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## arts & leisure

### BOOKS:

# Oscar's Secrets & Trials

BY ROBERT WILLIAM WOLFF

*The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*  
by Neil McKenna  
2005, Basic Books  
465 pages

The big question as I began reading Neil McKenna's book was, "Will I finish the book knowing what has disturbed me for years about the events leading to Oscar Wilde's imprisonment, death and loss of Wilde's artistic gifts, or will I still feel frustrated?" Finished, I am not frustrated. I have the same feeling I do at the opera when a character ruled by emotion does something that is truly stupid, and then continues to dig himself deeper as the drama continues. This shift and McKenna's adroit telling of the story made his book worth reading. Previously unrevealed detail that will interest gay readers is included.

Of the several books, plays, and films on Wilde I have experienced, this book tells the most detailed story of the great writer and wit's personal life and his driven relationships with young men. The "boys" enjoyed by Oscar and his lover Bosie (Lord Alfred Douglas, the son of the Marquis of Queensberry) included working-class men that the London elites of the 1890s did not rank as respectable companions for the educated Wilde and his titled Bosie. Lord Alfred's Oxford classmates, friends, and peers were also favored. A goodly number of "rent boys," male prostitutes and blackmailers of that day, were likewise among their bed mates.

In McKenna's thorough examination, the 21st century reader learns what sodomy meant to the English in the 1890s. He delivers insights on the dynamics between the Marquis of Queensberry, Oscar Wilde, and the young Lord Douglas. McKenna writes about Bosie's older brother, Francis Viscount Drumlanrig. Francis,

unable to deny his feelings for men to conform with his father's wishes, committed suicide.

Queensberry incorrectly believed that our Oscar had seduced Lord Alfred to sodomy. But Bosie needed no such help. The classic father consumed by rage, the Marquis burned to see Wilde either safely in jail, banished from England or dead. In the end, with help of Oscar himself, Bosie, the English courts, and friends of Lord Rosebery (who needed to distract the public from news of his own sodomy), Queensberry achieved all of these goals, but not before he himself died.

The saga told in *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* is one of twists and turns and Channel crossings worthy of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Oscar Wilde marries Constance Lloyd; then Oscar meets Bosie and other young men whom he beds in various combinations. The Marquis threatens Wilde and finally hands his card with the fatal handwritten note to the doorman at Oscar's club.

Wilde could have taken his lawyer's advice and forgotten the matter. But, encouraged by Lord Alfred, Wilde sues the Marquis for libel, knowing full well that Queensberry's accusation that he is posing as a sodomite is more than true — he is not posing, Oscar is a sodomite. Worse yet, while lying about these relations during the first trial, Wilde was aware that there were young men, who, having blackmailed him in the past, could testify against him.

The author unfolds a convincing case for Wilde being attacked legally in the second and third trials partly to protect Lord Rosebery, then the leader of the English government, from being accused of sodomy by the same Marquis of Queensberry. The fascinating story of the happenings and emotional currents among the people involved between this point and Oscar's death at age 46 is the reason to read this enlightening book.

As I read, I became aware of the alcoholic fog that Wilde and Bosie maintained and the impact

that could have had on the judgment of each man. Bosie and The Marquis were both overwhelmed with anger. The Marquis' wife (Lord Alfred's mother) was not on friendly terms with him.

Wilde falls into the trap unwittingly woven in part by his legally inexperienced lover. It is still not completely clear why Oscar Wilde did not realize that the trial in which he was about to be engaged would reveal his sexual adventures with men, in a time when it was strictly against English law. He could have been too focused on not hurting Bosie, who wanted his father to lose in court. Certainly Wilde considered himself in a social and artistic world where he was "above" the common people of the London streets. Perhaps all of these factors came together to cloud his reasoning. As we know from previous descriptions of the trials, Wilde spent his time in court being witty, when wit could not help him.

It was not until he was on his way to prison that he began to fully grasp the hell into which he had fallen. In prison, he wrote *De Profundis*, for the first time putting to paper his angry feelings toward Bosie, whom he blamed for getting him into this life-threatening mess. He swore that he would not become entangled with Bosie after his release, and for a time he and Bosie stayed apart.

In Lord Alfred's absence, Robbie Roberts, reportedly Oscar's first male lover, took care of details of Oscar's life with which Wilde was unable to cope. But Oscar and Bosie were soon together again. Wilde went back to drinking great amounts and not eating much most of the time. At other times, having sufficient money, he ate like a king. During this period Wilde also fed his ravenous appetite for relationships with young men. His last written words expressed the joy of men loving men. ▼

*Robert William Wolff lives in Randolph, and designs scenery and lighting for theatre in Vermont. He is also a potter.*