In a famously grim saying, the prospect of being hanged in a fortnight’s time concentrates the mind wonderfully. So does imprisonment for two years “kept to hard labour.” Alone in his prison cell in 1895, Oscar Wilde was bewildered by the terrifyingly sudden ruin that had pulled him down from the heights. It had taken years to find his true métier, which was theater rather than poetry or fiction, and comedy rather than tragedy. An Ideal Husband had opened that January at the Haymarket Theatre, before a glittering first-night audience that included the Prince of Wales. Wilde had dined afterward with his friends Max Beerbohm and Herbert Beerbohm Tree, and Lord Alfred Douglas, the captivating young “Bosie,” with whom his life had been entwined for more than two years past and with whom he had shortly departed for Algiers and the pursuit of pleasure. Wilde was back in London for his last first night.

On February 14 The Importance of Being Earnest opened at St. James’s Theatre. It was a change in manner and tone from Wilde’s previous work and also quite different in terms of literary quality from anything he had written before. He had been famous for years; now it seemed that at the age of forty, he was at last securely established for life. Everyone knows the tragedy of hubris and nemesis that followed. Insulted by Douglas’s crazy father, Lord Queensberry, who addressed him with angry illiteracy as “Oscar Wilde posing Sodomite,” Wilde brought a prosecution for criminal libel, a refinement of English law by which a convicted defendant could be imprisoned. But Queensberry’s counsel produced devastating evidence to incriminate Wilde, who was imprisoned less than fifteen weeks after that glorious Saint Valentine’s Day. Treadmill, foul diet, and insomnia broke Wilde in body and spirit. He died within four years of his release, aged forty-six.

Everyone also knows Wilde’s saying that he had put his talent into his books and his genius into his life, and it’s true that few other writers have ever devoted so much energy to inventing and promoting themselves as personalities. “Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde,” as he was known at Oxford, shortened by stages to the universally recognizable “Oscar,” wasn’t so much a writer of books and plays as an artifice, which was now shattered. And in silent solitude he brooded incessantly on his fate. What he could not have foreseen was the way in which he would become an object of literary grave-robbing, with interested parties trying to appropriate his shroud—and forever projecting their own interests and obsessions on him. For the hundred years since his death “Oscar Wilde” has meant less an oeuvre than a study in reputation; and even now disentangling the man from tendentious interpretation is a tricky job.

The most definitive and scholarly biography of Wilde is Richard Ellmann’s informative if somewhat imperceptive study of 1987, which drew heavily on
Wilde’s letters. Batches of these had been published over the years before 1962, when the first proper collection appeared. Edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, it was a superb book, and a landmark in one other way. Wilde’s younger son, Vyvyan Holland (Wilde’s unhappy wife, Constance, had hurriedly changed the family name when he was imprisoned), was then still alive, and his grandson was at school at the time. After some agonizing by the family, it was decided that there should be no censorship on grounds of taste or morals, although the law under which Wilde had been convicted was still in force, and the, frankness with which some of the letters treated homosexuality was at the time still very unusual in print. Hart-Davis had tracked down every letter he could, but the latest edition, edited by Merlin Holland (the grandson in question), includes several hundred more, making it, with its full and illuminating annotation, in its way the best of all biographies of Wilde.

One of Ireland’s countless gifts to English letters, Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854 (two years before Bernard Shaw, eleven before W. B. Yeats, and twenty-eight before James Joyce; has any other city ever produced such a crop within the space of three decades?). From Trinity College, Dublin, he proceeded to Oxford and a brilliant English debut. After graduating he was at loose ends, going to “the Hicks-Beachs” in Hampshire, to kill time and pheasants and the ennui of not having set the world quite on fire as yet,” but he hadn’t long to wait. The early letters give a portrait of the artist as a young man on the make, as he buttonholed the fashionable and tried to fashion himself. All the while he was tuning his voice, and over the years before his late thirties—is any good? The empty verse drama of The Duchess of Padua ("Love is the sacrament of life; it sets / Virtue where virtue was not; cleanses men / Of all the vile pollutions of this world . . .") was matched by the leaden prose drama of Vera, ostensibly a political play (“Brothers, is it your will that Prince Paul Maralofski be admitted and take the oath of the Nihilist?”).

The need for an income was all the greater after Wilde’s marriage to Constance Lloyd, in 1884. Their son Cyril was born in June of 1885, and Vyvyan in November of 1886. Wilde was an affectionate husband to begin with, and a loving father always; after his disaster it was the knowledge that he would never see his sons again, as much as anything, that broke his heart. “I was always a good father to both my children,” he wrote from prison. “I love them dearly and was dearly loved by them, and Cyril was my friend.” His relationship with Constance is more
problematic. When the first edition of the *Letters* appeared, forty years ago, it was reviewed by W. H. Auden, whose essay is a riveting document in its own right. Distinctly unsympathetic to Wilde, both as a writer and as a man, Auden called his marriage “certainly the most immoral and perhaps the only really heartless act of Wilde’s life,” and could not accept the excuse of lack of sexual self-knowledge: “one cannot believe that Wilde was such an innocent.”

Is it as easy as that? A “mulierast” (“woman-lover,” or straight, in contrast to “pederast,” in the underground slang of Wilde’s set) feels that he may be intruding on a private debate here. Still, everyday observation suggests that whereas there are men like Auden, who emphatically knew and enjoyed what he was by adolescence, there are others again who enter middle age as yet uncertain as to their sexual identity. Wilde was twenty-nine when he married Constance, and no evidence has been found that he was actively homosexual before his marriage. At twenty-three he nearly married Florence Balcombe before she instead chose a young Irish civil servant named Bram Stoker, who was to achieve a different kind of literary immortality with *Dracula.*

It seems perfectly possible that Wilde got married before making that crucial discovery. After trying to find employment as a school inspector, of all things, Wilde took up the one salaried job he ever bad, in the unlikely form of editing a women’s magazine from 1887 to 1889. In 1891 he published his only novel, and the mood changed. “I think it will make a sensation,” he predicted of *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* and he wasn’t wrong. He despaired of “the possibility of any general culture in England” when books were judged morally, but maybe he would be better off if *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were judged on moral rather than literary grounds. It isn’t quite right to call it “a bore,” as Auden did. Wilde was often silly but rarely dull, and he had the gift—not granted to some finer and deeper minds—of holding the reader. But the nonsense of it! Not just Dorian’s naughty exoticism, but the clunking melodrama.

And the dialogue! Although Wilde said that “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be,” there are plenty of hints that Lord Henry Wotton is a self-portrait, certainly the most immoral and perhaps the only really heartless act of Wilde’s life,” and could not accept the excuse of lack of sexual self-knowledge: “one cannot believe that Wilde was such an innocent.”

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And the dialogue! Although Wilde

Attempts to appropriate or reinvent Wilde come in various shades of green, red, and pink: Wilde the Irish rebel, Wilde the subversive socialist, Wilde the gay martyr. All these have been most assiduously promoted by intelligent writers; none looks any more convincing after a close reading of the *Letters* and his works.

Begin with the wearing of the green, and what Roy Foster, one of the saner contemporary Irish historians, has called the way “Wilde has been re-Hibernized as a ‘Fenian’ and even ‘the first gay nationalist martyr.’” The Wilde family may have been Dutch in origin—one of many such, along with English and Scottish, that had come to Ireland

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at the end of the seventeenth century, following the total extirpation of the Catholic Gaelic order and the creation of the Ascendancy, which owned and ruled Ireland for 200 years. Wilde was of course brought up as a Protestant; several of his uncles and cousins were Episcopalian clergymen. His father, Sir William, was a surgeon in Dublin; his mother was the preposterous nationalist poetess “Speranza,” appropriately played by Vanessa Redgrave in the latest Wilde biopic.

Like his mother, Wilde made play of being Irish, as when he told Shaw ingratiatingly, “We are both Celtic” (which they weren’t; Shaw was another Saxon Protestant). But when he published a sonnet in the Irish Monthly, edited by a nationalist priest, the Reverend Matthew Russell S.J., Wilde wrote in reply to a rebuke from Russell, “I am sorry you object to the words ‘our English land’. It is a noble privilege to count oneself of the same race as Keats or Shakespeare.” For the last twenty years of his life Wilde barely visited Ireland. Even when he had returned there as a young man, his main Irish concern had been fishing and shooting at his father’s lodge in Connemara, along with collecting rents on the family property—or rather, in the age of the Land League and Captain Boycott, the difficulty of collecting them, though this at least afforded an excuse when tradesmen tried to dun him: “The extremely unsettled state of Ireland, and the impossibility of getting rents even after the twenty-five per cent reduction, render it really out of my power to settle your bill.” That kind of Irish rebel.

As a young man, Wilde flirted with Roman Catholicism, losing a legacy in consequence, and he was baptized a Catholic on his deathbed. The nationalist critic Declan Kiberd has made much of this, with the fatuous claim that “Wilde had always been something of a cultural Catholic”; Kiberd explains that “Catholicism had multiple attractions for a Tory Anarchist, appealing at once to his love of gorgeous traditions and to his belief in rebellion.” It is true that Ireland is a predominantly Catholic nation, and was for long a subject nation. From that comes the false syllogism...
that Irish Catholicism must have been a "rebellious" force rather than a reactionary one. As it was, the independent Irish state, with its narrow philistinism and extreme Catholic puritanism, would prove an ironic reflection on Wilde’s nationalist sympathies: the stupid and cruel law under which he was imprisoned was repealed from the English statute book in 1967, but remained in force in the Irish Republic for another quarter century.

This desperate desire to mold Wilde to one’s own preconceptions can produce still drollier results. Owen Dudley Edwards is a considerable authority on the popular literature of the period, and usefully traces Wilde’s influence on later writers, from Saki to Evelyn Waugh to Joe Orton, before telling us that “Wilde has, idiotically, been called a snob.” There might be statements made about him more idiotic than that, but it isn’t easy to imagine them. In his letters and in his work Wilde’s snobbery is as transparent as it is harmless. It’s true that he combined this with an intermittent affectation of radicalism, but if Dudley Edwards thinks that it’s impossible to be both a self-proclaimed leftist liberal and a crashing snob, he should get out more often. Snobbery may even have been beneficial to Wilde as a writer. Isaiah Berlin wrote once about the kind of young man who “could not but be dazzled by the aristocracy, as Balzac, or Wilde, or Proust were, ... when he came into contact with what seemed, and perhaps was, a freer, gayer, more confident world.” That world nourished Wilde, who loved its acclaim. In his final exile, almost more humiliating than begging for money or being cut by those he had once known was that someone he despised could treat him “as I would not have treated the most dull and unimportant of the lower middle-classes.”

Other admirers claim Wilde as a subversive or even a revolutionist. Christopher Hitchens has called him an homme sérieux, citing as his text “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” an essay Wilde wrote in 1891. Not everyone at the time took Wilde’s politics as seriously as Hitchens does now. None less than Friedrich Engels was still around in 1892 to snort with derision at a form of socialism that “has actually donned evening dress and lounges lazily on drawing-room causées.” “The Soul of Man” can seem beguiling, partly because Wilde was really preaching not state socialism but a form of libertarianism in a world free from want, where the machine would emancipate man and not enslave him, and his genial levity is sometimes a refreshing contrast to the dourness of his Marxian and Fabian contemporaries. There has always been something depressing about the inheritance bequeathed by religious puritanism to the secular puritans of the left, those “who don’t have the faith but won’t have the fun,” and we all know radicals who could usefully lighten up a bit.

All the same, Wilde’s languid cleverness carried him astray. “As for the virtuous poor,” he wrote, “one can pity them, of course, but one cannot possibly admire them.” But it was precisely men from among the virtuous poor—otherwise the “self-helping” working class—who were at that very time building the labor movement in England and giving their lives to socialism in a way that Wilde would never have done. His levity undid him in other ways. In the very month that “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” appeared, Wilde published a letter in the Daily Telegraph, then as now the London voice of commercial conservatism, on the subject of men’s dress: “The handsome effect produced by servants’ liveries is almost entirely due to the buttons they wear … Waistcoats will show whether a man can admire poetry or not.” That kind of homme sérieux. My sympathies are with Engels.

To disallow Wilde the palm of gay martyrdom might seem farfetched, and homosexual men can scarcely be denied the right to see him as a brother. But the letters make it clear that Wilde never claimed that martyr’s palm, or even, despite his horror at what had engulfed him, claimed to be the victim of any kind of frame-up (a word Hitchens ill-advisedly uses). Writing to Douglas from his cell in words of icy clarity, he recognized that “I am here for having tried to put your father in prison.” And he said.
The one disgraceful, unpardonable, and to all time contemptible action of my life was my allowing myself to be forced into appealing to Society for help and protection. Of course once I had put into motion the forces of Society, Society turned on me and said, “Have you been living all this time in defiance of my laws, and do you now appeal to those laws for protection? You shall have those laws exercised to the full.”

So far from being “glad to be gay,” he brought his fatal action against Queensberry to deny that he was a “Somdomite.” And although his speech from the dock about “the love that dare not speak its name” brought cheers and tears from those who heard it, Wilde was not openly defending physical love between men but specifically (if implausibly) insisting that this “great affection of an elder for a younger man” was entirely spiritual, “as pure as it is perfect.” That kind of gay martyr.

Meeting Alfred Douglas was the decisive moment of Wilde’s life, and his great undoing. As his infatuation grew, he realized that he not only had fallen in love but had become caught up in a frightful family quarrel. It was at Douglas’s urging that he rose to the bait cast by Queensberry, and in prison Wilde turned with controlled rage on Bosie. In his recent biography of Lord Alfred, Douglas Murray did his best to make a case for Bosie, but his advocacy is no more persuasive than anyone else’s for that “vicious, gold-digging, snobbish, anti-Semitic, untalented little horror for whom no good word can be said.” It is an uncompromising words. Murray even quaintly claims that Douglas had real poetic talent, and gives as one example the “movingly” written “Ennui”:

“Who shall devise this thing, / To give high utterance to Miscontent, / Or make Indifference articulate?” One might think these lines certainly very useful, to show any writing class as a prime example of how not to compose English verse. Even Douglas’s one celebrated line, “I am the Love that dare not speak its name,” is famous only because of the part it played in Wilde’s trial.

A better defense of Douglas might be that he was Wilde’s muse. Until they met, Wilde had nothing like a masterpiece to his name. In fact, it’s hard to see how much of his work could ever have been taken seriously, in his lifetime or later. Some of his lighter pieces survive, not least his children’s stories, which can be curiously touching. I have, as a talisman from childhood, a “talking book” of “The Happy Prince” on 78s. It made me weep at six, and still can fifty years later. Wilde showed more promise when he went back to theater in 1892, although some of the lines of the first three plays in that decade hang heavy in the air, and none of those plays matches The Importance of Being Earnest, “that absurd comedy ... so trivial, so irresponsible,” as Wilde called it, and Auden just as felicitously acclaimed it as “perhaps the only purely verbal opera in English.”

It is also an authentic masterpiece of gay sensibility, starting with the interplay of character. With homosexual writers, the reader sometimes needs to effect what could be called gender transposition: Proust’s Albertine doesn’t really make sense until one thinks of her as him, and I am not sure that any of the female characters in Earnest can be taken seriously as a woman. There are also the themes of false identity, secret dealings, and “guising,” all bound up with Wilde’s own double life in those years. None of that would be enough if Wilde hadn’t at last discovered the pure spirit of comedy. Awful as his sufferings were, it is grievous not least to think that but for his downfall, he might have written many more comedies on that sublime level.

But he didn’t. He scarcely wrote anything apart from letters, and what makes this last act so indelibly sad is that Wilde left prison with such high hopes, of writing again and meeting people again, only for the hopes to crumble. A large part of his misery after his release came not from indigence but from the gradual realization that he really was a total outcast, who could never again consort with anyone respectable, let alone grand. There is nothing more horribly ironic in the Letters than his writing to Douglas shortly before he was to be sentenced, “I decided that it was nobler and more beautiful to stay ... I did not want to be called a coward or a deserter. A false name, a disguise, a hunted life, all that is not for me.” Perhaps he remembered writing that letter when, exiled forever and disguised as “Sebastian Melmoth,” he was hunted out of hotels where censurable English tourists were staying.

One after another, the players left the stage. Having endured her son’s disgrace, Lady Wilde died in February of 1896. Constance bravely came to break the news to Wilde in prison, and wrote to him regularly afterward; they never met again. In March of 1898 he reported from Paris, “I had a very nice letter from Constance yesterday.” Less than two weeks later she died in Genoa after a spinal operation, aged forty. With his parents and his wife dead, with any sight of his sons denied him, with few friends still meeting him, Wilde decayed emotionally and physically, until he approached his premature end. “In Paris!” Dr. Chasuble says when he hears of the supposed death of Ernest: “I fear that hardly points to any very serious state of mind at the last.” Whatever his state of mind, Wilde had little choice about dying in Paris, where his ghastly last illness consumed him.

As if all he had done to Oscar and to English poetry weren’t bad enough, Lord Alfred Douglas turned madder, badder, and more dangerous to know with every year thereafter, becoming almost insanely quarrelsome and litigious. He screeched and hectored away, and died in 1945, unmourned except by a few odd friends he had latterly collected. His bitter enemy Robert Ross, Oscar’s most faithful friend, admirably cleared Wilde’s debts and then brought out a fourteen-volume Collected Works of Oscar Wilde in 1908. But the best and happiest thing Ross ever did was to befriend Wilde’s two boys and reconcile them with their father’s memory, which still scarred them. In the year of the Collected Works he took the brothers to a grand dinner in their father’s honor attended by many of his friends and some social notables—a sign that Wilde’s posthumous rehabilitation was under way.
In The Importance of Being Earnest one of the most excruciating contrapuntal lines is “The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life. But I have no doubt his name would appear in any military directory.” So did Cyril Holland’s name, after he became, of all things, an efficient and popular officer in the Royal Artillery, but “man of peace” wasn’t allowed him. When the Great War broke out, he and his brother went to the Western Front, and there Cyril, along with three quarters of a million of his countrymen, met his destiny, caught by a sniper’s bullet at Neuve-Chapelle in 1915. Vyvyan survived the war and lived until 1967. In 1954 he published Son of Oscar Wilde, a rather bleak memoir in which he said, “For many years I had a recurrent dream that I met my father again, rather quietly in a somberly-lit room, and that he gently spoke to me and asked me to forgive him for the unhappiness he had brought upon his family.”

At least Vyvyan had lived to see Wilde’s memory transformed. The plays were gradually, and then frequently, performed again. The Importance of Being Earnest was revived in London in 1912, and in 1946 a charity performance attended by King George VI and the royal family gave a final accolade of respectability. Now Wilde is constantly in print; he has been given a window in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey, and a kitschy memorial was unveiled for glare-free lighting that’s perfect for a variety of indoor activities.

George Wheelcroft is a regular contributor to The Atlantic. He has just finished writing a history of the Tour de France.