

Entertainment

How a trip to the US influenced Oscar Wilde



Oxford University Press

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By **THE WASHINGTON POST** |

August 3, 2018 at 6:45 am

By **Alexander C. Kafka** | **Washington Post**

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“The Critic as Artist.” “Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”

Wilde wore many masks during his too short life. He was an academic classicist, a poet and a didactic aesthete. He was an aphorist, a progressive journalist, a provocative essayist and a tragedian. He was a British elitist, but also, paradoxically, an Irish nationalist and a homosexual martyr.

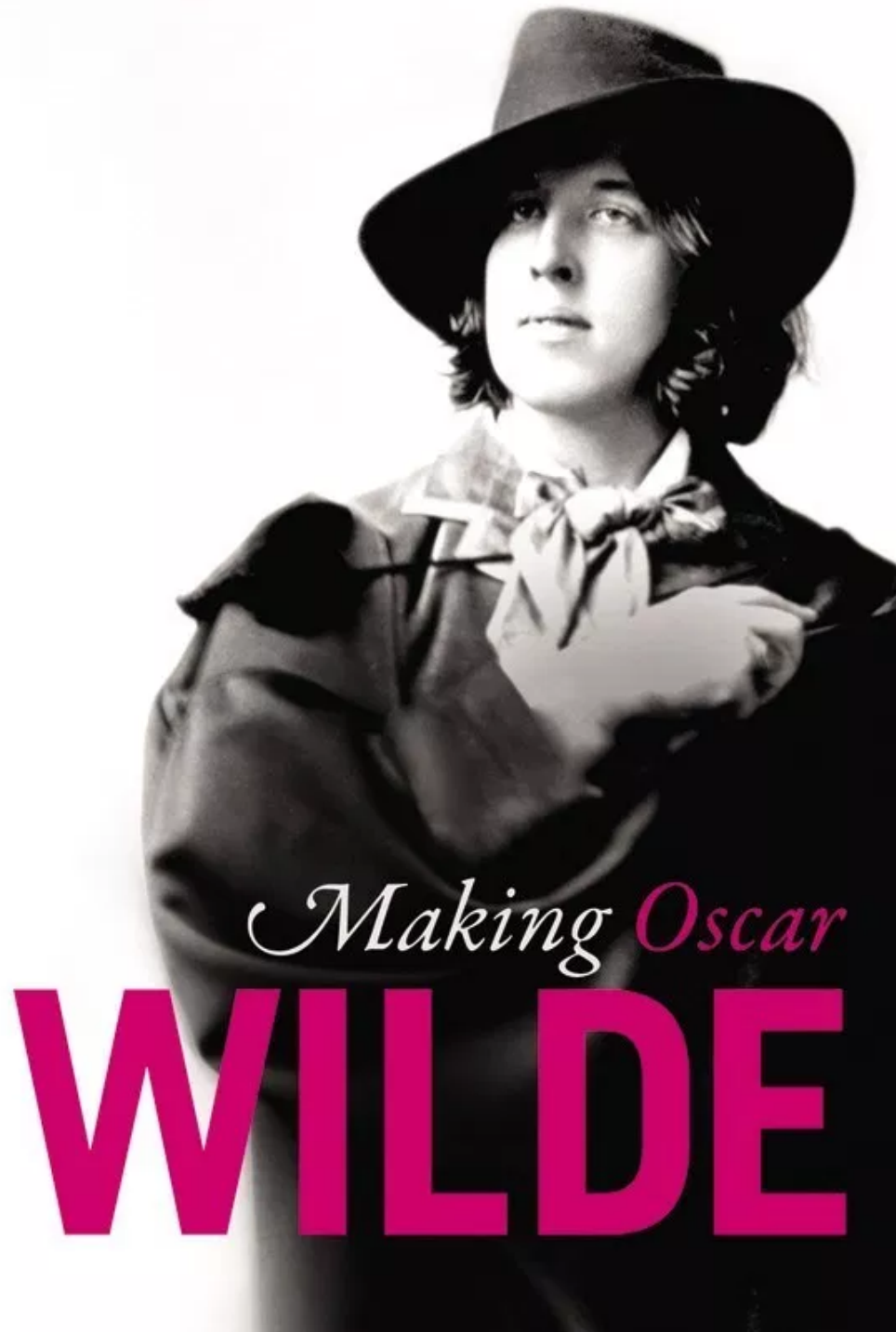
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His most indelible persona, however, was that of the brilliant late-Victorian wit.

In an astonishing burst of productivity in the early 1890s, he wrote the blockbuster comedic plays “Lady Windermere’s Fan,” “A Woman of No Importance,” “An Ideal Husband” and “The Importance of Being Earnest.” Nothing in Wilde’s prior output hinted at such ebullience or the sustained addictive battiness of his aristocrat caricatures.

MICHÈLE MENDELSSOHN



Making Oscar Wilde, by Michele Mendelssohn Oxford University Press

But the concoction, she explains in her provocative “Making Oscar Wilde,” had been simmering for a decade. Combine erudition acquired at Trinity College, Dublin, and Oxford with, of all things, minstrelsy.

Minstrelsy? Really? What could be further from Wilde’s highbrow high jinks than that racist, degrading American and English entertainment for the masses?

It’s a hard contrast to process, but Mendelssohn’s detailed examination – geared more to the devout Wildephile than to the casual fan – is compelling.

The catalyst, Mendelssohn explains, was Wilde’s 1882 lecture tour of America, in which he was laughed at as much as with and where the kaleidoscope of virulent American racism and nationalism cast him simultaneously as a British cultural authority and an Irish laughingstock. The Irish, like blacks, were at the low end of the period’s social hierarchy.

This was not the later accomplished Wilde, but the early Wilde of pretentious pronouncement and vague promise. Eager for fame but ready to settle for notoriety, he was sent to the States by Richard D’Oyly Carte as a promotional gimmick to boost the box office for “Patience,” the Gilbert and Sullivan comedic opera that satirized Wilde’s aesthetic movement. Experts argue over whether Wilde was a significant inspiration for the poet character Bunthorne in “Patience.” Regardless, the two shared physical, intellectual and sartorial characteristics, and Wilde was a suitable dunking-booth representative.

While Wilde lectured on aesthetics as, essentially, a caricature of himself, he had to compete with parodies, some by minstrel troupes, of himself and of “Patience,” too. In other words, parodies of parodies. Cartoonists portrayed Wilde, or Wildesque characters, as a black minstrel or a monkey, with the aesthetes’ iconic sunflower.

Many Americans truly were hungry for some Old World guidance on aesthetic philosophy and its application to home decor. Wilde’s audiences, then, often minimal, were a disconcerting combination of true believers and rowdy hecklers. His mystique was amplified by tour photos taken by his official portraitist Napoleon Sarony: Wilde in knee breeches, for instance, reclining sensuously on a fur rug. He was a photographic Rorschach test: Some saw his large, carefully turned out figure as strikingly manly, some as feminine and some as a baffling composite.

An odd thing happened during this harrowing tour. Wilde, the clever but somewhat vacuous celebrity poseur, became an increasingly passionate

Wilde would later reconfigure the Americans' provincial attacks against him and commodify them into concentrated doses of dizzy drama, Mendelssohn argues. Toying with fashionable French literary conventions, he internalized the minstrel mockery of high society and made it his own distinctive whiteface brand.

Mendelssohn's scrupulous account humanizes Wilde, often unflatteringly. He was an unrepentant racist who alternately dismissed or fetishized blacks, bragged about his white-supremacist uncle and toadied up to Jefferson Davis and other Confederate stalwarts, drawing parallels between Southern secessionism and Irish republicanism.

But if the American crowd mentality distressed Wilde, its iconoclasts impressed him – particularly Walt Whitman, whose pansexual outlook helped incline Wilde toward a more forthright assessment of his own predilections. He carried back to England, too, a spirit of American feminism that influenced his politics and journalism.

At the height of his fame, Wilde was convicted of sodomy and sentenced to two years in prison at hard labor. Afterward, physically compromised and having lost his family, his fortune and his reputation, he changed his name and took his grief to the continent, dying in Paris of meningitis at 46.

Wilde the wit, the aesthete and the social commentator, partly fashioned in the furnace of an unruly America, continues to be relevant.

Mendelssohn writes: "His story is intertwined with the history of Anglo-American society as it grappled with massive waves of immigration, nationalist movements, racial and ethnic conflicts, political upheavals, new media technologies and a sensation-hungry press. ... It was a time that resembles our own in many ways."

Kafka has written about books for The Washington Post, the Boston Globe and the Chicago Tribune.

Making Oscar Wilde

By Michele Mendelssohn

Oxford University Press. 368 pp. \$24.95

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