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FICTION

BIOGRAPHY



Hesketh Pearson
**The Life
of
Oscar Wilde**

Read by
Simon Russell Beale

NA306812D

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Hesketh Pearson

The Life of Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin on 16th October 1854, the second son of William Wilde, the pioneering and distinguished ear surgeon, and Jane Francesca Elgee, a clever but eccentric woman with a literary bent and a colourful political past. Oscar was sent to Portora Royal School, Enniskillen; his schooldays there must have been made awkward by the sensational scandal surrounding his father and one Mary Travers, which absorbed Dublin in 1864. Oscar studied at Trinity College, Dublin, from where he proceeded on a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford in October 1874.

The extraordinary story of the rest of his life is, of course, told in this biography, but it may be worth outlining some of its notable features here. Wilde achieved quite remarkable success with his plays, but only after a slow start to a literary career which (apart from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) is undistinguished in all forms except the dramatic. The earlier plays (*A Woman of No Importance*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband*) are characterised by an

uncomfortable blend of melodrama and repartee, and it was only with *The Importance of Being Earnest* that Wilde found his true genius. The play succeeds because in it Wilde is largely able to discipline the self-indulgent luxuriance of his style and to mobilise his wonderful gift for dialogue which delights in witty paradox. The play is a triumphant masterpiece of artificiality.

Hesketh Pearson sensibly devotes much of his autobiography to the presentation of Wilde the conversationalist, the man who captivated London society in the 1880s and early 1890s; but, equally, he relates with sympathetic economy the tragic fall of Oscar Wilde, the man whose arrested emotional development and love of self-dramatisation seem to have lured him irresistibly towards disaster.

Pearson's *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, first appeared in 1946, and was probably the first reliable biography produced on its subject. Frank Harris (author of the notorious *My Life and Loves*), who was a friend of Wilde's, wrote a characteristically

lively and untrustworthy account, and others cashed in on the huge interest in Wilde which developed (ironically) after his death in impoverished circumstances in Paris in 1900. Pearson manages to take a levelheaded view of Wilde's homosexuality, especially when one considers the time in which he was writing – long before 'Gay Liberation' – and he also had the advantage of knowing personally many of Wilde's intimates, notably Lord Alfred Douglas, who was interviewed by Pearson in the 1940s.

Pearson's view of Wilde is that he was widely misrepresented, both in his own lifetime and afterwards. He sees Wilde as, in some ways, a more robust, less 'exquisite' character than he is often painted, and stresses his generosity and capacity for happiness. Wilde's weaknesses, for Pearson, lay in his restricted emotional development allied to extraordinary intellectual precocity, and his self-destructive need to be centre stage – even in the dock, where his exchanges with Carson (the opposing counsel) have become legendary for their wit and bravado. Wilde, it seems, could resist everything 'except temptation'.

Hesketh Pearson was born in 1887 and was educated at Bedford Grammar School. He made his living as an actor, a career interrupted by active service in the First

World War, but turned to writing in 1931. His other biographies include works on Gilbert and Sullivan, Dickens and Bernard Shaw. His writing is distinguished by elegance of style and acuteness of observation; his knowledge of the stage comes through very clearly in his *Life of Oscar Wilde*.

Notes by Perry Keenlyside

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Hesketh Pearson
The Life of Oscar Wilde

Read by **Simon Russell Beale**

The remarkable and tragic story of Oscar Wilde, legendary wit and conversationalist, author of perhaps the most perfect comedy in the English language, yet seemingly doomed by his own flawed temperament to suffer at the hands of a censorious and hypocritical society.



Simon Russell Beale is a young actor with a string of major RSC successes behind him. His performance of Ariel in *The Tempest* was nominated for an Olivier Award. Other credits include Ferdinand in the London production of *The Duchess of Malfi* and Mosca in the highly-praised *Volpone* at the Royal National Theatre.

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