

The Socialism of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde is known today for his satirical wit and literary accomplishments. But he was also a socialist committed to the fight against oppression and exploitation.



The great satirist Oscar Wilde believed that a better society was possible under socialism. (Pixabay)

That Oscar Wilde found much to ridicule in the conventional values of late Victorian society is evident to anyone who has turned a page of his work. What is less known is that the playwright and poet envisioned a very different society as not only desirable but possible, and penned a political essay — “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” — in which he outlined his political beliefs. One of Wilde’s most frequently quoted lines — often reproduced without reference to its source — is contained within that work: “To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.”

Wilde lived a full life, albeit a short one. Born in October 1854 at Dublin’s Westland Row, but raised primarily at nearby Merrion Square, Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde was the son of two of the great eccentrics — and intellectuals — of nineteenth-century Dublin. His father, William Wilde, was a pioneering surgeon and medical authority, who accepted a Knighthood in Dublin Castle, the home of British rule on

the island of Ireland. By comparison, his mother Jane Wilde spent much of her life seeking to break that connection with Britain. A folklorist, poet, and essayist, she wrote under the pen name Speranza, the Italian word for hope.

The Nation and Young Ireland

The household in which Wilde was raised was one of intense political discussion, encouraged by Speranza who saw the home as something of a political salon. The suffragist Millicent Fawcett was invited by Speranza to come “explain what female liberty means,” in a city where the question of women’s suffrage failed to gain the same traction as on the neighboring island for some decades.

As a poet, Speranza’s output appeared in the pages of the *Nation*, a separatist newspaper aligned with the Young Ireland movement. The title — “Young Ireland, and thus the Young Irelanders” — was a bestowed reference to the emerging national-republican movements sweeping the continent in the 1840s, in particular Giuseppe Mazzini’s Young Italy.

A break with the conservative constitutional nationalism of Daniel O’Connell, the Young Irelanders heralded the Second French Revolution with the observation that “dynasties and thrones are not half so important as workshops, farms and factories. Rather we may say that dynasties and thrones, and even provisional governments, are good for anything exactly in proportion as they secure fair play, justice, and freedom to those who labour.” The movement led an abortive insurrection in 1848 against the backdrop of famine and starvation, Speranza’s poetry encouraging “fainting forms, hunger-stricken” into revolt.

Speranza, later quoted by James Connolly in the pages of *Labour in Irish History*, frequently hosted veterans of the Young Ireland movement in the family home, Wilde later recalling that “with regards those men of forty-eight, I look on their work with peculiar reverence and love, for I was indeed trained by my mother to love and reverence them, as a Catholic child is the saints of the cathedral.”

A Different Kind of Separatism: Wilde in America

Wilde’s comments on the Young Irelanders were made during a speaking tour of the United States in 1881, the young poet embarking on a journey across the country speaking on aestheticism, but discovering that audiences were instead drawn by the chance to hear Speranza’s son.

Some of Wilde’s pronouncements before American audiences seem puzzling today, including his lavish praise for the Confederacy, and insistence that “we in Ireland are fighting for the principle of autonomy against empire, for independence against centralization, for the principles for which the South fought.” Wilde toured the French Quarter of New Orleans with former Confederate general Pierre Gustave Beauregard, “the man who ordered the first shot fired in the Civil War,” and professed Jefferson Davis the American he most wished to meet.

Wilde’s flirtations with the cause of the South reveal several things — chiefly, the desire of the young poet to tell local audiences what they wanted to hear. There were

no such murmurings in New York, for example. The kind of separatism espoused by the Southern states was at variance with much of what was preached in the pages of the *Nation* of course, but there was still something Speranza admired in the Confederacy, and in that she was not entirely unique.

Shaw and Fabianism

In the London of the 1880s, Wilde came to prominence as a journalist and playwright. As editor of the *Woman's World* from 1886 until 1890, he published articles on the suffrage question, and called for equality in society between the sexes, as “cultivation of separate sorts of virtues and separate ideals of duty in men and women has led to the whole social fabric being weaker and unhealthier than it need be.”

The magazine, Wilde authority Eleanor Fitzsimons has noted, championed “South-African-born radical feminist Olive Schreiner, who agitated for greater access to political life and an end to the sexual double standard,” and was decidedly progressive in tone.

Much is sometimes made of Wilde signing a letter seeking clemency for the anarchists convicted of involvement in the Haymarket Affair in the United States in 1886, at the request of George Bernard Shaw. His fellow Dubliner later recounted however that “it was a completely disinterested act on his part; and it secured my distinguished consideration for him for the rest of his life.”

The socialism of George Bernard Shaw had its origins in his involvement with the Fabian Society in Dublin, but had developed — and been challenged — in his time in England. Much of Fabianism remained with Shaw, who wrote in 1890 of his belief that “socialism can be brought about in a perfectly constitutional manner by democratic institutions.”

Fabianism in Dublin had won few disciples — in a city where Home Rule dominated all political questions and pushed societal questions aside — but things were different in London. A meeting attended by both Shaw and Wilde in July 1888 had a transformative effect on Wilde — Wilde’s former lover and literary executor, Robbie Ross, would insist it formed the inspiration for Wilde’s 1891 essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” It was a work which Shaw commented on bitingly, insisting “it was very witty and entertaining, but had nothing whatever to do with socialism.”

The Soul of Man Under Socialism

While Shaw may not have recognized socialism in Wilde’s essay, perhaps he was looking only for a socialism he himself recognized, from his own past engagement with Marxist ideas.

Wilde had become increasingly influenced by the anarchist writings of Peter Kropotkin, something explored in detail by the anarchist historian George Woodcock, a biographer of both men. The admiration was mutual, Kropotkin later writing to Robbie Ross of the “deepest interest and sympathy” for Wilde within the anarchist community, and lauding “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” as a work containing words “worth being engraved.”

To Woodcock, Wilde's essay amounts to "the most ambitious contribution to literary anarchism during the 1890s." In it, Wilde outlines his belief in the need for the abolition of private property:

With the abolition of private property, then, we shall have true, beautiful, healthy Individualism. Nobody will waste his life in accumulating things, and the symbols for things. One will live. To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.

Wilde's essay was not so much a call for a new order, and the advancement of the cause of labor, but for the abolishment of wage labor, maintaining that "socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody." The work also contains a critique of charity, as something which serves only to treat the symptoms of that which is making society sick — a capitalist economy which denies us the time to live.

"The Soul of Man Under Socialism" is no dry polemic — it contains within it some of Wilde's finest witticisms, that "charity creates a multitude of sins," and that "it is finer to take than to beg." Most unfortunately, the work appeared in print right at the worst moment in Wilde's life.

Imprisonment and Afterlife

As Neil Bartlett has noted, a mere five days had passed after Wilde's conviction in May 1895 for gross indecency before the publication of "The Soul of Man" (its original title). It was a small print run of just a few dozen copies, but its publication "only five days after Wilde's conviction was making an extraordinary point. Just at the moment when he was being silenced, somebody was determined that it was Wilde's voice at its most overtly radical that should continue to be heard in print." Wilde's marriage to Irish author Constance Lloyd had produced two children, but they had become sexually estranged from the time of the birth of their second son, Wilde later writing privately that "she could not understand me, and I was bored to death with the married life," while also acknowledging she was "wonderfully loyal to me." By that time, Wilde had embarked on a homosexual relationship with Robbie Ross. A later relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas ultimately led Wilde to the dock, where he was savagely cross-examined by Edward Carson, later to come to prominence as the leading dissenting voice against Home Rule for Ireland. Both were graduates of Trinity College, and Dubliners, though Wilde wryly noted of Carson's brief that "no doubt he will perform his task with all the added bitterness of an old friend." History recalls Carson as the man who divided Ireland, but he was also the downfall of Wilde. The rule of law meant less to Carson a few short years later, when he threatened bloodshed against the passing of Home Rule.

Incarceration, from May 1895 until 1897, produced Wilde's most poignant and reflective work, the letter *De Profundis*. It is a work which captures the profound mental anguish of imprisonment, and the breaking down of one's individuality, but it also contains a sense of defiance: "When first I was put into prison some people advised me to try and forget who I was. It was ruinous advice. It is only by realizing

what I am that I have found comfort of any kind.”

On release from prison, Wilde — living under the name Sebastian Melmoth — lived his final years in exile in France. His faithful friend and former lover, Ross, would ensure continued publication, including an edition of “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” in 1912. Ross also commissioned the sculptor Jacob Epstein for Wilde’s tomb in Père Lachaise Cemetery. Much has been written on Epstein’s work, condemned as indecent and which French police insisted be covered, the angel’s genitalia causing offense to the sensibilities of some in Parisian municipal politics. But what of the inscription upon the monument?

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

With the passing of time, Wilde is no longer a disgraced figure, nor a mourned one. In the Ireland of the late-twentieth century, he became a figure of inspiration to a generation of Irish gay rights activists, challenging the idea — as the writer Declan Kiberd noted some “essentialist souls” saw it — that “you can be gay or you can be Irish, but you cannot be both at the same time.” To popular memory, Wilde exists as the great satirist of his age, but he was a writer for all ages, and there is still much to ponder in his work on society as it is and as it could be.