

The fatal illness of Oscar Wilde

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Figure 1



Figure 2

Abstract

The literary genius of Oscar Wilde has been sullied and besmirched by his infamous entanglement with Lord Alfred Douglas for "gross indecency" leading to his subsequent imprisonment for two years. After release he developed what was certified as "cerebral meningitis" in November 1900, from which he died. The much disputed cause is discussed. The claims for neurosyphilis are wholly inadequate; a chronic middle ear infection with cholesteatoma and intracranial suppuration is here suggested as the basis of his fatal illness. Had he lived in the 21st century Oscar Wilde would not have been so cruelly punished, may have received effective treatment, and thus been spared to provide much more of his wit and elegant plays, stories and poetry.

Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes. Oscar Wilde

The literary output of the comic genius Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854-1900) (Figure 1), his elegant, entertaining plays, magical children's stories, and wonderful witticisms need no reprise [1]. Wilde's well-publicised affair with Lord Alfred Douglas caused his father, the Marquess of Queensberry to leave his calling card at Wilde's club, the Albemarle, on 18 February 1895. On it was inscribed: "For Oscar Wilde, posing sodomite*". Oscar Wilde foolishly initiated a private prosecution against Queensberry for libel, held on 3rd April 1895. Three days later he was arrested for "gross indecency" and after two further trials was sentenced to two years' penal servitude with hard labour in Newgate then Wandsworth prisons, and finally

to Reading gaol. Whilst in Reading his letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, *De Profundis* (published 1905), records a man fallen from the throne of social and literary glory to the dungeon of public degradation. Wilde confessed his own "pit of shame" and vainglorious behaviour; he sought redemption.

Terrible as was what the world did to me, what I did to myself was far more terrible still.... There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility.

He was released on 19 May 1897 and sailed that evening for Dieppe, where he lived in self-imposed exile, never to return to England [2]. To avoid public attention he adopted the name Sebastian Melmoth, and his wife, Constance (née Lloyd) changed her surname, and those of their sons to Holland.

Following his release and self-ordained exile his literary skill waned and he wrote only the maudlin ballad, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: a recognition of a universal human paradox.

*...In Reading gaol by Reading town
There is a pit of shame,
And in it lies a wretched man
Eaten by teeth of flame,
In a burning winding-sheet he lies,
And his grave has got no name. ...*

*And all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword.*

The first indication of his fatal illness is when in Reading gaol he fainted in the chapel and injured his ear, though which side is unknown. He became deaf and the ear would bleed

intermittently. He later developed persistent headaches. He consulted British embassy GP, Dr Maurice a'Court Tucker whom his devoted former lover Robbie Ross considered a silly, kind, excellent man [3]. Tucker called in an otologist Dr Claisse**, who on 10th October 1900, performed an unspecified ear operation, probably a mastoidectomy for cholesteatoma. His health temporarily improved but he reverted to his old habits of gross over-eating and excessive consumption of brandy, wine and absinthe. Not surprisingly his health declined. He became stout, and was likened to the gluttonous Roman Emperor Vitellius. A Dr Hennion warned Ross that Oscar could not live more than three or four months unless he altered his way of life. He also had a fluctuating red skin lesion which he mistakenly attributed to mussel poisoning. It is consistent with, but unlikely evidence of secondary syphilis.

By 25 November 1900 he developed "cerebral meningitis". His friend Robbie Ross arrived on 29 November, sent for a priest, and Wilde "in a semi comatose state" was conditionally baptised and given the Last Sacraments into the Catholic Church by Fr Cuthbert Dunne of Dublin. Wilde died the next day.

Cause of death

The certified cause of death was cerebral meningitis. Many of the early descriptions of his malady are shrouded by Wilde's self dramatisation and biographical argument with inadequate records of his physicians and surgeons. The problem of this last illness has constituted an interesting case for commentary [3].

A frequent suggestion was neurosyphilis. As an Oxford undergraduate he may according to Ellman have contracted syphilis from a female prostitute [5,6]. Dr Tucker thought syphilis the cause of his illness but Wilde was examined by at least seven doctors, including two psych-

iatrists in Reading gaol and none had diagnosed syphilis nor disclosed evidence of tertiary lesions [7]. The evidence that Wilde had ever contracted syphilis is sketchy and based more on gossip than on objective clinical facts [4]. Supported by Robins and Sellars [8], Terence Cawthorne, a distinguished otologist gave convincing evidence that the probable cause of Wilde's final illness was intracranial suppuration (pyogenic, not syphilitic) resulting from otitis media [9].

Oscar's father Sir William Wilde was eccentric and promiscuous, but an excellent oculist and Ear Nose and Throat surgeon. It is not without irony that he observed in his *Practical Observations on Aural Surgery and the Nature and Treatment of Diseases of the Ear* (1853):

So long as otorrhoea is present, we never can tell, how, when or where it will end, or to what it may lead.

A curious coincidence is that his son, Vyvyan Holland, an author and translator, required ear surgery for mastoid infection only eight weeks after his father's death.

Oscar Wilde's body was deposited in a pauper's grave in Bagneux cemetery, Paris. Nine years later Robbie Ross aided by donations from Wilde's admirers transferred his remains to Père-Lachaise cemetery in July 1909. There, a sculpture by Jacob Epstein (Figure 2) bears the epitaph from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*:

*And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.*

Had he lived in the 21st century the genius that was Oscar Wilde would not have been so cruelly punished. If only modern experience: "the name everyone gives to their mistakes" could have prevailed in his lifetime, his further writing would have enhanced our literature and shamed our past.

*Queensberry's misspelling of "sodomite"

**Sometimes referred to as Dr Klein or Dr Kleiss [4]

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