



Persoonlijkheden

Neil McKenna

The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde

In deze persoonlijkheden vertelt Neil McKenna over zijn jarenlange fascinatie met Oscar Wilde. Door middel van niet eerder gebruikte bronnen komt McKenna tot een herinterpretatie van Wildes homoseksualiteit.

When was it that first I fell under Oscar Wilde's spell? It all began a very long time ago, sometime in the middle of the 1970s, in the small cathedral city of Norwich. I lived alone with my mother in a small terraced house on the top of one of Norwich's few hills. I was a rather nervous and introverted fifteen-year-old boy trying desperately to understand who I was and what I was and where I fitted in to the bewildering and confusing world in which I found myself.

I was lonely, ill at ease with other boys, and without any particular friends, other than one or two of the girls at school who used to take pity on me and go around with me a little. It may have had something to do with the fact that I was fresh from the North, from Manchester, and spoke with the strong Mancunian accent that used to sound so odd and out of place against the rural Norfolk burr. Or it may have been that the other kids sensed that I was different, that I had a secret, a guilty secret.

One solitary afternoon – one of many solitary afternoons – I found myself watching an old film on television in which the Australian actor Peter Finch portrayed Oscar as a great tragic hero. The film was *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* and I was dazzled. As a teenager who was trying rather unsuccessfully and very unhappily to make any sense of my life, I recognised in Oscar the same sexual spark that existed within myself. It helped, of course, that Peter Finch made an incredibly handsome Oscar Wilde – and I still don't quite know if I had fallen in love with Oscar Wilde or with Peter Finch – or, indeed, with both of them. (As fate would have it, I did meet Peter Finch about three years later. He was utterly charming and delightful and managed to put me sufficiently at my ease for me to gush out how wonderful I thought his performance as Oscar Wilde was).

The very next day I hurried down to Norwich Central Library and

started to read everything I could lay my hands on about Oscar Wilde. I'm not sure what I expected to find. I suppose I was looking for answers to the great questions of Oscar's sexuality and hoping to read within his life the runes of my own. I was disappointed. Most of the biographies gave few, if any, answers. With the remarkable and honourable exception of Rupert Croft-Cooke's *The Unrecorded Life of Oscar Wilde* (London 2003), most biographies of Oscar gave the standard version of his life as a tragi-comedy, with the tragedy self-inflicted.¹

Oscar's sexuality was explained away, rather than explored. On the rare occasions when his sexuality was discussed at all, the story took the form of a cautionary tale, a moral fable which warned against the dangers and temptations of homosexuality. Oscar's love for other men was presented as a sort of incurable disease, a contagion which, once caught, inevitably led to prison and disgrace. Oscar was portrayed as a happily married man who had been seduced into the evils of homosexuality by the wicked Robbie Ross. Worse was yet to come when Oscar became entangled with another dangerous young homosexual, Bosie Douglas. Bosie not only led Oscar further and further down into the nightmarish world of male prostitutes, he was also the person responsible for embroiling Oscar in the dispute with Lord Queensberry, the father of his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, which ultimately led to prison, exile and disgrace. Oscar was presented as a classic victim, a victim who had transgressed and who deserved to pay a very a high price for that transgression.

A decade or so passed by. It was the late 1980s and I was in my twenties. My life had moved on and changed almost out of all recognition. I was now an 'out gay man' though the vim and vigour implicitly coded in that phrase hardly reflected my true state of mind. I'd been to university to study English literature and art history and I'd done drugs and sex. I'd had half-a-dozen unhappy love affairs and one disastrous relationship. I'd moved to London and was desperate to find meaning and purpose in my life. I had come out and embraced my sexuality, though I was still trying to come to terms with

- 1 Zie onder andere: Boris Brasol, *Oscar Wilde. The man – the artist* (London 1938); Martin Fido, *The dramatic life and fascinating times of Oscar Wilde* (London 1973); St John Irvine, *Oscar Wilde. A present time appraisal* (London 1951); Harford Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde. The aftermath* (London 1963); Hyde, *The other love* (London 1970); Hyde, *Oscar Wilde* (London 1976); Hesketh Pearson, *The life of Oscar Wilde* (London 1946) Arthur Ransome, *Oscar Wilde. A critical study* (London 1912); Frances Winwar, *Oscar Wilde and the yellow nineties* (New York 1940).

some of the unhappinesses and uncertainties of my childhood and with the sudden death of my mother three or four years earlier.

My interest in Oscar Wilde had waxed and waned and then waxed again. I'd read and re-read almost everything by and about Oscar that there was to read. So I was naturally very excited when Richard Ellmann's landmark biography of Oscar Wilde came out in 1987.² It was a difficult time to be gay in Britain. Margaret Thatcher's Tory government was economically liberal, but socially extremely conservative. 1987 was the year that ushered in a national panic about AIDS in Britain and some politicians and commentators were openly calling for homosexuals to be incarcerated, castrated, or exiled to a rocky island in the Atlantic. There was a palpable sense of fear and of foreboding, as if something terrible were about to happen. The streets of London were no longer paved with gold (not that they ever really had been). But everyone was aware of the sudden increase in queerbashing, indeed this ugly word came into common currency in the late 1980s.

I was dazzled and disappointed in almost equal measure by Richard Ellmann's account of Oscar's life. Dazzled because it was and is a beautifully written and beautifully crafted biography. But profoundly disappointed by the intellectual axis of the book. Ellmann saw the great struggle of Oscar's life as the epic conflict between agnosticism and faith, between paganism and Catholicism. Wilde's sexuality is marginalised and diminished. Ellmann treats it sympathetically enough, but fundamentally views it as a deviation on Oscar's part, a lapse, a fall from heterosexual grace. Ellmann conceptualises Oscar's homosexuality as a disease, a contagion which (rather like the syphilis which Ellmann – wrongly, I think – believes Oscar to have been infected with) once caught, inexorably leads to dishonour and death.

A year after Ellmann's book was published, I found myself working as a journalist for the gay press. It was a time of intense political activity where the politics of health and the politics of gay liberation became inextricably combined. It became the period of my own radicalisation and my own political empowerment. In the face of overweening injustice and unfairness, I became angry and I became powerful, feelings I had rarely experienced before.

My interest in Oscar Wilde intensified. I realised that for better or for worse, Oscar Wilde's life held huge symbolic importance for gay men. Twenty years earlier in 1967 when sex between men was partially decrimi-

2 Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York 1988).



Oscar Wilde. Uit: Holland, *Oscar Wilde*, titelblad.

nalised in England and Wales (but not in Scotland or Northern Ireland), Oscar Wilde was the name on the lips of the reforming peers and MPs. When the Sexual Offences Bill became law on 13th July, 1967, Lord Arran who had sponsored the Bill invoked the ghost of Oscar Wilde who had predicted the long walk to freedom:

'Because of the Bill now to be enacted, perhaps a million human beings will be able to live in greater peace. I find this an awesome and marvellous thing ... My Lords, Mr Wilde was right: the road has been long and the martyrdoms many, monstrous and bloody. Today, please God! sees the end of that road.'

Lord Arran was referring to a letter Oscar sent to his friend George Ives after he came out of prison: 'Yes. I have no doubt that we shall win, but the road is long, and red with monstrous martyrdoms.'³ Ives was passionately committed to reforming the unjust laws on homosexuality and Oscar's letter to him was, I had come to realise, an overt indication of a sexual political consciousness on Oscar's part.

About this time, as I made my way as a gay journalist and activist, I met Derek Jarman, the artist and film-maker who had been the first British celebrity to publicly announce that he had AIDS. Jarman was a remarkable man who launched himself into the politics of protest with utter commitment. We first met in 1989 when we were both part of a group of gay men and lesbians in the media who met to try to work out a strategy of opposition to the infamous Clause 28, a homophobic piece of government legislation designed to oppress gay men and lesbians. Derek and I discussed the possibility of making a film of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. We even discussed the idea of trying to make a film of *Teleny*, the highly homoerotic, if not downright pornographic, novel attributed to Oscar Wilde and his circle.

Two years later, on Friday 13th September 1991, Derek Jarman and I stood side by side on a protest by the activist group OutRage! outside the offices of the *Guardian* newspaper, the famously radical, left-wing yet curiously homophobic British broadsheet. We were protesting about the newspaper's latest unpleasant contribution to its coverage of gay issues. Afterwards, Derek, myself and one or two others went off to have a sandwich and a coffee on the roof of Panther House, a rather odd office building which

3 Oscar Wilde in zijn brief aan George Ives, 21 maart 1898. Geciteerd uit: Merlin Holland en Rupery Hart-Davis ed., *Letters* (Londen 2000) 1044.



Robert Ross, beter bekend als Robbie Ross, geschilderd door Sir William Rothenstein. Uit: Vyvyan Holland, *Oscar Wilde. A pictorial biography* (Londen 1960) 118.

housed the offices of *Capital Gay*, the small weekly gay newspaper which I worked for. The subject of Oscar Wilde came up. Why wasn't there a statue of our greatest gay martyr? There and then we hatched the idea of erecting a statue of Oscar. It was, we decided, to be a highly political act. What we wanted was a statue of Oscar Wilde, handcuffed and in convict dress, standing on the platform of Clapham Junction where he was mocked and spat upon on his way to Reading Gaol. The statue eventually came about, long after Derek had died, the power and political affront of its original concept much watered down.

By 1997, I realised that we had won the war against homophobia. In what Foucault called a reverse discourse, the very homophobia of the Thatcher era had engendered a wave of sympathy and reaction, paradoxically creating the perfect conditions for gay men to pursue their campaign for justice and social equality. I had spent almost a decade of my life working at the forefront of the movement and I knew that my life would change, whether I wanted it to or not. The winning of the war against state-sponsored homophobia had left me exhausted and I became ill. And it was during this six-month period of illness and enforced idleness that I turned back to re-read Oscar's work and to think about him anew.

Radicalised, I began to rethink and reinterpret his life. I started to question the authorised version of Oscar's life promulgated by the biographies. Even the most cursory reading of Oscar's collected letters painted a very different portrait to the tragic figure who was slowly sucked into the vortex of London's gay life in the late nineteenth century. The more I read about Oscar and the more I researched his life, the more I realised that there was a great deal of material about Oscar's sexuality that had never been properly used. Some of it was there for all to see. There was and is a vast amount

of material about Oscar's sexuality in his letters, and in the letters of Bosie Douglas and others of Oscar's circle. Some important material had appeared once in long out-of-print books and had been promptly forgotten about; and some of it had never been published at all and lay sleeping in the archives of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, in the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) at Austin, Texas or in the Clark Library in Los Angeles.

I can only speculate why much of the unpublished material had never been used. Some of it was of course far too sexually explicit and would have been unpublishable in Britain, or for that matter, the United States, until the early 1990s. But that is only a partial explanation. Why, for example, did an unfinished and untitled homoerotic poem of Oscar's remain unpublished for well over a century? Written while he was at Oxford, probably in 1876, the poem vividly describes an encounter with a young boy. The poem opens with a quotation from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'Ah God, it is a dreary thing to sit at home with unknissed lips', and vividly describes how Oscar 'went out into the night' and 'waited under the lamp's light' for a young male lover to appear:

And there came on with eyes of fire,
And a throat as a singing dove,
And he looked on me with desire,
And I know that his name was Love.

See what I found in the street
A man child lusty and fair
With little white limbs and little feet
A glory of golden yellow hair.

Red and white as a mountain rose,
Little brown eyes so bright as wine
Little white fingers and little white toes
O he is lovely, this boy of mine.

Oscar ended the poem by throwing down a gauntlet to those who would condemn his love for his 'lusty and fair' boy:

What do ye say he's the child of sin
That God looks on him with angry eyes,
And never will let him enter in
The holy garden of Paradise?

It would be hard to construe this early poem as anything other than expressing a great and passionate homoerotic interest in a younger boy. Oscar's decision not to publish the poem is understandable. Written at the very beginning of his writing life, this poem seemed to me to pull the rug out from under almost every biographical thesis of Oscar's life. How could a man who could write with such passion, such intensity, such eroticism about a boy be the same man who was happily heterosexual up to and including his marriage to Constance Lloyd? How could this same poet be somehow seduced into homosexuality by Robbie Ross, and further dragged into the vortex by Bosie Douglas?

It is puzzling to understand how such an early and dynamically homoerotic document could have been overlooked by scholars and biographers. The manuscript of this poem has been in the Clark Library in Los Angeles for a long time. It is listed in the 1957 catalogue of the Wilde collection at the Clark compiled by John Charles Finzi, and was probably acquired by the Library at some point in the 1920s.

The more I searched, the more material I found. A new arc of Oscar's life began to unfold before my eyes. Like Ellmann, I was convinced that there was a great struggle in Oscar's life. But unlike Ellmann who believed it was the struggle between agnosticism and faith, between paganism and Catholicism, I realised that the great struggle of Oscar Wilde's life was the conflict between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The great story and the epic struggle of his life is his journey from reluctant heterosexuality to a joyous embracing of gay sex. It was a long and painful journey, but I think that Wilde himself believed that it was the greatest and most important journey of his life. It shaped his life and his art and gave it meaning and purpose. This was the inspiration for my book *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London 2003).

A very different picture of Oscar began to emerge from my researches: a more dynamic, a more subversive Oscar; a darker and a more complex Oscar than many have imagined. I realised that there was an opportunity to write a book about Oscar that had not yet been written; a book about his emotional and sexual life as a Uranian, as some men who had sex with other men chose to style themselves, from the first stirrings of his feelings for other men, to his rash decision to marry Constance, and onward to his growing and increasingly passionate involvement in the Victorian Uranian underground.

One of the most surprising things for me was the extent of Oscar's

political commitment to and activity in what he and many other Uranians referred to simply as 'the Cause', the struggle for legal and social equality. Oscar and Bosie were at the very heart of the embryonic movement for change. It was a strangely moving moment for me when, in 2001 in the austere and windowless reading room of the Humanities Research Centre in Austin, Texas, I held in my hand the relics of George Ives's secret society, the Order of Chaeronea, set up in 1893 by Ives and other like-minded Uranians to press for legal and social reform for men who loved men. I held in my hands the tangible evidence of a generation's hopes and dreams – hopes and dreams that would be shattered seemingly for all time by the prosecution and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, hopes and dreams that I and other gay men of my generation and of the generations to come had lived to see fulfilled.

George Ives was the illegitimate son of an army colonel who had been brought up by his paternal grandmother, whom he always referred to as Mother in his – literally – voluminous diaries now held at the HRC. Ives's diaries number one hundred and twenty-two thick volumes containing about eight million words. Much of the text of the diaries is indecipherable as I know from the many hours I spent poring over it. Oscar himself once 'dived' into Ives's diaries and 'struggled with the bad handwriting'.⁴ The diaries are unreadable in another sense too. Ives wrote page after page in an exalted, half-ecstatic, ranting Old Testament style of thees and thous, prophesying bright visions of a Uranian future, alternating with terrible and Mosaic diatribes on the hypocrisy of society – the whole liberally soured with maudlin passages of misery and self-pity.

Oscar picked Ives up at an Author's Club dinner on the evening of 30 June. His interest in Ives was initially sexual. Ives recorded the event in his diary. 'Our meeting was quite droll and romantic,' he wrote, 'and would be pronounced far-fetched in a play but such meetings are not new to me or to him.' According to Ives, Oscar

'looked at me with his sleepy eyes and said What are *you* doing here? I replied I was attending the literary dinner. But, he answered – tho' I forget the words used it is so long ago – What are *you* doing here among the bald and the bearded?'⁵

4 Zie het dagboek van George Ives, 21 november 1899. Te vinden in het archief van het Human Research Centre (HRC) in Austin Texas.

5 Ibidem, 30 juni 1892.



Een foto van Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas, ook wel Bosie Douglas genoemd. Uit: Holland, *Oscar Wilde*, 92.

Oscar invited Ives to come on with him to the Lyric Club. If he found Ives attractive when he picked him up, it seems that by the end of the evening he had thought better of it. Perhaps it was Ives's moustache that put him off. Oscar had never got over his abhorrence of facial hair. A year later, though, he did kiss Ives 'passionately' on the lips, but by that time Ives, 'having obtained permission from Mother', had shaved off his 'anti-Hellenistic' moustache.⁶ After Oscar's trial and imprisonment, Ives spent several pages of his diary fantasising about how different Oscar's life might have been had he fallen in love with him,

Ives, instead of with Bosie. Ives was amiable, attractive and likeable. He was moneyed and leisured, a poet and a penal reformer. But he was also depressive, highly secretive and obsessed with the 'new culture', with 'the Cause', as he called it. What physical attractions he possessed were outweighed, at least for Oscar, by his obsessive secrecy and, at times, dreary and repetitive conversation. Oscar was frequently exasperated by George Ives. Once, after Ives had particularly irritated him, Oscar suggested – not entirely in jest – that he should 'establish a Pagan Monastery, possibly on some small rocky island in the Mediterranean.'⁷

The Order of Chaeronea was named after the battle of same name in 338 BC where the male lovers of the Theban Band were slaughtered. Ives

6 Ibidem, 14 oktober 1893.

7 Ibidem, 26 oktober 1892.

started to date his correspondence from 338BC, this being year one of 'the Faith'. The 'Rules of Purpose' stated that the Order of Chaeronea was 'A Religion, A Theory of Life, and Ideal of Duty', although its purpose was primarily political. 'We demand justice for all manner of people who are wronged and oppressed by individuals or multitudes or the laws,' the Order's rules stated.⁸ Members of the Order were 'Brothers of the Faith', although it seems there were some lesbian members who were 'Sisters of the Faith'. The 'Service of Initiation' for the Order still survives. It was 'revised in the Year of the Faith, 2237' – or more prosaically 1899 – and it contains 'The vow that shall make you one of our number':

'That you will never vex or persecute lovers.
That all real love shall be to you as sanctuary.
That all heart-love, legal and illegal, wise and unwise, happy and disastrous,
shall yet be consecrate for that love's Holy Presence dwelt there.
Dost thou so promise?'⁹

It is impossible to know exactly how many men and women did so promise and were recruited to Ives's Order of Chaeronea, but at its peak 'the Elect' numbered perhaps two or three hundred. No membership lists survive, and the members referred to each other by initials, if at all. And as in the best-organised radical political groups, new members were recruited by just two existing members in a cell structure. Ives impressed on new members the vital need for secrecy in his best Old Testament prose. 'Thou knowest the two who received thee in the Order. Thou dost not need to know any others. Thou art forbidden to mention who belongs to anybody outside it.'¹⁰

The Order of Chaeronea was, according to Ives, emphatically not to be used as a forum for men to meet other men for sex. Sex 'is forbidden On Duty, and the Order is most ascetic', Ives wrote. 'Yet we condemn not any sensuality, so long as it is passionate. All flames are pure.'¹¹

It is almost certain that Oscar was an early recruit to the Order of Chaeronea. 'Oscar Wilde's influence will be considerable I think,' Ives confided to his diary on 26 October, when he was in the process of establishing the Order. Two of Oscar's sayings are quoted, reverentially, in the 'Thoughts' which preceded the solemn vow members were expected to swear to, suggesting that Oscar was a potent and profound source of inspiration to the Order.

8 Zie de George Ives materials, HCR.

9 Ibidem.

10 Ibidem.

11 Zie het dagboek van George Ives, 26 februari 1894.

The first was Oscar's ambiguous 'Love is a sacrament that should be taken kneeling', the second, a line from his play *Salomé*, 'The mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death.'¹²

One of the greatest mysteries of Oscar's life was why, when he was faced with certain prosecution and imprisonment, he chose to stay and face the judicial music rather than flee to safety in France. It was, I came to believe, Oscar's commitment to Uranian love which was the driving force behind his decision to stay and face certain imprisonment. Both Bosie and Oscar saw his decision to stay as a glorious martyrdom. 'To have altered my life,' Oscar wrote to Robbie Ross, after he came out of prison, 'would have been to have admitted that Uranian love is ignoble. I hold it to be noble – more noble than other forms.'¹³ What troubles me is why Oscar's – and, for that matter, Bosie's – political commitment to social and legal reform for Uranians has been airbrushed out of their histories for so long. When it comes to sexual politics, Oscar in particular has always been presented as apolitical while, paradoxically, many grandiose – and I think, unfounded – claims have been made about his Irish Nationalism.

In the same way, in the arena of Oscar's sexual behaviour, there has been a similar process of sanitisation, of censorship of what biographers have considered as unacceptable behaviour. Oscar was far from being a saint. His sexual odyssey took place in the hotels, restaurants, bars and backstreets of nineteenth-century London's homosexual underworld. It was a story of sex with aristocrats and servants, poets and students, rent boys and blackmailers. He was wildly, joyously promiscuous. He fell in and out love, and in and out of lust. He treated many of his lovers badly. But as far as I could discover, he never coerced any boys into having sex with him. But he often paid boys to have sex with him, and sometimes threatened them with dire consequences if they blabbed about it. I was extremely fortunate to be given access to the recently-discovered statements given to Lord Queensberry's solicitor, Charles Russell, by the witnesses ranged against Oscar Wilde. These included some of the blackmailers and male prostitutes Oscar had had sex with, as well as staff from the Savoy Hotel, like Jane Cotta, the maid who found semen and faecal stains on Oscar's sheets at the hotel. The statement of Walter Grainger, Bosie's fifteen-year-old Oxford servant with whom Oscar had sex regularly is especially disturbing. Grainger said

12 George Ives materials, HRC.

13 Oscar Wilde in een brief aan Robbie Ross, 18 februari 1898. Geciteerd uit: Holland en Hart-Davis ed., *Letters*, 1019.

that Oscar had told him that he would be in 'very serious trouble' if he told anybody that they had had sex. Such strategies might today be condemned as a classic stratagem of child abuse. There are other examples of Oscar's less than perfect behaviour with boys. Similarly, I came across a letter from Lord Alfred Douglas to Robbie Ross written from Algiers in which Bosie recounts his sexual adventures with a fourteen-year-old boy with whom he 'eloped', as André Gide put it, from his home in Blidah.

One of the strongest reactions to the book has been to the suggestion – no more than a suggestion – that Oscar was on some occasions the receptive partner in anal sex. There is strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that this may have been the case. Quite a number of people have objected to this suggestion, some of them quite violently. I have asked myself why this, of all the sexually explicit details I give in the book, has raised so many hackles among so many people.

After four years of research I had compiled my warts and all portrait of Oscar as a highly sexualised man and when I considered the shortfalls, the censorship, the not-quite-telling-the truth, and sometimes the downright dishonesty of some of the previous accounts of Oscar's life, together with the seeming reluctance on the part of many to confront the truths of Oscar's sexuality, I started to frame a theory. I think that much of this cultural doublethink boils down to a question of ownership and assimilation. For many people, the prevailing image of Oscar Wilde is of the ultimate dandy and wit, firing off devastating epigrams and writing sparkling social comedies which are still, over a century later, guaranteed to pull in the crowds to West End theatres. In our society Oscar has become a safe, reliable and almost avuncular figure. He has been assimilated into our dominant heterosexual culture as the acceptable and unthreatening, apolitical and largely asexual face of homosexuality. Oscar's sexuality, when and if it rears its head, is only vaguely understood. Most people are only too happy to believe in the standard version of Oscar's life as a married man who was seduced into sex with other men. There is a pervasive sense that Oscar's sexual behaviour with boys and young men amounted to little more than some fervent hand-holding, some snatched kisses and a little light masturbation. To bring any suggestion of sodomy – with attendant semen and faecal staining – into the equation disturbs and disrupts the rather cosy relationship, the sense of ownership and assimilation which has been established between society and Oscar. And to suggest that Oscar's sexual behaviour was also a political act and that he was a sexually political animal is a bridge too far, at least for

the English-speaking world.

My account of Oscar's life is just one account among many. But my hope is that it will help people to understand and appreciate Oscar Wilde's involvement with and commitment to 'the Cause' of love between men. His decision to stay and proclaim what he called the 'nobility' of Uranian love was a deliberate martyrdom. 'I have no doubt we shall win,' Oscar wrote, 'but the road is long, and red with monstrous martyrdoms.'¹⁴ It is a road that I have myself trodden. When I began my journey, the path was decidedly stony and I have known several men who, in one way or another, have experienced monstrous martyrdoms. Some have committed suicide, some have sought refuge in mental illness. Some have suffered, and continue to suffer, their anguish hidden, their scars covered over. And as a journalist, I came across many horrific stories: of assault, of murder, of homophobic bullying and of desperation.

Today, a quarter of century later, the going has become much easier for those modern-day Uranians venturing out on the road of self-discovery. In Britain, in a matter of just a few months, men who love men will be able to have their unions recognised and sanctioned by the state. For Oscar Wilde and the other Uranians, who toiled for legal and social justice, such an eventuality must have been almost unthinkable. But it was Oscar's formidable courage, his determination to stand up for the love that dare not speak its name, which began the long journey towards liberation.

Of course for many, the journey towards liberation has not yet begun. Gay men and lesbians throughout the developing world face what Oscar faced, and far worse, on a daily basis. I hope that if my book does nothing else, it celebrates Oscar's courage and importance as a pioneer of gay liberation and encourages and empowers us all to redouble our efforts to help oppressed Uranian lovers the world over.

14 Oscar Wilde in een brief aan George Ives, 21 maart 1898. Geciteerd uit: *ibidem*, 1044.