

AS OSCAR WILDE'S ONLY GRANDSON and the executor of his literary estate, a position he's held since 1977, Merlin Holland started research on Wilde in the mid 1980s. At 62, the accomplished writer is an expert on his grandfather, and though he is heterosexual, he remains outspoken against homophobia. His works include *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*; *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, which contains the first uncensored transcript of the event that led to Wilde's imprisonment for homosexuality; and *The Wilde Album*. His 2007 release, *Coffee With Oscar Wilde*, is a time-travel biography that brings the witty Irishman to life in a fictional interview. He is presently writing a book about a period in their family history neglected by scholars, the years following Wilde's death in 1900.

**Constance Lloyd, your grandmother, was quite conservative compared to your grandfather. Why do you think he married her?** Because he loved her.

**They did love each other romantically?** What is love other than romantic? I don't think he loved her money. He didn't need a smoke screen at that stage. The law against relations between men in the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment hadn't been passed by the time they got married. The fact that he finally realized that he was more attracted to men than he was to women and became an out-and-out homosexual from probably the early 1890s onward, nobody's going to dispute. Just give him the benefit of having loved his wife when he married her.

**So you wouldn't think that references to his romantic involvements with women, particularly when he was young, are just to veil his true identity?** I'm not whitewashing anything. People love things to be pigeonholed, put into compartments, black-and-white. He was. He wasn't. History tells us that it has happened to many people in the same way, and I don't think it makes him any the less interesting. He is the most wonderful gay icon, but he's flawed. There are some people who don't really like that. It's uncomfortable. It's not a perfect gay icon. He's a man who discovered his true nature and then made no bones about it and indulged in his homosexuality completely, which is obviously what got him put into prison.

**Your grandmother was so embarrassed by the scandal that she changed the family name to Holland. She wasn't so embarrassed by the scandal that she changed the family name. She didn't want to change the family name.**

**Why did she do it?** She had to do it. She didn't want to do it. She wouldn't have done it were it not for the fact that far



Merlin Holland (above) and his grandfather, Oscar Wilde

## After the Fall

Oscar Wilde's only grandson, Merlin Holland, wants to shed light on the years that followed his grandfather's infamous imprisonment **By Julia Ann Charpentier**

away from England in those days, in Switzerland, a Swiss hotelkeeper said, "You're obviously the wife of the infamous Oscar Wilde. You'll have to leave. It's bad for business." It was then that she realized that she had to change her name. She didn't want to divorce him, and she never did divorce him. As he said, "It's highly unlikely that I would ever have gone back to Constance, but she was the link between me and my children." Once she died, that was it. There was far too much meddling by other people in their relationship. I think that's one of the great sadnesses. Had they been allowed to get on with their lives and sort their two lives out together, I'm sure that there would have been contact between them. And as Constance said not long before she died, "If I saw him again, I think I would forgive everything. When I love a person once, I love them always." I'm not suggesting for a minute that they would have got back together as a married couple. He was far more interested in men than he was in women by that stage. But at least there would have been some form of communi-

cation between them, and it might have allowed him to see his children. The whole story of what happened between Oscar and Constance after prison has yet to be written, and I'm in the process of writing it at the moment.

**That's the one area that has been neglected.** The sadness and the madness of their nonrelationship at that time is one of the things which is eternally tragic. And that leads me into the book, which is a look at Oscar, his reputation, his friends and enemies all fighting and squabbling with each other about what he did or didn't do, or what they did or didn't do. It's really a look at a hundred years between his death and 2000, at the amazing things, the outstanding things, ridiculous things which were done around him and in his name.

**Have you considered changing your name back to Wilde?** Briefly, but then I decided against it. It is, in the end, a permanent rebuke to Victorian morality. It's history. It's been and gone. ♦

*Our complete interview is on Advocate.com.*