

Mr Wilde

Among the book reviews in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of November eighteen eighty-five, was one entitled: *How to be Happy though Married: Being a Handbook to Marriage*. The book's author was identified merely as "a graduate in the University of Matrimony" The reviewer, however, Mr Oscar Wilde had no qualms about self-promotion, having been lecturing in English towns for over a year, and working as a regular reviewer of both books and drama. And, of course, he himself was married, albeit for just under a year and a half.

Here is a taste of that review:

In spite of its somewhat alarming title this book may be highly recommended to everyone. .... [the author] has a most interesting chapter on marriage-made men, and though he dissents, and we think rightly, from the view recently put forward by a lady or two on the Women's Rights platform that Solomon owed all this wisdom to the number of his wives, still he appeals to Bismarck, John Stuart Mill, Mahommed and Lord Beaconsfield, as instances of men whose success can be traced to the influence of the women they married.

[True] Bishop Whately once defined woman as "a creature that does not reason and pokes the fire from the top", but since his day the higher education of women has considerably altered their position.

Women [Wilde's review goes on] women have always had an emotional sympathy with those they love; ...

On marriage vows our author ... tells of a nervous bridegroom who, confusing the baptismal and marriage ceremonies, replied when asked if he consented to take the bride for his wife: "I renounce them all"

[and] of a Hampshire rustic who, when giving the ring, said solemnly to the bride: "With my body I thee wash up and with all my hurdle goods I thee and thou" ...

We strongly recommend this book as one of the best of wedding presents. It is a complete handbook to an earthly Paradise, and its author may be regarded as ... the Baedeker of bliss.

Miss Lloyd

Constance Lloyd lived for some of her early years near Saint James's.

In eighteen sixty six the Lloyd family came to live at number nine, Sussex Gardens. And – four years later – when Constance was six years old they moved to number forty-two Sussex Gardens, which in those days was well set back from the street by a long front garden. Nowadays it is part of the Hall of Residence of Saint Mary's Hospital.

At the age of eighteen Constance went to live in her grandfather's house, number one hundred Lancaster Gate – today a block of flats. She also spent time on the Continent, becoming fluent in French and Italian. Much of her reading in later life was in these two tongues.

According to biographer Anne Clark Amor in “Mrs Oscar Wilde *A Woman of Some Importance*” High on the list of social accomplishments thought desirable for girls in the Victorian era was music. Constance proved an apt and gifted pupil ...

Oscar and Constance had a number of things in common: Not only did the families know one another – and each other’s scandals - their social backgrounds were similar and they shared a love of Keats’s poetry, a love of art, and artists, and theatre, and music. In Oscar’s early undergraduate days he would have gone on about his Greek travels, and spoken enthusiastically of Cardinal Newman and the Roman Catholic Church, while she, in turn, would have told of her Italian travels and the exotic company of the older women with whom she often stayed.

Joyce Bentley – who wrote *The Importance of Being Constance* – says: Constance knew what kind of love she wanted, or else why wait until she was twenty-six? ... Having seen the result of her parents’ unhappiness, and indeed spoiled for ‘ordinary’ marriage by her association with the Pre-Raphaelites, Constance stood her ground. Whatever objections the family had would be totally disregarded.

In her own words to her brother: I won’t stand opposition, so I hope they won’t try it. For Anne Clark Amor the issue is beyond dispute: She was determined to marry for

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love and romance, and not for money.

Oscar, too, [Amor adds] found the notion of a marriage of convenience abhorrent, and found it absolutely necessary to arrange his affairs on a firm financial basis before making a formal proposal.

In a letter to an American friend, the sculptor, Waldo Story, Oscar wrote:

She is quite young, very grave, and mystical, with wonderful eyes, and dark brown coils of hair ... We are, of course, desperately in love ... we telegraph to each other twice a day, and the telegraph clerks have become quite romantic in consequence. I hand in my messages, however, very sternly, and try to look as if 'love' was a cryptogram for 'Buy Grand Trunks', and 'darling' a cipher for 'sell out at par'. I am sure it succeeds ... [And he concludes with the statement]

She knows I am the greatest poet, so in literature she is all right.

In a letter to one of the most noted beauties of her time, the actress Lillie Langtry, an old friend, Wilde wrote:

I am going to be married to a beautiful girl called Constance Lloyd, a grave, slight, violet-eyed little Artemis with great coils of heavy brown hair which make her flower-like head droop like a blossom, and wonderful ivory hands which draw music from the piano so sweet that the birds stop to listen to her.

Yet why – you may still wonder – did Oscar finally choose to marry Constance, since he could have had his choice of many rich, beautiful and intelligent ladies?

Biographer Anne Clark Amor is in no doubt:

The fact is that, quite simply, he fell in love with her. She was a very lovely young woman, exceedingly gentle in disposition, and possessed of an engaging eagerness to please.

She had a naïve belief in the essential goodness of human nature, she was fond of those with whom she came in contact, and she shared with Oscar a love of beauty and simplicity of form. ... Despite her simple charm there were considerable strengths in her character, and she was capable of exceptional loyalty. She was also in every sense Oscar's true disciple, a characteristic which was, perhaps, essential to him. ... Asked why he fell in love with her, Oscar once said, "She never speaks, and I am always wondering what her thoughts are like."

## OSCANCE

On the Saturday of the Whit weekend in 1884 – at about three o'clock in the afternoon, Oscar Wilde and Constance Lloyd were declared "man and wife" in Saint James's. The day was fine and warm but with a slight chill in the wind.

The bride wore a pale yellow satin gown with a Medici collar, high at the back of her neck and tapered to a low-cut bodice. The folds of the skirt fell simply, in true Pre-Raphaelite

style and were gathered about her waist by a silver girdle, a gift – like the unique wedding ring – of the bridegroom. The ample sleeves were puffed and the veil of saffron coloured Indian silk gauze was embroidered with pearls and worn Mary Stuart fashion. The large bouquet had as much green in it as white.

Of the attire of the bridegroom the *Irish Times* said that:

He looked less like George the Fourth than usual, as – though his hair was fully curled – the modern blue morning frock coat and grey trousers rather took away from the character.

A large crowd had gathered outside Saint James's muttering with discontent. On the express orders of the bridegroom only invited guests were to be admitted. For a full half hour the crowd remonstrated with officials until the ushers relented and the doors were opened. The uninvited poured in to take their places with leading contemporary figures in the worlds of art and literature. Oscar likened the crowded church to a full house.

In the marriage register the groom described himself as “gentleman” – a description he preferred to “writer”. And he gave his age as “twenty-eight”. The marriage was authorised by Special Licence rather than on the normal basis of Banns, because the Victorian upper classes considered the Calling of Banns somewhat undignified.

On the first page of the Visitor's Book in their house in Tite Street, Oscar wrote a three stanza poem entitled:

*To My Wife.*

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I can write no stately proem  
as a prelude to my lay;  
From a poet to a poem  
I would dare to say

For if of these fallen petals  
One to you seem fair;  
Love will waft it till it settles,  
On your hair.

And when wind and winter harden  
All the loveless land,  
It will whisper of the garden,  
You will understand.

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