

Death of the selfish giant

Oscar Wilde, fallen far from his star status, died in lonely obscurity in Paris 100 years ago.

MARK CALLAGHAN describes his disgraced last days and his posthumous rehabilitation

IN THE 1900 Paris of the *belle époque* an unkempt, overweight man could be seen in the Left Bank cafés, sipping absinthe. He cut a sad figure, always ready to depart at the sound of an English voice. Solitary in the most sociable of cities, staying in a cheap hotel under the name Sebastian Melmoth, Oscar Wilde lived out his final humiliation.

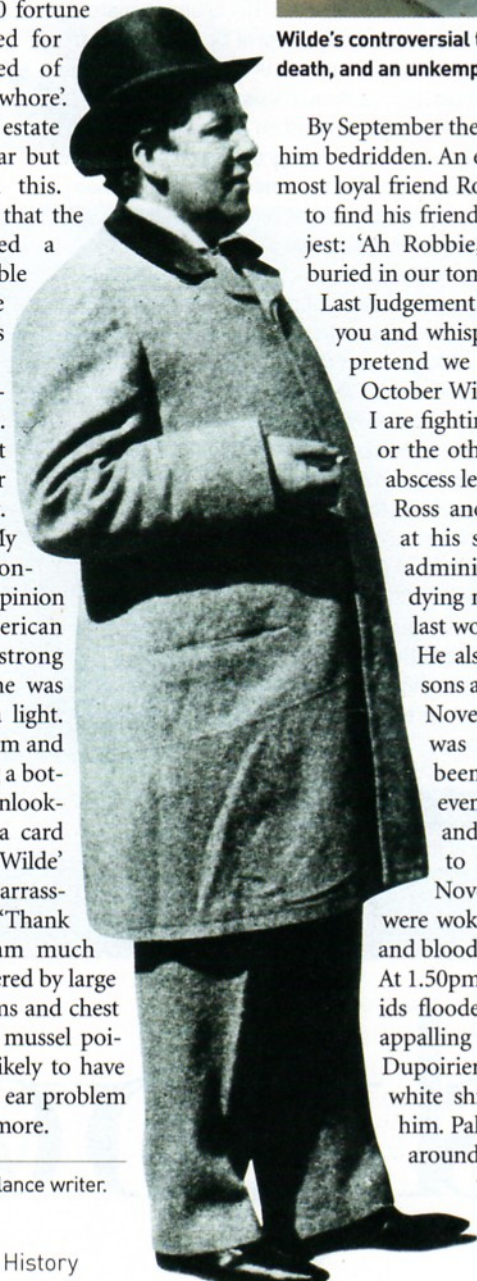
Wilde had been at the Hotel d'Alsace since August 1899. The owner, Jean Dupoirier, liked him and lent him money. Dupoirier was one of the few stars in the dark skies of Wilde's final months. His money worries were not helped by his reckless spending of the little he had. With his tyrannical father Lord Queensberry dead, his nemesis Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas had a £20,000 fortune but when Wilde asked for help he was accused of behaving 'like an old whore'. His wife Constance's estate paid him £150 per year but he soon squandered this. Wilde, who once said that the man who dominated a London dinner table could dominate the world, almost always ate alone.

Rebuffs were frequent, and they hurt. The American artist James McNeill Whistler cut him in a restaurant. Wilde commented: 'My sentence and imprisonment raised Jimmy's opinion of England'. An American student named Armstrong was in a cafe when he was asked by a man for a light. Wilde still had his charm and soon they were sharing a bottle of wine. When an onlooker passed Armstrong a card saying 'That is Oscar Wilde' Wilde sensed his embarrassment and left, saying: 'Thank you for listening. I am much alone'. Wilde was bothered by large red blotches on his arms and chest which he insisted was mussel poisoning but are more likely to have been syphilitic. An old ear problem aggravated him much more.

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Wilde's controversial tomb (above); the Hotel d'Alsace at the time of his death, and an unkempt, obese Oscar during his last Parisian days (left)



By September these painful conditions made him bedridden. An ear operation failed and his most loyal friend Robbie Ross was summoned to find his friend with enough spirit left to jest: 'Ah Robbie, when we are dead and buried in our tombs, and the trumpet of the Last Judgement is sounded, I shall turn to you and whisper "Robbie, Robbie, let us pretend we do not hear it"'. On 29 October Wilde said 'My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go'. An ear abscess led to meningitis. His friends Ross and Reggie Turner remained at his side with Dupoirier, who administered morphine. The dying man asked Ross to have his last work *De Profundis* published. He also spoke fondly of his two sons and his native Ireland. By 29 November Wilde's condition was desperate. Morphine had been replaced by opium but even this didn't dilute the pain and Wilde would bite his hand to stifle his screams. On 30 November Ross and Turner were woken by a death rattle. Foam and blood came from Wilde's mouth. At 1.50pm he died. As he expired, fluids flooded from every orifice. The appalling mess was disposed of by Dupoirier who dressed his guest in a white shirt and drew a sheet over him. Palm branches were arranged around him and a flashlight photograph was taken.

'Bosie' was chief mourner at the funeral. The coffin was cheap, and the hearse ragged. A side door of the church of St Germain-des-Prés was used for the few mourners, mostly journalists. When the coffin was lowered, Douglas almost fell into the grave. Wilde was buried in the undistinguished Bagneux Cemetery beneath a simple stone with an iron railing around it. For nine years his body remained there. Then, on July 19, 1909, it was exhumed and transferred to Paris's famous Père Lachaise cemetery. The celebrated Jacob Epstein Monument, which took three years to

sculpt, caused a rumpus. The angel, clearly masculine in gender, spent most of its first years covered by a tarpaulin. Epstein once found a bronze plaque over the figure's genitals and a gendarme standing guard. Even in death Wilde was accused of indecency. Despite the scandal, Wilde was finally in a suitable setting and in glorious company. On the rear of the monument there is a verse from Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*:

*And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.*

In 1918 Robbie Ross died and at his request his ashes were placed in Wilde's tomb. Now together in death they could pretend not to hear the Last Trumpet. Wilde's tomb, despite competition from Chopin, Proust, Balzac, Modigliani, Edith Piaf, and Jim Morrison, is the biggest draw in Père Lachaise. From the moment Wilde's body was placed in this sumptuous setting the agonies of his Parisian exile began to fade. As his body was raised from obscurity, phoenix-like his memory would rise too. **E**

JOURNEYS

An illustrated edition of *The Complete Works* is published by HarperCollins to commemorate the centenary of Wilde's death.

The Hotel d'Alsace is now called simply L'Hotel, and can be found at 13 Rue des Beaux Arts. Oscar Wilde's room retains the famously questionable wallpaper. See History to Go, page 85 for details of Oscar Wilde centenary events in London.