

Oscar Wiley

Capital Punishment

The Letters and Petitions on Prison Reform.



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The petitions and letters of Oscar Wilde for prison reform.

Oscar Wilde was convicted of gross indecency under the criminal law amendment act on 27th May 1895. His sentence of two years hard labour led to the cruel destruction of his creative temperament. The philosopher dandy, the sparkling wit, the inspirational thinker, kept in solitary confinement twenty three hours out of twenty four, forbidden any intellectual stimulation, and driven by insomnia to an eventual collapse, was quietened to a brooding hulk. However, the anguish of causing his own and his family's ruin eventually led Wilde to rethink his past and to prepare himself for an uncertain future.

On his imprisonment the first thing to strike Wilde was the brutality of the prison system. Its shock was paramount. Brought suddenly to earth, after years of luxurious living and immense success, the realities of prison life jolted him from his aesthetic indifference. Lost in the cold light of objectivity he found the world of art and beauty hidden from him. But his pains were not wholly self centred. Later, when transferred from Pentonville to Wandsworth, he was further appalled by the terrible plight of convicted children and the constant horrors of their impromptu punishments. So much so that shortly after his release in May 1897 he wrote to the Daily Chronicle, pleading for reforms on their behalf, stating, "Wherever there is centralisation there is stupidity. . . . no child under fourteen years of age should be sent to prison at all. I hope you will use your influence to have this done. The way that children are treated at present is an outrage on humanity and common sense. – What is inhuman in modern life is officialism."

Incipit

(here begins)

The Victorian era was coming to its close. Many barbarous punishments, both civil and military, were being put under close scrutiny by politicians. Among their findings was the need for prison reform, now being considered on many levels of society including government committees. But few people outside the prison service had first hand knowledge of the difficult problems inmates faced. One incident in particular incited Wilde to help many hapless victims worse off than himself. Late one afternoon, while on his way to receive a visit from a friend, he looked down through the gratings onto a line of children. They were carrying their bedsheets underarm and preparing for admission to the cells. At the end of the line stood a little boy, younger than ten, and so tiny that "evidently no prison clothes could be found small enough to fit" him. The boy was pale, bewildered and struck with terror. The sight revealed that all the intelligent discussions, rationalisation and questioning debates in parliament, were worth nothing without a sense of humanity and a knowledge of practical aid for prisoners.

Thousands passed before the bench each year, but the Victorian courts paid little heed to pleas for leniency. Many hundreds of children were jailed. As many again spent days or weeks on remand awaiting their day in court or the settlement of debts, condemned to face the worst of human brutalities. This type of harsh remand, often followed by a remit of sentence, was called 'not sending a child to prison'. More often than not their punishments were for such crimes as stealing an apple from a fruit barrow, or playing in trees within an exclusive park. After some correspondence with friends and warders Wilde did his best to have some of these fines paid, thus releasing the children from jail. To give a new start to many other prisoners he was careful to fulfil his promises of money, references and clothes.

In the late 19th century a child's life in prison became one of far reaching consequence, not just the periodic misery and fear due to a short sharp sentence. Weeks of isolation, confusion and uncertainty became a whole life lived in desperate measure. Under confinement every waking hour was spent by some in fits of anguish, their nights prolonged by insomnia. Worked up into such a state it was impossible for a child to eat, let alone keep up the strict disciplinary code necessary to avoid harsh punishment. A child's sufferings were further added to by the knowledge that murderers were hung within the prison walls, and that swift birchings could mark them for life. A Punishment that was earned for the slightest error. Quickly law and order became a cruel master, one to remain terrified of.

Dura Lex sed Lex

(The Law is hard, but it is the law)

Although children were screened during chapel from older prisoners and were exercised in separate 'sunless yards', every inhuman aspect of prison life was meted out to them as to the adult criminal. But it was not the other prisoners who were the corrupting influence on young minds. Rather, it was the dark airless cells, the numbered existence, harsh rules and bleak prison garb that took away all the humanising and simple pleasures of childhood, and left many bitterly opposed to society's authority.

In London's prisons the penal code was enforced in differing ways. Wilde, who was sent in turn to Newgate, Pentonville and Wandsworth, experienced variations of the silent separate system. This was a routine that sought to correct prisoners through extensive psychological management (for management read maltreatment). Fanatical applications of such mental cruelty were enforced under equally fanatical governors. Prisoners were forbidden to communicate with each other at all times. An almost fatal punishment for a man said to be the greatest talker of his age. During daily exercise hoods were worn to avoid facial recognition. Only a broken series of taps while segregated on the treadmill served for human communication. Talking to Warders was strictly controlled and haughtily formal. In 1896/97 these codes of practice were in the process of being reformed though Wilde, unfortunately, suffered a testing mixture of both the old and revised ideas.

Dies Irae

(Days of Wrath)

A mans sentence was intended to reform him both in body and in soul; but to do so through the inducement of remorse and repentance, was, at best, a futile hope. Few who were freed were penitent. The endless months of solitary confinement, for instance, were designed to first humble the prisoner and in due course force him to come to terms with his failed conscience. By ruminating on his transgressions and looking into himself, during such suffering, it was thought that the soul would be uplifted and the spirit levelled. To this end a Bible and prayer book was provided, and through the little visits of the prison chaplain, a 'reducing' diet, and the privations of the plank bed, the punishing regime was driven to succeed. That it failed miserably is a lasting shame shown, no less than in the loss to literature, by the poor flickering of Wilde's once precocious talent after his release.

Living conditions in Pentonville were so bad, in fact, that on opening the cells for morning inspection it was not uncommon for the warders to turn away and be 'violently sick'. Totally overpowered by the awful stench of overflowing human waste: all the cell latrines had been removed in a previous 'reform'. Many of these gruesome details come from Wilde's two letters to the Daily Chronicle. A paper that had shown some sympathy with his ruin. The first letter, 'The case of warder Martin: some cruelties of prison life.' was published on May 28th 1897. The next, 'Prison Reform' appeared on March 24th 1898, when the house of commons began the debate on the second reading of the prison bill. Wilde's petitions to the press make sombre reading. The last was published under the

heading 'Don't read this if you want to be happy today'.

The two letters follow a careful approach. They steer clear of sensationalism and the provocation of sentimentality. Wilde called for purely practical reforms. He showed as completely useless the formal request for more official visits. Discipline was often stepped up at such times and prison life made even worse for convicts as a result. Instead he wished to combat the mindless insomnia, the daily hunger pains and the spread of disease. In lurid detail Wilde accurately testifies to the dreadful misery caused through insanitary conditions. He also asks that prison doctors should have no external General Practice to interfere with the care and sanitary welfare of prisoners, for whom they showed scant respect. Wholesome foods were to be provided and reducing diets stopped. (Bread and water had been a convenient way of breaking or punishing a man for sometimes up to a month.)

Many convicts were in fact starving, especially the very young. This led to a case in which Wilde was quick to publish the inside story. The particulars, already commented on in the press, discussed the sacking of a Reading Warder, Thomas Martin. Martin had tried to help a hungry boy who was unable to stomach prison gruel, and as a result had become very ill. On hearing the lad's complaints Martin had gone out and bought him some sweet biscuits. (Huntley and Palmer's grandiose biscuit factory was next door to the prison) and for this act of kindness the prison commissioners had instantly dismissed him. It is an interesting point that Wilde was once a V.I.P. visitor to the Palmer's factory. He had also attended many of their literary soirees. Therefore it was something of a great embarrassment to them when he ended up incarcerated next door. Wilde's signature on the visitors book was finally pasted over when a shocked hand put exclamation marks after it!

Throughout his public support of Martin Wilde clearly showed how innocent acts of kindness could bring the downfall of any caring official. At Reading gaol Martin had been a good friend to Wilde. His small actions, such as a daily greeting or a polite enquiry after his health – as well as supplying him with smuggled ginger biscuits and a morning paper – went far in alleviating the numbing inhumanities of the system. Wilde wrote on a scrap of paper to Martin, *'I hope to write about prison life and to try and change it for others, but it is too terrible to make a work of art of. I have suffered too much in it to write plays about it.'* Wilde also clearly tells us that beyond the incessant routines there was of course no colour in life. The grim light of the cells strained the eyes and made reading difficult. The meagre ration of books were read repeatedly until the lines held little or no meaning. Every hour drifted slowly by. Every day that passed was the same day.

Kept at hard labour for many months the poet was first set to picking oakum (rope shredding). Long hours were spent walking the treadmill and turning the crank. The mill was described as undergoing a perpetual steep climb in deep snow. Such punishments were archaic, badly cramping the lungs and the muscles; it is said that the treadmill also badly chafed the skin between the thighs. These pursuits were devoid of any useful effort, being deliberately aimless. There was also an incessant daily routine of cell cleanliness, constantly under inspection, and for which Wilde was brought before the Governor on malingering charges more than once.

Ecce Homo

(Behold the man)

In a bid to alleviate his suffering Wilde began to petition the board of commissioners. In small blue script he crammed the official paper with every conceivable woe, but his pleas were either ignored or curtly refused. Finally, after months of agonised and impotent rage, driving himself almost mad with crushing regrets, he collapsed in his cell. He managed to recover a little to attend compulsory chapel where a while later he collapsed again, this time badly damaging his ear. Not until then was he moved to the infirmary. After some high placed lobbying, possibly by the notorious editor Frank Harris, an official enquiry was raised and inspectors were sent to the prison to look more closely at Wilde's case. On one occasion, being spied upon, he was seen sharing a joke with fellow prisoners in the infirmary . . .

His petition to the board had expressed his fear of insanity and its subsequent treatment in an

asylum. Wilde had hoped for an early release and a better understanding of his sexual nature. He wrote his petition in complete acceptance of his sentence. It is very frank, though perhaps a little shrill. No matter, Wilde was being made an example of and any mitigation of his suffering would have been seen as privileged treatment for the upper classes. Small wonder then that his admission of suffering from erotomania and calling for its recognition and proper treatment had fallen on deaf ears. His hard labour term would stand. Not until a later transferral from Wandsworth to Reading would conditions be relaxed. However his fear of madness was recognised and his requests were noted. He was provided with a few books. The influence of Robert Haldane, a respected figure in prison reform, was of some assistance here. Haldane's advice and his comforting of Wilde was not forgotten by the poet. It encouraged him to write of his imprisonment and its barbaric regimes, eventually resulting in his composing and publishing *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

Nosce te ipsum

(Know thyself)

Finally with his transferral to Reading, partly on Medical grounds, Wilde was given the vehicle to unburden himself and rid his mind of "much perilous stuff" His life, from the wilting Arum lily of the 1880s to the suggestive green carnation of the 90's, had been encapsulated in a blaze of self promotion and luxurious living. His obsession with being in love with the love of a nature which alternately pleased then poisoned him had driven him out of control. Here lay much to be exorcised. After writing materials became freely available to him he experienced a radical change of heart. With the full articulation of his recent life, written down in a long letter to Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie), his spirits began to rise. The championing of reform proper continued in this light of self absolution. Long after Wilde's death, in 1905, the explicit letter to Bosie was published by Robert Ross. At first it appeared in shortened extract, entitled '*De profundis*', (Perhaps a play on the catholic prayers 'Dei profundis' – psalm 129.) The original manuscript, handed to Ross by Wilde, was then locked in a vault at the British Library, not to be opened until 1960.

In the grim light of his cell, sat beneath a barred and soot stained window, Wilde brought his intellectual powers of observation and introspection to bear. In slow self analysis he revisited the many small moments of life that shape our everyday existence. Learning from such that the will slips from an individuals control when driven by a white heat, held fast inside, and kept burning by perverse desires until the proper conduct of life is smelted through falsity, self deception and gross determinism. Wilde, living on such a brink, found it impossible to stop his slide into chaos, having been trapped in a terrible net of contrasting personalities and emotions. In that state no life preserving instincts could prevail – albeit they remained in conscious touch with his every hazardous decision, merely becoming the faint voice of a dreamed life. His disaster was virtually unavoidable.

Oscar's dramatic expression of his own grief, anxiety, loneliness, love and its eclectic passions, are told without censure in *De Profundis*. His conduct is explained by various means, in story form, anecdote, religious meditation and plain honest talk. Here Wilde walks through his life with head bowed, and in noble words turns his present embittered state into the resurrection of self respect. He finds the will to go on hidden within his sorrow. And it is out of such sorrow that much of his help for others was born.

Fide et Amore

(By faith and love)

In the lee of such humility the tutor of a finer nature remained. A nature that transmutes others less refined by slow and gentle contact. One that has the gift to move without preaching or converting but edifies from within. Wilde's soul searching communicates a distinct way of seeing things. To persuade for reform, to grant a better life, a higher standard of living and a better appreciation of human

complexity remained his aim. Without being high minded, or spoiling what joys one privately gains from life, Wilde appealed directly to the human instinct, for its love of freedom and its care for the rights of the individual. His is a refreshed doctrine of truth and beauty. In his own interpretation he tells us much about the teachings of Christ, teachings that point to a wiser care of the soul. And through the works of Dante and the christian martyrs he spiritualises all suffering and brings an awakening of respect and love for mankind. He makes no distinction between class or creed. That he felt there was such a lesson to teach in an age of church building and mission funding not seen since the medieval period is, indeed, quite incredible; but hypocrisy and cant were hard fought battlefields of Wilde's. The theme also brings a terrible and telling irony to his mocking of english earnestness. Social reform had been a golden thread throughout much of Wilde's thinking, and the development of the individual played a central and fundamental part in achieving it. Individualism was the very crux of his philosophy. Both of his letters to the Daily Chronicle closely fit this strategic frame, and an added realism in his words give the articles a biting power.

Quos deus vult perdere prius dementat

(whom god wishes to destroy he first makes mad)

Euripedes

Wilde's sentiment was not the self consoling philanthropy of the rich. On the contrary the conscience easing millionaires and titled aristocracy were challenged for maintaining the status quo by pitiful hand-outs and profitable house cramming. George Bernard Shaw had already written plays attacking such behaviour. Wilde went further than that. He brought the reader into graphic contact with the humane and the inhumane. He showed the society that prided itself on empire and industrial might that the love of power and the love of social position had not a single care for its people. Fighting for reform, Wilde increases his intensity when describing the slow descent into madness of fellow prisoner, Prince, or A.2.11. A man who in his affliction cavorted around the exercise yard in flagrant breach of disciplinary procedure, hopping, dancing and pulling idiotic faces to himself. There was little doubt to those on exercise that the man was deranged or half witted, and his constant weeping and howling, night and day, needed special care and not constant punishment. As if in proof of the disrespect shown to such antics there occurred many severe beatings of A.2.11. That the taking of a rod and its use for the punishing of the mentally ill proved the need for reform there is no doubt. But very little thought was given to the care and rehabilitation of such cases. Indeed 19th century asylums were full of such unspeakable horrors. And any man who was finally sent there had little or no chance of recovery or release. In fact it wasn't until the early years of the 20th century that wide-sweeping prison reforms were passed and much of the cruelty to prisoners was abated. The welfare of asylum inmates would wait much longer After his beatings A.2.11. was returned to the exercise yard. His face further contorted in an ape-like grin, while his hands flew about, making fantastic gestures in the air. Wilde was aware of many other floggings in prison, but the screams of the poor devil Prince he described within Reading gaol were etched on his mind for the rest of his life.

In Extremis

(at the point of death)

After his release in May 1897 Wilde crossed to France in self exile, disgusted by the treatment of his fellow countrymen and having failed to gain entrance to a catholic retreat. In Paris Robert Sherard, an old friend, was encouraged to see that Wilde had regained something of his earlier self. The egotistical pomposity of the glitter years was largely gone. It was a gentler more philosophical man that took to wandering Europe, staying in Italy and Switzerland. On the Boulevards he was at times an even better talker than of old, according to some, such as A. E. Houseman. But within himself, in the denial of aesthetic philosophy or the riddance of aesthetic distance, there had come about a deliverance. The old loves and their habitual demands were, of course, still there, yet now it was an abstracted soul that carried them. An almost complete severance of shallowness and insincerity appeared Wilde's later writings, much departed from his earlier poses and symbolic credo. Living alone in a chalet at Berneval -sur- mer, that art was all the more lovelier to him and life all the more spirited is without doubt, as his letters to the poet Earnest Dowson and friend Ross convey. But the bitter end was not long off. It

came in Paris on November the 30th 1900. 'Its me or the wallpaper Robbie, he said, one of us has to go.' and later ' I'm dying beyond my means.' Oscar Wilde died of meningitis after an ear operation in the Hotel D'Alsace in the Rue des Beaux Arts.

In our century can look at this maelstrom of events from a distant promontory; and in the dim light on the ocean see and be dazzled by the lightning effects of the storm. Enthralled, yet secure. Enticed to know more, yet perhaps remaining all too impassive, knowing that campaigning against such a frightening madness of conditions for life is a too bitter struggle. No doubt reform will always be the same mixture of practical and impractical aid. Indeed, only recently has the Portland Reform centre for boys finally been closed, bringing to an end a very harsh and unsympathetic regime. That such institutions still perch like gargoyles on today's society is little repayment for Wilde's suffering and his bids for reform. But I think it is well to have known, however critical one may be, the terrible effects of prison and ruin on a man such as Wilde. That somewhere in the expression of his intellect and in the passion of his personality we might ourselves be all the more richer, and perhaps uncover the secret of our own frailties.

As if in some strange premonition of doom Wilde wrote this dedication to his wife in his book, *Poems*. (reissued 1892.)

. . . and when wind and winter harden,
all the loveless land,
it will whisper of the garden,
you will understand.

Picture captions.

- 1) (Prisoners tramping the yard in masks and chains)

'With slouch and swing around the ring
we trod the fools' parade!
We did not care: we new we were
The Devil's own brigade:
And shaven head and feet of lead
Make a merry masquerade.'

from *'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'*

- 2) (Crowded Prison Chapel)
Pentonville prison chapel shown during the silent separate system.

- 3) Holloway Gaol for men in the 1890's. Wilde was put on remand here.

- 4) (Wilde, Constance and Jean Palmer on Grass)
Wilde in full repartee with Jean Palmer. (Of Huntley and Palmer's biscuits)
Packets of biscuits were given free to first class passengers leaving Paddington Station.
The wrappers 'reminding' them to look out for the Reading factory - next to the prison!

- 5) The Wildes at a Palmer's Literary Party. Constance seated, looking thunderous
in a sickle moon dress, and holding the 'corporate' lily.

- 6) Wilde's grave at Pere la Chaise cemetery in Paris, covered in roses and kisses.
A little plaque at its foot requests the faithful to refrain from desecration.