



# More Lives Than One

The Remarkable Wilde Family  
Through the Generations



GERARD HANBERRY

# More Lives Than One

The Remarkable Wilde Family  
Through the Generations



GERARD HANBERRY



The Collins Press

[www.collinspress.ie](http://www.collinspress.ie)

[Twitter](#)

[Facebook](#)

# CONTENTS

*Acknowledgements*

*Wilde and Elgee Family Trees*

Prologue

*Part 1 - Origins*

1 Veiled Roots

2 Marry Well

3 A Rural Boyhood

4 City Girl

*Part 2 - Youth's Kingdom*

5 The Young Doctor

6 Voyage of Discovery

7 In Business

8 Hard Times

9 Rebel Poet

10 William and Jane

*Part 3 - Marriage*

11 A Well-Matched Pair

12 Merrion Square

13 The Swedish Connection

14 Moytura

15 Schooldays

*Part 4 - Trials*

16 The Pamphlet

- 17 Miss Travers
- 18 Reputation in the Dock
- 19 Repercussions

*Part 5 - Heartbreak*

- 20 The Radiant Angel
- 21 An Ancient Battle
- 22 Sons and Daughters
- 23 A Weariness of All Things
- 24 A Changed Fortune

*Part 6 - On the Cusp*

- 25 The Aesthete
- 26 Leaving Dublin
- 27 Literary London
- 28 The First Collection
- 29 A Proposal

*Part 7 - Conquests*

- 30 The House Beautiful
- 31 Robbie Ross
- 32 Bosie
- 33 A Brilliant Success
- 34 Swept Away

*Part 8 - Calamity*

- 35 Arrest
- 36 Prosecution
- 37 Incarceration
- 38 Release
- 39 The Last of the Wildes
- 40 Outcasts Always Mourn

*Appendix 1* – Sir William Wilde’s Publications

*Appendix 2* – Lady Jane Wilde’s Publications

*Appendix 3* – Oscar Wilde’s Publications

*References*

*Bibliography*

About the Author

Photographs

Copyright Page

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family – my wife, Kerry, sons Jamie, Daniel and Gregory and daughter Jane – for their support and tolerance over the years while I worked on this book. I particularly want to thank Gregory for his invaluable assistance on the IT front. He always responded patiently to my many cries for help when my computer refused to act as it should.

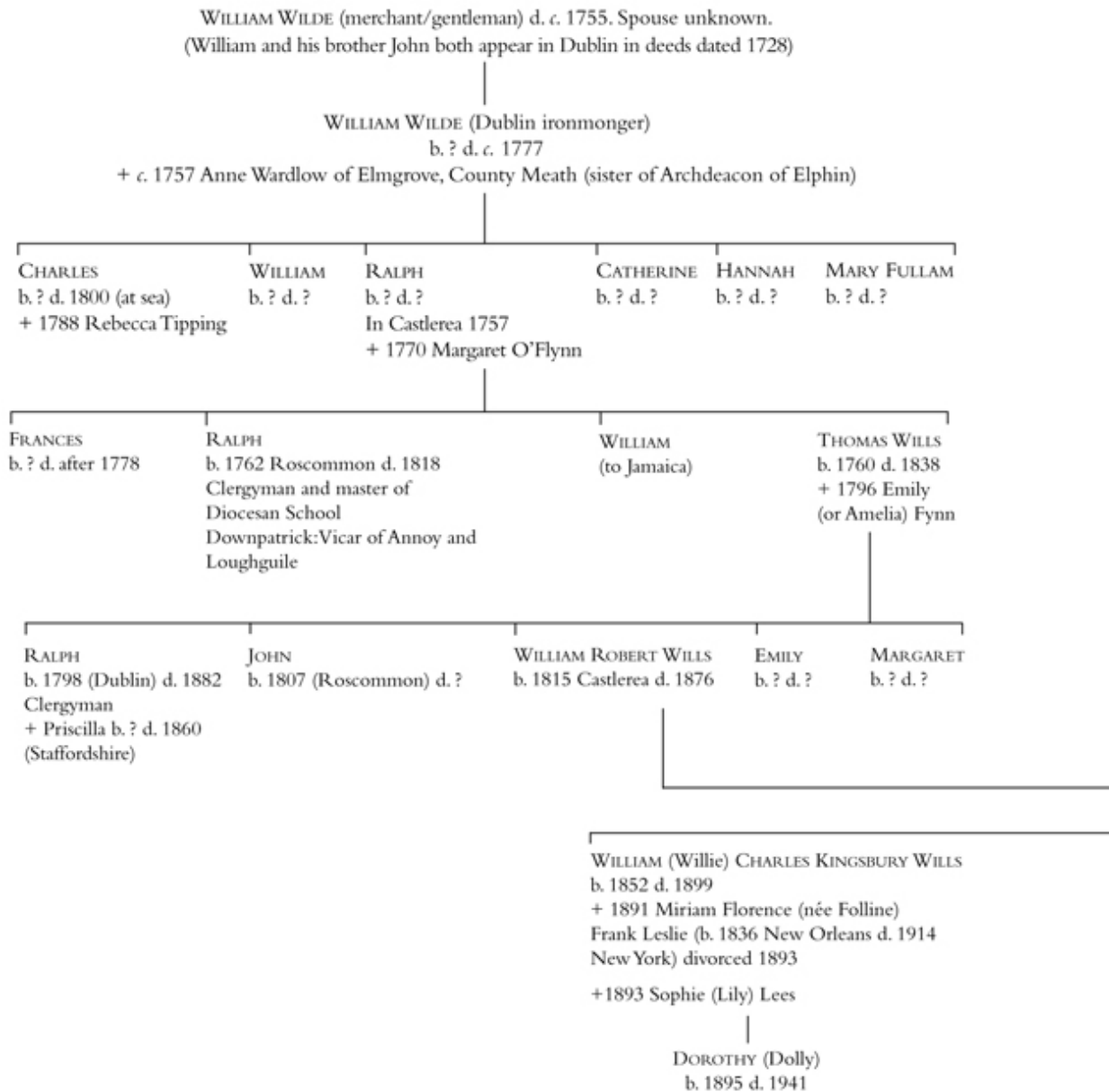
I am indebted to Siobhan Campbell of Kingston University for her support and encouragement over many drafts of the manuscript and for her constant belief that it would eventually become a worthwhile book. I also wish to thank Professor Adrian Frazier of the National University of Ireland, Galway, for his encouragement and for giving me the confidence to continue. Also Dr Éibhear Walshe of University College Cork and Denise Bukowski of Toronto for their valuable suggestions, which helped improve the manuscript. I wish to include The Collins Press for accepting the manuscript and editor Laurence Fenton for his excellent work. I would like to extend a special word of gratitude to Stephen Wall of Cong for giving so generously of his time and for sharing his knowledge of the locality that played such a large part in the life of Sir William Wilde. Likewise I am most grateful to my good friends Liam Madden and his wife Carol for their encouragement and more specifically for their practical assistance in sharing both their vast knowledge of the lake and their lovely cruiser *Witchhazel* in the days when I was attempting to retrace the route taken by Sir William in his book *Lough Corrib, its Shores and Islands*. I wish to thank Scott Jacobs of the William Andrews Clarke Memorial Library, UCLA, and Orla Sweeney and

Honora Faul of the National Library of Ireland for their kind and helpful assistance in locating photographs for publication.

I would like to include my friends and colleagues at St Enda's College, Salthill, for their encouragement and also the members of The Talking Stick Writers' Group, Geraldine Mills, Hugo Kelly, Hedi Gibbons Lynott, James Martyn Joyce, Siobhan Shine and Alan McMonagle who have always been there with positive words of advice over the years.

# THE WILDE FAMILY TREE

(partly based on Brian de Breffny 'The Paternal Ancestry of Oscar Wilde', *The Irish Ancestor* Vol 5:2, 1973)





# Prologue

**W**hen Oscar Wilde was fifteen years of age and a boarder at Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, in what is today Northern Ireland, he became fascinated by a high-profile prosecution then under way in England. He told his fellow students that it would be wonderful if some day he too were 'to go down to posterity as the defendant in such a case as "Regina versus Wilde"'.<sup>1</sup> This wish to be at the centre of a legal sensation would be eventually granted with catastrophic results.

It was at half past three on the afternoon of Saturday 25 May 1895 that the jury in the second criminal trial of Oscar Wilde retired to consider its verdict. They returned two hours later but only to query some minor detail of evidence before withdrawing again. The Prosecutor turned to Sir Edward Clarke, Council for the Defence, and whispered 'You'll dine your man in Paris tomorrow.' Sir Edward, in his mid-fifties and one of England's most respected barristers, was less optimistic. Long, pointed side-whiskers brushed his high shirt-collar as he replied 'No, no, no'. Clarke had done his best but his arguments were 'fatally weakened with each new witness that the prosecution produced'.<sup>2</sup>

Sir Edward's task had been made all the more difficult by Oscar's co-defendant, Alfred Taylor, being found guilty of the same charge just days before. Nevertheless, the experienced barrister had delivered an excellent closing statement and nothing was certain. He told the jury:

If on an examination of the evidence you, therefore, feel it your duty to say that the charges against the prisoner have

not been proved, then I am sure you will be glad that the brilliant promise which has been clouded by these accusations, and the bright reputation which was so nearly quenched in the torrent of prejudice which a few weeks ago was sweeping through the press, have been saved by your verdict from absolute ruin; and that it leaves him, a distinguished man of letters and a brilliant Irishman, to live among us a life of honour and repute, and to give in the maturity of his genius, gifts to our literature, of which he has given only the promise of his early youth.

But the prosecution was left with the final words, and they were damning. Both the Solicitor General Sir Frank Lockwood's speech and the judge's summing-up were couched in most unpleasant terms.

When the jury returned for the second time they had a verdict. Oscar Wilde, they agreed, was guilty of committing indecent acts. Mr Justice Sir Alfred Wills peered from the bench at the two prisoners now standing together in the dock. A pair of wire reading-spectacles sat on the end of a long nose and his lean face looked even more severe than usual. Victorian society, so often wittily satirised by Wilde, would now have its say. The courtroom fell silent for the last time in this sensational case:

Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor, the crime of which you have been convicted is so bad that one has to put stern restraint upon one's self to prevent one's self from describing, in language which I would rather not use, the sentiments which must rise to the breast of every man of honour who had heard the details of these two terrible trials. That the jury have arrived at a correct verdict in this case I cannot persuade myself to entertain the shadow of a doubt; and I hope, at all events that those who sometimes imagine that a judge is half-hearted in the cause of decency and morality because he takes care no prejudice shall enter into the case,

may see this is consistent at least with the common sense of indignation at the horrible charges brought home to both of you. It is no use for me to address you. People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect upon them. It is the worst case I have ever tried. That you, Taylor, kept a kind of male brothel it is impossible to doubt. And that you, Wilde, have been the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men, it is equally impossible to doubt.

I shall, under such circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgement it is totally inadequate for such a case as this. The sentence of the Court is that each of you be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for two years.

Wilde, pale-faced, uttered 'My God, my God!' and tried to say more but his words were lost in the uproar and the judge waved him away. The warders caught his swaying bulk and took him down, with the slight-framed Taylor following like a bit player in the tragedy. The Marquis of Queensberry, the bellicose father of Oscar's lover Lord Alfred Douglas, and his circle of cronies were delighted, but the cry of 'Shame' was also heard ringing through the courtroom.

Sentencing over, Wilde and his co-defendant Taylor were immediately taken from court and held at Newgate Prison while the warrants for their detention were being prepared. From there they were conducted by prison van to Holloway Prison where their possessions were taken from them. Wilde was told to strip and had his appearance and physical condition closely noted, after which he was ordered to take a bath. He was then given a full suit and cap of grey prison clothes complete with black arrows and shown to his cell. Soon after, he tasted his first prison meal as a convict, a

plate of thin porridge and a small brown loaf. Oscar would later recall the moment in *De Profundis*, the long reflection he wrote towards the end of his sentence. 'I sat amidst the ruins of my wonderful life, crushed by anguish, bewildered with terror, dazed through pain.'<sup>3</sup>

In early June Oscar was moved from Holloway to Pentonville Prison. Here the fallen 'Lord of Words' was introduced to the treadmill, a bare plank bed and meagre prison rations. Oscar's destruction was total, and he would serve his full two years without any remission. All pleas on his behalf for even a slight mitigation of his sentence were ignored.

In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, composed shortly after his release, he wrote:

And for all the woe that moved him so  
That he gave that bitter cry,  
And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,  
None knew so well as I:  
For he who lives more lives than one  
More deaths than one must die.

If Oscar died for the first time that terrible evening in Holloway Prison, he was to experience many more 'deaths' before his final days in the Hotel d'Alsace, Paris, where he passed away on the afternoon of 30 November 1900, the most famous man of English letters of his day, reduced to an impoverished exile, abandoned by all but a few loyal friends.

Towards the end of his prison sentence, Oscar had been allowed improved access to pen and ink by Major J. O. Nelson, the newly appointed warden of Reading Gaol, to which he had been transferred in late 1895. From January to March 1897 he managed to write an autobiographical account of the time spent with his lover, Lord Alfred

Douglas, in which he reflects on the events leading to the ruinous trials and the resulting anguish of his incarceration. In order to circumvent prison rules, the text – eventually published as *De Profundis* – was written in the form of an emotionally charged letter to Douglas. It was, according to Oscar, ‘the psychological explanation of a course of conduct that from the outside seems a combination of absolute idiocy with vulgar bravado’.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to his loyal friend Robert Ross, Oscar reveals another reason for trying to elucidate what he calls his ‘extraordinary behaviour’: ‘I am not prepared to sit in the grotesque gallery they put me into for all time; for the simple reason that I inherited from my father and mother a name of high distinction in literature and art, and I cannot for eternity allow that name to be degraded. I do not defend my conduct, I explain it.’<sup>5</sup>

Oscar was especially close to his mother, Lady Jane Wilde. In *De Profundis* he tells of her lonely death while he languished behind bars and of his torment at having disgraced the proud family name:

I am transferred here [to Reading Gaol]. Three more months go over and my mother dies. No one knows better than you how deeply I loved and honoured her. Her death was terrible to me; but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame. Never even in the most perfect days of my development as an artist could I have found words fit to bear so august a burden; or to move with sufficient stateliness of music through the purple pageant of my incommunicable woe. She and my father had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured, not merely in literature, art, archaeology, and science, but in the public history of my own country, in its evolution as a nation. I had disgraced that name eternally. I had made it a low byword among low people. I had dragged it through the very mire. I had given it to brutes that they

might make it brutal, and to fools that they might turn it into a synonym for folly. What I suffered then, and still suffer, is not for pen to write or paper to record.<sup>6</sup>

In her time, Jane Wilde had been adored by the masses in her native land – Ireland. As the young revolutionary poet ‘Speranza’ she had stirred a nation with fiery verses for the rebellious Young Ireland movement of the 1840s.<sup>7</sup> Later, as Lady Jane Wilde, wife of Sir William Wilde, she would meet with royalty and be the mistress of one of Dublin city’s finest mansions. Sir William and Lady Wilde loved to entertain, and Oscar and his older brother Willie learned the art of conversation at first hand when, as children, they were allowed to sit in silence at the end of their parents’ dining table, where they were introduced to many leading figures of the day. But Jane also experienced great personal tragedy and despair. In the end, Oscar’s success was her only source of comfort, and even that was taken from her.

Lady Wilde bequeathed many of her qualities to her two sons, Willie and Oscar. They received her large frame, her extravagance, her sense of self-importance and her humour. Her friend, the scholar and famous mathematician Sir William Rowan Hamilton, once told a colleague that ‘she is quite a genius, and thoroughly aware of it’.<sup>8</sup> From his father, Oscar inherited a quick intelligence and also a certain disregard for the conventional.

Sir William Wilde was only sixty-one years old when he passed away on 19 April 1876, while Oscar was still attending Oxford University. He had been an eminent eye and ear surgeon in Dublin, and was the founder of St Mark’s Ophthalmic Hospital in Park Street. He was the Surgeon Oculist in Ordinary to the Queen in Ireland and ran a busy private practice. He also lectured in his field, with students coming from as far away as America to attend St Mark’s and learn about his treatments. Sir William’s book *Practical*

*Observations on Aural Surgery and the Nature and Treatment of Diseases of the Ear* remained the standard textbook for many years on both sides of the Atlantic.

Sir William's reputation went far beyond Ireland and did not rest solely in the field of medicine. He was a noted antiquarian and archaeologist with several books on these subjects to his name. He also published two popular and successful travel books, together with many articles on history and folklore as well as on medicine. Because of his superb powers of observation and description, and his extraordinary ability to handle data, Sir William was appointed Medical Commissioner for the Irish Census. It was primarily for his work in this area that he received a knighthood from Queen Victoria in 1864. On top of all that, he took upon himself the enormous task of cataloguing the many artefacts in the museum of the Royal Irish Academy.

Sir William was well respected by Dublin's poor as a caring doctor, but he was often the subject of rhymes, jokes and vulgar street ballads, mostly related to his reputation as a womaniser. According to popular rumour he had 'a child in every farmhouse'. Exaggerated reports of his philandering were not without some basis, and it is known that he fathered at least three children - a son and two daughters - outside of wedlock. Sir William also became implicated in a sensational court case involving alleged sexual misconduct with a younger woman; the account of proceedings reads like a strange foreshadowing of the terrible lawsuit that would destroy his son a generation later. Many of the ingredients are there - a hastily written note, an action for libel, sex, scandal and private lives laid bare before an eager press and a packed public gallery.

This book tells the story of a remarkable family from their veiled origins in the early 1700s to the present day. It examines the lives of Sir William and his wife Lady Wilde, extraordinary people who experienced both the lofty heights

of triumph and tragedy's deep troughs. By linking the generations, and placing the life of Oscar in the context of his family background, a more complete picture emerges of this brilliant Irishman whose wit and works still dazzle and whose tragic fall still breaks the reader's heart.

# **Part 1**

## **Origins**

'The man who could call a spade a spade should be compelled to use one. It is the only thing he is fit for.'

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

# 1

## Veiled Roots

Jane 'Francesca' Wilde believed that a creative mind must be free to live like 'a pine upon the mountain', high above the mundane considerations of the day-to-day, but her lofty world often included much that was fanciful. When it came to explaining her ancestral origins she claimed her family name of Elgee could be traced to sixteenth-century Italy and that it was actually a corruption of the name Algiatia. In her more flamboyant moments she went so far as to mention a familial connection with the poet Dante Alighieri himself. For this reason she chose 'Speranza', Italian for 'Hope', as a *nom de plume* when, in her early twenties, she began writing for the Young Ireland newspaper, the *Nation*. With her dark eyes and long black hair, this romantic Italian fantasy was almost conceivable, and besides, who would dare to question her? Even if such a foolhardy inquisitor existed, Jane's claims could not be challenged because her birth was never registered: the law did not require it at the time.

The reality of Jane's family background is much more commonplace. Her great-grandfather was neither Italian nor a poet. His name was Charles Elgee and he was a bricklayer from Raby in County Durham in England where he was born in 1714 to a Richard Elgee who on 15 May 1705 had married Margaret Marley in St Helen's Church, Auckland, Durham.

Richard and Margaret had two other children, William born sometime around 1705 and John born about 1708. John stayed in England while his two brothers, William a carpenter and builder and Charles the bricklayer, came to Dundalk, County Louth, during Ireland's building boom of the 1730s where they both prospered. Their children and grandchildren married well and the Elgees climbed the social ladder, up and away from 'trade'. 'From a label there is no escape!' Lord Henry Wotton exclaims in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but Jane Elgee, ever conscious of class and status, a trait she passed on to her sons, could not be associated with carpenters from Durham, hence her fanciful attempt to escape into a fictitious Italian background.

As for her husband's surname, she liked to believe the Wilde name arrived in Ireland with an officer in the Cromwellian army who remained on after the wars. Oliver Cromwell is still widely hated in Ireland where his name is synonymous with cruelty and anti-Catholic bigotry following his Irish Campaign of 1649-50. It is interesting that Jane would prefer to be associated with the detested Cromwell rather than with a 'trade'. Vyvyan Holland, Oscar Wilde's son, maintained the name came from a Dutch army officer called de Wilde who served with the armies of William of Orange, who as Protestant King William III of England fought Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Hostilities over, de Wilde is supposed to have settled in Castlerea, County Roscommon. There is, however, no evidence to support either of these claims.

So what is known about the origins of the Wilde family? Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar's lover, snobbishly remarked in his 1914 biography *Oscar Wilde and Myself* that 'Wilde's father was certainly a knight; but heaven alone knows who his grandfather was.'<sup>1</sup> Douglas, of course, was being characteristically snide.

Sir William Wilde's father was Dr Thomas Wills Wilde, a general practitioner based near Castlerea, County Roscommon, in the west of Ireland. Dr Wilde was a familiar figure in a caped riding coat, doing the rounds of his wide-ranging country practice on horseback until he died on 1 January 1838 at seventy-eight years of age. He is buried in the Holy Trinity Church of Ireland graveyard, Castlerea, and his tombstone states that 'he practised as a Physician in this town for upwards of 30 years'. Dr Wilde's father was Ralph Wilde, a 'dealer' and agent for an aristocratic family - the Lord Mount Sandfords of Castlerea House and estate - who then prospered and acquired property in the locality. Ralph married Margaret O'Flynn, the daughter of a distinguished Gaelic family whose ancestors gave their name to a district in Roscommon. He eventually became known as a farmer and then a gentleman in his own right.

But where did this Ralph Wilde come from? He appears as Lord Mount Sandford's Roscommon agent in the middle of the eighteenth century but from there the trail to his origins becomes uncertain. One study points to the possibility of Ralph being 'a son of a Dublin merchant named John Wilde who belonged to a family of merchants, ironmongers and property developers'.<sup>2</sup> It points to the fact that when Sir William received his knighthood in 1864 an article appeared in *Duffy's Hibernian Sixpenny Magazine* linking him with a certain Richard Wilde who lived in Dublin towards the end of the 1700s. Richard Wilde was 'a man of high commercial standing in Dublin'. He was also involved with the Society of United Irishmen, a secret organisation behind the Irish uprising of 1798. Richard had to flee to America following the failure of that rebellion. There, his son, Richard Henry Wilde, went on to become a poet, writer, lawyer and member of the US Congress for the state of Georgia. Richard Henry Wilde's claim to even greater fame rests on the fact that he discovered a lost portrait of Dante in the

Bargello Palace in Florence, which was attributed to Giotto or to the school of Giotto, while researching a book on the life of the Italian poet Tasso, which he published in 1842.

Sir William Wilde, who liked to be associated with influential people, did claim a connection between his family and this famous American politician and author. However, there was no evidence to support the link and nothing was ever said about Richard Henry Wilde's father, the Irish rebel and ironmonger who lived at 12 High Street and later at 73 Thomas Street in Dublin before making his getaway to America. Perhaps the anonymous writer of the 1864 article was trying, for political reasons, to forge a link between the new knight, the Protestant Sir William Wilde, and Irish nationalism. After all, Sir William's wife had once been the great nationalist poet Speranza. But this connection with the American Wildes does not ring true. William Wilde's politics had never been nationalist. He was a Protestant supporter of the link with the British Empire, the son of a doctor and the grandson of an agent for an aristocratic family. It is difficult to see a close family connection with the rebellious United Irishmen and with a rebel who had to take flight.

On the other hand, Terence de Vere White in his book *The Parents of Oscar Wilde* is quite definite about William Wilde's family history. The parish register in Wolsingham in the county of Durham, England, where the Wilde name is common, shows that a William Wilde was baptised there on 28 March 1656 and that a 'Ralph Wilde is given as one of the twenty-four in the parish of Wolsingham in 1713 ... Either this Ralph or one of his sons settled in Connaught.'<sup>3</sup> He also offers as proof the fact that 'In a door window of a house opposite the National Bank, Castlereagh, County Roscommon, there could be seen written on the glass "R. Wilde July 16, 1758, old English."'

Brian de Breffny's work 'The Paternal Ancestry of Oscar Wilde' (*The Irish Ancestor* Vol 5:2 1973) sheds some light on

the father and possible grandfather of Ralph Wilde, Dr Thomas Wills Wilde's father. His discoveries lead one to believe that Ralph Wilde who married Margaret O'Flynn of Roscommon was the son of William Wilde, a Dublin ironmonger who about 1757 married Anne Wardlow, the daughter of Charles Wardlow of Elmgrove, County Meath, c. 1757. She was also the sister of the Reverend John Wardlow, Archdeacon of Elphin. This would supply the Roscommon connection. This William Wilde, who died in 1777, had three sons - Charles, William and Ralph - and also three daughters - Catherine, Hannah and Mary. He was the son of a Dublin gentleman and merchant also called William Wilde whose spouse is unknown, as are his origins, but he had a brother called John, maybe the John Wilde mentioned earlier as being the possible father of Ralph. He died in 1755. Perhaps it was this man or his father who arrived from England.

So there never was a Cromwellian officer or a Dutch soldier called de Wilde. The truth appears to be that a Ralph or William Wilde, possibly a builder from Durham in the north of England, was attracted by the construction boom of the early eighteenth century and arrived in Ireland. He prospered and his sons and grandsons married well. They climbed the social ladder and managed to obscure their humble origins along the way. The reality, distasteful as it may be for a professional family from Merrion Square, is of a background where an honest living was earned by the sweat of one's brow, be it as a Dublin ironmonger or a Durham builder.

What would Lord Alfred Douglas have made of this revelation? As for Oscar, if he ever discovered there was a drop of carpenter's blood in his veins, the great conversationalist would probably have attempted to include it in the story of a brilliant star and three wise kings bearing gifts. If the Durham connection is the correct one, then, by

an amazing coincidence, when William Wilde came to marry Jane Frances (she preferred Francesca, it being more Italian) Elgee in November 1851, he was taking as his wife not only a poet of national standing but a woman whose veiled roots were the very same as his own.

## 2

### Marry Well

**W**hen Oscar crowned his successes at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1874 by winning the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek, he was following in the footsteps of the eldest son of Ralph Wilde, the Castlerea land agent, also called Ralph, who had been awarded that very same prize two generations before. Thus begins the almost eerie foreshadowing of events that is a feature of the story of the Wilde family through the generations.

Ralph Wilde, the land agent, had three sons. The eldest was Ralph, the Berkeley gold medal-winner, born in 1758. He entered Holy Orders becoming curate of Inch and later took a position running a school at Downpatrick. The third son, William, went off to Jamaica and the middle son, Thomas Wills, born in 1760, became a doctor and settled down to practise first in the rural town of Loughrea in County Galway and later in the small town of Castlerea, County Roscommon.

Lord Alfred Douglas had a point, although he did not know it, when he raised questions about Oscar's paternal grandfather, Thomas Wills Wilde. Biographers have always been happy to swiftly brush past the figure of Dr Wilde doing his rounds on horseback, pleased to have established him as a general practitioner (GP) of medicine with a rural practice in Roscommon. But this is not the full story.

Previously unpublished facts have recently come to light concerning Thomas Wills Wilde's medical qualifications.<sup>1</sup> It appears that he was almost fifty years of age before he qualified as a GP and little is known about his life up to that point. He received his Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree from the University of St Andrews in Scotland on 27 January 1809 on the recommendation of two other MDs and the payment of a fee that was normally £25. This was not an unusual practice for the time. His two sponsors were James Cleghorn, MD, sometime president of the King's and Queen's College of Physicians of Ireland, and John Pentland, MD of Dublin. They were in a position to state that Thomas 'attended and completed a course of Lectures on the General Branches of Medicine in Trinity College Dublin, has received a Liberal Education, is a Respectable Character, and from personal knowledge we judge him worthy of the honour of a degree in Medicine'.

It is known that in 1796, at the age of thirty-six, Thomas Wills Wilde married Miss Emily or Amelia Fynn, whose family held a large estate at Ballymagibbon, near Cong in County Mayo. It would be another thirteen years before Thomas managed to qualify as a doctor and his whereabouts or occupation up to that point remain unknown. Emily Fynn Wilde would eventually keep house for her youngest son, William, in Westland Row, Dublin, when he in turn set out on his own medical career years later. There were three sons from this marriage: Ralph, born in 1798, John, born in 1807, and William, Oscar's father, born in March 1815 in Kilkeevin, near Castlerea. There were also at least two daughters from this marriage, Margaret and Emily, whose birth dates were not recorded, in keeping with the times.

The two eldest brothers both entered the church. Ralph held various appointments both in England and Ireland over a long lifetime. His final position was as Rector of Hollymount, County Down, and he died at Downpatrick on

10 January 1882. He was the clergyman who christened Oscar at St Mark's on 26 April 1855. John was appointed Vicar of West Ashby in Lincolnshire, England. Oscar, as a student in Oxford, occasionally visited with his clergyman uncle where they had lively discussions on matters of religion, Oscar having leanings towards Rome. In a letter to his Oxford friend Reginald Harding dated 5 July 1876, Oscar recounts a visit with his uncle John Wilde when he 'examined schools in geography and history, sang glees, ate strawberries and argued fiercely with my poor uncle, who revenged himself on Sunday by preaching on Rome in the morning, and on humility in the evening. Both very "nasty ones" for me'.<sup>2</sup>

Both the Elgees and the Wildes 'married well', as the saying goes. When Thomas Wilde took Emily Fynn as his wife he was looked upon as her social inferior. The Fynns, being landed gentry, were connected to some of the most distinguished families in Connaught, such as the Surridges, noted for their scholarship, and the Ouseleys, one of whom became the British Ambassador to Persia.<sup>3</sup> Such is the intricacies of Irish genealogy, that the Fynn family was also connected to the great native Gaelic clan of the 'ferocious' O'Flahertys, whose ruined castles today dot the Connemara landscape. The O'Flahertys had been the dominant family or clan in Connaught for centuries before the Normans arrived into Ireland in 1169, sweeping the old order before them. The O'Flahertys then settled in Connemara, the remote mountainous region west of Lough Corrib, where they once again established their control. Jane marked this association with the old Gaelic chieftains of Connemara when the time came to give baby Oscar his names by including O'Flaherty on the list, thereby suggesting that her son had some tentative link to an ancient Celtic past.

Writing in the less politically correct world of the 1940s, Sir William's biographer T. G. Wilson is interesting on the

topic of the Wilde/Fynn gene pool. 'The division between genius and madness is very narrow,' he wrote. 'The Fynnes were undoubtedly very unstable mentally, and there can be no doubt that much of the later peculiarities of the Wilde family, and perhaps much of their genius, can be traced to the Fynne strain in their blood. John Fynne was an enthusiastic member of the sect of "Dippers". It is said that he used to bribe impecunious peasants to allow him to baptise them in a spring near his house.'<sup>4</sup> Wilson goes on to quote from a popular ballad referring to the Fynns:

If you were in Ballymagibbon  
Convenient to Cross,  
It's there you would see them  
Like water-rats creepin',  
When they were baptised  
By the Tyrant, John Fynne

The Fynn estate at Ballymagibbon covered about 2,000 acres along the northern shores of Lough Corrib near Cong, County Mayo. A young William Wilde travelled regularly from Roscommon to his grandparent's estate although his grandfather was no longer alive. John Fynn of Mayo had married Elizabeth Donaldson of Lucan, County Dublin, in 1779 and had died in Lucan in 1796. Young William was greatly influenced by all he encountered at Ballymagibbon. Today the old Fynn mansion is an ivy-clad ruin, hidden from sight and forgotten in the middle of green fields outside the village of Cross.

Sir William would continue to be drawn back to the west of Ireland frequently. In the early 1850s he managed to fulfil an ambition when he acquired Illaunroe, a fishing lodge in a remote district of Connemara, off to the west near the Atlantic coast. Ten years later he was in a position to do even better and succeeded in purchasing 170 acres of

Ballymagibbon lands when his aunt, a Miss Fynn, was certified insane and had to be committed into care. There, on a green hilltop overlooking Lough Corrib, Sir William built his beloved Moytura House, a comfortable gabled lodge that still stands today at the end of a half-mile driveway.<sup>5</sup> It became his haven in the west, the place where the busy eye and ear surgeon was happiest. Here his family came for holidays to escape the unhealthy environment of the city with young Willie and Oscar fishing and boating on the nearby lakes and little Isola, their beloved golden-haired younger sister, toddling around the walled garden. Here a young Oscar experienced the ancient Gaelic culture and traditions at first hand. He would have heard the Gaelic language spoken by the tenantry and would have listened to the enchanting stories as told by local folk, such as Frank Houlihan who worked for Sir William at Moytura. Such exposure at an early age to this rich oral tradition must have had a big influence on the boy who would grow up to be one of the world's greatest storytellers. Oscar had a deep fund of Irish folk tales according to the writer Vincent O'Sullivan, who befriended the fallen author in his final years.

On Jane's side, her great-grandfather, the builder Charles Elgee who had come over from Durham with his brother in the 1730s, obviously prospered. He is known to have built a large residence in Dundalk called Cumberland Castle while his brother William built the Dundalk Court House. Charles and his wife Alice had eight children but John Elgee was the only son to survive. He entered the church and was appointed curate in Wexford, a strong Protestant town at the time. In 1782 he married Jane Waddy, a daughter of Cadwallader Waddy of Wexford. They had seven children, the eldest being Charles Elgee, Lady Jane Wilde's father. In 1795 John was promoted to Rector and was still there three years later when rebellion broke out in Ireland and Wexford

became the scene of the worst atrocities in that most brutal uprising. Ireland had never been content to settle down under rule from England. It had remained loyal to the Church of Rome while England embraced the reformation. As English and Scottish Protestant planters gradually replaced the native Irish Catholic landowning population, a disgruntled, alienated class continued to be a thorn in the establishment's side. This disaffected populace occasionally found expression in violent rebellion.

Years later, Jane told how her grandfather escaped being murdered by the 1798 rebels when they captured the town of Wexford. His reprieve was put down to a kindness he had earlier shown to some Catholics in the area, possibly to a prisoner or prisoners he had befriended while visiting Wexford jail. According to the story she had been told, the Reverend Elgee returned home from administering the sacraments to his terrified congregation only to find that insurgents had taken possession of his house. He was seized, put on his knees and surrounded by armed pike-men ready to strike but the leader stepped forward, laid his hands on the kneeling Rector and ordered that his life be spared. The rebels even placed a guard on the Rector's home to protect both his family and his property. The family went unmolested during the three bloody weeks the rebels held the town.

John Elgee and his family came through the horrors of the 1798 rebellion unscathed, whatever the full truth of Jane's account. They remained indoors in the rectory during that month of terror when other Protestant clergymen and their flocks were tortured and put to death on the bridge over the River Slaney. It was there on the same bridge that the ringleaders of the rebellion were later hanged from the iron lamp bracket when General Lake retook the town. In 1804 John was appointed Archdeacon of Wexford, the same year his wife Jane passed away. Today the old graveyard of