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Additions and Corrections to  
**Richard Ellmann's**  
*OSCAR WILDE*

second edition  
revised and enlarged

Braunschweig 2002  
privately printed

# ***BEGINNINGS***

## ***Chapter I***

**[3 / 3] Portora Royal School ... was a good school, though to call it ‘the Eton of Ireland,’ as the headmaster and Wilde’s mother did, was pretentious.**

The epithet derives neither from the headmaster of Portora nor from Wilde’s mother, but from Walter Hamilton, the authority cited by Ellmann.

**[3 / 3] ... interviewed for the *Biograph*, an English annual ...**

The periodical was a monthly, and its full title was *The Biograph and Review*.

**[3 / 3] The letter Wilde wrote from there [Portora School] survives only in a fragment.**

In 1962 only a fragment of the letter could be published, because Rupert Hart-Davis had to content himself with the snippets advertised in the Stetson sale catalogue of 1920 (*Letters*, 3 and n. 2). The original of the letter has, however, since been traced, and the letter has been published in its entirety in *Compl. Letters*, 3-4.

**[4 / 4] More than aesthetic preference lay behind his eagerness to read his mother’s new poem in the *National Review*. It bore the patriotic title ‘To Ireland’ ...**

From Ellmann’s context it would seem as if the poem had been published in September 1868. It was in the August

issue of the *National Review*, however, that ‘To Ireland’ first saw the light of day (vol. 1, no. 3, p. 60).

**[5 / 5] ‘Aunt Warren’ in the letter was Lady Wilde’s much older sister, Emily Thomazine, who in 1829 had married Samuel Warren ...**

The correct spelling of the second name is Thomasine. (Melville, 4, 7).

**[6 / 6] ‘... Let Speranza, if you will allow my canonisation, work the miracle of your restoration ...’**

For ‘allow’ read ‘admit.’ (David J. O’Donoghue, *The Life of William Carleton* [London 1896], II, 139.)

**[6 / 6] Her [Lady Wilde’s] father, Charles Elgee (1783 – 1821) ...**

It is now believed that Speranza’s father left Ireland for India shortly after 1821 and that he died there in 1824. (Melville, 5).

**[6 / 6] Further back, Lady Wilde’s paternal great-grandfather, Charles Elgee (1709-87), was a well-off farmer in County Down; another ancestor on her mother’s side was English: a bricklayer (died 1805) who emigrated from County Durham in the 1770s because of the Irish building boom.**

Lady Wilde’s paternal ancestors hailed from County Durham, England. Both her great-grandfather Charles Elgee (1714-1787) as well as his eldest brother William (born

1705) earned their living as bricklayers there before they emigrated to Ireland in the early 1730s and became prosperous builders in Dundalk, Co. Louth. – The ‘well-off farmer in County Down’ was a maternal great-great-grandfather of Speranza’s. (Brian de Breffny, ‘Speranza’s Ancestry,’ *Irish Ancestor*, vol. 4 [1972], 94, 97-99; Melville, 3).

**[8 / 9] Oscar Wilde would comment later, ‘Where there is no extravagance there is no love, and where there is no love there is no understanding.’**

For ‘extravagance’ read ‘exaggeration.’ (*Reviews*, 539).

**[9 / 9] When someone asked her to receive a young woman who was ‘respectable,’ she replied, ‘You must never employ that description in this house. It is only tradespeople who are respectable. We are above respectability.’**

The remark may have been inspired by Speranza’s idol, Elizabeth Barrett Browning: ‘Since when was genius found respectable?’ (*Aurora Leigh*, VI, 275).

**[9 / 9] ‘You, and other poets, are content to express only your little soul in poetry ...’**

For ‘your little soul’ read ‘your own little soul.’

**[9 / 10] She claimed her aquiline look came from having been an eagle in a previous existence.**

This is a very odd metamorphosis of Speranza's actual remark: 'I like ambition. In a previous existence I was an eagle.' (Henriette Corkran, *Celebrities and I* [London 1902], 138).

**[10 / 10] William Robert Wilde, who married Jane Elgee on 14 November 1851, was worthy of her regard.**

The first names of Oscar's father were William Robert Wills. He married Jane Elgee on 12 November 1851. (De Breffny, 'Speranza's Ancestry,' 101).

**[10 / 10] Ralph's son Thomas, a physician, married Amalia Flynn (born about 1776).**

For 'Flynn' read 'Fynn.' (Brian de Breffny, 'The Paternal Ancestry of Oscar Wilde,' *Irish Ancestor*, vol. 5 [1973], 97, 99).

**[10 / 10 f.] When a census of Ireland was undertaken in 1851, Wilde was appointed Census Commissioner to organize the collection of medical information.**

Wilde's status was that of Assistant Commissioner. (P. Froggatt, 'Sir William Wilde and the 1851 Census of Ireland,' *Medical History*, vol. 9 [1965], 306.)

**[10 / 11] He was appointed Surgeon Oculist to the Queen in Ireland in 1863 ...**

For '1863' read '1853.' (Anon., 'Sir William R. Wilde,' *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 85 [1875], 581; Walter Hamilton, *The Aesthetic Movement in England* [London

1882], 85; T. G. Wilson, *Victorian Doctor: Being the Life of Sir William Wilde* [London 1942], 212).

**[11\* / 11\*] Reports circulated later that during his stay in Sweden Wilde had operated on King Oscar's eye, and while the king was temporarily blinded, seduced the Queen. The Boccaccian rumour was sufficiently widespread for Crown Prince Gustave on a visit to Dublin to claim waggishly that he was Oscar Wilde's half-brother. The Wildes did meet the royal family once in Uppsala, but the royal archives give no evidence of Wilde's having operated on the king. Nor of the king's having agreed to be godfather to Oscar Wilde.**

The reports are so absurd that Ellmann would really have done better without this footnote. After all, when the Wildes visited Sweden in 1862, the ruling monarch was not 'King Oscar,' but Charles XV (1859-1872), and it was not until ten years later that Charles's younger brother succeeded to the throne as Oscar II (1872-1907). And the future Crown Prince Gustave had already been born in 1858, four years before the Wildes' visit. (Cf. also Walter W. Nelson, *Oscar Wilde and Sweden. A Summing Up* [Lund 2000], 2-4.)

**[14 / 14] When Mary Travers discovered this letter of 6 May 1864 among her father's papers, she sued Lady Wilde for libel.**

The letter is published in Pearson, 14.

**[15 / 15] In April 1873 the Royal Academy of Ireland conferred on him its highest honour, the Cunningham Gold Medal.**

The month was March 1873. (Anon., ‘Sir William R. Wilde,’ *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 85 [1875], 587).

**[15 / 16] The first [child], William Robert Kingsbury Wills Wilde ...**

For ‘Robert’ read ‘Charles.’ (Melville, 56).

**[15 / 16] [The first child, Willie,] inspired her to write, ‘Alas! the Fates are cruel. / Behold Speranza making gruel.’**

The doggerel was not of Speranza’s making, but was the brain-child of some visitor who saw her over her saucepans in the nursery. (Melville, 57).

**[15 / (16)] ... their [the Wildes’] better address at 1 Merrion Square West.**

‘West’ is a slip for ‘North.’ (*Letters*, xxii [*Compl. Letters*, viii]). (In the American edition the side of the square is not mentioned.)

**[16 / 17] He did not like it, however, when William Archer referred to him casually in print as ‘Oscar.’**

There is more to this than meets the eye in Ellmann’s bald remark, for in a review of *An Ideal Husband* in the *World* of 9 January 1895, William Archer said that it could not be agreeable to Wilde ‘to be familiarly hailed by the gallery as “Oscar,” like a favourite music-hall artist ... who has just done a screaming “turn.” My sympathies, however, are entirely with the gallery. They have a perfect right to take

him at his own valuation. There are two men behind that enigmatic mask: Oscar and Wilde, the - I had almost said the mountebank - and the artist; and when the worser is predominant, we naturally accord him the treatment he invites ...' Wilde took offence at this, and objected in an interview with Ross in the *St James's Gazette* of 18 January 1895. (Repr. Mikhail, I, 248, and *More Letters*, 193).

**[17 / 18] ... she [Speranza] has been described by Thomas Flanagan as 'the silliest woman who ever lived' ...**

'One of the silliest women who ever set pen to paper' was Flanagan's verdict.

**[17 / 18] Soon after Isola's birth the Swedish writer, Lotten von Kraemer, then a very young woman, accompanied her father, Baron Robert von Kraemer, the governor of Uppsala, on a visit to the Wildes when the British Association came to Ireland in July 1857.**

At the time of this visit, Lotten von Kraemer (born 6 August 1828) was already close to 29 years of age. (*Svenska Män Och Kvinnor*, vol. 4 [Stockholm 1948], 328).

**[18 / 19] Michael MacLiammoir commented, 'Yes, that would explain it all. Oscar probably upset Edward's sandcastle.'**

I have not been able to verify this reference.

**[18 / 19] Perhaps a year or two later they were at Glencree in the Wicklow mountains. They took a farm**

house ... less than a mile from the newly opened Glencree Reformatory. The Reformatory chaplain, the Reverend L. C. Prideaux Fox ..., visited them. William Wilde expressed his bitter opposition to reformatories, but his wife enjoyed the chaplain's company, and even asked if she could bring her children to his chapel ... Father Fox, himself a convert, wrote, 'It was not long before she asked me to instruct two of her children, one of them being that future erratic genius, Oscar Wilde. After a few weeks I baptized these two children, Lady Wilde herself being present on the occasion.' Oscar would have been perhaps between four and five.

As a matter of fact, Oscar was eight or nine years old at this baptism which probably took place in 1862 or 1863. This is the date given by Mason (118 n.), and it also follows implicitly from Ellmann himself who, immediately preceding this passage, had discussed a summer holiday which the Wildes had spent at Dungarvan (where Oscar is said to have played on the seashore with his crossexaminer-to-be Edward Carson) and which he had dated 1859. (557 / 595 n. 62). – As Boris Brasol notes, there is no record, though, at Glencree of Oscar's baptism. (*Oscar Wilde: The Man, the Artist, the Martyr* [New York 1938 (repr. 1975)], 376 f.).

**[20 / 21] 'Willie is my kingdom,' she wrote on 22 November 1854, and announced, 'I will rear him a Hero ...'**

The second half of Speranza's boastful pronunciamento is from her letter of 21 November 1852 to her 'unnamed Scottish correspondent.' (Melville, 57). Cf. 15 / 16 and 557 / 594 n. 46.

**[20 / 21 f.] By 1865 Lady Wilde was remarking impartially in a letter, ‘My two boys have gone to a public school.’**

The letter (to Mrs Olivecrona) was written in April 1864. (Melville, 87; White, 182).

**[22 / 23] Another pupil at the school was Edward (later Sir Edward) Sullivan ...**

Ellmann had already made use of Sullivan’s memoir in the preceding paragraph.

**[22 / 23] In ‘The Critic as Artist’ Wilde would attribute the foundation of social intercourse to whoever ‘first, without ever having gone out to the chase, told the wandering cavemen at sunset how he had ... slain the Mammoth in single combat.’**

The point of reference is not ‘The Critic as Artist,’ but ‘The Decay of Lying.’ Apart from that, ‘the chase’ should read ‘the rude chase,’ and ‘the wandering cavemen’ should read ‘the wondering cavemen.’ (*Intentions*, 2nd ed. [London 1894], 28). – It may be noted in passing that the above spelling mistake is also to be found in *CW*, 1081.

**[23 / 24] As Wilde said later, ‘The impossible in art is anything that has happened in real life.’**

The epigram is repeated on p. 285\* / 303\*.

**[23 / 24] ... Because of appeals it was heard three times at the Court of Arches ... Wilde was fascinated by the**

**mysterious name of the court, derived from the arched steeple of its original site.**

The court was held in the church of St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside (*Beata Maria de Arcubus*). The name is probably derived from the arches of the Norman crypt. (*The London Encyclopaedia*, ed. Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert [London 1983], 741).

**[24 / 25] On her partial recovery, she was sent, for a change of air, to stay with her uncle, the Reverend William Noble, at Mastrim (Edgworthtown).**

The places are called Mostrim and Edgeworthstown. (Mason, 295).

**[24 / 25] ‘Tread lightly, she is near / Under the snow, / Speak gently, she can hear / The lilies grow ...’**

For ‘lilies’ read ‘daisies.’ (CW, 748).

**[26 / 28] From Wilde’s point of view Mahaffy, Mahaffy lacked charm and style.**

Wilde’s criticism is repeated on p. 272 / 288.

**[26 / 28] ... George Russell asked Mahaffy to sign a petition of protest against the knouting of peasants by the Czar of Russia ...**

Russell did not ask Mahaffy to sign a petition of protest, but to ‘write to *The Times* and use [his] influence about it.’ (Oliver St John Gogarty, ‘The Most Magnificent Snob I Ever Knew (2),’ *Irish Times*, 11 July 1962, p. 8).

**[27 / 28] ‘They had not the creative imagination and the power of the Greeks to give life to the dry bones of their abstractions ...’**

For ‘the creative imagination and the power’ read ‘the creative imaginative power.’ (Smith & Helfand, 123).

**[29 / 30] The interminable German novel, *The First Temptation, or ‘Sicut Eritis Deus’*, by M. Schwab, of which Lady Wilde published a translation in 1863, was the history of an overweening aesthete who turned aesthetics into a religion of beauty and died tragically.**

Ellmann might have added that the German original, the correct subtitle of which is *Eritis sicut deus*, had been published as recently as 1854 and that, with its criticism of contemporary theology, the novel had achieved a *succès de scandale* (second edition 1855). The book had been published anonymously. Its author was long supposed to be some Marie Schwab, until Wilhelmine Friederike Gottliebe Canz (1815-1901) owned up to having written the book. (*Biographisches Jahrbuch*, vol. 6 [1901], 78; *Deutsches Anonymen-Lexikon*, vol. 5 [1909], 97). – It is true, in Ellmann’s Index (623 / 666) the true authorship is hinted at, but this should have been elaborated in the main text.

**[31 / (32)] Its final chapter confirmed the all-importance of the word ‘aesthetic.’ It was not that Symonds coined it; Baumgartner had done that in 1750.**

The name of the German philosopher was Baumgarten. The publication referred to is Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica*, a work published in two parts 1750-1758. – The spelling mistake recurs on p. 85 / (88).

**[32 / 33] At Trinity ... he had rooms in a building known as Botany Bay.**

Botany Bay is the name of the square on the north side of which Oscar had rooms.

**[33 / 35] One of the four other candidates [was] G. T. Atkinson ...**

There were in fact eighteen other candidates for the two Classical Demys at Magdalen. (Vernier, 5).

**[34 / 35 f.] ‘Who never ate his bread in sorrow, / Who never spent the midnight hours / Weeping and wailing for the morrow, / He knows you not, ye heavenly powers.’**

For ‘midnight’ read ‘darksome,’ for ‘wailing’ read ‘watching,’ and for ‘heavenly’ read ‘gloomy.’ (*Letters*, 472 n. 2 [*Compl. Letters*, 736 n. 2]).

**[34 / 36] The Wildes were delighted with their stay, and Lady Wilde wrote to her friend in Sweden, Mrs Rosalie Olivecrona, wife of a professor, ...**

Rosalie Olivecrona (1823-1898) is remembered first of all not as the ‘wife of a professor,’ but as a writer in her own right. (*Svenska Män Och Kvinnor*, vol. 5 [Stockholm 1949], 629).

**[34 / 36] Lady Wilde wrote to Mrs Olivecrona on 31 December 1874 ...**

The letter was written a year later. (Melville, 125).