The PALIMPSEST

JUNE 1937

CONTENTS

PUBLISHED MONTHLY AT IOWA CITY BY

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA
UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH
Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

PRICE—10c per copy: $1 per year: free to members of Society
ADDRESS—The State Historical Society Iowa City Iowa

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XVIII ISSUED IN JUNE 1937 NO. 6

COPYRIGHT 1937 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

"Think of Faint Lilies"

In the late seventies and early eighties of the past century, the aesthetic wave in England, dubbed derisively the Pre-Raphaelite movement, was ebbing. The splash on the rocks was becoming a trickle among the sands. The earnestness inspired by the masters (Rossetti and Morris), no longer a fresh and vigorous force, was subsiding into a cult expressing itself in intellectual attitudinizing and eccentricities of manner.

It was not long until the humorous magazine *Punch* was leveling its shafts of satire at these vagaries in a series of amusing drawings over various titles — "Nincompoopiana" appearing conspicuously. Certain characters appeared in these drawings again and again — Jellaby Postlethwaite, the poet; Maudle, the painter; Prigsby, the critic; and the intense Mrs. Cimabue Brown — all set frequently against a background of lilies, the lily, as readers of *Punch* knew, having been affected by some of the painters of the aesthetic brotherhood. In contrast to the long-haired and languorous males of these cartoons was the Colonel, who represented English common sense and whose function it was to leave the reader in no doubt of the ludicrous nature of his companions. There was a good deal of fun, too, with the pet phrases attributed to those satirized — "intense", "really quite too-TOO", "most consummately so", and others suggesting extravagance. It was all very amusing. In the years during which *Punch* had its sport with the aesthetes, its readers were educated to understand innumerable subtle allusions to the weaknesses of its victims. "Nincompoopiana" pleased the public fancy.

Early in 1881, *Punch* reflected the popular belief that the mantle of apostle and prophet of the paradoxical and bizarre in art had been received, not unwillingly, by a talented young Irishman and publicity-lover by the name of Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. Already, while a student at Oxford, Wilde had manifested a taste for peacock feathers and had expressed the wish that he could "live up to his blue china". Now, in 1881, he experienced the pleasure of finding himself singled out for ridicule in *Punch*, one of the best cartoons representing his head emanating from the stalk of a sunflower, "the gaudy leonine beauty" of which, to quote his own words, gives to the artist "the most entire and perfect joy." And in April, 1881, he was portrayed as Reginald Bunthorne, "a fleshly poet", in Gilbert and Sullivan's delightful comic opera, *Patience,* in which the affectations and the excesses of the whole aesthetic school were gently done to death and then resurrected to an immortality of pleasant laughter.

Upon the import of *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride,* hangs the tale of Wilde's visit to America in 1882, and, more specifically, his lecture tour in Iowa, where sunflowers were only a back-yard decoration, and where there were no languid Postlethwaites to feed soulfully upon lilies. Hence a word or two of recollection about *Bunthorne's Bride,* or, at least, about Bunthorne. He is a poet, it will be remembered, beset by "twenty love-sick maidens" whom he scorns, though to whom, with slight urging, he consents to read his latest poem. In the background, meanwhile, are the Colonel and the Heavy Dragoons. "It is", says Bunthorne of his poem, "a wild, weird, fleshly thing; yet very tender, very yearning, very precious. It is called, 'Oh Hollow! Hollow! Hollow!' . . . It is the wail of the poet's heart on discovering that everything is commonplace. To understand it, cling passionately to one another and think of faint lilies." The maidens cling, and envision lilies, and greet the reading with exclamations of "How purely fragrant!" "How earnestly precious!"

But when the twenty love-sick maidens have left the stage, followed anxiously by "the soldiers of our Queen," Bunthorne says:

Am I alone,
And unobserved? I am!
Then let me own
I'm an aesthetic sham!
This air severe
Is but a mere
Veneer!
This cynic smile
Is but a wile
Of guile!
This costume chaste
Is but good taste
Misplaced!
Let me confess!
A languid love for lilies does *not* blight me!
Lank limbs and haggard cheeks do *not* delight me!
I do *not* care for dirty greens
By any means.
I do *not* long for all one sees
That's Japanese.
I am *not* fond of uttering platitudes
In stained-glass attitudes.
In short, my mediævalism's affectation,
Born of a morbid love of admiration!

And later, when he is alone with Patience, he confides: "Patience, I have long loved you. Let me tell you a secret. I am not as bilious as I look. If you like, I will cut my hair. There is more innocent fun within me than a casual spectator would imagine. You have never seen me frolicsome. Be a good girl — a very good girl — and one day you shall. If you are fond of touch-and-go jocularity — this is the shop for it."

Unfortunately for Bunthorne, his courtship of Patience is obstructed by the rivalry of Grosvenor, "a trustee for Beauty", who writes poetry that "a babe might understand." To appreciate his verses, "it is not necessary to think of anything at all." With such competition, what chance has poor Bunthorne with his profound verse that tasks the mind to "think of faint lilies"? In this manner the story moves to its mock-pathetic ending, which must here be left to the reader's memories or to the delight of a first reading.

In London, *Patience* was a "brilliant, instantaneous success", and enjoyed a run of 408 performances. More pertinent to our tale, however, is the fact that Gilbert and Sullivan's manager, Mr. R. D'Oyly Carte, brought the comic opera to New York, where it was produced at the Standard Theatre concurrently with the London performance. Though *Patience* was successful in New

York, the satire was not fully appreciated. America lacked an aesthetic brotherhood, a Grosvenor Gallery (where the brotherhood displayed its paintings) and, above all, a jaunty pretender to artistic claims upon whose head the dunce-cap of *Patience* might fittingly be placed.

Since America had no counterparts for those satirized in *Patience,* the ingenious promoter, D'Oyly Carte, conceived the idea of importing an English specimen, displaying him to the public (for a consideration), and thereby whetting the desire to see the comic opera. It was an inspiration calculated to enhance the success of the D'Oyly Carte company. All that remained was to capture the most showy specimen available and to offer a plausible reason for his appearance in America.

Oscar Wilde was the chosen man, and a good choice for the purpose he was. To find a serious and convincing explanation for his presence in America was, however, difficult. Besides dressing in a conspicuous manner and talking charmingly in paradoxes, he had accomplished little at twenty-six. It is true that he had written a slender volume of verse ("very mediocre", said a Boston man of letters) which had had a vogue in America. But that vogue had been of a covert nature, occasioned, so it was hinted, by the titillating story of Charmides. But of true accomplishment Wilde was innocent. It was, therefore, a straining of the absolute truth when the London *World*, in an article by Wilde's brother, Willie, announced that because of the "astonishing success of his 'Poems' Mr. Oscar Wilde had been invited to lecture in America." This was, perhaps, a sufficiently satisfactory statement for those unacquainted with the plans of the intrepid D'Oyly Carte.

When Wilde accepted the invitation to advertise *Patience* in America, he was, necessarily, stepping into a situation fraught with embarrassments. But he was still a young man, with a lively if not an excellent sense of humor, he was badly in need of money, and he was willing to do much to get on in the world. Bashfulness was not an element in his character. "Every time my name is mentioned in a paper," he once told a friend, "I write at once to admit that I am the Messiah. Why is Pears' soap successful? Not because it is better or cheaper than any other soap, but because it is more strenuously puffed. The journalist is my 'John the Baptist'." This friend explained that, "So long as people talked about him, he didn't care what they said". Yet there may remain the doubt that any true Messiah worthy of the name would speak in any such fashion. And had the young man considered his course well, he might have recognized earlier that his acquiescence in permitting himself to be used to publicize the caricature of his own person would very likely end in his great discomfiture.

All might have gone well much longer had it not become known almost as soon as Wilde set foot in America that he had been brought by D'Oyly Carte. So audacious did the scheme appear that some refused to believe it. Even *Punch,* which had apparently been serious under the cover of the mild derision of "Nincompoopiana", could hardly bring itself to believe the truth. But D'Oyly Carte, when questioned by the reporters, seemed to take the situation and its discovery as a matter of no great concern. "I don't consider it anything out of the way, my bringing Wilde over here," he was reported as saying. " 'Patience' is only good-natured satire." Hence America was quickly divided into two camps as to Wilde: those who accepted him for what he posed as being — an earnest lecturer on art, and those who regarded him as one who made himself "something very like a buffoon for notoriety and money."

All the reporters, however, welcomed Wilde. He was good for almost endless copy. When he arrived in New York on January 2, 1882, the whole country knew within a few days that he had said to the customs officers, "I have nothing to declare except my genius." Everybody knew, also, that almost his first act was to attend a performance of *Patience*, and that, when the whole audience turned to look up at him when Bunthorne came on the stage, Wilde had leaned toward one of the ladies in his box and said: "This is one of the compliments that mediocrity pays to those who are not mediocre." He had not been in America a month when the sun was almost eclipsed with reports of what he had done and said — or what he was supposed to have done and said.

HUBERT H. HOELTJE

The Apostle of the Sunflower in the State of the Tall Corn

Wilde had already lectured in America for two months when he made his first appearance in Iowa, at Dubuque, on March 1, 1882. The *Herald* of that city greeted him with apparent enthusiasm:

"Oscar Wilde appeared last evening at Springfield, Illinois. He will arrive in this city today, and appear tonight at the Opera House soon after 8 o'clock. He comes with the reputation of having drawn the largest audiences in Boston, New York, Washington, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Chicago and Cincinnati, of any recent public character. In appearance he is tall and prepossessing, with long wavy hair reaching to his shoulders, and clean shaven face of womanly beauty. The public curiosity has been raised to such a high pitch that it is expected the house will be filled to overflowing."

Only a modern newspaper reader, however, one accustomed to classified advertisements and news columns relatively free from editorial comment, one, that is, not acquainted with the "puffs" in the newspapers of the past century, would accept at full value so complimentary a welcome. What the *Herald* really thought about Oscar Wilde came to light somewhat later.

"About the slimmest audience in number that the Opera House ever contained," said the *Herald* on March 2nd, "was that listening to the namby-pamby lecture of Oscar Wilde." The same paper remarked in another note, "There was a Wilde house at the Opera House last night, but it was thin." This figure of speech was no great strain upon the reporter; he had probably seen it more than once in the national dailies. Furthermore, he was in the same current of vapid criticism when he recorded that "a young lady who saw and heard Oscar last evening says that petticoats would become his pedal extremities." But what new and fresh characterization could be invented? All the bright young reporters from Saint Louis to New York had had their fling at Wilde. Not a single unused epithet remained in the ink pot.

On March 3rd, the *Herald* gave itself a little more elbow room in discussing Wilde in an article entitled "A Random Talk with the Apostle of the Dado." It complained somewhat petulantly. "Mr. A. Kitson, the gentleman who induced Mr. Wilde to lecture in our city, is evidently a wiser man today than he was before the nomadic English specimen introduced himself to a Dubuque audience. The lecture was not rendered in full; neither did Mr. Wilde give his lecture in as glowing colors and in as luminous a manner as Mr. Kitson was led to believe he would, and it evidently was quite fortunate for Mr. Wilde that he got his money in advance".

Poor Mr. Kitson! He may have believed his own puffs — furnished, very likely, by Wilde or his agent. Even at this distance the disappointment seems sad. "Luminous", Wilde's lecture manner certainly was not. But shrewdness in a business way one can not deny the lecturer. His money he had in advance.

But to go on with the "Random Talk": "In conversation with some gentlemen after the lecture, Mr. Wilde expressed his opinion on the press of America and many other features concerning the American people. The press he thought had no comparison with the English journals. He considered American newspapers nothing but a lot of garbage; that they are the cullings of police courts and circulators of immodest literature, and he considers them so much beneath his notice that he will not attempt to answer their slanderous and unjust attempts to hurt his business in this country."

It is not easy to judge Wilde's intent in speaking in this manner. One remembers what he once said about publicity, good or bad. If he really was indifferent to the nature of the advertising he received, so long as it *was* advertising, America gave him "a devil's plenty". There is no doubt that he deliberately provoked newspaper comment (as he may have been doing in the Dubuque interview); yet even his noisy bravado may not have been sufficient armour against the attacks of a tough-minded and fun-loving press. There must have been moments when Wilde wished that he had never come to America.

Outwardly, however, he put on a bold front. "He thinks", continued the *Herald*, "that if he is degrading himself (by subjecting himself to the criticism of unfriendly newspapers), he is converting a large number of the American people to the appreciation of the beauties in scenery, and also cultivating their tastes in a manner that will be of great benefit in the future."

To effect this conversion and this cultivation, was, it is true, the avowed object of Wilde's lecture tour in America. Whether he accomplished anything toward this purpose is highly uncertain. It is not easy to win converts to a cause which one sponsors, even in part, to promote a caricature of the thing sponsored. When once the cat was out of the bag that Wilde had come to America at the request of D'Oyly Carte to advertise *Patience*, the cause of art and beauty, as evangelized by the prototype of Bunthorne, was not likely to win many converts.

It seems doubtful that Dubuque experienced many of the delights of conversion through the discourse of Wilde. The *Herald,* at any rate, failed to have its heart softened. It was "a namby-pamby lecture". Only a "thin" audience heard the speaker. The *Herald* had said not a word about the content of the lecture. How many in Dubuque had heard the word or seen the light?

In conversation with the reporter, Wilde permitted himself to speak with authority on a point of literary history. "He contradicts the statement made by Harvey Young", said the *Herald,* "that the aesthetic movement started in France. Mr. Wilde says that the aesthetic enthusiasm first started in England about a half-dozen years ago." At that time Wilde had been at Oxford, trying to "live up to his china". The suggestion is tacit that he was the original starter. Indeed, he permitted himself to tell in America "how it first came to him at all to create an artistic movement in England, a movement to show the rich what beautiful things they might enjoy and the poor what beautiful things they might create." Literary history, however, which requires an impersonal exactness, was not Wilde's forte. A more disinterested critic might say that the movement in question began "a half-dozen years" before Wilde was born, and that with its true origin Wilde had had nothing to do.

But to return for the last time to the *Herald* interview with "the Apostle of the Dado". Wilde was asked whether it was really true that D'Oyly Carte had paid some eastern newspapers to advertise him as a baboon with an apple in his hand. Of course Wilde denied the charge, and probably rightly. The reporter, however, had had his sport, for he had brought to Dubuque a joke that was to roll from the Atlantic to the plains of the Far West.

From Dubuque Wilde journeyed to Wisconsin. It was not until March 19th that he returned to Iowa, this time to Sioux City. He was advertised to speak on "The English Renaissance".

The initial greetings from the newspapers were friendly and lengthy. The *Daily Times* treated its readers to a biographical notice of considerable detail, with emphasis on the brilliance of Wilde's parents. Of Wilde it said that "he hit upon the happy expedient of coming to America, where his aesthetic theories, knee breeches, and other oddities made him an object of curiosity; he has been fortunate in obtaining a large amount of gratuitous advertising; and pandering to the American weakness for humbug, he dishes it up in quantity and flavor to suit. . . . He registers as 'Oscar Wilde, England.' Pays better than 'Oscar Wilde, Ireland.' . . . The vulgar impression would seem to be that he is an eccentric and brilliant simpleton. We think this a mistake. If anybody supposes Oscar Wilde an idiot, they are sadly mistaken. He has genius unquestionably. . . . We think that his lecture will prove a thing of real merit, intrinsically worthy of appreciation."

The Sioux City *Journal* sent a reporter to interview Wilde at the Hubbard House. The result was an article half humorous, half serious, though not very critical, entitled "An Aesthete in Undress". For a half-dozen paragraphs Wilde was permitted to speak of his impressions of America and of his views on art in our country.

"While inducting this aestheticism into the newspaper man, Oscar Wilde occasionally moistened his wrists in a preoccupied way with perfume from a tiny flat vial. His large, liquid eyes rolled upward at times as he became interested, something as a school girl's when she speaks to an intimate friend of her latest love affair. The full, ripe cheeks and long chin of the apostle of the beautiful seemed alike guiltless of razor or beard. The heavy black hair that was pushed back, and fell almost to the shoulder, was not parted exactly in the middle, but careless like, a little to one side. Soft navy-blue hose — silk, apparently, and embroidered with simple golden daisies — ornamented his ample feet. The knee breeches were not visible . . . Neither the tie nor dressing gown were unaesthetically new or tidy, but rather in old English disorder, as it were.

"But seriously, Mr. Wilde is a most entertaining talker. His words come mellow and rippling like a meadow brook in his own England. Judging from his conversation — and one cannot hear him without believing that he is honest and in earnest — he has read nothing, knows nothing, cares nothing, for the ridicule that crowds the press and convulses the street. Only once did he allude to it slightly, and then only to say that the art movement was not understood. What strikes one most forcibly is the appearance of the man. Not only his voice and countenance, but his unconscious enthusiasm, his gentleness, his way of arriving at a conclusion, all seem to belong to the sex of which he is the admirer, and by which he is admired. Oscar Wilde is very different from other men."

That Wilde knew nothing of "the ridicule that crowds the press and convulses the street" was, of course, wide of the mark. Of his "gentleness" the *Journal* had more to say in an editorial. "The women are the support of Oscar Wilde. The men, on the whole, exhibit little curiosity either to see or hear him. This has been illustrated in Sioux City. Oscar is like a lazy spring day in etherial mildness. He is languid, has soulful eyes, is pure in his thought, and graces his eyes with tender sentiment. He is a man with a woman's nature. He answers the prayer, as the poet has it —

> Be a God and hold me with a charm:
> Be a man and fold me with thine arm.

Not that Oscar could be guilty of any physical impropriety, but that his aesthetic nature embraces the aesthetic nature of woman, with the resultant harmony of soul. He may be said to supply a long felt want. Woman's smile is sweetest, and the roses on her cheeks the fairest, when she is gently led into the domain of the beautiful, where thoughts are purest and love the least stainless — and led by a man. If the men would only learn of Oscar — not in his dress, nor in the way he wears his hair, particularly; but in his gentleness of manner, his freedom from grossness, his love of the beautiful that is good — they would learn the way to make some woman's heart supremely happy, and some home quite a paradise."

And so on and on into the bogs of saccharine sentimentality for another three hundred words. Wilde must have been amused at this effusion, if he saw it, for the *Daily Times* certainly was right about that young man in at least one respect — he was no idiot. After the lecture itself, however, the tone of the *Journal* was radically different. It found Wilde "a spiritless namby-pamby nondescript . . . a caricature on robust manhood."

From Sioux City, Wilde went to lecture at Omaha before starting on his excursion into the Far West. Upon his departure from Omaha, a reporter from the *Bee* met him at the railway station to bid him farewell, and to give him a last bit of publicity.

"Will we see many wild animals," asked Wilde, "from the cars, I mean?"

The reporter was eager to supply him with some unnatural lore of American fauna. "O, yes!" was his answer. "You will see jackrabbits between here and Cheyenne, and herds of antelope on the mountains, with here and there a drove of grizzly bears, buffalo, and Rocky Mountain lions."

And when the train pulled out, the reporter reflected that the disciple of aestheticism was really not dressed very tastefully, but looked, in his fur-collared overcoat and slouched white hat, "like Big-Nose George, the famous mountain bandit."

It was more than a month later, on April 26th, after he had perhaps learned that mountain lions do not move in droves, that Wilde for the third time came to lecture in Iowa. This time he visited Des Moines, his lecture once more being "The English Renaissance".

The *Iowa State Register* gave him two full columns. His manager, at least, must have been greatly pleased. "The Irish apostle of aestheticism", began an article entitled "The World Wonder Wilde", "visited this aesthetic city yesterday, and lectured last evening at the Opera House." An "aesthetic" newspaper representative visited "the British peculiarity at his rooms in the Aborn House, and passed an hour with him in conversation on topics congenial to them both. As he entered Mr. Wilde was seated on a sofa smoking a very large cigar, with his hands lying across his lap. He arose at the chronicler's entrance and came forward, appearing a well developed man, perhaps five feet and a half high, straight, and full in bust. His hair, a dark brown, is combed back carelessly from his forehead, and is allowed to grow long and untrimmed. His complexion is not dark, nor exceptionally fair, but as soft and smooth as a lady's. His eyes are truly feminine, and in talking an expression of kindness plays in them, which gives the eyebrows the proverbial arch of good nature, and serves as an index to the true tenderness of his temperament. To begin where we should in telling of his clothes, let it be said that his trousers are long and cover a pair of patent leather shoes, cut low, and pointed in the toe. In sitting down, the crook of the knee, in slightly elevating the pants, serves to display a rich red pair of silk stockings, clocked in a lighter shade of the same color, and fitting closely over the instep."

Wilde asked whether Des Moines were not the largest city in the State. He was interested to know whether there were ruins in the vicinity (the reporter could think of none except those in the saloons), and then the discourse turned to art and beauty.

Wilde spoke of the art of Italy and of the natural beauty of California, from which State he had just returned. Too much of American furniture he found ugly. The chinaware in American hotels was only crockery three-quarters of an inch thick. In a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco, however, he had been served tea in "dainty little cups which were no thicker than the thin, tender petal of a white rose." He expressed particular dislike of the American cast-iron stoves, with their funereal urns as surmounting decorations. It was this last remark which Thomas Nast, famous cartoonist for *Harper's Weekly*, ridiculed in a cartoon entitled, "Oscar Wilde on our Cast-Iron Stoves." The poet wished to go to Japan to study the handicraft of the Japanese and to "improve upon the element of delicacy which pervades their artistic achievements" — which, coming from a young man who, according to the artist Whistler, knew little about art, might have been a very interesting statement to the Japanese.

Wilde's lecture in Des Moines was only fairly well attended. Curiosity, ventured the *Register*, was the chief motive which had attracted the audience. Perhaps those present got their money's worth when it was observed that Wilde came upon the stage with the walk and the bow which Bunthorne had caricatured so well in *Patience*. If not, there was little to reward their presence, for Wilde's unsatisfactory expression, and his manner of holding his head up as if he were addressing the ceiling, made his words inaudible half the time. Only once, apparently, was there a ripple of interest — when Wilde stopped in his talk to allude to two young men who had come dressed in imitation of Wilde and had taken conspicuous seats in the parquet. Otherwise his audience sat solemnly waiting for the end. When he had finished, "the great aesthete" gazed with "a pitying glance" on his listeners, "and with a low bow of combined humility and superiority retired from the stage."

For two or three days after Wilde's appearance in Des Moines, the *Register* continued to sprinkle its pages with remarks about the lecturer. At the Aborn House the manager had ordered Wilde's chocolate served in a cup no thicker than "the thin, tender petal of a white rose," though he defended the usual hotel crockery, against which Wilde had complained, on the ground that the dishwashing was done by Wilde's own countrywomen, who were not delicate. At the railway station, the wits had some fun with an old farmer from the back country, who wanted to know whether Wilde was a temperance lecturer.

A full half column was given to a writer for the Prairie City *News* who had heard Wilde lecture in Des Moines and thought him genuine. To this writer, who had interviewed the lecturer, Wilde explained the aesthetic movement more accurately than he had at Dubuque. Rossetti and Morris were, after all, the fathers of the movement. "Make as much fun of Wilde as we may," said this admirer, "the reason that we as a people are striving to place in our homes, music, books, pictures, decoration and flowers, is because we are striving after, perhaps in a blind and imperfect way, the very things that Oscar Wilde advocates in an extreme manner."

But the *Register* editorially did not agree with the writer in the Prairie City *News*. Its view was more nearly like that which the Keokuk *Gate City* had expressed when Wilde made his first appearance in Iowa — that he was, simply, a travesty, a mountebank, and a charlatan. The *Register* may have taken the lecturer too seriously; it may have forgotten that he was still a very young man, not only with "a love of lucre", but with a diverting sense of self-importance; it may have been unduly unappreciative of the fun that Wilde had provided to those who had their wits about them, its own reporter included; and it was perhaps too incensed at the young man's assumption of American gullibility. But its judgment was close enough to the truth so that, if Wilde ever learned of it, it must have made him uncomfortable, and uncomfortable he certainly was before he left America. The Iowa press had no better statement.

THE REFORMER IN KNEE BREECHES

Now that the celebrated aesthete has condescended to visit Iowa, and the sons and daughters of the prairie have had a chance to gaze upon him in all his loveliness, perhaps it might be well to analyze this strange specimen of humanity, and set it before the people in its proper light.

Mr. Wilde's ostensible object in coming to this country is to propagate in the minds of the American people the peculiar ideas of aestheticism in England, with the peculiarities greatly increased by reason of the eccentricity of this remarkable aesthetic agitator. The ideas which Mr. Wilde presents are not all original. Indeed it may be said that his original ideas in regard to art are the most absurd of all that he advocates. But where he simply represents the English aesthetic movement, and not Mr. Wilde, his ideas are not unworthy of the best attention. For the most part they are noble ideas, and if generally adopted would go far toward making this world, which is a good old world after all to a healthy mind, by far more pleasant and beautiful and happy than it is now. So far as Mr. Wilde represents a reform which has for its object the inspiration in the minds and hearts of the people, high and low, rich and poor, of a love for that which is really beautiful not only in the genuine works of the best artists and sculptors, but in the forms and ornamentation of the visible objects with which we are of necessity daily surrounded, this far Mr. Wilde is entitled to great credit, and he should receive the thanks of everybody for undertaking to promote such a desirable movement. His ridicule of many of the absurd features of American decorative art is entirely warranted by the extent of such absurdity. In this particular direction reform is sadly needed, but Mr. Wilde, in calling attention to it, has simply done what every high-class journal in the land is doing daily. It is quite probable that Mr. Wilde, who has concealed under the ridiculous costume in which he chooses to mask himself, a great knowledge of human nature, has borrowed some of these ideas from the American newspaper, and it may be that he has borrowed them and ridiculed them simply because such ridicule is popular. But whether borrowed or not the ridicule is merited, and we are glad that Mr. Wilde has so viciously attacked so many of the alleged representations of decorative art.

But is Mr. O. Wilde really sincere in advocating these ideas of aestheticism? Does he submit to all the horrid inconveniences of this perfectly dreadful country, simply through his absorbing love for the beautiful, or is he, while pretending to advocate the wonderful mixture of his own peculiar ideas with those of the aesthetic movement, merely subordinating art to money-getting? Does he assume the costume of an ancient day simply because of his love for that style of garb, or for the purpose of better advertising himself and putting money in his purse? Are the most peculiar ideas which he represents — the ideas which are peculiarly his own, and not those of the aesthetic movement — advocated by him because of the desirability or practicability of their adoption by the people, or are they simply little hypocritical eccentricities purposely thrown in to excite public attention and ridicule and to draw a crowd?

We confess to a belief that Mr. Wilde is not what he seems. While evidently in love with art, and anxious that others should share that love, he is using art primarily as a means of increasing his fortune, and he is doing it in a very clever way. He is a very clever actor. He has heard that Americans are a gullible people, and he is probably becoming more assured of the fact every day that he stays in America.

But he is rapidly growing less in favor. His audiences are dwindling. Real aestheticism is on the contrary gaining ground and becoming more popular everywhere, even in communities that will never see the amiable countenance of Mr. Wilde. The diminished size of the aesthete's audiences shows that people are beginning to know him for a sham and a cheat.

But Oscar is no fool. Let no one delude himself into this belief. He is talented, educated, shrewd; and he has an abundance of genius, as many of his poems will bear witness. But he has sacrificed genius and talent on the altar of hypocrisy, and while ostensibly appearing before the American people in the role of an aesthetic agitator, he is making money-getting his main business, and the art of which he declaims so rapturously is subordinate to the love of lucre.

On the day following his appearance in Des Moines, Wilde lectured in Iowa City. His intention to come to the seat of the University had been announced as early as April 13th. The *Daily Republican* on that date had quoted an exchange to the effect that "by sending Oscar Wilde and Jumbo to this country, England delights us with her rarest curiosities." Jumbo, as everybody in the eighties knew, was a very large elephant brought to this country by that most successful of showmen and advertisers, the "Prince of Humbugs", P. T. Barnum.

The Iowa City papers were filled with "puffs" for the lecturer, though the effects must have been minimized by the fact that they appeared over and over again from day to day. The student paper spoke of Wilde as being, "by common consent", the leader of the aesthetic movement, and carefully revealed its knowledge of the relation between Wilde and Bunthorne and *Patience*. On the campus the boys wore bandanna handkerchiefs and artificial sunflowers to celebrate the lecturer's arrival, and for the occasion "Wild Oscar Bonnets" were in vogue among the girls. (The boys said these hats looked like coal scuttles.)

At a hilarious meeting, arrangements were made toward receiving Wilde in "an aesthetic and too-too manner." One of the boys, a certain Mr. Payne, gave an impromptu lecture on aestheticism in which he struck the Oscar Wilde pose and asserted that he "believed that the neatest attire for a young man was simply a pair of low-cut shoes and a sunflower." Somewhat more mildly, the program of the Irving Institute (a literary society) was concluded by a musical selection by Miss Mullin — the "Oscar Wilde Gallop". There was, in short, a good deal of stir over the approaching lecture.

One word of warning to the students was given in the University paper. Let us hope that it was not from some professor. "It is to be hoped", said a writer in the *Vidette-Reporter*, "that the students of the University will conform to their custom of following eastern colleges only in things worthy of approbation, and will, therefore, give him the attention and respect due to one who stands at the head of a movement, one of the objects of which is to cause a mingling of the beautiful and useful in our dress and in the decoration of our houses; so that, even in the turmoil and worry of business, we may develop a taste for the beautiful." The reference to "eastern colleges" was perhaps to Harvard, and to an occasion early in Wilde's lecturing when a crowd of Harvard students, ludicrously dressed, clapped and stamped and shouted every time Wilde cleared his throat or paused to take a drink.

With such a display of enthusiasm in the anticipation of the event, the appearance of the lecturer himself should have been greeted by nothing less than a roaring demonstration. Unfortunately for the popular expectation, however, the only spectacular aspect of Wilde's exhibitionism was his long hair and his clothing — that and his off-stage conduct and remarks. When he appeared on the stage, he quickly revealed what the curious public had come to see.

And so it was at Iowa City. No sooner had he been introduced at the Opera House by the Reverend Mr. Clute, than he plunged into his lecture. From then on the excitement ceased. The audience had seen the long hair and the womanly face, the black velvet coat and the knee breeches, the silk stockings and the shapely calves, the low shoes and the silver buckles. After that, the show was practically over. It was difficult to understand what he said, for his utterance was thick and indistinct, and he spoke without a rising or a falling inflection. Most of the time he stood on one leg, throwing back his head and staring, like the Frog-Footman in *Alice in Wonderland,* up into the air. Not for a moment, said a chronicler of the occasion, was he *en rapport* with his audience. It was a tedious evening.

The *Republican,* though it protested that the lecture had been practically inaudible, ventured to say that the lecture itself ("The English Renaissance") was "a finished literary production" that "would read well. However, we have neither inclination nor space to give a synopsis."

If any one is still interested in the literary merit of Wilde's lectures, he can, of course, consult Wilde's later critics. He can turn to one who, after the lecturer's death, wrote a volume which was the subject of a libel action, and therefore might not be expected to be over-complimentary. There he will be told that the American lectures contained "much that is charming . . . together with much that is ridiculous, and some of the charm is in the folly." Or the persistent inquirer can go to the biographer and critic who said that "no book could have been written more reverently than his." There he may read: "One is fain to confess today that these lectures make poor reading. There is not a new thought in them; not even a memorable expression; they are nothing but student work, the best passages in them being mere paraphrases of Pater and Arnold."

One thing seems clear about Wilde's passage through Iowa. Whatever of enthusiasm was experienced by his audiences was an enthusiasm of anticipation. The advance advertising and the humorous press comments raised the expectations of the public. Wilde's acual presence was an anticlimax. The billboards always promised more lions than the circus really brought.

The last lecture in the State, at Cedar Rapids, was the greatest disappointment of all. The story began, as usual, with a piece of newspaper humor. "Oscar Wilde", said the *Republican*, "is negotiating for dates through this section. A very good vigilance committee can still be organized here on a few hours' notice when occasion requires." (Though Jesse James had just been shot, there were still horse thieves abroad, and everybody knew the purpose of a vigilance committee.) Then, a little later, the *Times* tried to add to the amusement. "Oscar Wilde", it told its readers, "is coming *sure*, April 28. What has Cedar Rapids done to be thus afflicted? We thought the scarlet fever was scourge enough for one season." Finally, there was the customary "puff", this one a clipping from the New York *World*. It lauded Wilde's lecture: "Almost gorgeous at times, his language never quite ran away with him but was always equal to the clear expression of the most subtle fancy. . . . It is not every day that one can sit in the hearing of so keen a critic or catch glimpses of so clear a revelation of art."

And then came the anticlimax. Wilde lectured to an audience of less than two hundred. Many left before he had finished. "Oscar Wilde has come and gone", said the *Times*. "He will probably never come again". One wonders what Wilde, upon such occasions, must have thought of D'Oyly Carte and the hope of fame in America. Living up to Bunthorne was not always a gay affair.

Iowa's experience with Wilde was, after the Cedar Rapids lecture, very near its end. The Fourth-of-July celebration, if one may use the figure, was coming to a close. It had not been wholly successful. There had been rain, and most of the firecrackers had been fizzlers. But just before complete quiet had descended, there shot up into the night air a skyrocket that zigzagged across the sky and made the most raucous and absurd of noises. This striking display, to bring the figure to a close, was an article in the *Iowa State Register* by Bill Nye, a piece of grotesquerie which had originally appeared in Nye's famous Laramie, Wyoming, *Boomerang*. In reprinting it, and thus ending the Wilde episode in Iowa, the Des Moines paper brought to its readers perhaps the best example of frontier humor elicited by Wilde's visit to America.

We went down to the overland train Thursday evening to see the great aesthete. We picked him out without any trouble, and tackled him for a quiet little talk all by ourselves.

Mr. Wilde is very tall, with a face like a broadaxe. We told him that our name was Nye, the great Wyoming aesthete. He smiled like a rolling mill and shook hands.

He wore a soft hat and a kind of steel-colored velvet sack coat. He also wore his hands in his pockets clear up to his elbow joints. He wears a kind of Byron collar and a necktie the color of a diseased liver. His pants were of a gray material and held in place with pale pink gum suspenders. These were shown as he stooped over, his coat being cut just below the shoulder blades. His shoulder blades are high and intellectual.

He wears his hair long, with hay and little mementoes from the sleeping car in it. His face is thin, and when buried in a piece of pie must be a ghastly sight.

Mr. Wilde's teeth are evidently his own; nobody could make teeth like them and escape the vigilance committee. They are broad and prominent with a tendency to go out and look for air. He does not seem strong, but his breath proves this impression to be erroneous. Mr. Wilde wore a silk handkerchief the color of the illustrations found in public documents describing the cattle plague.

He spoke of various topics with a seductive drawl, wiggling his limber, angle worm legs as he spoke and posing like a giraffe with the colic, for the benefit of the ladies who stood near. He wipes his nose in a languid, yet soulful way and makes you wish he would do so again.

We asked him when he would return to England and he tossed his mane in the air and said:

"Ah! I don't know whether I shall survive or not."

"You get a good deal of free advertising, I see," said the Boomerang man, gnawing a little fragment from an irregular piece of navy and thoughtlessly stepping on the patent-leather shoe of the great aesthete.

"Yes, sir. Most too much of it. Still, it pays moderately well, he-he-he. However, it is absolutely stupid of them to make such beastly and peculiar little jokes upon me, ye know."

Mr. Wilde's complexion is very pallid, with here and there a little pimple that relieves the monotony some. He wears no beard or moustache at all, but makes up for that with a large growth of hair on his head, which falls in graceful festoons over his shoulders like a horse's tail over an olive green dashboard. He is just as full of soul as he can be, and walks, and breathes and exists like a two-year-old steer in a cabbage grove. He smiles every little while like a colicky baby in its sleep, and sighs and places himself in statuesque positions, as though something had given way in his apparel and he was trying to keep his ethereal pantaloons on till people looked the other way.

And so closed the aesthete's visit to Iowa, where his adventures were fairly representative of his experiences throughout the country as a whole.

Whatever of enduring literary value Wilde accomplished in his lifetime, he was to accomplish later; whatever truly significant lessons he learned from life, he was still to learn. As for his literary career, that was probably not greatly influenced by his American tour, which was really of no vital importance. He had, indeed, by lecturing in America, attained a vast amount of publicity, most of it of a coarsely critical nature, little or none of a favorable character. He had provided some laughter, though that was at the expense of his dignity. At best, and at worst, he had merely provided another item for "Nincompoopiana".

HUBERT H. HOELTJE

Oscar Wilde in the Classroom

When Oscar Wilde lectured in Iowa City he accepted the opportunity of visiting some University classes, all the while maintaining his aesthetic pose. He favored the law students with "a few remarks in which he said the only objection he had to law was that it was not very artistic."

Irving B. Richman, then a student of history in the University, remembers that Wilde attended Professor L. F. Parker's class. "Prof. Parker, himself had a keen sense of humor", recalls Mr. Richman, "and he thought to have some glee with Oscar, so he remarked to the latter apropos of a topic — a rather recondite topic — that he the Professor would not discuss it, but would turn it over to an expert such as Oscar Wilde. Oscar, although evidently having no knowledge whatever of the subject, got by with it by ignoring it completely and discussing Poetry. He did this with entire self-possession and the whole class was immensely entertained."

HUBERT H. HOELTJE

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Established by the Pioneers in 1857
Located at Iowa City Iowa

PUBLICATIONS OF THE SOCIETY

The Quarterly Journal of History
The Palimpsest—A monthly magazine
The Public Archives Series
The Iowa Biographical Series
The Iowa Economic History Series
The Iowa Social History Series
The Iowa Applied History Series
The Iowa Chronicles of the World War
The Miscellaneous Publications
The Bulletins of Information

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the State Historical Society may be secured through election by the Board of Curators. The annual dues are $3.00. Members may be enrolled as Life Members upon the payment of $50.00.

Address all Communications to

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Iowa City Iowa