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The Trials of Oscar Wilde: An Account

by Douglas O. Linder

Old Bailey, the main courthouse in London, had never presented a show quite like the three trials that captivated England and much of the literary world in the spring of 1895. Celebrity, sex, witty dialogue, political intrigue, surprising twists, and important issues of art and morality--is it any surprise that the trials of Oscar Wilde continue to fascinate one hundred years after the death of one of the world's greatest authors and playwrights?

The events that would bring Oscar Wilde to Old Bailey began four years earlier in the summer of 1891 when Wilde, then thirty-eight years old, met a promising twenty-two-year old poet named Lord Alfred Douglas ("Bosie") at a tea party. The two became extremely close. Douglas took great pleasure in the interest shown in him by Wilde, already a major literary figure. Douglas called his elder companion "the most chivalrous friend in the world." Wilde saw in Douglas not only a lively intellect, but a young man with an Adonis-like appearance. Wilde made no secret of his interest. Douglas later said, "He was continually asking me to lunch and dine with him and sending me letters, notes, and telegrams." He also showered Douglas with presents and wrote a sonnet for him. They stayed together in each other's houses and in hotels, and went on trips together.

The first serious problem for Wilde growing out of his relationship of Douglas came when Douglas, still a student in Oxford, gave an old suit to a down-and-out friend named Wood. Wood discovered in a pocket of the suit letters written by Wilde to his youthful friend. Wood extorted £35 from Wilde for return of most of the compromising letters. Wilde later described the money as a gift to enable Wood to start a new life in America. Two other would-be blackmailers were given smaller amounts of money after returning the remaining letters.

Wilde's downfall came not from blackmailers, however, but rather the father of Alfred Douglas, John Sholto Douglas, the Marquess of Queensberry. Queensberry was an arrogant, ill-tempered, eccentric and perhaps even mentally imbalanced Scottish nobleman best note for developing and promoting rules for amateur boxing (the "Queensberry rules"). Queensberry became concerned about his son's relationship with "this man Wilde." His concern was temporarily alleviated at the Cafe Royal in late 1892, when his son introduced him to the noted literary figure. Wilde charmed Queensberry over a long lunch with many cigars and liqueurs. By early 1894 Queensberry concluded the Wilde was most likely a homosexual and began demanding that his son stop seeing Wilde: "Your intimacy with this man Wilde must either cease or I will disown you and stop all money supplies," Queensberry wrote in April. "I am not going to try an analyze this intimacy, and I make no charge; but to my mind to pose as a thing is as bad as to be it." Douglas replied in a telegram: "What a funny little man you are."

Queensberry began taking increasingly desperate measures to end the relationship. He threatened restaurant and hotel managers with beatings if he ever discovered Wilde and his son together on their premises. In June of 1894 Queensberry, accompanied by a prize-fighter, showed up without warning at Wilde's house in Chelsea. An angry conversation ensued, ending when Wilde ordered Queensberry to leave saying, "I do not

know what the Queensberry rules are, but the Oscar Wilde rule is to shoot on sight." Queensberry's subsequent letters to his son, who he had already ceased to support, grew increasingly intemperate. "You reptile," he wrote, "you are no son of mine and I never thought you were." Douglas answered, "If O.W. was to prosecute you in the criminal courts for libel, you would get seven years' penal servitude for your outrageous libels."

On February 14, 1895, Wilde's new play *The Importance of Being Earnest* was set to open at the St. James Theatre. Wilde learned that Queensberry planned to disrupt the opening night's performance and harangue the audience about Wilde's alleged decadent lifestyle. Wilde arranged to have the theater surrounded by police. His plan blocked, Queensberry prowled about outside for three hours before finally leaving "chattering."

Four days later at the Albemarle Club--a club to which both Wilde and his wife belonged, Queensberry left a card with a porter. "Give that to Oscar Wilde," he told the porter. On the card he had written: "To Oscar Wilde posing as a sodomite [sic]." Two weeks later Wilde showed up at the club and was handed the card with the offensive message. Returning that night to the Hotel Avondale, Wilde wrote to Douglas asking that he come and see him. "I don't see anything now but a criminal prosecution," Wilde wrote. "My whole life seems ruined by this man. The tower of ivory is assailed by the foul thing. On the sand is my life split. I don't know what to do."

The next day, Wilde, Douglas, and another longtime friend named Robert Ross visited a solicitor, Travers Humphreys. Humphreys asked Wilde directly whether there was any truth to Queensberry's allegation. Wilde said no. Humphreys applied for a warrant for Queensberry's arrest. On March 2, Queensberry police arrested Queensberry and charged him with libel at the Vine Street police station.

Travers Humphreys asked Edward Clarke, a towering figure in the London bar, to prosecute Wilde's case. Before accepting the case, Clarke said to Wilde, "I can only accept this brief, Mr. Wilde, if you assure me on your honor as an English gentleman that there is not and never has been any foundation for the charges that are made against you." Wilde answered that the charges were "absolutely false and groundless." Wilde left Clarke's office to join Douglas for a quick trip to the south of France before the trial.

About a week before trial was set to begin at Old Bailey, Wilde returned to London, where numerous close friends advised him to drop his libel suit. George Bernhard Shaw and Frank Harris, two well known friends of Wilde's from the literary world, pleaded with Wilde to flee the country and continue his writing abroad, possibly in more tolerant France. Douglas, who was also present at the luncheon with Shaw and Harris, objected. "Your telling him to run away shows that you are no friend of Oscar's," Douglas said, rising from the table. "It is not friendly of you," Wilde echoed as he departed the restaurant with his young friend.

On April 3, 1895, the first trial of Oscar Wilde--with Wilde in this case cheering the prosecution--began at Old Bailey. Queensberry, wearing a blue hunting stock, stood alone, hat in hand, in front of the dock. Wilde, wearing a fashionable coat with a flower in his button-hole, chatted with his attorney. Meanwhile, in another room in the building,

a group of young men--gathered by Queensberry to substantiate his charge--laughed and smoked cigarettes.

Sir Edward Clarke delivered the prosecution's opening statement. Clarke's address impressed even Edward Carson, Queensberry's attorney, who said "I never heard anything to equal it in all my life." Clarke attempted to take some of the sting out of one key piece of evidence that Queensberry planned to introduce. He read one of Wilde's letters to Douglas that might suggest to many readers the existence of a homosexual relationship. Clarke admitted that the letter "might appear extravagant to those in the habit of writing commercial correspondence," but said it must be remembered that Oscar Wilde is a poet, and the letter should be read as "the expression of true poetic feeling, and with no relation whatever to the hateful and repulsive suggestions put to it in the plea in this case."

After brief testimony from Sidney Wright, the porter at the Albemarle Club, Wilde took the stand. He began by lying about his age, which he said was thirty-nine (he was actually forty-one). Under questioning by Clarke, Wilde, with easy assurance, described his earlier encounters with--and harassment by--Queensberry. To Clarke's final question, "Is there any truth in any of these accusations [of Queensberry]?", Wilde answered: "There is no truth whatever in any of them."

After lunch, Edward Carson--a rival of Wilde since their days together at Trinity College in Dublin--began his skillful cross-examination. The cross generally broke into two main parts: a literary part and a fact-oriented part focusing on Wilde's past relationships. In the literary part of the examination, Carson asked Wilde about letters to Douglas and two of his own published works, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and *Phrases and Philosophies for Use of the Young*. Wilde defended the works against Carson's suggestions that they were immoral or touched on homosexual themes. "There is no such thing as an immoral work," Wilde asserted in *Dorian Gray*, rather "books are well written, or badly written." "That expresses your view?" asked Carson, "a perverted novel might be a good book?" When Wilde replied, "I don't know what you mean by a 'perverted' novel," Carson said, "I will suggest *Dorian Gray* as open to the interpretation of being such a novel." Wilde answered indignantly, "That could only be to brutes and illiterates. The views of Philistines on art are incalculably stupid." Carson asked about a suggestive letter to Lord Douglas: "Was it an ordinary letter?" "Certainly not," Wilde answered, "it was a beautiful letter." "Apart from art?" Carson wondered. "I cannot answer any questions apart from Art," Wilde replied. And so it went. Wilde did his best to turn the proceedings into a joke with flippant answers. Always the artist, he seemed to be reaching for creative, witty answers, even if they contradicted earlier ones. Though immensely interesting reading, the literary part of Carson's cross was not the most incriminating. Rather, one senses that Carson enjoyed *toying* with his old rival.

When Carson began to ask Wilde about his relationships with named young men, Wilde became noticeably uncomfortable. The jury appeared astonished when Carson produced items ranging from fine clothes to silver-mounted walking sticks that Wilde admitted giving to his young companions. Suspiciously, the recipients of the gifts were not, in Carson's words, "intellectual treats," but newspaper peddlers, valets, or unemployed--in

some cases barely literate. Wilde tried to explain: "I recognize no social distinctions at all of any kind, and to me youth, the mere fact of youth, is so wonderful that I would sooner talk to a young man for half-an-hour than be--well--cross-examined in court." Soon after that confident response, Carson asked Wilde about a young man, sixteen when Wilde knew him, named Walter Grainger. Did Wilde kiss him? "Oh, dear no!" Wilde replied, "He was a peculiarly plain boy." Carson zeroed in on his prey. Was that the reason he didn't kiss him? Why then did he mention his ugliness? "Why, why, why, did you add that?" Carson demanded to know.

That afternoon the prosecution closed its case without calling, as was widely expected, Lord Alfred Douglas as a witness. No testimony that Douglas might give, no matter how forceful, could save Wilde's case.

When Carson announced, in his opening speech in defense of Queensberry, that he intended to call to the witness box a procession of young men with whom Wilde had been sexually associated, the atmosphere in the courtroom became tense. Edward Clarke understood his client was in serious personal danger. An 1895 Act, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, had made it a crime for any person to commit an act of "gross indecency." The Act had been interpreted to criminalize any form of sexual activity between members of the same sex.

After trial that evening, Edward Clarke met with his famous client. "When I saw Mr. Wilde," Clarke later recalled, "I told him it that it was almost impossible in view of all the circumstances to induce a jury to convict of a criminal offence a father who was endeavoring to save his son from what he believed to be an evil companionship." Clarke urged Wilde to allow him to withdraw the prosecution and consent to a verdict regarding the charge of "posing." Wilde agreed, and the next morning Clarke rose to announce the withdrawal of the libel prosecution.

Queensberry's solicitor, meanwhile, had forwarded to the Director of Public Prosecutions copies of statements by the young men they had planned to produce as witnesses. At 3:30 p.m., an inspector from Scotland Yard appeared before Magistrate John Bridge to request a warrant for the arrest of Oscar Wilde. Bridge adjourned the court for an hour and a half, apparently to give Wilde time to make his escape from England on the last train to the Continent.

Wilde, however, had lapsed into "a pathetic state of indecision." Meeting with Douglas and his old friend Robert Ross at the Cadogan Hotel, Wilde wavered back and forth between staying and fleeing until, he said, "The train has gone--it is too late." When Wilde learned from a journalist calling at the hotel that a warrant had been issued, Wilde went "very gray in the face." He sat quietly in his chair drinking glass after glass of hock and seltzer. Soon Wilde's name was removed from the ads at playbills at the St. James Theatre, where *The Importance of Being Earnest* was still being performed.

The first criminal trial of Oscar Wilde opened at Old Bailey on April 26, 1895. Wilde and Alfred Taylor, the procurer of young men for Wilde, faced twenty-five counts of gross indecencies and conspiracy to commit gross indecencies. A parade of young male

witnesses for the prosecution testified regarding their roles in helping Wilde to act out his sexual fantasies. Although Wilde was not prosecuted for sodomy, there was little doubt by the end of the trial that he might have been. Almost all of them expressed shame and remorse over their own actions, and Wilde seemed to be left conflicted by their testimony. (Later Wilde compared his encounters with "feasting with panthers." Wilde wrote that "the danger was half the excitement.") On the fourth day of trial, Wilde took the stand. His arrogance of the first trial was gone. He answered questions quietly, denying all allegations of indecent behavior. The most memorable moment of the trial came in Wilde's response to a question about the meaning of a phrase in a poem of Lord Alfred Douglas. Prosecutor Charles Gill asked, "What is 'the Love that dare not speak its name'?" Wilde's response drew a loud applause--and a few hisses:

"The love that dare not speak its name" in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the "Love that dare not speak its name," and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it. Edward Clarke followed Wilde's testimony with a powerful summation on behalf of his client. Clarke closed by asking the jury to "gratify those thousands of hopes that are hanging on your decision" and "clear from this fearful imputation one of our most renowned and accomplished men of letters of today and, in clearing him, clear society from a stain." Clarke's closing speech left Wilde in tears, and he scribbled out a note of thanks which he passed to his counsel.

The jury deliberated for over three hours before concluding that they could not reach a verdict on most of the charges (the jury acquitted Wilde on charges relating to Frederick Atkins, one of the young men with whom he was accused of having engaged in a gross indecency.) On May 7, Wilde was released on bail to enjoy three weeks of freedom until the start of his second criminal trial.

The Liberal government determined to go all-out to secure a conviction in Wilde's second trial, even when people such as Queensberry's attorney Edward Carson were urging, "Can you not let up on this fellow now?" There is much speculation about the government's aggressive position on the Wilde case. Prime Minister Rosebery was suspected of having had a homosexual affair, when he was Foreign Minister, with Francis Douglas, another one of Queensberry's good-looking sons. It was shortly after Francis Douglas was "killed in a hunting accident" (probably a suicide), that Queensberry went on the rampage against Oscar Wilde. There is plausible evidence in the form of ambiguous letters to conclude that Rosebery was threatened with exposure by Queensberry or others if he failed to aggressively prosecute Wilde. It is interesting to note that during the two

months leading up to Wilde's conviction, Rosebery suffered from serious depression and insomnia. After Wilde's conviction, his health suddenly improved.

Wilde's second prosecution was headed by England's top prosecutor, Solicitor-General Frank Lockwood. Although the trial resembled in many ways the first, the prosecution dropped its weakest witnesses and focused more heavily on its strongest. Lockwood had the last word in the trial, and used it to offer what Wilde described as an "appalling denunciation [of me]--like something out of Tacitus, like a passage in Dante, like one of Savonarola's indictments of the Popes of Rome." After over three hours of deliberation, the jury returned its verdict: guilty on all counts except those relating to Edward Shelley. Wilde swayed slightly in the dock; his face turned gray. Some in the courtroom shouted "Shame!" while others expressed their approval of the verdict.

The Wilde trials caused public attitudes toward homosexuals to become harsher and less tolerant. Whereas prior to the trials there was a certain pity for those who engaged in same-sex passion, after the trials homosexuals were seen more as a threat. The Wilde trials had other effects as well. They caused the public to begin to associate art and homoeroticism and to see effeminacy as a signal for homosexuality. Many same-sex relationships seen as innocent before the Wilde trials became suspect after the trials. People with close same-sex relationships grew anxious, concerned about doing anything that might suggest impropriety.

Wilde served two years in prison, the last eighteen months being spent at Reading Gaol. He came out chastened and bankrupt, but not bitter. He told a friend that he "had gained much" in prison and was "ashamed on having led a life unworthy of an artist." In his prison writing, *De Profundis*, Wilde says, "I became a spendthrift of my genius and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy."

After his release from Reading Gaol, Wilde traveled in Europe. He died on November 30, 1900 in Paris.

"All trials are trials for one's life, just as all sentences are sentences of death, and three times I have been tried. The first time I left the box to be arrested, the second time to be led back to the house of detention, and the third time to pass into prison for two years. Society as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on just and unjust alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole." [Oscar Wilde, De Profundis]

<https://www.famous-trials.com/wilde>