

NICHOLAS FRANKEL. *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*. London: Reaktion Books, 2021. Pp. 288. \$25.00 (cloth).

In a 1998 article “The Invention of Oscar Wilde,” *New Yorker* critic Adam Gopnick surveyed the recent critics, filmmakers, and playwrights who had occupied themselves with giving Wilde’s legacy a makeover. There was much handwringing over reevaluations that made Wilde a “hostage” to politics, critical fashions, and academic passions for, say, poststructuralist discourse. “What the professors used to be dreadingly good at—putting texts in context, giving a sense of what was original and what was just the way they did things then—is exactly what you will almost never find in the new academic literature on Wilde,” Gopnick mourned (Adam Gopnick, “The Invention of Oscar Wilde,” *New Yorker*, 18 May, 1998, p. 78-88, at 78). This is, however, exactly what you will find in Nicholas Frankel’s 2021 *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*. In twelve relatively brief and chronological chapters, Frankel explores the methods Wilde used to create himself, including writing English poetry, prose, and plays (chapters 2, 5, 7); declaring his genius (chapter 3); thinking paradoxically and subversively (chapter 6); loving pederastically and going to jail for it (chapters 8, 9, 10); and, in the end, standing in symbolic relationship to the nineteenth century (epilogue). Frankel’s writing is clear, and his ideas are accessible throughout. He compresses and summarizes other critics’ research with skill, although their work is not always scrupulously attributed. In chapter 6, Frankel demonstrates how, under Wilde’s pen, dialogue became “an intellectual theatre” (153) that put absurdity and contradiction center stage. This is one of the strongest chapters because it clarifies Wilde’s philosophy and demonstrates his seriousness as a thinker. Much is made of Wilde’s revisions to his only novel, terrain previously covered in Frankel’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray: An Annotated, Uncensored Edition* (2011). In the treatment of the society comedies, Frankel gives detailed attention to graphic design and

staging in ways that enhance his argument about Wilde's curiosity about sexual ambiguity. The treatment of Wilde's imprisonment usefully interpolates *De Profundis* with his correspondence to reveal fascinating contradictions. Here again, Frankel's best insights draw on his previous books, *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (2017) and *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde* (2018).

The book's greatest strength is in Frankel's explanations of Wilde's thought and personal history though the book's narrative holds no surprises for anyone familiar with Wilde's story. That a wellborn Irishman became a brilliant Oxford pagan who took London by storm and became "a taste maker of the very first order" (#) is not going to be a revelation to readers of Richard Ellmann's 1987 biography (still the standard in many circles). There is nothing wrong with keeping to the road most traveled, but it would make all the difference if lesser traveled and more recent critical roads had been signposted. Most of the fresh, relevant, new research about Wilde's self-invention is relegated to the bibliography.

Those attentive to the newer critical groove into which Wilde studies has ineluctably been moving will quite reasonably wonder why these new developments aren't addressed. In a 2018 *Times Literary Supplement* article, Kate Hext observed that several recent publications about Wilde "highlight[ed] a broader change of perspective in the field, showing that there is indeed new ground to cover" (Kate Hext, "Just Oscar: Defining the Wilde We Want to See," *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 November 2018). A few of the titles that might have merited further acknowledgment by Frankel include Matthew Sturgis's 2018 attempt to surpass Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde: A Life*; my 2018 *Making Oscar Wilde*, which gives Irishness and Wilde's American tour a central place in his self-invention; and Gregory Mackie's 2019 *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife*.

Perhaps not every critic wants to range forward and explore the ringing grooves of change. In this case, however, the conservative approach makes Wilde criticism look static,

when, in fact, it has been particularly dynamic and incisive of late. For example, the omission of race and empire in chapter 7 means that we are told that Wilde's society comedies were a sustained attack on the English aristocracy while the grounds for the attack—Wilde's Irishness, for starters—aren't considered. Wider currents in related areas of scholarship, such as celebrity studies, are also overlooked. For instance, one wonders how Frankel's claim that "Wilde was also the first global celebrity" (257) might have been tempered by giving due consideration to Sharon Marcus's 2019 *The Drama of Celebrity* which argues that "no one shaped modern celebrity more than" the Franco-Jewish, media-savvy, androgynous actress Sarah Bernhardt, "the godmother of modern celebrity culture" to whom Wilde was devoted (14). Like her, Wilde was subjected to racialization, Barnumization, imitation, and minstrelization (161, 168–69, 205). But the reader will not learn that from *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*. Nor will the reader find references to cutting-edge criticism on gender, sex, race, and theory. Frankel's Wilde resembles a saint enshrined or a fossil fixed in amber, not a vibrant thinker who might invigorate current debates about the culture wars, race, Black Lives Matter, Trans Lives Matter, and gender fluidity.

This is a biography for Wilde fans who want to be reassured that he is still "unquestionably heroic" (213). In other words, it is a book for those who believe that *aimer c'est tout pardonner*. But scholars and fans alike must acknowledge Wilde's broken, questionable, and unheroic aspects, too. These contradictions include the fact that he edited a feminist journal but behaved caddishly to his wife, and that he admired the US Confederacy because he saw the Southern Cause as similar to Ireland's. One of the most urgent tasks facing today's critics is to accurately portray the complex ambiguities that beset his life and work. For me, Frankel's admirably crisp prose and smooth, predictable argument reveal too little of the flawed human being who set the world on fire and immolated himself in the process.

Michèle Mendelsohn

Oxford University

michele.mendelsohn@ell.ox.ac.uk