resemblance adds a nuance, at least, to Oscar’s statement about men and their mothers” (9). It is worth reiterating here that accounts of Wilde’s relationship with his mother (apart from that by Terence de Vere White) largely ignore her copious correspondence to him, much of which is held at the Clark Library. Related also to the idea of family is Karl Beckson’s informed essay of 1983 on Willie Wilde, “The Importance of Being Angry.” (See also in this respect Madeleine B. Stern [1953].) Elsewhere Eric Tappe (1986) describes the career of T. Wemyss Reid from editor of the Leeds Mercury to general manager of Cassells publishing house in London. Tappe describes how instrumental Reid was in securing Wilde as editor of the Lady’s World (the title of which Wilde quickly changed to Woman’s World).

In general terms, recent trends in Wilde biography can be summarized in the following way. The emphasis on uncovering new facts about Wilde has resulted in an explosion of information about him. This information in turn has allowed Wilde’s life to be reinterpreted in the context of contemporary cultural and political concerns. However, it is still the case that elements of the “myth” persist (particularly in Ellmann’s biography), and have to a large extent structured and interpreted much of this evidence. So, for example, those aspects of Wilde’s life and personality which do not fit the myth—his domestic roles as a father, a son, a husband, and his public life as a working dramatist rather than as a socialite—still require attention.