

The Wildes, Father and Son

OSCAR WILDE, HIS LIFE AND HIS WIT. By Hesketh Pearson. New York: Harper & Bros. 1946. 333 pp. \$3.75.

VICTORIAN DOCTOR. By T. G. Wilson. New York: L. B. Fischer. 1946. 325 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by JEAN C. S. WILSON

OF ALL the poets and writers that mocked the foibles and fashions of the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde was the true child of Victorianism. His wit and humor could only have flourished in a *fin de siècle* period dominated by the Mayfair drawing-room. His trial and subsequent imprisonment could only have occurred in a time when psychology was in its infancy and false prudery in the ascendant. Because he was the leading figure in a society scandal he has been too often considered as *sui generis* instead of indigenous to his age.

The nineties were more than a picturesque prologue to the twentieth century; they were the epilogue to an age of unprecedented emphasis on manners and materialism. Rapid mid-century developments in commerce, manufacture, and science had won an empire for Britain abroad that eventually reached the staggering proportions of one-quarter of the earth's surface. At home, these same forces had created great new social classes which were often vulgar in their display of wealth, evangelical in their religion, and lacking in appreciation of the arts. Literary men of the day devoted their time to social satire and criticism in an attempt to awaken the rising classes to their own snobbery, cultural ignorance, and appalling commercialism. By 1890 the battle had been won and what was a serious and vital literary movement ended in the twilight of estheticism.

Perhaps the best background for the understanding of the social and domestic forces that produced Oscar Wilde is T. G. Wilson's study of Wilde's father "Victorian Doctor." As far as I know this is the only unbiased picture of Sir William Wilde and his wife, the Italian-Irish authoress Speranza, to see print. It is not only a fine character analysis which gives its principals the foreground, but it also paints a vivid backdrop of literary Dublin, Irish political dissension and strife, and medical and archeological developments of the period. From page to page, one is continually reminded that the nineteenth century was an age of constant flux and change.

Sir William Wilde was himself a member of the new middle class. His father was a country doctor who married into the ancient Irish family of Fynne in County Mayo. Dr. Wilson tells us that the Fynnes were mentally unstable and that undoubtedly much of the peculiarities and genius of the Wilde family can be traced to the Fynne strain. In Sir William the Fynne blood seemed to show in a remarkable intellect, a certain amount of literary ability, and his erratic personal life. His medical and scientific career was as astonishing as the diversity and variety of his interests. He was a famous otologist, who made many of his own instruments and founded his extraordinarily successful St. Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital for diseases of the eye and ear in Dublin, an archeologist and writer of note, a pioneer in the field of vital statistics, and a constant writer of scientific essays, one of which on the suckling of whales and other marine animals was of real biologic significance. By the time he was knighted in 1864, at the age of forty-nine, for his work on the census during the years of the Irish famine, he had completed Part I of the catalogue of the antiquities of the Royal Irish Academy, which is still a definitive work. Sir William's achievements are all the more astounding when one realizes that throughout this time he was a busy practising physician. In actual accomplishment he far surpassed his more notorious son.

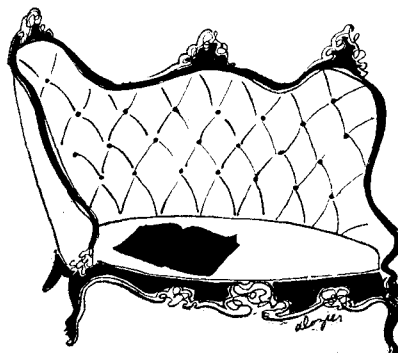
But like his son Oscar his intellectual feats were marred by a particularly scandalous public trial. His personal life seems to have been filled with illegitimacies which caused little if any stir in Dublin social circles until the public circulation of a pamphlet "Florence Boyle Price: or a Warnings, (sic) by Speranza." This was not written by Sir William's wife, but by a mistress of some years' standing, Mary Josephine Travers, who accused Sir William in parable of first chloroforming and then seducing her. From the vindictive patterns of her behavior it is apparent

that she was mentally and emotionally unsound. Though the jury found in favor of her case, they thought so little of her that she was only awarded a farthing's damages. The impact of the trial on Sir William was far more costly since it brought about his immediate decline as a public figure and a medical force. The similarity between Sir William's record and that of his son Oscar seems to show that they were both so constituted that they could only perform brilliantly in the full light of public praise and acclaim.

Speranza, though not so talented as her husband, moved in the political and literary circles of Dublin. For a time in the forties, she wrote revolutionary poetry and prose of an inferior quality for the Young Ireland movement, and later Irish folk stories. Her bizarre clothes, studied languor, odd personality, and glandular peculiarities prevent her from being taken as a serious revolutionary, and instead she appears as one of the tragi-comic figures which the Irish nationalist movement seemed to produce with such frequency.

Much of Dr. Wilson's material on the Wilde family is used by Hesketh Pearson in "Oscar Wilde, His Life and His Wit" to show the brilliance and eccentricity of Oscar's intellectual and emotional heritage. When Oscar's life, unnatural though it was, is viewed in the focus of his family background and his chosen environment of fashion and frippery, it seems a normal growth; in almost every case he followed the parental pattern. He inherited from both parents literary facility and independence of thought and behavior, from his father quick activity of mind and sexual maladjustment, and from his mother a taste for elaborate costume and a physical make-up which Dr. Wilson suggests was due to glandular malfunction. The mixture of these qualities produced Oscar's spectacular personality and genius.

Mr. Pearson's biography is first of all a balanced and sane account of the events of Wilde's life, and secondly, and even more difficult to achieve, a portrait of his wit. Wilde said of himself, "I have put all of my genius into my life: I have only put my talent into my works." In this sentence Oscar gives us the clue to his life and activities. There is magnificent foolery bordering on genius in the way he turned himself into a caricature of the literary and artistic criticism of the age by adopting a languid air, and wearing velvet knickerbockers and the famous sunflower. His epigrams, paradoxes, fantasies, and telling phrases, as revived by Mr. Pearson, show us a man of unbelievable conversational powers. As a medieval



bard wandering from hamlet to hamlet telling tales for his dinner Oscar would have been supremely happy, for he could have avoided the labor of composition and devoted all his energies to his great gift of vocal story-telling. For a period he was the modern equivalent of the ancient scop. He did not, of course, sing for his supper but he did build his literary and social position on his dinner-table conversation and until his trial he was spoiled, petted, and pampered by the English upper classes, for his entertainment value was immense.

His popularity, his tremendous sense of fun and nonsense unquestionably set him apart from a workaday world and perhaps obscured the bent of his personal relations from even his own eyes. After his imprisonment he says, "What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion." The explanation seems far more complex. All of his life, Wilde was haunted by a sense of impending doom, and this might well have been caused by the effect on a young mind of his father's trial and disappearance from public life. Certainly Wilde's career of early fame and brilliance, trial, and ruin closely parallels his father's experience. There is even coincidence in the fact that Miss Travers and the Marquis of Queensbury were more than slightly deranged mentally. Wilde did cause his own downfall by first suing the Marquis of Queensbury for libel. If he had not done this it is doubtful whether any criminal action would have been brought against him.

Expiation, immature emotional development, a possible lack of marital adjustment, buttressed by Victorianism in its worst form, seem to be the contributing factors that led to Reading Gaol and exile. In evaluating Wilde's friendships and his friendship with Lord Alfred Douglas in particular, most biographers seem to have overlooked his marriage as a possible cause of his perversion. Mr. Pearson tells us something of Wilde's courtship and his role as a devoted husband during the early years of his marriage but it is not sufficient. We know that until his death Wilde remained an interested and loving father, though he was never allowed to see his sons after his trial, but we know almost nothing about his wife, Constance Wilde, except that she was beautiful, deeply religious, and almost fanatically interested in missionaries. There seems to be no contemporary account of the life in the house on Tite Street in its last years, but Wilde must have suffered disillusion, for we find him saying, "The worst of having a romance is



that it leaves one so unromantic," or, "One should always be in love. That is the reason one should never marry."

In the eighties Wilde was satirizing Victorianism by his wit and life and it is his tragedy that in the nineties he became the victim of the age that made him famous. His habits were pathological, but in a medically enlightened time he would never have been made a whipping-boy for public morality. Through anecdote, quotation, and reminiscence, a lucid account of the trials and Wilde's real

suffering under the prison system of the day, Mr. Pearson gives a full-dress biographical performance. Considering the purpose of his book he quite rightfully regards Wilde's poetry, prose, and plays as source material for Wilde's character and life rather than as literature. Compared to his gift of tongues Wilde's writing was second-rate. His very facility of speech may have prevented him from being more than an author of promise and it also may have had much to do with his inability to grasp the realities of his own life. Wilde said: "Between me and life there is a mist of words always. I throw probability out of the window for the sake of a phrase, and the chance of an epigram makes me desert truth." This is as good an explanation of his talent and tragedy as we are likely to find.

Candide Up to Date

ALL FOR THE BEST. By Bentz Plagemann. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 1946. 226 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

THE title, plus the bust of Voltaire on the dust cover, plus any page of this book, will establish its relationship with "Candide." It is, at best, a second cousin, but the strain is very consciously there and not without some of its old vigor. For *Candide* we have young David Forster, a Navy doctor, and for Pangloss his Uncle Harry. Between them, with alternating shafts of naïveté and cynicism, they strike some telling blows at contemporary America, its customs, its romanticism, its lip-service to liberalism, and its rigid caste systems and prejudices; and, in a sharper focus, there are scathing judgments on medicine, psychology, and psychiatry as they are professed today. It is David who makes the broad and exultant swipes at truth, who is apt to cry out in delight at the wonderful fact of progress—"If a man was shot by an arrow during combat in the Middle Ages he could only be carried into the nearest castle, but nowadays when a man is blown apart by a hand grenade he is taken five hundred miles by plane to a hospital—" or to remark quite gravely, "I flatter myself that I am broadminded. I do not go out of my way to make friends with Jews, but I do not avoid them. . . . They weren't in my fraternity at Martin Towers. It seemed the only sensible way to avoid discrimination."

But it is his Uncle Harry who shoots more consciously at acid evaluation.

He advises David on a career: "We are learning now that if one begins with the study of psychology the path leads inevitably to mysticism and beyond, all culminating, ultimately, in free verse. The poet's tower, David, is not only a lonely place, but nowadays it is so cluttered with technical works that one rarely has time for the traditional meditation. . . ." And so on. Some of this, of course, is patently smart, and unfairly loaded, but it makes good fun. There are always some hits in a load of buckshot.

It is a curious thing that David, who is supposedly the honest and impeccable *Candide* of the modern scene, is not at all the most attractive figure in the book. That title must go to his Uncle Harry, who combines with the practical cynicism of Pangloss the worldly charm and eloquence of Oscar Wilde's Lord Harry Wotton. We will recall that Voltaire took care not to permit this to happen; that wily old moralist made it quite clear where our sympathies were to lie. But Mr. Plagemann, like Wilde, has been taken into camp by his own created antagonist; it is Uncle Harry who seems not only the brighter but the better man. He bears the weight of worldly knowledge with gay martyrdom. He advises young David with patience and pity, almost with reticence, and his remarks upon folly are the more pungent for his acceptance of it, than are David's horrified discoveries that to err is human, and to compromise necessary. Mr. Plagemann seems less than fervent about his moralities, for he has given his best lines to the devil's advocate.