Oscar's Mirror

By Michael G Cronin

In *Borstal Boy* (1958), Brendan Behan's fictionalized younger self finds a fellow Borstal inmate reading Frank Harris's *Life of Oscar Wilde*. The teenage Brendan is serving time for his part in a failed IRA bombing campaign in Britain at the beginning of the Second World War. We are not surprised then to learn that in his childhood Brendan had conflated the story of Wilde's imprisonment with the heroic tales of Irish rebels at the bar of British justice in which, as the child of a Republican family, he was steeped. Even when he began to suspect that it had something to do with sex, and asked his mother why Wilde was jailed he remembers her replying vaguely "his downfall—they brought him down the same as they did Parnell," a reply conceding that Wilde's was a sexual scandal, while insisting on the interpretive framework of British injustice towards an Irish patriot. In the prison library Brendan is now told exactly why Wilde was

imprisoned. He responds with studied insouciance— "every tinker has his own way of dancing"—keen to stymie his worldly fellow inmate's satisfaction at shocking "Paddy," But since we have already seen the emotional intensity and palpable homoeroticism of Brendan's friendship with an imprisoned young English sailor, Charlie, we can assume that this revelation about Wilde is more intimately charged for Brendan than his response suggests.

EIBHEAR WALSHE
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Behan's deft employment of the Wilde figure to convey the complex tempo of his young protagonist's political and sexual formation encapsulates a twentieth-century history of such uses in Irish literary and political discourse. It is this century-long history which Eibhear Walshe maps so assiduously in *Oscar's Shadow*. There are two salient currents running through his account. One is the recurring debates about Wilde's Irishness, differing perspectives on the significance of his Irish background for understanding his work, along with varied interpretations of his imprisonment within a nationalist, or latterly postcolonial, framework. The other is the equally recurring engagement with his queerness, from silence, obfuscation and homophobia during much of the twentieth century to the active mobilization of Wilde as a powerful totem for contemporary Irish lesbians and gay men. As Walshe describes it, the relationship between these currents has been fraught.

The book is organized chronologically, beginning with the coverage in the Irish press of Wilde's three trials and imprisonment in 1895. Comparing this with the coverage in the English press, we see the same reticence about the precise nature of Wilde's crime and a concomitant tendency to represent Wilde's body, especially his dandified mode of self-presentation, as the site of disturbance. In other words, in the press focus on Wilde's physicality we can already see that powerful alignment of disparate ideas about sexuality, gender and class into the historically novel homosexual "type" that would characterize the twentieth century; a process crucially determined by the powerful cultural figure of post-imprisonment Wilde, as Alan Sinfield has demonstrated. But, as Walshe argues, the coverage in the nationalist Irish press was much less overtly homophobic and displayed a marked sympathy for Wilde. This was partly out of respect for his mother, "Speranza," and her contribution to cultural nationalism, but, more generally, it was a historical function of the nationalist critique of the imperial administration and a reflex support for any Irishman at odds with the British establishment. On the other hand, comparing the coverage of Wilde's trial with the 1884 trial of a group of Dublin Castle officials charged with sodomy and the coverage of the Irish Crown Jewels affair in 1907—when accusations of homosexuality were raised against the officials responsible for the security of the stolen jewels— it is clear that the nationalist press could be just as homophobic when colonial officials were in question, and there was much emphasis on homosexuality as a "foreign vice." (Walshe's account of the 1884 trial is one of the book's more fascinating sections, offering a glimpse into a hitherto little known same-sex male subculture in Victorian Dublin.)

This discrepancy—enthusiasm for Wilde's Irishness, unease with his homosexuality—is a recurring motif in the subsequent century of efforts to assimilate Wilde to the history of Irish nationalist, anti-colonial struggle. As Walshe demonstrates in the second chapter, this was particularly intense in the immediate aftermath of Wilde's death, which also coincided with the rich ferment of political and cultural activity during Ireland's revolutionary period. Walshe discusses a selection of essays by Joyce, Yeats, Shaw, and the other major writers of the period, charting how they each deployed Wilde to express their ideas about art and politics. In particular, he argues, Wilde "was commandeered by fellow Anglo-Irish writers to become part of a particular tradition of Irish nationalist discourse…his Protestant Anglo-Irish identity became an important protection for his homosexuality, as it was intertwined in these accounts with his mother's status as a nationalist poet" (18).

By contrast, the decades after independence appear rather fallow in Walshe's account; this is indicated by his extended discussion of Kate O'Brien's banned novel *The Land of Spices* (1941) and the Seanad debate on censorship, a now well-covered incident and only very tenuously connected to Wilde. In the later chapters, covering the period from 1980 to the present, Walshe demonstrates how the effort to position Wilde within Irish history was resumed with gusto in literary criticism, scholarly biographies, speeches, essay and plays. While surveying this work in some detail, Walshe reiterates Lucy McDiarmid's skeptical dismantling of the trope of "Wilde in the dock as an Irish patriot" (still used in the 1990s by Seamus Heaney in a speech and subsequent essay, for instance). Likewise, echoing Alan Sinfield, Walshe argues that even in the more radical postcolonial versions of Wilde the discussion of his homosexuality continued to be deeply problematic, dependent on outmoded notions of gender inversion in Terry Eagleton's play *Saint Oscar* (1989), or effaced by a postmodern notion of indeterminacy and subversion in Declan Kiberd's literary criticism. As Walshe notes, "Rebel Wilde… always subsumed the spectre of Queer Wilde" (93).

Walshe is considerably more appreciative of those attempts by Irish writers to foreground Wilde's queer sexuality and reclaim him as a gay forefather. A key figure here is Micheál MacLiammóir, whose life and career is discussed at length in the middle chapters. MacLiammóir's trajectory was a curious obverse of Wilde's; an Englishman who moved to Ireland and adopted a highly stylized Irish persona, and whose sexuality was a potent open secret. His hugely successful one-man show, *The Importance of Being Oscar*, with its fascinating lapses and expressive silences about Wilde's sexuality, paved the way for the more explicit engagement with Wilde by Irish gay writers after decriminalization in 1993. Walshe discusses this work in some detail in the final chapter, situating it historically in relation to the evolution of the lesbian and gay rights movement and paying particular attention to three novelists: Colm Tóibín, Jamie O'Neill and Emma Donoghue. For these writers, Wilde offers a richly productive route into imaginatively recreating a sustaining sense of gay history for contemporary lesbians and gay men—a project which is ultimately concerned with transforming the present and the future. This avowedly queer project moved in tandem with a vibrant new appreciation of Wilde in Irish mainstream culture—plaques and statues erected to commemorate his death, for instance. Though, as Walshe points out in conclusion, a debate in the letters pages of the newspapers in 2010 about renaming Merrion Square as Oscar Wilde Gardens demonstrates that Wilde can still disturb Irish public discourse.

As Walshe acknowledges, the model for *Oscar's Shadow is* Sinfield's *The Wilde Century* (1994), which mapped the complex, contradictory ideas about sex and gender identity mobilized around the figure of Wilde in twentieth-century English culture. While primarily a literary critic, Sinfield drew on diverse material, including memoirs, oral histories and other works of social history; the book is studded with illuminating vignettes about the resonance attached to Wilde across the social spectrum. Aside from the examination of the press archives in the early chapter, Walshe mainly discusses works of literature and literary criticism; in other words, the discussion is largely confined to elite discourse and one gets little sense of how Wilde was viewed more generally in the society. In particular, one gets little sense of what Wilde may have meant to those Irish men who, as Walshe reminds us, continued to be harassed and imprisoned under the same law well into the twentieth century. There may, of course, be a practical explanation for this—the absence of such sources.

However, the comparison with Sinfield's work also raises a significant conceptual problem. For Sinfield, the Wilde figure continued to be so powerfully charged into the late twentieth century because the ideas about sex and gender clustered around that figure remain so intensely volatile and contradictory, even after second-wave feminism and gay liberation. By contrast, for Colm Tóibín or Jamie O'Neill the figure of Wilde tends to prefigure a more settled post-Stonewall, egalitarian ideal of middle-class gay masculinity, and Walshe's sympathetic reading leaves the politics of this largely unexamined. To use Walshe's own trope, Oscar's shadow may alternatively be Oscar's mirror— reassuringly reflecting back to us what we want to see. This lacuna in Walshe's analysis stands in contrast with the rigorous critique he rightly applies to Marxist postcolonial interpretations of Wilde. The inconsistency is perhaps a structural weakness, determined by the decision to set the "Irish" and "Queer" Wildes in such stark opposition and to reiterate that in nationalist and postcolonial discourse Wilde's sexuality must always be subordinated. In this respect, it is telling that his relatively brief discussion of Behan cites a rather antiseptic account of the Borstal library episode from Michael O'Sullivan's biography rather than the more suggestive, fictionalized version from Behan's novel, which, as we have seen, lends itself to more nuanced readings.

Though marred slightly by some poor editing—especially the repetition of some material—the writing is fluent, elegant and lively. Brimming with fascinating details and sharp insights, this book makes a significant contribution to the study of lesbian and gay history in twentieth-century Ireland, and demonstrates Walshe's passion and scholarly commitment.

—National University of Ireland, Maynooth