

Oscar Wilde's rich and dramatic portrayals of the human condition came during the height of the Victorian Era that swept through London in the late 19th century. At a time when all citizens of Britain were finally able to embrace literature the wealthy and educated could only once afford, Wilde wrote many short stories, plays and poems that continue to inspire millions around the world.

By the time William Wilde, Oscar's father, was 28, he had graduated as a doctor, completed a voyage to Madeira, Teneriffe, North Africa and the Middle East, studied at Moorfields Eye Hospital in London, written two books and been appointed medical advisor to the Irish Census of 1841. When the medical

statistics were published two years later they contained data which had not been collected in any other country at the time, and as a result, William became the Assistant Commissioner to the 1851 Census. He held the same position for the two succeeding Censuses and, in 1864, he was knighted for his work on them. When William opened a Dublin practice specializing in ear and eye diseases, he felt he should make some provision for the free treatment of the city's poor population. In 1844, he founded St. Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital, built entirely at his own expense.

Before he married, William fathered three children. Henry Wilson was born in 1838, Emily in 1847 and Mary in 1849. To William's credit, he provided financial support for all of them. He paid for Henry's education and medical studies, eventually hiring him into St. Mark's Hospital as an assistant. Sadly, Mary and Emily, who were raised by William's brother, both died in a fire at the ages of 22 and 24.

Oscar's mother, Jane Francesca Elgee, first gained attention in 1846 when she began writing revolutionary poems under the pseudonym "Speranza" for a weekly Irish newspaper, *The Nation*. In 1848, as the country's famine worsened and the Year of Revolution took hold of Europe, the newspaper offices were raided and had to close. Jane, who was also a gifted linguist with working knowledge of the

major European languages, went on to translate Wilhelm Meinhold's gothic horror novel 'Sidonia the Sorceress.' Oscar would later read the translation with relish, and draw on it for the darker elements of his own work.

Jane's first child, William "Willie" Charles Kingsbury, was born on September 26, 1852 and her second, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie, on October 16, 1854. The daughter she had longed for, Isola Emily Francesca, was delivered on April 2, 1857. Ten years later, however, Emily died from a sudden fever. Oscar was profoundly affected by the loss of his sister, and for his lifetime he carried a lock of her hair sealed in a decorated envelope.

Willie and Oscar attended the Portora Royal School at Enniskillen, where Oscar excelled at studying the classics, taking top prize his last two years, and also earning a second prize in drawing. In 1871, Oscar was awarded the Royal School Scholarship to attend Trinity College in Dublin. Again, he did particularly well in his classics courses, placing first in his examinations in 1872 and earning the highest honor the college could bestow on an undergraduate, a Foundation Scholarship. In 1874, Oscar crowned his successes at Trinity with two final achievements. He won the college's Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek and was awarded a Demyship scholarship to Magdalen College in Oxford.

Oscar's father died on April 19, 1876, leaving the family financially strapped. Henry, William's eldest

son, paid the mortgage on the family's house and supported them until his sudden death in 1877. Meanwhile, Oscar continued to do well at Oxford. He was awarded the Newdigate prize for his poem, 'Ravenna,' and a First Class in both his "Mods" and "Greats" by his examiners. After graduation, Oscar moved to London to live with his friend Frank Miles, a popular high society portrait painter. In 1881, he published his first collection of poetry. 'Poems' received mixed reviews by critics, but helped to move Oscar's writing career along.

In December 1881, Oscar sailed for New York to travel across the United States and deliver a series of lectures on aesthetics. The 50-lecture tour was originally scheduled to last four months, but stretched to nearly a year, with over 140 lectures given in 260 days. In between lectures he made time to meet with Henry Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Walt Whitman. He also arranged for his play, 'Vera,' to be staged in New York the following year. When he returned from America, Oscar spent three months in Paris writing a blank-verse tragedy that had been commissioned by the actress Mary Anderson. When he sent it to her, however, she turned it down. He then set off on a lecture tour of Britain and Ireland.

On May 29, 1884, Oscar married Constance Lloyd. Constance was four years younger than Oscar and the daughter of a prominent barrister who died when she was 16. She was well-read, spoke several European languages and had an outspoken, independent mind. Oscar and Constance had two sons in quick succession, Cyril in 1885 and Vyvyan in 1886. With a family to support, Oscar accepted a job

revitalizing the Woman's World magazine, where he worked from 1887-1889. The next six years were to become the most creative period of his life. He published two collections of children's stories, 'The Happy Prince and Other Tales' (1888), and 'The House of Pomegranates' (1892). His first and only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, was published in an American magazine in 1890 to a storm of critical protest. He expanded the story and had it published in book form the following year. Its implied homoerotic theme was considered very immoral by the Victorians and played a considerable part in his later legal trials. Oscar's first play, 'Lady Windermere's Fan' opened in February 1892. Its financial and critical success prompted him to continue to write for the theater. His subsequent plays included 'A Woman of No Importance' (1893), 'An Ideal Husband' (1895), and 'The Importance of Being Earnest' (1895). These plays were all highly acclaimed and firmly established Oscar as a playwright. In the summer of 1891, Oscar met Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas, the third son of the Marquis of Queensberry. Bosie was well acquainted with Oscar's novel 'Dorian Gray' and was an undergraduate at Oxford. They soon became lovers and were inseparable until Wilde's arrest four years later. In April 1895, Oscar sued Bosie's father for libel as the Marquis had accused him of homosexuality. Oscar withdrew his case but was himself arrested and convicted of gross indecency and sentenced to two years hard labor. Constance took the children to Switzerland and reverted to an old family name, 'Holland.'

Upon his release, Oscar wrote 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol,' a response to the agony he experienced in prison. It was published shortly before Constance's death in 1898. He and Bosie reunited briefly, but Oscar mostly spent the last three years of his life wandering Europe, staying with friends and living in

cheap hotels. Sadly, he was unable to rekindle his creative fires. When a recurrent ear infection became serious several years later, meningitis set in, and Oscar Wilde died on November 30, 1900.

Numerous books and articles have been written on Oscar Wilde, reflecting on the life and contributions of this unconventional author since his death over a hundred years ago. A celebrity in his own time, Wilde's indelible influence will remain as strong as ever and keep audiences captivated in perpetuity.