

THE WILDEAN

Matthew Sturgis reviews

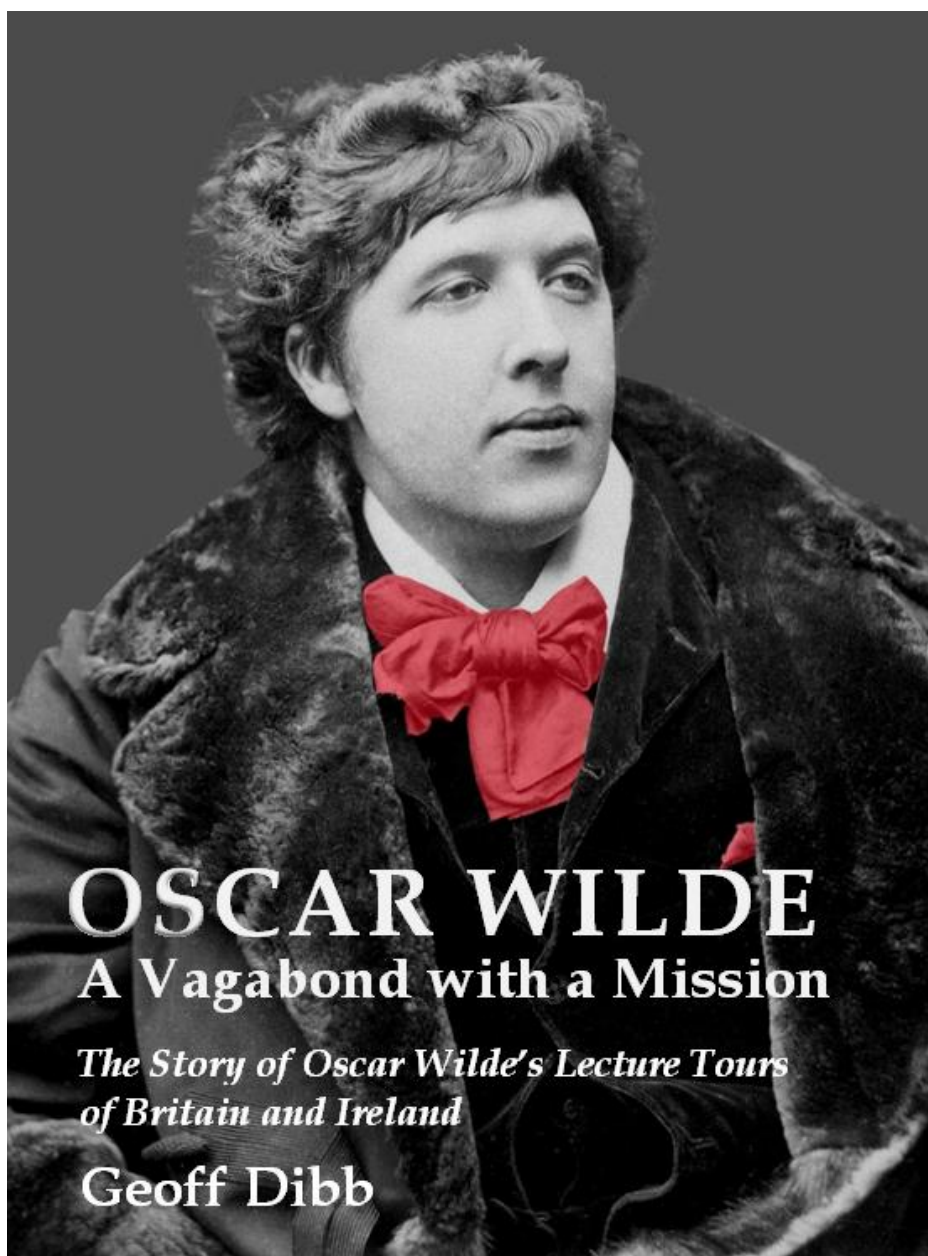
*Oscar Wilde –
A Vagabond with a Mission*

by Geoff Dibb

in the January 2014 issue of *The Wildean –
A Journal of Oscar Wilde Studies*.

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OSCAR WILDE
A Vagabond with a Mission

*The Story of Oscar Wilde's Lecture Tours
of Britain and Ireland*

Geoff Dibb

MATTHEW STURGIS

Review of *Oscar Wilde –
A Vagabond with a Mission*

THE MIDDLE years of Oscar Wilde's career have been historically under-recorded. Once the glamour of Oxford, the glitter of London, and the bold colours of the American lecture tour are passed, a sort of hiatus opens up in most accounts of Wilde's work until the sparkling successes of the early '90s: *Intentions*, *Dorian Gray* and the comedies. But now the imbalance is being gradually corrected. This year has seen the publication of the two Oxford English Text volumes of Wilde's journalism, John Cooper's elegant tome *Oscar Wilde on Dress*, and now Geoff Dibb's account of Wilde's British lecture tours, *Oscar Wilde – A Vagabond with a Mission*.

Wilde's UK lecture tours – which ran between 1883 and 1886 – have been particularly neglected. They suffer in comparison to his great North American tour of 1882. That was a distinct and novel enterprise, with a pleasing sense of self-contained drama and completeness about it. And it has attracted a due amount of attention, and indeed several dedicated books.

By contrast Wilde's British lectures have too often been viewed as a sort of fading echo of this earlier undertaking, carrying over familiar ground and amidst other more interesting cares – the New York production of *Vera*, the growing tension with Whistler, his courtship of Constance Lloyd. Montgomery Hyde in his biography of Wilde covers the tours in a paragraph; Ellmann gives them a couple of pages, including a footnote that manages to confuse most of the dates – and introduces Wilde's tour-manager, Appleton, as a location for lecture.

Dibb sets the record straight, and does much else besides. His book is both a labour of love and a work of scholarship, full of new information, new connections, and fresh insights. He shows, above all, what a stupendous amount of time, energy – and rail travel – was involved in the enterprise. Between July 1883 and March 1885 (with breaks during the high summer months) Wilde kept up an almost incessant campaign, giving over two hundred lectures, travelling thousands of miles across England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, visiting such unlikely outposts as Penzance, Ryde, Ulverston (twice), Middlesborough, Clonmel, Falkirk, Burnley and

Tunbridge Wells. Lecturing was - during these years - the main activity of Wilde's life.

Dibb's painstaking researches in the local and national press have established many new lecture-dates and corrected many old confusions of chronology. (A few lectures still remain unfixed, and are marked in Dibb's lecture-lists as lacunae to be filled – perhaps in future editions of the *Wildean*.) By collating multiple press-reports he has also been able to construct convincing texts for Wilde's previously unpublished lectures on *The House Beautiful* (different in form and detail if not in import from his American talk of the same name) and *Dress*, as well as adding some significant material to the previously published texts of *Personal Impressions of America* and *Modern Art Training* (a talk he delivered in 1883 to the students' club of the Royal Academy Schools). He also uses the same method to provide partial outlines for Wilde's other lectures – *The Value of Art in Modern Life*, *The Mission of Art in the Nineteenth Century* and *Chatterton* – although, as he points out, towards the end of his lecturing career Wilde became rather cavalier about the relation between the title of his talk and its content, reverting – whenever in doubt – to various key sections from *The House Beautiful* and *Dress*.

Derived as they often are from Wilde's reported words, the greater part of these lecture texts have been left in the past tense, when it might have been better to convert them back into the present that Wilde would have used when delivering them. But this is a minor point to set against the pleasure of having Wilde's views on daddoes, antimacassars and lady's bonnets safely preserved and published.

From the numerous newspaper reports that Dibb has gathered it is clear (despite the wilfully negative reporting of some publications) that Wilde was a very, very good lecturer. There is general praise for his delivery and stage manner. And this is perhaps more interesting than Dibb acknowledges.

He has allowed himself to be persuaded by Ellmann that Wilde had lessons in oratory from his friend the actor Hermann Vezin before his *American* tour, rather than accepting the source, Sherard, who states that Wilde only sought this help before his *British* engagements. In fact Wilde's delivery on his American travels was generally condemned. Numerous reports lament the strange droning monotone in which he spoke on the platform – the stranger because in conversation his voice was admitted to be so mellifluous. When Wilde was taxed with his deficiencies on this score by the reporter from the *Salt Lake Herald* he admitted, 'Yes, you are right; my delivery has often been criticized *very* severely, but I confess it is abominable. But I cannot help it. I have never studied elocution – but I shall when I return to England, probably under Vezin.'

And it seems that he did study. Although Sherard (and Dibb) record Wilde's request, 'I want a natural style with a touch of affectation,' and Vezin's riposte, 'Well, and haven't you got that Oscar?'— from the evidence of the American tour it is clear that Wilde needed help in order to be able to reproduce his natural style on the lecture platform. And it is surely to Vezin's credit that we must set the huge improvement in Wilde's delivery and his sense of stagecraft. Wilde became not just a clever young man with something to say, but an accomplished performer.

His audiences, at least in the first year of his lecturing, continued to be disappointed that he did not appear in his full 'Aesthetic' rig of long hair, velvet breeches and coat. But as he had abandoned this costume after the initial stages of his American tour, this serves as a testament to the enduring power of that popular idea of Wilde that had first emerged in *Punch* in 1880 and had been sustained by the press and the advertising industry.

Gradually, though, his listeners accommodated themselves to his new look — the shorter 'Neronian' hair, the conventional evening clothes, the Vandyke cuffs — taking what solace they could from the daring 'crushed strawberry' handkerchief tucked into his waistcoat. (My one small quibble with the extraordinarily handsome production of this well-illustrated volume is that the tinted 1884 photograph of Wilde on the dust-jacket, has given this handkerchief the altogether darker tone of 'crushed raspberry'.)

Many came to see Wilde out of curiosity, expecting something absurd and extravagant. He duly surprised them by talking a great deal of often very practical sense. ('Turning to the subject of carpets, I consider that they ought never to cover the whole of the room because it looks heavy and they collect the dust.' 'If you teach the child design you open its eyes to the wonder and beauty of the world about it.' 'The tight-fitting half veil worn by ladies is ugly and useless.' 'For our changeable climate I advocate woollen garments' etc.) But if he impressed people with his sound sense he also amused them. Greatly.

Over the course of his American tour he had begun to learn what makes an audience laugh, and had begun to relish the pleasure in doing so. He built upon these discoveries for his English lectures: all of them (with perhaps the exception of the one on Chatterton) were shot through with both humour and wit. His phrase about 'the criminal calendar of Europe' that in the schools is 'termed History' was a recurrent — and much appreciated — one; as was his line about a fashion being 'merely a form of ugliness so absolutely unbearable that they have to alter it every six months.'

He developed his gift for absurd overstatement: Placing two large mirrors opposite each other in a drawing room, he condemned ‘as one of the many unpunished crimes of the nineteenth century.’ He delighted in incongruous juxtapositions: ‘Nothing distresses me more than to see a paragraph in which it is stated that such and such a colour is going to be very fashionable next season, and I hold that it would not be more ridiculous to read in a musical magazine that B flat is going to be a very fashionable note next season.’ But it was, in fact, his risqué mention of ‘that dreadful, that wicked thing, called the dress-improver’ that always produced the loudest laugh.

He was – or could be – a big draw. It is interesting to learn that he was particularly popular in Newcastle and across the North East, getting full houses of up to 3,000 in some places. At Edinburgh in December 1884 – on a stormy night – 5,000 people turned out to hear him at the St Andrew’s Halls. He was invited back to many places several times. There were, of course, occasional disappointments, gleefully reported by the hostile section of the press, but from the full record provided by Dibb it becomes clear that these were exceptions.

Wilde made good money from his lecturing. Although the picture is complicated by the different payment methods adopted for different lectures (flat fee, percentage of net receipts, percentage of gross receipts) it does seem that for each lecture Wilde cleared about 10 guineas – which might equate to almost £1,000 at today’s prices. And, as Dibb shows, there were a lot of lectures.

One of the side effects of such success was Whistler’s growing animosity towards Wilde. The artist was also upset by what he saw as Wilde’s appropriation of ‘his’ ideas, (rather ignoring the fact that most these ideas – about the relationship between Art and Nature – had other even more distinguished antecedents, from Plato to Théophile Gautier.) It was an animosity that provoked Whistler into giving his own Ten O’Clock Lecture, in February 1885, and finally erupted into an open breach in November 1886 with Whistler’s vitriolic outburst, published in the *World*, about ‘the amiable, irresponsible, esurient Oscar’ who ‘picks from our platters the plums for the pudding he peddles in the provinces.’

Wilde often advised would-be authors to seek non-literary means of earning money, in order to give themselves time to write what they really wanted. And that may originally have been part of his own intention in taking up lecturing. The strategy must have appeared sound: he was able to earn almost £2,000 in two years from essentially just four lecture titles. It is what one freelance-writing friend of mine would describe as a very good ‘sweat to bread ratio’. Certainly he would not earn as much money for any other literary composition until the success of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. What is striking, though, is that during this period he seems to have

produced so little other literary work: no poems; no play; no stories; no essays.

The success of his American lecture tour had given him the time to create *The Duchess of Padua* and to work on *The Sphinx*. But the British tour, for all its success, never seemed to give him any time at all.

The schedule was exhausting, and Wilde – unsurprisingly – was often exhausted. There is an excellent passage in the book giving a detailed account of Wilde’s three lectures at Bradford and Leeds over the course of two days in early December 1884, and the night that he spent, between the two engagements, at the house of Beverley Nichols’ grandmother. It paints a vivid picture of what was involved: the rail-travel, the cold, the lack of privacy, the strain of always being on show. At the end of such days he must have felt pretty much like a crushed strawberry himself.

The pace could not be sustained. And Dibb charts the gradual shift from lecturing to journalism that Wilde accomplished during 1885. (He continued to give the occasional lecture – usually in Bournemouth – during the next three years, but the great campaign was over.) It is hard to see this shift as an advance: reviewing was not well paid, and Wilde’s pieces in the *Pall Mall Gazette* were unsigned. But Wilde needed a change. Also, having created his own ‘House Beautiful’ at Tite Street, as a setting for his new family life (he had married Constance, in the midst of his lecturing, in May 1884; their first child, Cyril, was born in June 1885), he wanted to be able to spend more time at home. Reviews could be written from the comfort of his Moorish library.

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Geoff Dibb. *Oscar Wilde – A Vagabond With a Mission. The Story of Oscar Wilde’s Lecture Tours of Britain and Ireland*. (London: The Oscar Wilde Society, 2013) £27.50. hbk. pp vi+418 ISBN 978-0-9560120-2-9