

Wilde biography a balanced portrait

Oscar Wilde: The Double Image
By George Woodcock
Black Rose Books

review by Vivian Zenari

Oscar Wilde: *The Double Image* is a reissue of George Woodcock's 1949 *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde* with a new introduction. Woodcock successfully reconciles two disparate views of Wilde: that of upper-class dandy and that of social critic.

Wilde indeed seems to personify contradiction. He floated amongst the parlours of the English upper-class, accepted the fawning praise he received for his skill as a conversationalist with little humility and, in short typified the uninhibited existence he describes in his best-known works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Yet Wilde also satirized the upper-class and envisioned an anarchistic state without government and without social class.

Woodcock contends that the contradictions in Wilde's behaviour and writings are unified in Wilde's belief in individualism. Thus Wilde's decadence arose out of the philosophy that one must experience everything without limit in order to realize one's potential without limit. Likewise, Wilde advocated a nonauthoritarian socialism that would eliminate the need for people to shoulder the burdens of others and inhibit their freedom to improve themselves. Woodcock states that Wilde's tragedy was that he could not balance his playboy/philosopher tendencies, which led him to stay in England to defend himself against a charge of homosexuality which in fact was true. Even though Wilde had the opportunity to leave England, he remained so that he could justify himself to the state which he constantly maintained held no power over him.

George Woodcock, current editor of *Canadian Fiction Magazine* and Canadian man of letters, has not created a flawless study. His psychological profile of Wilde is sometimes simplistic, especially in his explanations about Wilde's homosexuality. And he openly admits to being sympathetic to Wilde's socialist philosophies; he includes

Wilde's tract *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* in full in the book. So, occasionally the book leans toward being a socialist manifesto. But perhaps, as Woodcock writes in the introduction, these lapses are a product of the thinking of the 1940s.

Generally, Woodcock maintains the reader's faith in the legitimacy of his conclusions. He is knowledgeable about the philosophies which influenced Wilde's beliefs, from Walter Pater's epicureanism to John Ruskin's theory of art, from Christianity to Taoism. He convincingly demonstrates how they affected Wilde's specific writings and behaviour. Particularly fine is his analysis of Wilde's florid writing style. Woodcock states that Wilde loved an audience, and when he did not have one right in front of him he lost his self-control and overwrote. His most successful pieces of writing, such as *Earnest*, were the ones that captured the simpler style of his conversation.

Although Woodcock intends the book to be a study of literary criticism, not biography, Woodcock leaves us most importantly with a sympathetic and balanced portrait of Wilde, whose sensational and ultimately tragic life has often overshadowed any discussion of his writings.

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