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OSCAR WILDE'S FATHER on PORTUGAL and AUSTRIA

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William Robert Wills Wilde (1815-1875) was a versatile man indeed; "aural and ophthalmic surgeon, archeologist, ethnologist, antiquarian, biographer, statistician, naturalist, topographer, historian, folklorist".¹ He also founded and directed St. Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital, which became so popular that he had to move it to ever larger and better premises until he took over those of an abolished private medical school in Dublin's Park Street. He was a gifted and very prolific author and apart from scientific works he wrote travelogues² of a very special kind dedicated to those "who travel for more than change of climate, and desire to know something of a country beyond its scenery and amusements".³ He is the author of the first catalogue of Irish Antiquities,⁴ still being used in the Irish National Museum and of voluminous blue books which he wrote as medical advisor to the Census in Ireland.⁵ "A dark, ferrety-looking young man, below the average size, with retreating chin and a bright roving eye" if we believe his biographer T. G. Wilson. In "Victorian Doctor: Being the Life of Sir William Wilde",⁶ Wilson, who always maintained that he was a descendant of Sir William, gives us "the story of a man who like his son, had many faults. Like his son also his achievement was great — in fact I am not sure that when the final judgment is made, he will not be pronounced the greater man of the two".⁷

What brought the 22 year old Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons to Portugal in October 1837 was a combination of bad luck and good fortune. A scandal caused by an amorous indiscretion — the first of many to come — had to be avoided. That is why Sir Henry Marsh and Dr. Robert J. Graves decided to send William Wilde away. He was to accompany an ailing rich man, Mr. Robert Meiklam, on a Mediterranean cruise. Wilde was to publish his account of this voyage. *Narrative of a Voyage to Madeira, Teneriffe and along the Shores of the Mediterranean . . .*⁸ made him famous and relatively rich. He decided to spend the £250 on a journey to Vienna, where he arrived in the autumn of 1839 to stay for a year. Again he published a travelogue,⁹ another proof of his literary talent.

This enabled him to present dry facts and figures in such a way that they came alive under his pen, witnesses to the ongoing drama of human existence.

William Wilde was the son of Thomas Wilde a country doctor in Western Ireland. Often accompanying his father on his rounds he saw the ill effects of lack of education, hygiene, and social justice. For the rest of his life he was to remain concerned and compassionate and determined to make his contribution for a better order of conditions in Ireland. When travelling he observed the manner in which governments interfered in the lives of people in different countries. Thus he remarked on Austria: "The author has heard of and also seen much of what is called Austrian tyranny (the police state of Chancellor Metternich was notorious throughout Europe); but ardently as he loves liberty, and venerates the glorious institutions of Great Britain, he is now constrained to say that he would willingly exchange much of the miscalled liberty for which the starving, naked, and often houseless peasant of his fatherland, hurrahs, for a moiety of the food, clothing, and superior condition of the like classes in Austria. Without entering on the dangerous subject of politics . . . when other countries of Europe have been shaken to their foundations, or had their governments completely overturned by war and internal revolution, Austria has, during the last half century, remained like a ship in a calm, sluggishly rolling on the windless swell, while her helmsman simply rights his wheel when occasional jarring of his rudder reminds him that he is still director of the barque".¹⁰

What has Dr. Wilde got to say about Portugal? Endeavouring as usual to leave "no stone unturned in seeking information", he has neither hesitated to "censure abuses in men or institutions nor withheld praise, full, and . . . sufficient, where it was justly due",¹¹ as he claimed to have done for Austria later. Unable to judge the validity of Wilde's evaluation of Portugal at the time of his visit, I must limit myself to let him speak for himself.

Having remarked on the overwhelming and resounding canine population of Lisbon he adds "notwithstanding all this canine discord, the dogs appear at present the most stable part of the constitution of Portugal: their government is republican, formed of several petty states, and were it not for those nightly outbreaks, I would say was well regulated. Living in small communities, principally in the ruins of convents, old houses, and

many of the places desolated by the great earthquake, they own no masters, answer no names, and, uncivilized race, scorning the power as well as the protection of man — the true Ishmaelites^{11a} of the canine race. They have a peculiarly wild and ferocious aspect, and seldom stir out during the day; but at night, troops of fifteen or twenty of these ravenous creatures come rushing along the deserted and ill-lighted streets . . . They are under the present police surveillance, a necessary evil; there being no sewers, nor any means of removing nuisance and offal in this most filthy of cities, and no paving corporation to compel cleanliness, these dogs are, therefore, the only scavengers. The clergy endeavoured at one time to keep down their number, till the occupation of this place by the French, who compelled them to turn scavengers themselves — since this they have rather encouraged their increase to prevent the recurrence of a similar degradation."¹² In a footnote Wilde tells his reader in the second revised and enlarged edition of his *Narrative of a Voyage* . . . "Since the above was first published, I have been informed that many valuable improvements have been made in the city of Lisbon, and several sewers constructed".¹³

A liberal, free-thinker, rationalist and "naturalist", as scientists were called then, Wilde is usually anticlerical and suspicious of manipulation through organised religions, though he conceded some attraction to neo-baroque Catholicism. Upon visiting the Basilica da Estrela he notes:

"A single sentinel leaned on his musket at one of the side altars; a few scattered groups of females knelt around some patron saint; and the solemnity and silence that reigned throughout the building added to the awe and reverence inspired by the hour, the situation and the scene. Presently the priest entered . . . a cloud of incense rose around him, while a most enchanting strain of slow, soft music stole upon the stillness, and crept religiously around the aisles, swelling gradually till it filled the whole building. On either side of the organ was a close grating, behind which the nuns and monks of the adjacent convent were placed, and poured forth a full tide of harmony. How striking is a visit to a Roman Catholic house of worship abroad; where the pomp of ceremony, the splendour of decoration, and the enchantment of sound serve to exalt religious enthusiasm, and to lend to devotion those fictitious charms, made by exciting appeals to the senses."¹⁴

The party lived on the *s.y. Crusader* and Wilde had time enough to describe the colourful, busy harbour of Lisbon, which inspired him to convey his views on war and peace, as part of the description: "Here lay our own (the British) men of war, in the centre of the river; their topmasts

lowered for the night; and with their black hulls and mathematically squared yards, looking like so many monsters of the deep, waiting but the provocation to vomit forth destruction".¹⁵ Having made his position on war clear enough without having to insist heavily on his dislike of war, he changes topics and exults the brightness of the moon "a full and brilliant orb that sheds the rich effulgence of a midnight's glory on all around" . . . its resplendent brightness renders every object almost as clear and distinct as by an English sun."¹⁶

In describing his visit to the Cortes, Wilde gives yet another proof of the astuteness of his observations. ". . . the voice of the speakers is quite lost in the gallery, by a row of attic windows which have been opened round the hall".¹⁷

Avid to find out what life was like in Portugal in 1837, the reader notices Wilde's sympathy for the "poor Queen" of Portugal (Maria da Gloria 1826 - 53) who among other restrictions of her freedom was not allowed "to enjoy the sweets of this beautiful retreat (the palace of Sintra), the whole has gone much out of repair, and the furniture is hardly fit for a plain English gentleman".¹⁸ In Sintra and Mafra, Penha and other places visited by Wilde, today's traveller is entertained by the same stories as he was: that of the "mag-pie" hall "to commemorate for ever" a certain king . . . discovered by his queen in this very room kissing one of the maids of honour, who held a magpie on her arm; on seeing her majesty he exclaimed, "por ben", the Portuguese "honi soit". Upon which the queen had the hall decorated with many magpies holding ribbons on which "por ben" is written.

When visiting the Convento dos Capuchos, which he accurately calls the 'Cork convent' Wilde sees "a statue of our Saviour lying on its face, imbedded in the soft earth" . . . and he again wonders why the peasants abandoned the Catholic religion so quickly. "A few short years, nay, almost months ago, this figure was held to be one of the most sacred in Portugal, and none of the neighbouring peasantry went to their daily work without paying their devotions to it. What shall we say for the religion of such a land? Religion there is none; infidelity has usurped the place of ignorance and blind devotion, and now stalks naked through the length and breadth of the Peninsula, but more particularly in Portugal. By the present constitution, no male religious houses are permitted . . . the monks and friars have been driven from their princely establishments to live upon the sum of one and sixpence a day . . . What the French Revolution

commenced, and Napoleon carried on, Don Pedro, and the glimmering of enlightenment now breaking on this land, have completed." Wilde then goes on to say that the closing of nunneries is being contemplated, "a measure . . . which will be hailed by every signorita (sic!) in Portugal". The parochial clergy having little influence over the people "it is a singular fact that, so far from assisting the monks, when driven from their homes, the peasantry refused them the necessaries of life, or even the shelter of a cottage roof; and this to men before whom they had so lately knelt, and who exercised over them a spiritual tyranny neither tolerated nor known in any other country."¹⁹

"Most of the English residents have houses in Sintra", says Wilde, "they make up the principal society . . . as the present Portuguese aristocracy are either beggars or exiles; and the few who do not come under this description, decline society, from disgust at the unceremonious deprivation of the power and honours they had so long exclusively enjoyed."²⁰ While a modern traveller might get this same impression he or she could not agree with Wilde's account that "strangers see little of Portuguese manners or society, and what they do see is generally at the houses of the English residents".²¹ Today Portuguese society has several elites and resentment for lost privileges seems outbalanced by equally justified hope for, and faith in, democracy assuring freedom as well as social justice.

Wilde's forgotten book on Austria, which has recently been published in German, by the author of this article, contains at least one sensation — the first treatise in medical history declaring puerperal fever an infectious disease, and that, seven years before the Hungarian Semmelweiss published his theory on the matter. Both Wilde and Semmelweiss made their observations at Vienna's General Hospital.

Loving plants and gardens almost as much as people, William Wilde, the accomplished botanist has little use for what he calls the stiffness and formality of straight hedge-rows and clipped box trees. Wherever he went he described gardens and landscapes with often poetic exuberance. The gardens and fountains in the courts of Vienna's General Hospital enchanted him and he attributed to them a considerable healing effect on patients wandering through them. Unfortunately, the architects of Vienna New General Hospital, to be finished before the end of this millenium, have not read his praise of them — they built huge, air-conditioned towers — factories producing either health or death.

In Wilde's description of Montserrat, the English mansion he ascribes to William Beckford (1759-1844), he writes "princely mansion is roofless and overgrown with thistle . . . and the "mouldering ruins" are surrounded by vineyards and groves of orange and lemon trees".²³ He does not mention the famous botanical collection there, attributed to James Cook (1728-1779). Had it been there then he would most certainly have described it in detail.

William Wilde is a remarkable guide and visiting Lisbon and its surroundings more than 150 years after him, this traveller experienced churches, palaces and people with the same enchantment he did. Following in his footsteps in Ireland, in Vienna and in Portugal was most enjoyable and informative.

Two years after he visited Portugal, Madeira, Teneriffe and the other places described in *A Narrative*, Wilde will reach Vienna, the capital city of the Hapsburg Empire, famous throughout Europe for advances made there in ophthalmology. After the Napoleonic wars in Egypt 'ophthalmia' — or Egyptian blindness — brought back by French and English soldiers, attracted doctors throughout Europe to this branch of medicine, which had hitherto been often merely part of general surgery. In *Austria and Its Institutions* Wilde gives not only a detailed description of eye clinics in Vienna's General Hospital and in the Military Hospital, the Josephinum, — named after Joseph II (1741-1790), the enlightened absolutist whose reforms have elicited in his times, and since, the same admiration and rejection as those of the Marquis de Pombal (1699-1782). The young doctor from Ireland wanted to find out exactly and in detail all about the education of doctors in Austria, and about medical social services in the country and, being a thorough investigator, he did collect information on these as well as all other public involvement in private affairs.

While he praises the public school system and compulsory schooling rigorously enforced in every village of the Austrian Empire, Wilde deplores censorship, police surveillance of intellectuals and above all the lack of an Academy of Sciences in Vienna. "Were such an academy in existence", says he, "it would elicit native talent, and benefit scholarship, industry, commerce, and the arts. In short, it would generate a spirit and create a desire for scientific knowledge and investigation." He was well aware of the fact that since the French revolution of 1789 and especially

since the execution of Marie Antoinette, Queen of France and sister of Joseph II, the Hapsburg ruler of the time, Austrian politics had been overshadowed by fear of revolution. These fears which could have been answered by a continuation of the reform orientated policies of Maria-Theresia and her sons, led unfortunately to a police state and repressive measures which discredited Austria in Western Europe. By encouraging sciences and the arts the government would not "encourage a revolutionary spirit in the hearts of its dominions" according to Wilde. His own observations of life in Vienna had convinced him that the trading and working classes of ". . . are too comfortable, contented and happy to become the material by which the educated and the political can ever hope to effect any revolutionary change." Wilde having seen "with regret how much superior was the condition of the burghers and tradesmen of Vienna to the corresponding classes in England; and how much superior the Viennese mechanic was to the gin and whisky-drinking sallow-faced, discontented artisan of Great Britain — too often alas, rendered unhappy and discontented by the inciting declamation of some ale-house orator, or by the blasphemous and revolutionary sentiments of some Chartist periodical, that led him to brood over fictitious wants, or drive him forward to deeds of outrage, at once ruinous to himself and disgraceful to the community to which he belongs. But look at the same classes in Austria — enjoying their pipe and supper, listening to the merry strains of Strauss and Lanner". Amused and surprised to find members of the imperial family, of the aristocracy and most other social classes in places of popular entertainment he remarks "two or three of the archdukes of Austria mingling almost without observation among the artizans and shopkeepers over whom they rule; — strange to English eyes — yet such is Austrian policy. And then as to dancing — Orpheus must have been a Wiener, or at least have once set the good people of the imperial city a-going . . . men, women, and children — the infant and the aged, the merry and the melancholy — round and round they go, spinning away the thread of life, at least gaily, if not profitably".²²

NOTES

1. Inscription on the house in 1 Merrion Square in which Wilde and his family lived from 1855 to 1876.
2. *Narrative of a Voyage to Madeira, Teneriffe and along the Shores of the Mediterranean, including a Visit to Algiers, Egypt, Palestine, Tyre, Rhodes, Telmessus, Cyprus, and Greece. With observations on the Present State and Prospects of Egypt and Palestine, and on the Climate, Natural History, and Antiquities of the Countries Visited.* Dublin 1839, William Curry, Jun. and Company; Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, London; Fraser and Company, Edinburgh.
3. W. R. Wilde, Preface p. XX, *Austria: Its Literary, Scientific, and Medical Institutions. With Notes upon the Present State of Science, and A Guide to the Hospitals and sanatory Establishments of Vienna.* Dublin 1843 (same publishers as 2).
4. Catalogue of the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin 1857-1861; 1862.
5. W. R. Wilde. *The Census of Ireland for the Year 1851.*
See also: P. Frogatt *Medical History* (1965), IX, 302-27
6. T. G. Wilson. *Victorian Doctor: Being the Life of Sir William Wilde.* London, 1942.
7. Wilson, op. cit. Foreword.
8. Wilde, *Narrative*, op. cit.
9. Wilde, *Austria*, op. cit.
10. Wilde, *Austria*, p. 86.
11. Wilde, *Austria*, Preface, p. XX.
- 11a. "Ishmaelites" — the descendants of Abraham and the maid hagar — outcasts, who chose to live in the desert.
12. Wilde, *Narrative*, p. 33-34.
13. Wilde, *Narrative*, p. 34.
14. Wilde, *Narrative*, p. 32.
15. Wilde, *Narrative*, p. 32.
16. Wilde, *Narrative*, p. 32.
17. Wilde, *Narrative*, p. 35.
18. Wilde, *Narrative*, p. 45.
19. pp. 45-47.
20. *ibid.*
21. *Narrative*, p. 46.
22. Wilde, *Austria*, p. 78ff.
23. Wilde, *Narrative*, p.p. 51.

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W. R. Wilde, *Narrative* . . . (see note 2)

T. G. Wilson, *Victorian Doctor* . . . (see note 6)

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P. Frogatt, see note 5
+ in:

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