

Julia Ann Charpentier converses with Oscar Wilde's Grandson

## 'As a gay icon, Wilde is flawed'

MERLIN HOLLAND

**M**ERLIN HOLLAND is Oscar Wilde's only grandson and the executor of his literary estate, a position he has held since 1977. A journalist and lecturer, Holland started conducting research on Wilde in the mid-1980's. His background in industry and commerce preceded a career in academic publishing. At age 63, he is an expert on the life and work of his grandfather. While Holland himself is heterosexual, he remains outspoken against homophobia.

Among the many books on Wilde that Holland has authored or edited are the following: last year's *Oscar Wilde: A Life in Letters* (reviewed in these pages last September-October); *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (2004), which contains the first uncensored transcript of the events leading up to Wilde's imprisonment for homosexuality; and *The Wilde Album: Public and Private Images of Oscar Wilde* (1998). His 2007 book, *Coffee with Oscar Wilde* (Duncan Baird), is a time-travel biography that brings the witty Irishman to life in a fictional interview. Holland is currently writing a family history covering the century that followed Wilde's death in 1900.

This interview was conducted by phone late last year.

**Julia Ann Charpentier:** Constance Lloyd, your grandmother, was quite conservative compared to your grandfather. Why do you think he married her?

**Merlin Holland:** Because he loved her.

**JC:** Romantically?

**MH:** What is love other than romantic? I don't think he loved her money. He didn't need a smokescreen 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 1890's onward—nobody's going to dispute that. Just give him the benefit of having loved his wife when he married her.

**JC:** While most people think of Oscar Wilde as a homosexual, I believe that the correct term for his sexual orientation is bisexual.

**MH:** Bisexual implies that throughout his life he indulged in both one and the other. I would say that he was probably heterosexual up to a certain point in his life, and then from that moment

onwards he became homosexual. I think the term bisexual is probably wrong. I think he was initially heterosexual and then realized that he'd been channeled down the wrong path for too long. One sees, one almost feels in what he writes and in his letters that there is a sense of his relief at a certain point in his life that he has discovered his true sexuality.

**JC:** So you wouldn't think that references to his romantic involvements with women, particularly when he was young, are just veiled attempts to make him less gay to heterosexual admirers today?

**MH:** 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. He's flawed because he did have relationships with women in the beginning, and he obviously had a relationship with my grandmother; otherwise my father and my uncle wouldn't have been born, and I wouldn't be here.

**JC:** That's a good point.

**MH:** 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. If it was a black-and-white story of Oscar just being homosexual from year one and concealing it and finally coming to terms with it, it would make a much less interesting story.

**JC:** Your grandfather spent two years in prison doing hard labor for "gross indecency." This was a contrived scenario in a courtroom trial in which *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was brought in as evidence against him. Is it your belief that his homosexual acts were never actually proven?

**MH:** You're talking about legal definitions here, which are outside my capabilities. What is proof of homosexuality? The fact is that a large proportion of the witnesses were known blackmailers and rent boys who were being paid far more than their loss of earnings, their expenses, to give evidence. How much do you believe their evidence? I don't know. Oscar had indulged in homosexual practices over a period of years at the time of his trial. Whether or not he was guilty of exactly those things he was accused of in the trial, I don't know.

**JC:** It was Oscar's involvement with Lord Alfred Douglas that led to the trial. Douglas was a legal adult of aristocratic heritage. What happened to shift the focus onto underage men?

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**MH:** The public view today is that Oscar had a homosexual relationship with the son of a lord, Alfred Douglas, the third son of the Marquis of Queensberry, and as a result of this relationship, he got put in prison. That is, of course, ridiculous. Oscar was put in prison for his relationships with the rent boys and the young men who were brought up as evidence against him. Alfred Douglas is an awfully long way away from the cause, the direct cause, of Oscar's trial and imprisonment.

**JC:** Did Oscar have relationships with numerous men, or was he involved with only a select few?

**MH:** He probably had relationships, sexual relationships, with a number, not a large number, but a number of other men apart from Alfred Douglas. But how will we ever know?

**JC:** Your grandmother was so embarrassed by the scandal that she changed the family name to Holland. Do you believe she overreacted at the time?

**MH:** She wasn't so embarrassed by the scandal that she changed the family name. She didn't want to change the family name; she had to do it. She wouldn't have done it were it not for the fact that one time, in Switzerland, a hotel keeper 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 never did so. As [Oscar] said, "It's highly unlikely that I would ever have gone back to Constance, but she was the link between me and my children. I was devoted to my children, and she was the only way that I was ever going to see them again." 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. 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. Nobody but a fool would suggest that they would have got back together. But at least there would have been some form of communication 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.

**JC:** That's an area that has been neglected.

**MH:** It's a prologue to another book—Oscar between prison and his death, and the relationship with Constance, and the madness. The sadness and the madness of their non-relationship 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, the ridiculous things, which were done around him and in his name, a book which I've been researching for a number of years.

**JC:** Have you considered changing your name back to Wilde?

**MH:** 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.

**JC:** Oscar Wilde is a martyr among the gay community today. The passage of time made him a hero, not a villain. In some circles, homosexuality is still met with resistance. I understand that you're heterosexual, yet you spend much of your time speaking on behalf of the gay community. How often do you feel ostracized because you're his grandson?

**MH:** I don't spend much of my time speaking on behalf of the homosexual community. That's a total misapprehension. The reason I went to Moscow in 2006, and this is indicative of my whole support of the homosexual community—I don't join in homosexual rallies and march on gay pride marches, and say, "I'm gay, and I'm proud of it." I'm not gay, for a start, and I don't feel that it's up to me as an ordinary heterosexual person to go on gay pride marches and campaign for homosexual rights. In a sense, I could be accused, and probably rightly, were I to do it, of cashing in on something. There were two books published in Russian—my father's autobiography and my book on the trial by a friend of mine who was organizing the Moscow gay pride. It was connected with what was called IDAHO, the International Day Against Homophobia. There's a very fine, but a very important, distinction to be made between campaigning for gay rights and campaigning against homophobia. Because there has been suffering in our family, I can honestly, positively, willingly, and with enthusiasm campaign against homophobia. It's an appalling thing, and it has caused more suffering, more misery in the world, than one can possibly imagine.

**JC:** At this speaking engagement in Russia you were harassed quite severely, and protestors gassed the lecture hall. What were your thoughts the moment this happened?

**MH:** I suppose a sense of shrugging one's shoulders and smiling and saying, "Plus ça change..." It was the neo-fascist element in Russia today, which, as far as I am aware, is positively but discreetly condoned by the government because it suits their purposes. The government does very little to stop neo-fascists from beating up gay people who are trying to campaign for their rights. They certainly don't, as they would in any other democratic country in Europe, send the police in and disperse the neo-fascists for their behavior.

If Oscar Wilde were around today, he would lend his voice to a protest against homophobia, and certainly he would campaign for gay rights. One's sexuality shouldn't mark one in some way that excludes one from the right that every normal human being has. His sexuality wasn't the most important thing in his life. The most important thing was his art. People who try to make out that Oscar Wilde was just a sexual martyr lose sight of the fact that this man broke the mold. He was writing essays about literature and art at a time when what he was saying was considered to be outrageous and totally iconoclastic.

**JC:** What is the most significant gift that he gave you?

**MH:** I don't think it's up to me to say, and I wouldn't claim anything. If he gave me a love of words and of literature and of books and of something on that side of life's interests, that's wonderful. ■