

# Oscar Wilde's sensational fall

by Gilbert Bouchard

Last Saturday, October 12, was the one hundred and thirty-first anniversary of Oscar Wilde's birth. Wilde, the Irish poet, wit, dramatist, and Victorian parlor personality, is famous for his plays, including *The Importance of Being Earnest*, his one novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and an assortment of poems, short stories, and fairy tales like the childhood favorite *The Happy Prince*.

But overshadowing Wilde's literary achievements was his tragic personal life and particularly his sensational fall from grace. You see, Oscar Wilde was a homosexual — unashamed and unabashed — in an age of such puritanical restraint that the legs of pianos were covered and referred to as 'limbs'. Wilde was not only tried for homosexuality; he was tried for both his sexual desires and for the flaunting of those desires. Homosexuals in Wilde's time — if they kept out of sight — could, and did, live quite well. The people who were caught and exposed were usually trapped by accident.

Wilde, on the other hand, asked for it. The victim of England's most famous sex trial brought his misfortunes upon himself by suing the father of his young lover for a slanderous note left at Wilde's club. Up to that point Wilde's sexual tastes — known to a fair number of his peers — had been begrudgingly tolerated and left alone. No gentleman would have dared expose a fellow gentleman. But Wilde, having taken his private affairs to a public forum, opened himself to all kinds of attacks and abuse.

Wilde's problems began in 1891 when he met up to a young Oxford undergraduate named Lord Alfred Douglas, son of the 9th (sporting) Marquess of Queensbury. Wilde immediately fell in love with the beautiful 21 year old and was launched into a long and contorted love affair. The love between Lord Alfred and Oscar set off the already unstable Queensbury, who proclaimed to all who could hear that his beloved son was being corrupted by the monstrous Wilde. The Marquess, who delighted in tormenting his wife and sons, took particular delight in harassing both Lord Alfred and the Irish wit.

The torments culminated on February 18, 1895 with the Marquess' famous note left at Wilde's club: a note accusing Wilde of "posing as a sodomite."



Had Wilde left the Marquess be, that famous note would have joined all the other hate mail and the virtual stream of abuse aimed at Oscar and Lord Alfred — in well deserved obscurity. But somehow Lord Alfred managed to convince Wilde that they

could break the spirit and be rid of the harassments of his father once and for all by suing him for slander. And for reasons unknown Wilde ignored all the advice of his friends and legal counsel and set in motion proceedings against the agitated Marquess.

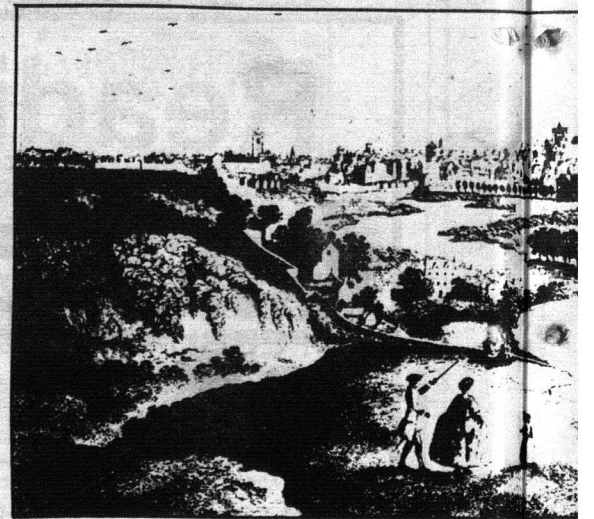
Stupidly, Wilde had played into the hands of his enemies. The Marquess, a lout and ruffian with a history of cruelty and sadism towards his family, came out of the trial with public sympathies and a verdict of 'not guilty'. The Marquess was seen as a distraught father trying to protect his young son from the corruption of a vile older pedophile, while Wilde endured two more trials before finally being convicted for a term of two years hard labour.

The very wit that had made Wilde the charm of London's salons, and one of the world's leading poets was also his greatest hinderance. As his wit had earned him many enemies, and had shocked too much of English polite society, his wit had also blinded him to the harsh realities of the courtroom. Where other men would have been more cautious and have tried to earn the jury's respect and sympathy, Wilde treated the entire trial as some perverse intellectual exercise and launched into witticism after witticism while on the stand. Unfortunately, the jury was not as educated and urbane as the friends that Oscar Wilde was used to entertaining with his wit, and the jury took Wilde's statements at face value. Wilde's testimony, outrageous, cutting and often impious, coupled with the testimony (enhanced by bribes from Queensbury and the prosecution) of a series of toughs and male prostitutes damned Wilde. He never stood a chance.

After his arrest immediately following his disastrous suit against Queensbury, Wilde had ample opportunity to escape. The friends of his who had posted his bail were more than willing to lose those funds to ensure Wilde's safety in France, but Wilde refused to leave the country. He sat out two trials, and the subsequent jail term with a stoic calm.

But why? Why did Oscar so persistently chase his destiny? Why did he so decidedly sentence himself to the humiliation of the

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- (2) To investigate complaints of sexual harassment at the University of Alberta;
- (3) To refer the results of its investigations to the appropriate grievance, or disciplinary body on campus or to legal authorities when warranted;
- (4) To forward to the President all confidential materials;
- (5) To report to the President at least annually.

— Alternate committee members do not attend committee meetings during the year so the time commitment is not demanding, but are asked to serve on an assessment or investigative panel once a year.

**Deadline For Applications:** 4:00 p.m., Friday, 18 October 1985. For Applications and Information, Contact the Students' Executive Offices, Room 259 Students' Union Building (SUB) (Noon, 1:00 to 4:30 p.m.)