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The love that dare not speak its name in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare.

It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect.

It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo and those two letters of mine, such as they are.

It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood, that it may be described as the love that dare not speak its name,

and on account of it, I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection.

There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man

when the elder man has intellect and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him.

That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.

So Dominic, that was the celebrated speech given by Oscar Wilde at his second trial completely off the cuff,

where he is defending himself against a charge of gross indecency that has been brought to him in the wake of the collapse

of the libel trial that he has brought against the Marquis of Queensbury,

who is the father of Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, Bosie.

In that speech, he is pretty clearly talking about himself and Bosie and denying that there is anything indecent about it at all.

It's an amazing speech, Tom. It was said at the time that it was the finest speech of an accused man since that of Saint Paul before Herod the Gripper.

And it is a very, very extraordinarily elegant, articulate and de-moving defence.

Of course, as Wilde's biographer, Matthew Sturgis, absolutely wonderful biography, Oscar, as he points out,

the problem is that actually Wilde is not on trial for his relationship with Bosie.

He's on trial for his misdemeanours, as they would have called it at the time,

with a succession of 17- and 18-year-old office boys, clerks, waiters, servants, to whom this description does not really apply.

Well, although, I think, again, Wilde would perhaps dispute that.

And he argues that actually in his relationship with young men who are in the language of the age very much his intellectual and social inferiors,

there is a kind of communion that he is kind of sharing his culture, he's sharing his tastes and educating them.

So this is kind of the argument that he is making.

But before we get to that, let's just remind our listeners of where we left this tragedy.
So Oscar Wilde's libel case has collapsed against the marks of Queensbury.
A writ for his arrest has been issued.
Two plainclothes policemen have come to the Cadogan Hotel and taken him away and he is driven to Scotland Yard.
He is charged under Section 11 of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act with committing acts of gross indecency
with other male persons and he is taken to Bow Street Police Station, booked, taken down to a cell for the night,
and at St James Theatre where the importance being earnest, his great comedy has been the Toast of London.
His name is quietly being removed from the advertisements and the playbills.
Yes, so we're in the year 1895 and Tom, we should say, you and I are still in this park in Washington DC where we were last time.
So if you hear the sounds of children crying, they've spotted Tom Holland, TV's Tom Holland, and they're terrified he's going to do one of his impersonations at them.
No risk of that.
Yes, so the day after he has been taken to Bow Street Police Station, the very next day, the committal proceedings begin at the upper courtroom at Bow Street Police Court, now a hotel, and Sir Edward Carson, who we discussed last time, the future politician who was the marks of Queensbury's barrister,
he is not the crown barrister this time.
It's his junior, Charles Gill.
Charles Gill brings out the case against Wilde and he brings it up very methodically.
He says, we have a succession of witnesses.
We have details of all these assignations.
The witnesses describe their encounters with Wilde.
Then there's a succession.
I mean, the case against him, Tom, even at this stage, it's obvious they've got a very, very compelling case against him.
They have ruthlessly, methodically compiled the witnesses,
but they also have not just the boys or the young men,
but they have the people who worked at the hotels, the chambermaids,
they have chambermaids, they have servants.
I mean, the most famous story is the chambermaid at the Savoy who says she was shocked.
She says it's at this point she tells the story.
She went into Wilde's room and she found the bedsheets and his night shirt smeared with Vaseline Seaman
and what she describes as soil.
And I think those kinds of details, I mean, those are the kinds of details that find their way into the press,
I mean that for night after night, the evening papers are full of scandal, of allegations.
And we should emphasize that actually the records of the trial and of the accusations are not fully reported in the paper

because it is seen as being too scandalous for gentlemen to read.

But not only that, Tom, we should also emphasize the public mood at this point is very, very anti-wild.

So the newspapers are calling for his prosecution.

There are crowds that cheered the Marcus of Queensborough while it's liable case was dropped.

The National Observer, for example, says Britain owes a deep debt of gratitude to the Marcus of Queensborough

for destroying the high priest of the decadence.

There must be another trial at the Old Bailey or a coroner's inquest, the latter for choice.

And of the decadence of the hideous conceptions of the meaning of art, there must be an absolute end.

So at this point, it's very clear that this is not just a case about Oscar Wilde.

It's a case that has now, as we talked last time, it's about politics, about a liberal government that's kind of in its death rows.

It is a case about, you know, there's a backlash against artistic decadence, against a sense of elitism, aestheticism.

But I think in part it's also about a sense of insecurity about what exactly Wilde is being accused of.

So he is being accused of gross indecency.

There's a sense that, which is absolutely, you know, a kind of venerable one going back centuries and centuries and centuries,

that what in law is called sodomy is, it's a moral offense.

It's something that people choose to do in the way that they might choose to do murder or theft or something like that.

But this is being challenged by a novel new understanding of sexuality that is coming in from Germany,

where psychologists have invented this portmanteau term, fusion of Greek and Latin, homosexuality.

This idea that actually, if you commit the act of sodomy, you were likely to be doing it, it's not because you're a sinner,

it's because you have a medical condition that is called homosexuality.

And how exactly that is to be framed and processed and understood.

You know, this is a live challenge at the time that these trials are happening.

And I think so, there's a kind of sense of moral confusion and uncertainty as well, which provides kind of part of the background to this.

So Wilde has moved to Holloway prison.

It's often thought, and we'll talk about this a lot in today's episode,

it's often thought that Wilde is singled out for special treatment because the establishment wants to make an example of him,

and they come down as it were especially hard on him.

That's not the case. So even at this point, he has a special cell at Holloway.

He's allowed to have food from a restaurant, he's given books, can read letters, he has a succession of visitors.

His one great visitor is Bosie at Lord Alfred Douglas, who we described as this terrible...

A baggage.

A baggage is putting it mildly. He's basically the worst man in the world.

Wilde describes him as a slim thing, gold-haired like an angel who stands always at my side, moving in the gloom like a white flower.

So fair to say that there are, you know, rival opinions on Bosie.

What we can say about Bosie is that Bosie is so devoted to Wilde, and is such a decent fellow that he leaves London for France just before the trial begins.

Anyway, so the trial begins on Friday, the 26th of April, 1895.

Mr. Justice Arthur Charles is presiding.

He is a conservative. He is a failed conservative politician.

But a surprising thing about this second trial is that it's pretty obvious, and I think we're not giving the game away by saying right from the beginning,

Mr. Justice Charles is biased towards Wilde.

Yeah, it's really unexpected, isn't it? That's not what the popular sense of...

No, of the trial is at all.

Because what happens in the next sort of five days is you have a succession of witnesses.

I'll just give you a brief flavour of it by reading from an extract from Matthew Sturgess's biography.

So you have William Parker telling of how over dinner at Ketner's,

his brother had repeatedly accepted preserved cherries from Wilde's own mouth.

Alfred Ward recounting how during dinner in a private room at the Florence restaurant,

Wilde had put his hand inside Warde's trousers.

Fred Atkins describing how he'd come back from the Moulin Rouge

to find Wilde in bed with Maurice Schwabber.

Edward Shelley reluctantly confessing that Wilde had kissed

and embraced him after separating all the while hotel,

and so it goes on and on and on.

You have a succession of witnesses.

Now, Sir Edward Clark, to his great credit, Wilde's barrister from the previous, from the failed libel case, to whom Wilde had lied, by the way,

Sir Edward Clark incredibly gallantly says,

I am my team will give our services to you for free to defend you in this case.

Sir Edward Clark's argument is these people are liars.

They are blackmailing Wilde.

The crown case is based on a pack of lies.

These people are condemned out of their own mouths as criminals, as lowlifes, as all this kind of thing.

So the case is not, oh Wilde did it and he was right to do it.

It's that he didn't do it at all, isn't it?

And this is the context where he gives his love, the love that dare not speak, his name, speech, it's implying to the degree that there is this relationship that he has with men.

It's ennobling and purifying and it is not sexual.

And on the fourth day, Sir Edward Clark, Wilde's barrister, gives this very rousing defense word.

He says, Mr. Wilde is not an ordinary man.

You know, you shouldn't condemn him on the basis of his writings.

He has been incredibly open with these young men, generous to them, kind to them.
Which I think is absolutely true.
I mean, he has been generous and he has been kind.
And he says, you know, there was nothing indecent about his relationships
which is not true with these men at all.
And so we get to the fifth day, that's Wednesday the 1st of May.
And Sir Arthur Charles, the judge has to give his summing up.
And I think this is extraordinary.
His summing up is very clearly partisan towards Oscar Wilde.
He says, you know, don't judge him by his writings.
Sometimes his writing, if I may be allowed to criticise his writings myself,
they are silly but wicked, no.
And then he goes on to say, is it plausible that a man such as Oscar Wilde
would have been so reckless?
That's the key thing he's saying, because he cannot fathom
that Wilde would have brought the libel.
Or done any, you know, if any of this had been true.
And he says, is it plausible that he would have had boys in his bed in the Savoy
and there would have been so little attempt at concealment?
I mean, of course we know, because we did episode one, that it is plausible.
But to the judge, this failed Tory MP, or would be MP,
it seems utterly unlikely that an intelligent man
would have behaved in such a catastrophically reckless.
He points out, Wilde has the right to ask you to remember
that he is a man of highly intellectual gifts,
a person whom people would suppose incapable of such acts.
And then that is buying into Wilde's argument in that great speech
that, you know, there's something of Plato and Shakespeare and Michelangelo about this.
So he is accepting what Wilde says.
So the jury go out, they go out at half past one, the hours go by,
the jury call for lunch, and then finally at quarter past five,
the jury come back into court.
And as if this wasn't the stuff of Hollywood already,
they deliver their verdict, there is no agreement, there is no verdict,
they can't agree.
The government's lawyer, or the Crown's lawyer, Charles Gill, says,
we will undoubtedly call for another trial.
And while it is sent out, there is going to be trial number three.
Now at this point, there is some discussion.
Some MPs, an Irish nationalist MP, T. M. Healy,
says to the Solicitor General, Sir Frank Lockwood,
do not put Wilde on trial again.
And the Solicitor General actually says,
I would not do so but for the abominable rumours against Lord Rosebury,

against the Prime Minister.

Yeah, so this is what we were talking about in the first episode, this sense that the Prime Minister, Lord Rosebury, has been involved in a same-sex relationship with the eldest son of the Marquis of Queensbury. So it is all a kind of great matrix of innuendo supposition that, I mean, kind of reaches to the absolute top of the government. It does indeed.

I mean, as a cousin, Wilde's old Trinity College Dublin classmate, often seen as the villain of this great drama, he apparently also appeals to the government and says to them, I don't think you should put Wilde on trial again.

So Lord Rosebury, he himself says to Herbert Asquith, his home secretary, at whose table Wilde had dined, should we let him off?

Should we just let this go?

And Asquith says, we can't.

If we do so, we will lose the election.

And, Don, just to reiterate,

Rosebury at this point is in a state of prostration.

And even though the election is approaching, he is basically just kind of lying in a dark room.

Not least because in the press, there are now stories saying, this is part of a conspiracy.

There is this huge network of gay men, as we would call them, sodomitical men, as they would have called them in the 1890s, who have covered this up and they're trying to get Wilde off. So the government feel they actually can't let this go.

I think they wish, deep down, that Wilde would go to France and his friends are still saying...

Right.

And so the key thing is that at this point, Bail is posted for Wilde and Wilde is granted Bail.

So, again, there seems to be a kind of encouragement from the authorities to Wilde to, you know, go away, go to France.

But he doesn't.

And maybe one of the reasons is that his mother, a Speranza.

Yes, Irish nationalist poet.

To whom Wilde is devoted, says that if he flees, she will no longer regard him as her son.

Whereas if he stays and even if he goes to prison,

she will still love him.
So maybe that's part of it.
So he's just frozen.
He's at his friends, the Levitans.
They put him up in...
I mean, it's just an unbelievable detail.
They put him up in the child's nursery
and he's just sitting there on the floor surrounded
by rocking horses and spinning tops
and all these kinds of things,
rabbits and stuffed toys.
And his lawyers come to consult him in the nursery
and he's sitting there and he's just a broken man
and they deliver the news.
They say, you know,
the government are not going to let you off.
In fact, the Solicitor General, Frank Lockwood,
has announced that he is going to prosecute
this third trial personally.
He is going to do this personally
because the Crown want to make an end of this now.
They want to do it.
Wilde is still represented by Sir Richard Clark,
still doing it for free.
I mean, extraordinary that he's giving up so much time for free
because he feels so bad about the first trial
in which his own client had lied to him, by the way.
Meanwhile, Wilde has to pay costs.
Wilde is bankrupt, effectively.
Because Bozy had promised to fund it
and has skedaddled to the continent,
leaving Wilde in every way to face the music.
So the trial opens on the 22nd of May.
I mean, all this is within just a few weeks.
That's what makes it so dramatic that it's sort of day after day new.
And it's detail of a kind that, you know,
Victorian newspapers are not used to handling.
And it's just coming out week after week after week.
So the 22nd of May case, they returned to the Old Bailey.
Wilde is kind of a broken man at this point.
So we talked before about the sort of
the sort of foppish flippancy, the arrogance almost,
with which he conducted himself
at the very beginning of the first case.

He's all gone.
He is haggard.
He is quiet.
He is withdrawn.
He knows that it's sort of disaster.
Well, he's still hoping though, isn't he?
Because the trial goes ahead,
and I mean, we don't need to reiterate it
because basically it's a rehashing
of everything that's gone before.
And there is, he's clinging to the hope
that perhaps the jury will kind of see things
as the previous jury had done.
And, you know, because if it's, again,
there is no decision reached,
then I think it will be abandoned.
And so as they're waiting for the verdict,
Lockwood says to Clark,
you'll dine your man in Paris tomorrow.
But Clark himself says, no, I don't think so.
Yeah, it's extraordinary.
This list of general who's determined
to prosecute the case personally
on Saturday the 25th of May
as they're waiting for the verdict,
that he actually thinks,
I probably haven't won this.
I probably haven't secured it.
Not least because once again,
there's a different judge this time.
He's less pro-wild,
but he's not excessively anti-wild.
I mean, his summing up is pretty sort of,
he doesn't really veer one way or the other.
Although, as we will see,
when the verdict is delivered,
and it turns out that Wild has been found guilty.
They've gone for two hours, aren't they?
They've gone for two hours of the jury.
As the minutes tick by, Wild's team become optimistic.
The longer the jury are out,
the more chances there is
that they can't agree.
The government aren't going to bring a third trial

on top of the libel trial.
They come back in and they just say
on count after count, guilty.
I think one count, he's found not guilty,
but all the rest, he's found guilty.
And it's then that Justice Wills,
you know, puts on the equivalent of a black cap
and declares that it is the worst case I have ever tried.
That you, Wild, have been the center
of a circle of extensive corruption
of the most hideous kind among young men.
It is impossible to doubt.
And he then delivers a sentence
which is the heaviest that he can legally deliver
two years imprisonment with hard labor.
And in my judgment, he says,
it is totally inadequate for such a case as this.
Tom, you've missed your vocation.
You would have made a splendid,
late Victorian hanging judge of the lady Bracknell kind.
I'm probably being unfair to Justice Wills.
I'm sure he didn't sound like that.
But when you read that, I mean,
it's kind of very, very devastating reaction.
And for Wild, I mean, he slumps and he,
I mean, it's so moving because this man
who has made his living and his fame
and his reputation out of his brilliance with words,
he briefly seems unable to speak.
And then he cries out,
and I say nothing, my Lord, and he can't.
The judge kind of waves him silent,
and Wild is hurried out of the dock, down the stairs.
Just on the trials.
I mean, our sympathy, obviously, is drawn to Wild.
You know, he is the victim in all this.
It would be unnatural for a 21st century listener
not to feel sorry for this man.
But of course, the truth is,
Wild is partly the author of his own demise
because of his own recklessness.
He's the author of his own demise
because he brought that libel case against the markets
of Greensboro.

I suppose you would say in his defence,
he felt that he was trapped.
He felt he had to settle the issue.
He felt there was nothing else he could do.
But of course, on the merits of the case,
he is, to use your expression, Tom,
he is banged to rights.
Yeah, he is guilty.
The government, I mean, he did, by the standards of the day,
commit all these misdemeanours with these blokes.
And, you know, it's not a miscarriage of justice that he is.
Would you agree, Tom, that he's found guilty?
Yeah, I mean, under the law of the time,
he clearly is guilty.
And the entire country basically agrees.
The overwhelming support for the verdict.
I mean, there are voices that are still raised in Wild's defence.
So, W.B. Yates, who's a friend of his, you know, the great poet,
he describes the whole thing as an orgy of Philistine ranker,
which I think is a perspective that,
with which people now would have more sympathy.
Tom, just on that Philistine ranker, though,
what W.B. Yates is objecting to is not the law,
but the entire moral structure of Victorian England.
It's the fact that he thinks Wild is an artist, Wild is special,
and therefore Wild should not be judged like ordinary men.
Am I right?
Yeah, but I think that there is a sense that Britain is peculiarly Philistine
in its opinions and its judgements.
And I think that, yeah, to a degree, it's a kind of mixture,
and this is going to be important for the kind of the legacy of these trials,
that the blurring of Wild's status as a great writer and an artist
and his status as someone who has been identified in the public mind
with homosexuality at precisely the time when the concept of homosexuality
is starting to come in as something that people in society understand,
is going to be really crucial for understanding its long-term impact.
But I think it also, the press reaction speaks to something
that people in Britain certainly would still recognise
is a feature of British public life.
And it's articulated by Bozy, who says of the verdict that is given on Wild,
when the great British public has made up its great British mind
to crush any particular unfortunate whom it holds in its power,
it generally succeeds in gaining its object.
Bozy, I have to say, it's probably the worst person

we've ever talked about on the rest of this history.
I can't stand Bozy.
Apart perhaps from Hitler.
Yeah.
He's not as bad as Hitler.
But Bozy behaves so badly throughout, doesn't he?
Offerings saying he'll pay and then he never quite does it
and running away to France, leaving his mate to face the music.
And of course, Bozy, who's been responsible for some of the most,
you know, the most reckless behaviour.
Anyway, this is by the by, this is just me ranting now.
Anyway, so let's take a break now.
Wild has been convicted, he's been taken down to the cells.
When we come back, we'll talk about what his life was like in prison.
Yeah, very good.
Welcome back to the rest is history.
We're into the final act of this great drama involving Oscar Wilde.
He's now a prisoner of the crown.
He is taken initially to Newgate and then to Pentonville.
Tom, and important to say,
World was sentenced to two years with hard labour.
But right from the beginning, they say you don't have to do the hard labour.
You can just do light labour because, you know,
you're not physically fit for the hard labour.
And I think there is a sense, even at this point,
among people who are not necessarily terribly sympathetic to Wilde,
that he is different from other prisoners
and he will not have to be subjected
to every single rigor of the penal system that others have subjected to.
Yeah, and I think that that reflects an understanding
that for Wilde, the punishment is peculiarly awful.
So there are people who write to the papers and say that
it will be worse for him than it would be for a Bill Sykes,
the murderer for all of the twist,
i.e. that for someone of Wilde sensibilities and background,
the sufferings that are imposed on convicts
will be far, far greater.
But I think, distinctively for Wilde,
he is in solitary confinement.
He's not allowed to talk.
There is a prohibition on communication between prisoners.
And Wilde is a man who all his life has spoken.
Conversation is the thing that he is peculiarly brilliant at.
Exactly, as Matthew Sturges says, Tom.

Wilde, who had lived for conversation, for social intercourse,
for intellectual stimulation, for beauty,
for comfort, for good food and ease,
had lost them all absolutely and at a stroke,
the horror of it overwhelmed him.
And of course, he is famous as an Eastie
to someone whose taste is exquisite.
And everything about being processed into prison
is the absolute opposite of that.
So he's given the convict's uniform with the arrows on it.
His hair is shaved.
He's stopped him from getting lice.
Fred, what is he? He's given bromide of potassium,
which is designed to suppress the libido.
Which it does. It does suppress your libido.
And all prisoners were given that
to basically make them sexually inactive.
While they were...
I mean, one of the prison chaplains, by the way,
and Wilde's, I can't remember which prison it is,
says of him that he suspects
that he's been spending all his time masturbating in prison
and claims that he's a cell.
Yes, the details and questions about this
have taken all the way up to the cabinet room.
I mean, astonishing.
It's Wilde masturbating too much in his cell.
It turns out that he isn't.
But Wilde does get terrible diarrhea, terrible dysentery.
His health collapses even in those first days and weeks
in prison.
There's a terrible story that they get very little exercise.
They're going around the prison yard,
and the man in front of him whispers to him,
they're not allowed to speak.
The man in front whispers,
says, I'm very sorry for you, Mr. Wilde.
And Wilde is so overwhelmed by this,
that he shouts out,
oh, thank you, thank you.
And he is then...
He's punished.
He's punished for it, because you're not allowed to speak.
Wilde is the great individualist.

Wilde is the person who refuses to accept
that he is one of the crowd.
This is the whole essence of his artistic and emotional life.
But now even his name has been taken away from him.
He just has a number.
That is who he is.
He's absorbed into the processing
of this terrifying penal system.
Well, that sense of erasure, Tom.
So his plays, by the way, have been taken off.
They've been taken off even in America.
The Western Mail, Welsh newspaper.
This thing about Wilde being erased.
This is what the leader said when he was imprisoned.
Oscar Wilde will never again be anything but a memory.
A beacon light set up to warn youth
from the dangers that lurk in a life of ease and pleasure.
His personality has been wiped out from the haunts of men.
And his name has become a byword and a reproach.
So that sense that actually in the press,
we will now just...
He's been cancelled, actually.
But interestingly, not by the governing liberal establishment.
This is what's so intriguing, isn't it?
That still there are people high up in the government
who seem to be looking out for him.
So on the 12th of June,
so he's not even two weeks into his sentence,
we talked about Herbert Asquith,
the Home Secretary, future Prime Minister.
One of his two or three best friends,
another Liberal MP, Richard Haldane, future War Minister,
who comes to see Wilde in prison,
makes a special trip to see him
and talks to him about books, about literature,
and says, listen, we're going to do what we can for you.
We will get you books.
What books would you like?
Wilde says very foolishly,
I'd like some of the novels of Gustave Flaubert.
And Haldane says to him,
well, he was in fact,
prosecuted himself for indecency.
So I'm not convinced those are the ideal books for you to be delivered.

Obviously that he will have St. Augustine,
Cardinal Newman, Walter Pater's Renaissance,
which is very...
A big history of Rome.
He will get special treatment
because other prisoners are not allowed books.
But Haldane says, we will bring you the books.
Haldane talks to Asquith.
They set, they have, they commission a report
to see if Wilde is being properly treated.
Is he being unfairly treated?
The head of the prison commission is a man
called Evelyn Ruckels Brice.
Of course he is.
And he also says,
we don't want to kill him.
We don't want him to be bullied.
We must make sure that he is a special person.
He is an exceptional talent.
And we must make sure that he is,
he does actually get the special treatment
that his status deserves.
Now that, I have to say, Tom,
I had, until we researched this,
I had no sense that anybody was looking out for him at all.
So there are certain figures within the prison system
who are clearly kind of very doctrinaire,
apply the absolute letter of the law
who have no sympathy for Wilde whatsoever.
But again and again, there are figures,
say governors, warders,
who do feel sympathy for him and express that sympathy.
And actually the true hostility
is coming from the public.
And so there is one particularly notorious episode
that illustrates this,
where he is being transferred from London
to Reading Jail.
Well, the fact he's being transferred at all, Tom,
he's being transferred to a country prison
because the authorities think he'll be better off
in a country prison
and they don't want to crush him in a city prison.
Go on, sorry, I interrupted you.

And so he is taken to Clapham Junction railway station
and he is forced to stand between his warders
for half an hour on one of the platforms at Clapham Junction.
And people recognise him.
And they gather, a large crowd gathers around him
and they laugh and jeer,
and one man spits at him.
And Wilde writes later that,
a year after that was done to me,
I wept every day at the same hour
and for the same space of time.
Yes, it's very moving actually.
Anyway, off he goes to Reading.
He's there for the last 18 months of his sentence.
Life is a bit better off in Reading.
It's cleaner air.
It was built on the site of a leper colony.
Really?
That's a good fact.
He becomes a leper in the eyes of the public.
He doesn't like the governor,
Lieutenant Colonel Isaacson.
He describes him as a man with the eyes of a ferret,
the body of an ape and the soul of a rat.
Yes, but then Isaacson gets replaced
by a new governor, Major James O. Nelson,
who Wilde says is the most Christ-like man he'd ever met.
Because he...
I mean, basically, it may be that Nelson is the person
who stops Wilde from maybe from dying,
from having a complete breakdown,
because he does treat him with incredible kindness and empathy.
Because most of the people in Reading prison
are people from the Reading and the surrounding villages
who have been guilty of misdemeanors, thefts.
They're working-class young blokes.
And for Major Nelson, Wilde is actually a treat.
They have regular meetings.
They chat about books.
He says to Wilde,
why don't you decide what books you should have
in the prison library?
He allows Wilde to have a notebook, to have a pen.
Yeah, he is allowed to write.

And the great thing that he writes in this time
is a letter to Bozi,
which stretches to 100 pages,
which, again, quite contrary to the law,
you're not allowed to take anything you write in prison.
You're not allowed to take out with you.
Wilde does end up taking it out with him.
And he gives it to Robert Ross,
who becomes his literary executor.
And in due course, this is given the name De Profundis.
And it's one of the most moving pieces of writing that Wilde did.
Absolutely kind of key part of the canon.
So that is testimony to the fact
that Wilde is not being peculiarly persecuted in prison.
In fact, quite the opposite.
And Wilde himself, in Reading Jail,
he becomes very popular not just with the governor,
but with his fellow inmates as well.
He does.
So I think he comes out really well
from the story of him in Reading Jail.
He's kind to the other prisoners.
He is unjudgmental and democratic
in his relations with the warders.
He talks to them about books.
They get him to help them win newspaper competitions.
So he wins for the one bloke.
He wins a silver tea service and a grand piano
by helping him fill in,
make all these witticisms to win these competitions.
And I think that what that shows is that his claim
that the young men who he had been sleeping with,
that he had treated them as equals,
that he had treated them with kindness,
that he had shared his conversation
about art and literature and so on,
as he would with people of his own class and background,
is actually true.
Yeah, it's true, but it's not the whole story, right?
Of course not.
He's in a position of power.
He was in a position of power over these boys.
I mean, I absolutely accept that.
Listen, everybody who listens to this podcast

will have a different view of this story.
I think when you contemplate the story
of this very rich, successful, articulate man
having these relationships,
they're not really relationships,
they're having these brief assignations
with very young 16, 17, 18-year-old boys
or young men who are poor, who,
you know, there are two ways you can interpret that.
One, you can say it's fine.
They're having fun.
They're having a crack on.
Another is to say there is a power dynamic there
with which we in the 21st century are uncomfortable.
Well, so on that point, very interesting.
WT, is it Stead?
Yes.
Stead, who is a campaigning newspaper editor,
he highlights what he calls the white slave trade,
the exploitation of young girls by rich and powerful men.
What is it?
The maiden tribute of the modern Babylon.
The modern Babylon.
And Stead has led a campaign to raise the age of consent
for girls from 13 to 16,
which he has done, I think, in the 1880s.
And his commentary on the wild trial and conviction
is to say you have sentenced wild
for his sleeping with young men, 16, 17, 18,
but you are not charging men who are sleeping
with female prostitutes of the same age.
And he's making this point not to defend wild,
but to highlight the fact that women are as subject
to the exploitation by powerful men as boys are.
And I guess that that is actually a perspective
that perhaps people still hold to in the 21st century.
Yeah, I think that's, you're not wrong, Tom.
I think these are very complicated issues.
Actually, I wouldn't want to pronounce
like a sort of, you know, sermonizing vicar to the listeners
because every listener will...
Or indeed campaigners for, you know, Me Too movement
or, I don't know, Stonewall or whatever,
because they are also people who are holding a moral position.

Morality has become, it's not just the preserve of vicar in the 21st century, but it's still very moral.
So, you know, it's an incredibly complex, ambivalent moral case.
I think before we just sum up what the long-term impact of this, and I think it does have a very, very big impact on the history of sexuality in Britain in particular in the 20th century.
Well gets released.
Yeah, 18th of May.
So, 18th, 19th of May.
Again, the establishment don't want to humiliate him.
So, there's a lot of subterfuge.
Basically, they move him to Pentonville.
And there's a wonderful story, actually, Tom.
I love this story from Matthew Sturgis.
Brilliant biography, which I can't recommend enough.
Basically, he's smuggled out of Reading Prison.
He's going to be put on a train at Twyford to move him to London.
And he's standing on the platform with his flanked by his warders who are escorting him.
And he's their kind of incognito.
And it's the first time, of course, he's been out of the prison.
And he stands there on the platform.
It's a lovely day.
He sees a tree and he shouts,
Oh, beautiful world, oh, beautiful world.
He waves his arms and Warder Harrison says,
Now, Mr. Wilde, you mustn't give yourself away like that.
You're the only man in England who would talk like that in a railway station, which I think abutably captures the relationship between Wilde and his warders who are amused by him.
You know, they like him, actually.
And Wilde does come out from this period.
It's so likable, doesn't he?
He's always likable.
I mean, right the way through, he is likable.
I think I would say lovable, actually.
And that's what makes the ambivalences around his record so complex.
I mean, he is a lovable person, I think.
The interesting thing there, Tom, he comes out of prison and he's very keen that he says to his friends,
I'm a reformed character.
I behave badly.

I'm a reformed character.
I won't, you know, go near young men again.
I'm a changed man.
And then of course, over time,
Can't help it.
He can't help it.
He goes abroad and he meets up with Bozie again.
Bozie again.
And of course, he's been declared bankrupt
while he's in prison.
So he has no money.
So he's reliant on his wife.
His wife, they have a formal separate,
not a divorce, but a separation.
And she is giving him an allowance on the,
on the understanding that he won't get back with Bozie,
but he can't help it.
Bozie basically kind of seduces him knowing this.
So again,
But the relationship now is very, it's poisoned, isn't it?
It's tempestuous.
They're always rowing.
You know, there's a sense of the fun has gone out of it for them,
I guess.
And they split up irrevocably.
And Wilde spends the last year of his life in Penury.
He dies in Paris.
He's gone back into the old ways.
So Matthew Sturgis says his monthly allowance was dedicated
more to rent boys than to rent.
So he's kind of gone back to the old picking up young man again,
all that sort of stuff.
And he dies.
He has an ear infection, doesn't he?
That he got from falling down in prison
and spreads into his brain.
Basically very sort of grim ending.
He dies on the 30th of November, 1900 in Penury,
as you said, panellists surrounded by his friends.
So lots of his friends are very loyal to him, aren't they?
Yeah.
He's a man who inspires loyalty.
But yeah, the martyrdom.
The martyrdom is what remains, right?

The sense that he has been...
Well, it's not just the martyrdom.
I think much more important than that initially is the,
said this before, the association of Wild
with this novel and evolving concept of there being something called
homosexuality, which is kind of entering public discourse
in Britain at exactly this time.
So the concrete, you know, hasn't yet set,
but it sets in a kind of wild-shaped mold.
And that means that for mainstream British opinion,
in the early years of the 20th century,
the concept of homosexuality wears the appearance of wild.
Dandieism, aestheticism,
flamboyance,
campness,
but also a certain association with kind of pederastic and predatory.
And this, of course, is terrible for gay people
because it associates them with sexual practices
that are not at all a given to gay people.
And that the legacy of the Wildtrial explains why Britain
is peculiarly hostile to gay people in the 20th century,
really up until the 60s.
I was going about to say,
you see that, think about some 50s, 60s Britain in the,
I don't know, the Sunday pictorial or the mirror
and the campaigns they would run against immoral men,
against pances as they would call them.
I mean, the Sunday,
what was it, the one Sunday paper in the early 50s
had a big double-page spread of series, in fact,
called How to Spot a Homo.
And it was kind of fondness for the theatre,
Dandie-ish clothes, liking flowers.
And it's all wild.
It's all Oscar Wilde, exactly.
And that, I think,
I think you're absolutely right that that rubs up against
a sort of puritanism in British culture,
a distrust of difference, of flamboyance, of aestheticism.
Against that, you know, the element of the martyrdom,
but more than that,
although when Wilde comes out of prison,
he does kind of express a kind of repentance.
It doesn't last long.

And he dies unrepentant for what he has done
and what he has been.
He doesn't feel ashamed about his sexual identity.
He actually kind of glories in it.
And he embodies a sense of pride in what he is,
that I think in the later decades of the 20th century,
becoming, you know, crucially important
for the way that gay identity evolves
and emancipates itself from this kind of legacy of hatred.
It makes him an icon, doesn't it?
Yeah.
I mean, he is as famous now.
I know you love his works.
You love his plays in particular.
But he is probably, I would say,
more famous now as a martyr than he is as a writer.
Do you think that's fair?
I know you love his stuff.
I think his status as a martyr
is dependent on the fact that he is a genius.
Okay.
I think without that,
he wouldn't have the stature and the standing that he does.
But we've been very, very harsh on Bozi.
But I just want to maybe end this episode
by reading something that Bozi wrote in a letter
to a literary journal three weeks after Wilde's Conviction,
which I think,
where I think he does speak for attitudes
that now have become completely normative.
This is a private letter written to an MP
who had been very hostile to Wilde.
And Bozi writes about what he calls
uranium love, the same-sex love,
what we would call gay love, I guess.
These tastes are perfectly natural,
congenital tendencies in certain people,
a very large minority.
And the law has no right to interfere with these people,
provided they do not harm other people.
That is to say,
when there is neither seduction of minors or brutalization,
and where there is no public outrage or morals.
I guess that that is pretty much where the consensus is now.

It is a kind of irony upon irony,
because Bozi later in life, as it were,
converted and became a very fervent opponent
of homosexuality and an anti-Semite,
a ferocious anti-Semite.

And a further irony,
he libels Winston Churchill and gets sent to prison for it.

Yeah.

And there was some case with Arthur Ransom, wasn't there?

It's the author of Sollows and Amazon.

It was after life, it's very strange.

Yeah, sort of strange kind of maelstrom of allegations,
rumours, court cases and ironies.

The strangest thing of all, Tom,
has been recording this episode in this park in Washington, DC,
where basically there are just a stream of families
going to a baseball game.

And here we are,
and we've been having to cut short our discussions of Oscar Wilde's
nocturnal activities every now and again,
as people are passing.

Dirty sheets.

Yeah.

And so on.

We've done a lot of Rest is History episodes in odd circumstances,
but I think I can safely say this is the oddest.

Anyway, thank you so much, Tom.

Thank you, Dominic.

Thank you, everybody, for listening.

And we will pack up our kit
and go off and sample the delights of Washington.

And we will see you all next time.

Bye-bye.

Bye-bye.

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