

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 341: The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Sex and Scandal

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The truth is really pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either. And modern literature a complete impossibility.

That wouldn't be at all a bad thing.

Literary criticism is not your forte, my dear fellow, don't try it. You should leave that to people who haven't been at a university. They do it so well in the daily papers.

What you really are, is a Bunburyist. I was quite right in saying you were a Bunburyist. You are one of the most advanced Bunburyists I know.

Tom, what on earth do you mean?

You have invented, Dominic, a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like.

I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury. In order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose, Bunbury is perfectly invaluable.

If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's tonight, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.

So that was the importance of being Ernest by Oscar Wilde. I think we can safely describe that as one of the ripest performances that we've heard for a long time in the rest of history.

Tom, we're out here in the sunshine in Washington, D.C. Annoying Americans with your...

Yeah, with your affected feet tones.

So if you hear dogs, helicopters, you know that's because we're out here in Washington. And Tom, our subject today, it's a cracking subject, isn't it?

The Trials of Oscar Wilde.

And we began with Importance Being Ernest, which is his most famous play, gloriously funny play. Jack Worthing, Algernon Moncreef, two kind of young gentlemen about town in London. Algernon Moncreef's terrifying Aunt Augusta, who is Lady Bracknell, as in a handbag.

All that kind of thing.

I wondered how long it would take us.

Yeah, well, we'll get it straight in.

And I have a particular fondness for that play because it inspired the very first piece of writing for which I got paid, which was a play called The Importance of Being Frank, which reworked the plot of The Importance Being Ernest to tell the story of Oscar Wilde himself.

So in that play, Jack Worthing became Oscar Wilde. Algernon Moncreef became Bozey, Lord Alfred Douglas.

You are an excellent Bozey, Tom.

Thank you very much.

Who was Wilde's lover. And Aunt Augusta, Lady Bracknell, became the Marquis of Queensbury.

Oh, very good.

Bozey's father and who was so furious about the affair that Wilde and Douglas were having that he kind of went around London accusing Wilde of being a Sondermite.

It's a misspelled opposing Sondermite.

Yes.

And Wilde then charged him with libel.

He came to court.

The evidence that Queensbury rustled up was so devastating for Wilde's case that he withdrew the libel accusation.

And then he, Wilde in turn, got arrested.

There were two trials and he ended up being sent to prison.

He did.

It's the story, isn't it?

It's the great 19th century martyrdom story.

I suppose certainly that's how it's perceived now.

There was the film with Stephen Fry as Oscar Wilde.

And Oscar Wilde is now, I would say, seen across the Western world as this great martyr in the course of gay rights, isn't he?

I mean, that's pretty much how he's seen as the sacrificial victim destroyed by a repressive, old fashioned, puritanical establishment.

Which, as we will see in these episodes, is actually not quite right.

The story is much more interesting and more complicated, isn't it?

So, you criticised me for saying things that are always more complicated than they seem.

Or Dominic, yes.

As Algernon said in the passage of importance of being earnest, we just opened with, the truth is rarely pure and never simple.

Very good.

And in this case, it's absolutely true.

So, Tom, Oscar Wilde, born in Dublin in 1854, the son of an Ireland's leading ophthalmologist and Lady Wilde.

So, William, his father and Lady Wilde was a nationalist poet under the pen named Speranza.

So, give us a sense for those people not massively familiar with him and his work.

Why he mattered in the late 19th century and what he, you know, why do we remember him?

Why was he such a big figure?

So, he's intellectually very brilliant.

He takes degrees at Trinity College Dublin, which is, of course, the Protestant university in Dublin that we were talking about only a couple of weeks ago.

He then goes to Oxford, does classics, wins all kinds of prizes there,

and he leaves and becomes a kind of, he sets himself up really as a kind of professional east seat.

Yes.

To the degree that Gilbert and Sullivan write an opera about him.

And they then take it to America and Wilde goes to America with the opera.

And he kind of famously arrives wearing all kinds of incredible clothing and is asked, you know, does he have anything to declare and says, I have only my genius to declare.

Which is what you said to the immigration official yesterday.

That's exactly, yes.

And was then pulled away.

Do you know what I said to the immigration official said to me, which one are you?

Because we'd had to explain who we were.

He said to me, which one are you in the in the partnership?
You know, are you his boss or is he yours?
And I said, oh, I'm not his boss.
He said, well, which one are you?
I said, I'm the funny one and the one who knows about history.
He found that very entertaining.
Did he?
So you declared your genius, Dominic.
Exactly.
Very nice.
Exactly.
Mr. Williams, just shout out to Mr. Officer Williams of the U.S. Border Force.
So Wilde did not need a straight man as I do.
So he just came on his own.
He kind of became kind of international star for being witty, for being funny, for being incredible, kind of intellectual brilliance.
And his works, you really rate his works.
You know, it's not just about the persona.
You think what he produced were works of tremendous literary elegance.
Yes.
So he comes back to Britain.
He, amazingly, he becomes the editor of the ladies magazine and he turns it into a kind of proto spare rib.
So he's very kind of progressive, very kind of feminist.
And then he gets bored of doing that.
And he from basically from kind of 1890 onwards, he embarks on kind of one of the great sequences of literary successes in British cultural history.
So he produces a novel, Dorian Gray, which will feature in in the story of the trials, because it's about a beautiful young man who is up to all kinds of sinister things that Wilde doesn't specify in the novel.
And he has his picture up in the attic, which all the kind of depravity and an evil that he's doing is reflected in the painting.
Dorian Gray maintains his beauty throughout.
He writes famous tragedy Salome.
He writes a series of brilliantly sophisticated and witty essays.
And he writes a series of comedies.
Lady Wyndham is found a woman of no importance and the most famous one of all, the importance being Ernest, which is probably the lightest, funniest, freshest comedy in English, I would say.
But let's get into the other side of world's life.
So well, or is it really another side?
Because of course, it's reflected in his writings.
So obviously, because this episode and the next episode are about his trials, there's going to be a lot of sex.
So this probably isn't one for the kind of five and six year old listeners.

But the interesting thing about Wilde, I discovered from Matthew Sturgis's biography. So at university, and as a very young man, he's actually sexually very of stimulus. There's actually no hint of people say of him, his friend, say of him, he's very prim. They talk of his culli refinement of nature. One of them calls him one of the purest minded men that could be met with. And actually, you know, even as he's establishing his reputation as an East Thief, there was no hint of scandal. And he marries Constance Holland. Constance Holland, exactly. No relation. And they have two children. But the turning point seems to be so in 1886. So just at the point where he's about to embark on this period of extraordinary literary output, you know, the high points of his genius as it were. He meets a 17 year old. I mean, we would say a boy or a young man called Robbie Ross, who is at a Kramer school. He's preparing for Cambridge and he is proud. He is exactly. He is what we would now call gay. He's completely comfortable with it. He's admitted that side of his nature to himself. And as far as we can tell, he seduces the old much older Oscar. He introduces him to this side of his nature. Yeah. And Wilde discovers he really enjoys it. And I think he enjoys it on a physical level, but I think he enjoys it also on an emotional level. Because if you think of the plot of Dorian Gray, the idea of secrets and kind of a sense of elevated knowledge amplifying your status is something that he really enjoys. And the great theme of Wilde's writing, really, is the fact that life is always paradox and and that it's impossible to pin a person down. If you can pin a person down, then that person is basically dead. He's always looking for ways to kind of complicate who he is and what his relationship is to his writings and to his kind of, you know, the world in which he's situated. And I think that he had studied classics at Oxford and he identifies very, very strongly with the notion that we talked about actually in our previous episode about Hadrian Antinous. The idea that the Greeks had an elevated understanding of what sexuality could be and that this was focused on same sex relationships. And so he comes to identify this, I mean, he rapidly becomes very, very promiscuous. And he seems to have identified this with the kind of cultural superiority that he had obtained by studying ancient Greek. Yeah, he thinks he's in the tradition of the Greeks. There's a kind of platonic ideal of love, which is represented by the love of two men. He thinks that Shakespeare. Yes.

He looks into Shakespeare's sonnets.

Michelangelo.

Marlowe.

It's not just that he physically enjoys it, as you say.

It's that it appeals.

It elevates him.

Yes, it elevates him, exactly.

Now, the interesting thing is that this is 1886.

One year earlier, there had been a change in the law.

So since 1533, the Buggery Act passed under Henry VIII had made sodomy the detestable and abominable vice of buggery, as it was called in the act, had made it a capital crime.

Obviously, by the mid-19th century, people are no longer being executed for it.

They're being sent to prison.

But in 1885, and it's a very complicated story, so we'll just give a kind of simplified version.

There was legislation, which was actually about texting women, because there was a great obsession at the time with what people called the white slave trade and young girls being trafficked.

And a liberal MP called Henry Labouchere introduced an amendment.

It's still debated by historians whether he was sort of messing around and wrecking the bill.

He thought he was wrecking the bill or whether he genuinely believed it because he was a radical.

He was a sort of top thumping campaigner.

But this amendment criminalized not just sodomy, but any what they called gross indecency of one male person with another male person and made it a misdemeanor.

So it's not a crime.

It's a misdemeanor.

And this maximum sentence is two years with or without hard labor.

So in other words, whereas previously, you had to be, I mean, to be blunt about it, you had to be convicted of penetration.

To get into trouble with the law.

And then you get life imprisonment.

And then you get, yeah, a variety of sentences.

But from 1885, so a year before Oscar Wilde discovers this taste, as it were, any form of interaction.

So any kind of messing around and fumbling and whatever is now liable for prosecution.

And I think that that only enhances the pleasure for Wilde.

So he will come to talk about his relationship with kind of male partners as feasting with panthers.

And I think that for Wilde, that sense of danger absolutely amplifies the pleasure.

So he will call his series of relationships with young men feasting with panthers precisely because it is so dangerous.

That is clearly, I think, a crucial part of this story.

The story of Wilde's trials are situated against this change in the law.

But Dominic, I think there's also another potentially even more intriguing aspect,

which is a crucial shift in the understanding of how sexuality functions, of what sexuality actually is.

And we are the heirs of this revolution.

And the revolution has triumphed so completely that perhaps we don't even realize that there's been one.

So essentially, that law of Henry VIII that you mentioned, what that is doing is operating on an assumption that sexual acts are moral crimes, that they are deliberate actions taken by sinners who are so depraved, so evil, so much the creature of their lusts that they're not willing to operate within the kind of the guidelines that God has set.

So it's moral.

And they're what you do rather than what you are.

So it's what you do.

So there is no concept that you might, for instance, you might be gay.

There's no concept of that at all.

But in the second half of the 19th century, this has begun to change.

And what you see is the kind of the medicalization of what had previously been something that was seen as being a moral offense.

And this is particularly associated with German psychology.

And it's Germans who coined the phrase homosexuality.

So it's a kind of portmanteau word mixture of Latin and Greek, like television.

And the guy who popularizes it is a German psychologist called Richard von Kraft Ebbing, who writes this great book about it called *The Psychopathia Sexualis*, which is translated into English in 1892.

So that's three years before Wilde goes to trial.

And the thing that's interesting about this is partly that Kraft Ebbing is kind of casting homosexuality.

This idea that people have a particular condition, a kind of morbid condition, as he describes it, as a disease, as something that is as a morbidity.

And therefore there is a hint in Kraft Ebbing that people should be treated with sympathy.

And furthermore, by the end of his career, Kraft Ebbing has come into such kind of contact with people who come to identify themselves as homosexual,

that he's arguing that it should be decriminalized completely and that people who are homosexual can lead kind of the equivalent of a married life.

So he's always kind of prefiguring gay marriage.

Now this matters, I think, for Wilde, because even as he is sleeping around a lot with young men, kind of casual affairs, he does meet the great love of his life, who is Alfred Lord Douglas, the son of the Marquis of Queensbury.

And this sense that homosexual love can be something that is dignified, that it is something that is noble,

that it is something that is pure, perhaps even purer and nobler than a kind of conventional heterosexual relationship,

is something that both Wilde and Bozzy, his name for Alfred Douglas, really, really get into.

And it kind of fuses with this Greek Roman idea.

Well, before we get into that, before we get to Bozzy, let's get to the end of the 1880s.

So Wilde had sort of discovered this taste, as it were.

I mean, that's obviously not the right expression, but you know what I mean.

In 1886, quite quickly, he becomes increasingly reckless.

So he's having assignations with much younger men, men 18, 19, 20, 21.

He's in his mid-30s.

And what's interesting, so we have this image, I think, Tom, of the late Victorians, of the sort of the world of the criminalization of homosexual behavior.

We often think of it as almost totalitarian in its repression.

But that's not quite right.

So Wilde is obviously getting away with this behavior.

It's an open secret in literary and theatrical circles in London and indeed elsewhere.

So rumours kind of spread.

So in his book, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, which you mentioned earlier, when that comes out in 1890,

it's interesting how a lot of the reviews of *Dorian Gray* see it against the background,

I think, of this kind of reckless behavior.

And so here's the *Daily Chronicle*.

The *Daily Chronicle* says of *Dorian Gray*,

it's a poisonous tale spawned by the leprous literature of the French decadence, heavy with the odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction.

We've all had bad reviews like that.

Well, that's what a lot of people say about this podcast.

Here's a much more interesting one.

The *Scott's Observer* says,

it's the kind of tale that would appeal to none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys.

Now, why perverted telegraph boys?

Well, because a year earlier in 1889, there has been a scandal called the Cleveland Street scandal when a homosexual brothel has been exposed.

Telegraph boys, so basically messenger boys are selling themselves to aristocrats.

So the most famous example is a guy called Lord Arthur Somerset, who was the echoree to the Prince of Wales.

He actually fled abroad to avoid prosecution.

So when the paper says this is a tale that will appeal to telegraph boys, they understand exactly what the code is in the picture of *Dorian Gray*.

And many readers will also say, ah, so now we know.

And of course, the thing about the telegraph boys and the aristocrats also is there's something else going on there,

which is this suspicion throughout the 1880s, 1890s, 1900s.

We've talked about it with the Kaiser actually in Germany, Tom.

This suspicion, which is very widespread in the Western world, that rich and powerful people are part of this sinister homosexual elite who are secretly having assignations with rent boys.

I mean, this is around in that kind of late Victorian Edwardian world.

And again, that feeds into the idea that there is something elevated about Greek love as both Bozi and Wilde would call it.

So Bozi kind of celebrates what he calls a frank paganism, because you have to have, you know, to study Greek and Latin at Oxford or Cambridge, you have to have the education and the class in the background to do it.

So let's talk a little bit about Bozi.

Bozi is Lord Alfred Douglas.

He's the third son of the Marquis of Greensbury.

So he's the aristocrat who codifies the rules of boxing.

Bozi had...

And he's very much the kind of man who you would associate with codifying the laws of boxing.

He's got tremendous side whiskers, hasn't he?

And he's terrifying.

Yeah.

He's a sort of hulking figure who crosses London, falling out with people.

He's a very keen secularist, Tom.

Yes, he is.

So he disrupted an Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Yes.

Clay.

Yes.

Because it had a disobliging portrait of an atheist.

Yes.

And he has been thrown out of the theater for shouting.

So he's a very strange figure, the Marquis of Greensbury, eccentric, maverick, badly behaved.

Dangerous enemy to have.

Yeah, very dangerous enemy.

So Wilde meets Bozi.

Who's 20?

20.

In 1891.

They start an affair in 1892.

But I think Dominic, important just to emphasize that Bozi is much more experienced.

Yes, you're absolutely right.

Than Wilde in terms of gay relationships.

Yes, he is.

So he's been having relationships at Winchester at school and at Oxford.

They immediately strike up.

I mean, what some people...

So, I mean, I'll put my cards on the table.

I think Bozi was an absolutely terrible, terrible man.

Terrible piece of work.

Yeah.

Yes.

They strike up what I think a lot of people, including some of Wilde's friends would say is a toxic relationship.

Is a relationship that is very bad for Wilde.

So they haven't actually been together very long as it were.

In August 1892, Wilde has taken a house in Norfolk, a sort of summer home for his family.

He invites Bozi along.

He and Bozi stay there.

And Bozi, it's...

From that point, it seems that Bozi basically introduces Wilde to this world in which Wilde had previously only dabbled.

Which is the world of...

There are places in London, you know, despite the fact that homosexuality is criminalised, there are places in London where you can pick up rent boys.

There's a roller skating rink in Knightsbridge.

The bar.

Roller skate.

Roller skating.

I know.

It's very 50s America, I think.

Milkshakes.

There's the bar at the St. James's restaurant.

If you know, you know.

And you go to these places and you pick up 17, 18, 19 year old young men.

And they behave...

It staggers me, you know, thinking about this story.

They behave with extraordinary recklessness.

Knowing the climate at the time, they are picking up rent boys.

We could give example after example, but the biographers are very similar.

These are 19, 20 year old clerks, office boys, servants, waiters.

They're always inferior, socially inferior.

But they are behaving, Tom.

They are taking rooms at the Savoyan things.

There's two brothers, Charlie and William Parker, for example.

Bose, he lets them sleep in his bed.

He lets them sleep in his bed so that the servants will see the next day.

Wild at the Savoy, when the pages at the Savoy come to bring him messages, he thanks them by kissing them on the mouth, which they find very alarming.

And then he gives them money.

Yes.

So Wild's approach to these boys.

I think you can call them boys because, I mean, they are pretty young.

Simultaneously, he is very kind.

He's very generous.

He's a great one handing out silver cigarette boxes.

He does that all the time.

I mean, he behaves well with them in that sense.

He's a kind man, but at the same time, this is clearly very exploitative.

He is much older.

He's much richer.

He's in a position of power relative to them.
And as we will find out in due course when they are cited in the trial,
Wild's actions with them seems to have caused them quite a lot of psychological stress.
So this is a fascinating question, which we, I mean,
I guess listeners to the podcast will draw their own conclusions,
and that will depend very much on your position as it were.
But obviously there are two different ways of seeing this.
One is to say Wild is the victim of this incredibly sensorious puritanical culture,
and he is martyr.
Another way of seeing it, which perhaps people in 2023 might be more inclined to do,
is to say Wild is exploiting a power and wealth.
And I think Wild himself would accept that.
So in due course, he says about this time,
I grew careless of the lives of others,
which doesn't mean that he is regretting it.
Because for Wild, the idea that of paradox is incredibly important.
The idea that you can be two things at once simultaneously
is the whole essence of his understanding of what character is.
And also he is very, very committed to the idea that genius and particularly artistic genius
means that you are emancipated from the standards of kind of broad and more conventional society.
So all of this is part of the kind of psychological mix of what is going on.
One quick thing, Tom.
Some people may be wondering, where's his wife and all this?
Constance.
And the answer is she's at home with the kids.
He's constantly saying, well, I have to go to the Savoy.
I have to go and...
And so hence the bun-breeding thing.
Two lives.
So when he comes to write the importance of being earnest,
on the surface, it seems a completely heterosexual play.
But the moment you realise what all these jokes are about,
the fact, you know, bun-breeding and so on,
this is exactly what Wild is doing.
But Tom, I mean, just on Constance,
she's always left out of this story.
She is innocent to all this.
When I say innocent, she has no conception of what is going on.
And she is distressed that Wild is going off and leaving her.
And at one point, she's still bringing him, by the way, his post.
So he will check into a hotel with Rosie Douglas.
She will bring him his post.
On one occasion, she says to him, when are you going to come home?
And Wild, in that flippant, dismissive way that he has, says,

oh, I've been gone so long that I can't even remember the address.
And you sort of think there is a sad side to the story.
It's funny and sad.
Exactly.
So meanwhile, Wild's name is starting to become tainted by this
the view of the kind of broader public.
So here's one story.
They take cottage engoring by the Thames.
The vicar comes around one day to see Oscar Wild.
Which is very important.
It's being earnest.
And Wild is lying there in the garden with just a towel.
Rosie is completely naked.
They've been dousing each other with hose pipe.
They are perfectly Greek semen described as.
And there are stories that engoring.
It's an open secret to this point.
The story goes that at the pub, the local pub,
the people are saying, I'd like to go and punch that Oscar Wild.
He's a terrible man.
What are they getting up to in that cottage?
So a lot of people now know.
And this is very like the plot of Dorian Gray,
where the reputation of Dorian Gray becomes steadily more and more evil.
And there's a sense in which Wild is almost kind of reveling in the way
that he is repeating the plot of that.
But what really turbocharges the sense in the kind of general public
that Wild is indeed feasting with Panthers
is the behavior of Bozi's father, the Markers of Queensbury.
So the Markers of Queensbury sees them.
I mean, he has met Wild and he's seen them together.
He thinks, you know, my son has a friend who is a very famous and important man.
But by the spring of 1894, you know, he's heard all the rumors.
He writes to Bozi with my own eyes.
I saw you both in the most loathsome and disgusting relationship
as expressed by your manner and expression.
You're disgusted, so-called father, Queensbury,
to which Bozi's reply, sent by telegram, is,
what a funny little man you are.
Yeah, but Queensbury then says to him,
if I catch you again with that man, I'll make a public scandal
in a way you little dream of.
And a few weeks later, he actually goes around to Wild's house.
This is June 1894.

Wild says to him, I mean, Wild is so, so reckless.
He says, are you seriously accusing me of sodomy?
And the Markers says, I don't say you are,
but you look at it and you pose as it, which is just as bad.
You know, they have this massive argument.
Queensbury says to him, if I catch you and my son together
in any public restaurant, I will thrash you.
So that tells you the sort of man the Markers of Queensbury is.
Now, even at that stage, Wild,
I mean, just unbelievably self-destructively
given what's to happen, is already saying to his lawyers,
I'd like to sue the Markers of Queensbury.
You know, I'd like to take legal action against him
for libeling me.
I mean, this is crazy,
given that actually what the Markers of Queensbury is saying is true.
It's true.
Yes.
So, Tom, I mean, the story gets so, I mean,
it becomes the stuff of a pure Victorian melodrama, doesn't it?
It does.
The first night of the importance of being earnest.
Yes.
The libel case, the trial and then subsequent trials.
So let's take a break before we plunge headlong
into the seething stew of resentment, anxieties,
accusations and high melodrama.
Hello.
Welcome back to the Restless History.
We are talking the trials of Oscar Wilde and Dominic.
We are approaching the first of those trials.
Yes.
Which is when Wilde sues the Markers of Queensbury,
the father of his lover, Bozy, for libel.
And it's the kind of mad thing for Wilde to do, isn't it?
It's completely mad.
It's completely mad.
So he's been threatened by the Markers of Queensbury.
The shadow, the hulking shadow of this boxing enthusiast.
Never take on a boxing enthusiast.
Never.
Never.
Even now.
So by the way, in the summer of 1894, just after he's had these threats,

Wilde is writing the play that we opened with the importance of being earnest.

In Worthing.

In Worthing.

Which is, so hence, Jack Worthing.

And here's an example of Wilde's recklessness.

He's in Worthing that summer on the beach.

He's got Bozy Douglas with him.

He's got his family, his sons.

They pick up a trio of boys on the beach,
most famously a guy called Alfonso Conway,
who Wilde calls Alfonso.

Alfonso is 16.

Wilde invites him out in dinghies and stuff,
you know, going crabbing or whatever they do,
with Wilde's children.

But when they will get back, you know,
when the children go to bed or whatever,
Wilde will go off with Alfonso.

And there's a, you know, he will,
and I quote, take hold of Alfonso and fumble with him.

How old is Alfonso?

Alfonso is 16.

So Alfonso, I think it's fair to describe Alfonso.

He's not a young man.

He is a boy.

And I think from the perspective of 2023,
that's a story that makes uncomfortable reading.
Don't you think Tom makes uncomfortable reading?

And given the circumstances,
so he knows this bloke is out there,
threatening to thrash him to make a public scandal,
I think just crazily reckless.

And so this play that he's written in Worthing,
while all this is going on,
the importance of being earnest,
comes on stage at St. James's Theatre,
14th of February, so Valentine's Day, 1895.

And it's this shimmering play about people leading secretly
reading secret lives in which nothing is quite as it seems.

And it's a triumphant success.

It's a brilliant play.

Wilde is now the literary toast of London,
but this shadow remains because the Marquis of Queensbury
has been prowling around the theatre trying to get access.

He can't get in and he has with him
a grotesque bouquet of vegetables,
which he wants to give to Wild.
He can't get in and so he kind of storms off,
chattering like a monstrous ape.
It's kind of a terrifying figure.
And so that's absolutely, of course,
a shadow over the success of the importance of being earnest.
Well, the very next day, Tom,
the very next day Wild again consults his lawyers
and says, I'd like to prosecute the Marquis of Queensbury,
get him off my case.
And so it's two weeks later, isn't it, Tom,
that 28th of February he gets the provocation,
the fateful provocation that pushes him over the edge.
Yes, so he goes to the Audemars Club
and there a porter hands over this note
that has been left for him by the Marquis of Queensbury.
The porter has very discreetly put it in an envelope
Wild takes it out.
And here is this kind of notorious accusation
that Oscar Wild is a Ponce and a Sondermite.
Yeah, so at first that's exactly what Wild thinks it is.
It's Ponce and Sondermite.
But I think, I mean, the Marquis of Queensbury
as monstrous apes tend to do, he has terrible handwriting.
So I think the consensus is that actually
it's posing Sondermite or something like this.
And Wild goes to see Bosie and his friend Robbie Ross,
the very person who'd introduced him to homosexuality.
And they say, yeah, go for it, prosecute him.
I mean, mad, by the way, completely mad.
But the plan is that Wild and Douglas are going to defend
their relationship as something exalted,
as something Greek, as something Platonic,
as something Shakespearean,
and make the Marquis of Queensbury look like a kind of gibbering ape.
Yeah.
It's basically the plan.
It is the plan.
And Wild and Bosie, I mean, he says to Wild,
oh, sure, it'll be very expensive.
But don't worry, I'll pay for it.
My family will hate, you know, my father.

Yeah.

We'll all pay for it.

We will basically put up the money for you to prosecute my father.

So Wild issues the writ,

and the Marquis of Queensbury is arrested

and he's brought to Marlborough Street Magistrates Court

and charged with publishing a criminal libel.

Yeah.

Now, the first in the Marquis of Queensbury does

is he engages somebody who will be well known

to people who've listened to our recent episodes.

So he engages a man who had been at university with Oscar Wilde,

who is Edward Carson,

later, very famously, the leader of the Ulster Unionists,

the great champion of anti-home rule Ulster Unionism

in the early 1910s.

Now, this is always this sort of clash of the two men.

It's almost always, actually, presented as a kind of morality story

with Carson as the villain.

The interesting thing, actually,

is that Carson didn't really want to take the case.

First of all, he didn't like the idea of appearing against

an old school friend.

And also, he thought the Marquis of Queensbury's case was too weak.

And the other interesting thing is that, actually,

Wilde's solicitor had wanted to retain Carson for Wilde,

but had been beaten to the punch by the other side,

because Carson already has a reputation

as this brilliant courtroom performer,

absolutely ruthless, devastating, and placable.

And it's a bad way for Wilde that Carson is on the other side.

But, I mean, he gets a very, very distinguished defense lawyer,

Sir Edward Clark,

whose descendant, Tom, is a member of the Restless History Club.

It's wonderful to know, isn't it?

Peter Clark, Casey, so there you go.

So Sir Edward asks Wilde,

is there any truth in these accusations, as he has to?

And Wilde says, absolutely none.

Yeah.

And so Clark prepares his defense on that assumption.

On that assumption, exactly.

But even at the very beginning,

so the committal hearing,

that Saturday the night of March,
even at that early stage,
so when the Marquis of Queensbury has been committed for trial,
Wilde is making a series of disastrous errors.
So he turns up in this dark blue velvet overcoat,
a white flower in his bottom hole,
you know, the picture of aesthetic dandyism.
His answers to the questions are flippant,
and, you know, are you a dramatist and author?
I believe I am well known as a dramatist and author.
And the magistrate says, just answer the question,
you know, yes or no.
There's all this kind of thing.
Bozy, who's completely deluded,
is going around saying everything is splendid.
It's going to be a walkover.
And actually, most people seem to assume that Wilde is going to lose.
So, yeah, even at this very, very early stage,
they have a friend called Frank Harris, who's a publisher.
And Wilde says to Frank Harris,
will you give evidence on my behalf?
And Frank Harris actually says,
yeah, I don't think you're going to win.
I mean, everybody knows you.
And starts to suggest,
which will become a suggestion that is increasingly made to Wilde,
that he should basically run away to France.
So even at this stage, some of Wilde's friends are saying,
but we all know that you have no case.
But Wilde and Bozy,
Bozy is such a terrible person, Tom.
Wilde and Bozy are just in their little bubble, aren't they?
They are consumed with contempt for the Marquess of Greensbury.
And I think for the kind of the Philistinism of British society generally,
that doesn't have fine ascetic feelings
and doesn't know what it's like to be Plato or Shakespeare,
I think that's also a part of it.
There's a kind of cultural elitism there.
Was it arrogance, actually?
Well, you would call it arrogant.
I would call it elitist.
Right.
You'd call it fine feelings.
Yes, elevated feelings.

But I think given the stakes,
given the danger,
it's crazy that they are charging ahead as they are.
So it's a Saturday morning, the last Saturday of March, 1895.
And the Marquess of Greensbury has to enter a plea of justification.
His lawyers have to present his case
and to say why he's justified in making this claim.
And to Wilde's shock and horror,
they say, he thinks it's all going to be, has books,
I mean, so self-deluding.
And actually, they say, we have a list as long as our arm.
Of all these boys.
Of all these boys.
Our solicitors have engaged investigators.
They have tracked down Edward Shelley,
Sidney Maeve or Fred Atkins, Morris Schwab,
Alfred Wood, Charles Parker, Walter Granger,
Alfons Conway.
This list of three years worth of assignments.
And Wilde is absolutely stunned.
And it's at that point for the first time that he thinks,
jeez, if I use this case,
what will happen is the Crown will immediately launch a case against me.
Problem is, is that if he does flee abroad,
then that's an admission of guilt as well.
And he will, again, he'll be ruined.
So either way, both alternatives are disastrous.
And so he decides he's the most articulate man of his generation.
And I think he views Edward Carson as a second-rate mind.
Yeah, he does.
A plotter knows him from school and thinks,
I'm going to trust in my own oratory, my own brilliance,
and hope that I can command the courtroom.
So the case opens, the full trial opens on Wednesday,
the 3rd of April, 1895 at the Old Bailey.
It's Central Criminal Court in the Old Bailey for overseas listeners.
I mean, this is the great cockpit of the British legal system.
You know, that gives you a sense of what a tremendous drama this is.
From the start, Wilde is still playing the kind of flippant,
the jokey remarks and all this.
And he clearly, here's contempt, as you said, for Carson.
He thinks Carson is a second-rate.
He does say to his counsel, no doubt Carson will perform his task
with all the added bitterness of an old friend.

Yes, and he's not wrong.
Because Wilde is getting the laughs in court,
but Carson is landing the blows which register with the jury.
Because the jury are North London shopkeepers.
All men, of course, as was the way in those days.
Wilde is making the jokes. Carson is unsmiling.
He is cold.
He just asks his questions again and again.
So there's a thing right at the beginning.
Carson is able to demonstrate that Wilde has been lying about his age.
How old are you, Mr. Wilde?
Wilde lies.
And this is kind of riff on a joke in the importance of being earnest,
where Lady Bracknell says, you know, it's very bad form to give your real age.
No one does this in polite society.
But here, it's not funny.
Because Wilde says, I'm 39.
And Carson says, but you're not, are you, Mr. Wilde?
You're 40.
And right from the start, it makes Wilde look unreliable.
It accentuates the age gap between him and all these people.
But also, all his witticisms are so brilliant.
They kind of dazzle, but they don't build up a coherent, solid case.
No.
And Carson, his questions are implacable.
Did you ask Ward to your house in Tide Street?
Was your wife away?
Did you have a moral practices at Ward?
Did you open his trousers?
Did Shelley stay all night?
Did you put your hand upon his person?
Did you kiss Conway on the Lansing Road?
Again and again, names, dates, places.
And the impression is, as you said, it's one of complete implacability.
Wilde makes this totally catastrophic error, doesn't he, Tom?
Yeah.
There's this guy who's a servant called Walter Granger, who was 17, who Bozy had interfered with.
Carson, did you kiss him?
Wilde says, oh no, never in my life.
He was such a peculiarly plain boy.
Kind of flippant, witticism, tossed out.
And Carson, he was what?
And then Wilde starts to stutter and says, oh, his appearance was so very unfortunately ugly.
I pitted him for his appearance.

Very ugly, says Carson.

Why did you mention his ugliness?

And he says that question, it's very Jeremy Paxman, which our British assistants will recognize.

It's a tigerish interviewer.

He says again and again, why did you mention his ugliness?

Why did you mention his ugliness?

Again and again.

And while complete, so you sting me and insult me and try to unnerve me.

And at times one says things flippantly when one ought to speak more seriously, I admit it.

You have the sense here that Wilde is suddenly realizing that wit is not enough.

Now there's one other moment at this point.

And the Carson interrogation, which is day two of the trial.

Carson reads out the letters of the Marquis of Queensbury attacking Wilde.

And in one of those letters, Queensbury has described Wilde as a damned cur and coward of the Rosebury type.

Lord Rosebury is the leader of the Liberal Party and prime minister.

So around Lord Rosebury, there have been swirling for months allegations and rumors that he too is gay.

I mean, amazingly, Dominic, there is a further connection here with the Marquis of Queensbury, right?

Exactly, because the Marquis of Queensbury's eldest son, Viscount Drumlinrig, had been Rosebury's private secretary.

There had been allegations about the relationship between them and Lord Drumlinrig had been shot. It's described as a mysterious shooting accident.

And people said, is this because he and Rosebury were having an affair?

So the point at which that letter is read out in open court, the prime minister, Tom.

Now, Wilde is quite close to the Liberal top brass.

He's friends with Asquith.

He's had dinner with the home secretary, Herbert Asquith, the future prime minister.

At that point that that is read out in open court, suddenly this is no longer just a sort of moral issue or a scandal about a celebrity.

It's political.

And the government, you know, immediately they'll are, oh no, because now we are involved and we cannot go easy on this.

You know, if Wilde doesn't win, and if we don't act, people will say you were trying to cover up the fact that he's part of this conspiracy with the prime minister.

This sort of mythical enterprise or whatever people would have said at the time.

So suddenly this now has this other dimension.

So this is all very, very bad for Wilde.

So there's one other thing on day two.

Our club member, Peter Clark, pointed this out to me, sent me an email about this.

At this point, Wilde says to his barrister, Edward Clark, actually, there is something I didn't tell you.

I was turned out of the Albemarle Hotel in the middle of the night and a boy was with me.

It might be awkward if they found out about it.

And at that point that his own barrister, Sir Edward Clark, clearly thinks, oh geez, you know, he has made.

Yeah, why did you not know this is not good.

You have clearly been lying to me all along.

So on day three, first thing next morning, Sir Edward Clark asked for a conference with his client and says,

I've been thinking overnight, this is a disaster.

You are going to have to withdraw from the prosecution.

There is no way we can win.

Probably the best thing is for us to try to do a deal.

And Clark goes to see Sir Edward Carson and says to Carson, look, Wilde will drop the case.

You know, can you do your best to make the Marcus of Queensbury pursue this no further?

And it seems that Carson says, I'll do my best.

I can't guarantee it.

But Carson later says he did not want Wilde to pursue it over this.

Yeah, I think it's absolutely plausible.

I know a lot of historians now view Sir Edward Carson as a baddie because of his role in the home rule crisis.

Unless, of course, they are sort of...

The Alster Univis.

Yeah, the Alster Univis, exactly.

So Sir Edward Carson gets a generally bad press, but I think it's very plausible that he did say, sure, we'll try to do a deal.

I don't want to pursue my own classmate.

Of course, the Marcus of Queensbury, this great chattering ape.

He's not in favor of that.

It's not a man in favor of doing deals.

He wants to destroy Wilde and destroy his own son, actually, I think to some extent.

There's partly an issue of him wanting to save his son, but also his son has been so rude to him.

The Marcus of Queensbury has been maddened by his son's conduct that he is determined to pursue it.

So this is exactly what happened.

So Wilde drops the case, but straight away, mentioned Lord Rosebury, Queensbury's solicitor sends the Crown Prosecutor a transcript to the trial, a transcript of all what their witnesses have been saying, all the boys, the government's top brass are kind of meeting in sort of emergency conclave. Herbert Asquith, the Home Secretary, the Attorney General to Robert Reed, the Solicitor General to Frank Lockwood.

So when people tell the story of the trials of Oscar Wilde, the instinctive way of doing it is to say he's the victim of a repressive, cruel, puritanical establishment.

But these people know Wilde, Asquith had had him around for dinner, and they are in a position where they think we cannot let this go.

You know, he has broken the law.

He appears to have broken the law.
Our Prime Minister has been dragged into it.
Dominic, the intriguing detail that at this point,
and for the duration of the trials that follow,
Rosebury seems to be basically kind of out of action.
He seems to have had a kind of breakdown, unexplained, nobody knows what it is.
But it is a kind of intriguing, very suggestive detail
that this exactly maps onto the process of the trials.
Exactly.
And so Asquith, as Home Secretary, he agrees to apply for a warrant for Wilde's arrest.
He gives orders that if Wilde tries to leave the country,
he should be stopped wherever he is found.
But again, there is this kind of amazing detail that the magistrate who issues the writ,
he finds out what time, when does the train leave,
that will link up to the ferry that will go over to France.
And he issues it for 15 minutes after that train.
So I think, Tom, actually, and this will surprise,
I imagine, a lot of people who think they know the story,
I think there is an argument that actually far from wanting to hammer Wilde,
the establishment are actually giving him slightly special treatment.
They want him to get away.
They've had dinner with him. They like him.
They're the kind of people who go to see his plays and find them funny.
I don't think they are actually trying to make an example of him.
But I think also there is this kind of, I think the whole Rosebury thing,
I think is not wholly implausible that Rosebury is somehow mixed up with this
and that maybe the Marks of Queensbury has incriminating evidence showing that.
Right? I think that's absolutely very plausible.
But Wilde doesn't go, does he, Tom? He's paralyzed.
I mean, it's extraordinary. He's seized by this, this passivity,
this inertia in the face of disaster.
He could have taken the boat train to France that night, but he doesn't.
He's still in, whereas he's still sort of hanging around.
He's at the Cadogan Hotel.
With Bozy.
Yeah.
Drinking Hock and Seltzer.
Hock and Seltzer.
Shall we finish this episode by reading the account of what happens that day
that was written by John Beckerman, the poet laureate?
Tom, I mean, you asked that question as though there's some possibility that I could say no.
You can't say no because I've got it all lined up and ready here.
So, Dominic, we will be back with Wilde's Arrest, the two trials and his conviction and imprisonment.
Yeah. Now, Tom, it would be remiss of me not to point out that if you are a member of the Restis

History Club,
you can of course listen to that right now.
And if you're not, sign up at RestisHistoryPod.com.
Incredible value.
But for now, here is John Beckerman's great poem, The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel.
A thump and a murmur of voices.
Oh, why must they make such a din?
As the door of the bedroom swung open and two plain clothes policemen come in.
Mr. Wilde, we have come for to take you where felons and criminals dwell.
We must ask you to leave with us quietly, for this is the Cadogan Hotel.
He rose and he put down the yellow book.
He staggered and terrible eyed.
He brushed past the plants on the staircase and was helped to a handsome outside.
We'll see you next time. Goodbye.
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