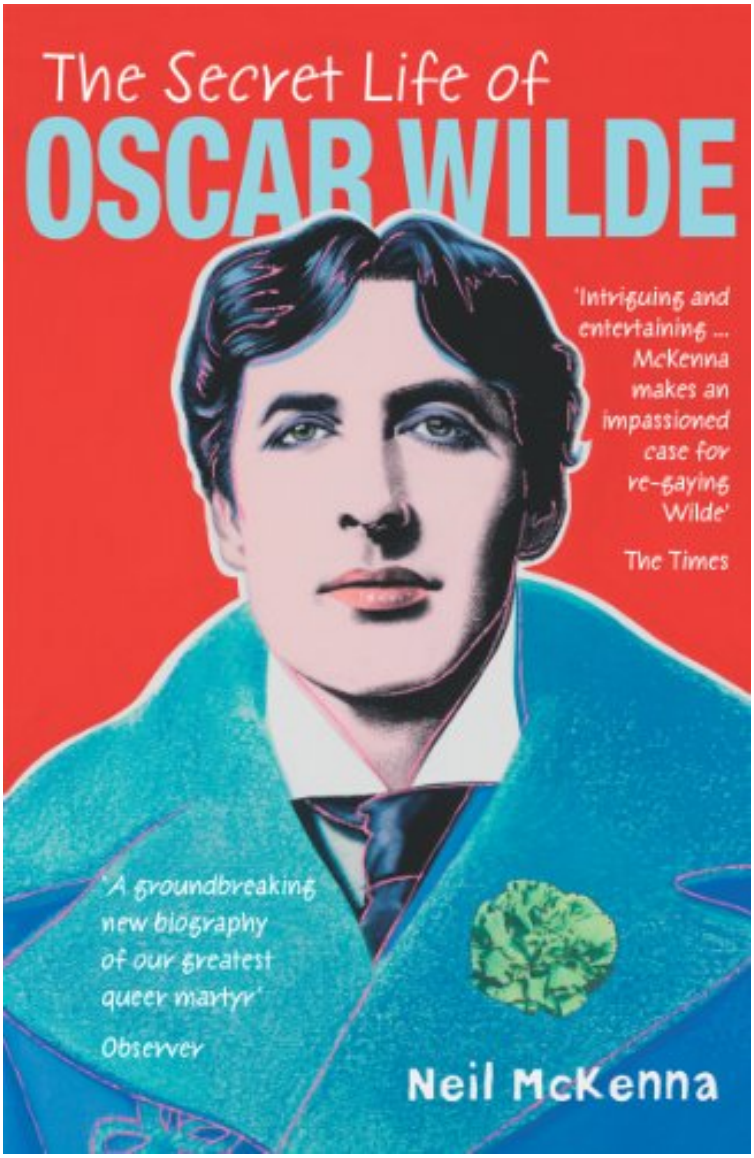
The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde



Par Neil McKenna
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(Mobile library) The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde

Par Neil McKenna : The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde:

Description : Description du produitOscar Wilde was not only extremely sexually promiscuous but also a campaigner for sexual freedom, argues McKenna. His last days in Paris were not miserable either; as Paris gave him freedom from the narrowness of London.

Prsentation de l'diteurI have put my genius into my life but only my talent into my work. So said Oscar Wilde of his remarkable life a life more complex, more erotic, more troubled and more triumphant than any of his contemporaries ever knew or suspected. Neil McKennas The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde charts fully for the first time Oscars astonishing erotic odyssey through Victorian Londons sexual underworld. Oscar Wilde emerges as a man driven personally and creatively by his powerful desires for sex with men, and Neil McKenna argues compellingly and convincingly that Oscars Wildes life and work can only be fully

understood and appreciated in terms of his sexuality.The book draws of a vast range of sources, many of them previously unpublished, and includes startling new material like the statements made to the police by the male prostitutes and blackmailers ranged against Oscar Wilde at his trial which have been lost for over a century.Dazzlingly written, The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde meticulously and brilliantly reconstructs Oscar Wildes emotional and sexual life, painting an astonishingly frank and vivid portrait of a troubled genius who chose to martyr himself for the cause of love between men.From Publishers WeeklyStarred . Oscar Wilde, though married to a woman, preferred sex with men; he was convicted of "gross indecency" and sentenced to two years of hard labor in 1895 in what has become a landmark case in queer history. Yet most biographies of the famous playwright and essayist touch only fleetingly on the writer's sexual history. McKenna's masterful, eminently readable new work takes a sharp, very productive turn in Wilde scholarship. While British journalist McKenna (On the Margins) comprehensively covers Wilde's literary and public career, his biography is organized around Wilde's sexuality as expressed in the sexual acts he performed, and on the centrality of his homosexuality to his identity and politics. Rather than limiting the account to trysts and encounters, McKenna opens new venues for understanding Wilde's life and work. McKenna has unearthed a wealth of new primary and secondary sourcesthe letters, journals, fiction and poetry of such 19th-century homosexual writers as J.A. Symonds and Ronald Gowerthat he uses to paint a vivid and engrossing portrait of Uranian (as 19th-century homosexuals called themselves) life and culture in late Victorian England. McKenna's fundamental argument is that Wilde's sexual identity moved him to the center of a nascent movement to destigmatize and even promote homosexuality as an identity. McKenna writes that Wilde and his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, "were passionately, fiercely committed to the Cause... [and needed] to proclaim their sexual orientation to the world." Not even a great biography can explain everything about its subject's lifeand certainly, despite the groundbreaking research here, this book will raise eyebrows as well as controversy. But it's also the most exciting and important Wilde scholarship to be published in decades. 16 pages of bw photos. (May) From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.comOscar Wilde's plays, especially "The Importance Of Being Earnest," ensured the Irish- born author a permanent place in the English canon. That is one reason why most previous biographies have focused on his literary achievements. But Wilde's sexual proclivities created nearly all of the public drama in his life. Drawing on newly discovered interviews with some of the witnesses at his trials, as well as numerous unpublished memoirs and diaries, Neil McKenna has produced a superb new portrait of the secret life of one of the 19th century's most tragic and beguiling figures. He begins with a surprising fact: "Oscar's place in the history of the small but courageous band of men who strove to bring about the legal and social emancipation of men who loved men has rarely been acknowledged." This meticulous reconstruction of Wilde's "sexual journey" breaks important new ground by placing Wilde at the center of a pantheon of gay sexual revolutionaries. And McKenna makes a powerful argument that Wilde's "commitment to 'the Cause' " accounts for "many of his otherwise inexplicable decisions." Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854, and he lived his entire life during the reign of Queen Victoria. His youth was circumscribed by the suffocating morals of Victorian life, in which sodomy was frequently portrayed as a crime worse than murder. But thanks to the British addiction to contradiction, gay sex was rampant among upper-class 19th-century boys and men. According to John Addington Symonds, a gay poet who attended Harrow, a public school, "every boy of good looks [there] had a female name, and was recognized either as a public prostitute" or as some bigger fellow's lover, while Wilde's future lover, Lord Alfred Douglas ("Bosie"), estimated that "at least ninety per cent of his contemporaries" at Winchester had sex with other boys. "The practice of Greek love is so general that it is only those who are physically unattractive that are reduced to living without love," Bosie wrote many years later. Wilde's mother published incendiary poems urging the Irish to rise up against their English oppressor. Her son inherited all of her radical genes, but he was destined to become an entirely different kind of revolutionary. He came of age just as Europe was witnessing the first stirrings of a scientific movement that challenged centuries of Judeo-Christian condemnation of same-sex love.In the 1860s, a German lawyer named Karl Heinrich Ulrichs may have been the first modern European to publicly declare his homosexuality. Ulrichs wrote dozens of books and pamphlets that made a crucial argument: The preference for same-sex love is hereditary; therefore it should not be a crime. He introduced the word "Uranian" as a synonym for homosexual relations, and even demanded that homosexuals be granted the right to marry. Slightly less radical thinkers in Germany, Austria and France began to argue that sex between men was a psychological disturbance to be treated by physicians, rather than a crime to be punished by the courts. As a

result, by 1876 "psychological" had become a term that Wilde and his peers used to describe anything pertaining to gay sex. At the same time, McKenna writes, "aestheticism seemed to spring to life, fully formed, towards the end of the 1870s." It was "a heady mix of art, idealism and politics, which sought to propagate a new gospel of Beauty." And in 1893, shortly after meeting Wilde, George Ives, a friend of Wilde's whose diaries contain many new details of the writer's life, founded a secret society called the Order of Chaeronea, named "after the battle where the male lovers of the Theban Band were slaughtered in 338 BC." New members of the Order were required to swear "That you will never vex or persecute lovers" and "That all real love shall be to you as sanctuary." These revolutionary currents -- and a highly publicized scandal linking upper-class men to lower-class "rent-boys" -- produced a predictable Victorian reaction. Before 1885, only the specific act of sodomy had been a crime in Britain. But that year Henry Labouchere, a journalist and a radical member of Parliament, added a clause to the "Criminal Law Amendment Act" that made any act of "gross indecency" between two men a misdemeanor punishable by up to two years in prison. The broadening of the law was ultimately Wilde's undoing. Like nearly all gay men of his era, Wilde "struggled against the 'burning channel' " of his inclinations: The "wonder of sex with a young man" would often "be followed by bitter remorse." Hoping to put his gay desires behind him, in 1884 Wilde married Constance Mary Lloyd, who quickly produced two sons, in 1885 and 1886. But as it had been for millions of gay men before him, Wilde's experiment with marriage as cure was a total failure. As McKenna demonstrates over and over again, Wilde used his fictional characters to convey all of his forbidden feelings. Five years after his marriage, he revealed his authentic sexual desires in The Portrait of Mr. W.H., a book about the mysterious person to whom Shakespeare dedicated his sonnets. Wilde's book promoted the existing theory that W.H. was an Elizabethan boy actor, and McKenna writes that "the real hero of the story is the spiritual and sexual love that men have for younger men." A year later, he published The Picture of Dorian Gray, a novel replete with homoeroticism, in which one of the characters proclaims a version of what became a mantra of gay liberation a century later: "To realise one's nature perfectly -- that is what each of us is here for. . . . The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it." Wilde's life imitated his art most disastrously when he became fatally obsessed with "Bosie" (Lord Douglas), whose slim figure, golden hair and blue eyes inspired "passionate admiration in men and women indiscriminately," according to George Bernard Shaw. When they first met in 1891, "Oscar took a violent fancy" to him, according to Bosie. The young man was fascinated by Oscar, but not initially attracted to him, because he had never been to bed with anyone older than himself. Bosie was "addicted to sex" with "dangerous young men," including male prostitutes -- tastes that Oscar eventually came to share. When they did become lovers, Oscar and Bosie flaunted their desire for working-class boys, entertaining them everywhere from the Savoy Hotel to the Cafe Royal. Even in Victorian England, they might have gotten away with their brazen displays of public affection, although most of their contemporaries considered inter-class sex at least as shocking as homosexual unions. But two facts guaranteed Wilde's eventual fall: Bosie's father, the Marquis of Queensberry, was violently homophobic, and Bosie was one of his two gay sons. The other, Viscount Francis Drumlanrig, was the lover of Lord Rosebery, who became a Liberal prime minister. Viscount Drumlanrig died after a hunting "accident," which McKenna argues was probably a suicide intended to protect his famous lover. The death of his oldest son inflamed the already erratic Queensberry. The big news in this biography is the strong circumstantial evidence McKenna presents that Queensberry sent a short and explicit ultimatum to the Liberal government: Send Oscar Wilde to prison or face the exposure of several senior Liberal politicians -- including the prime minister -- as sodomites. As for Wilde's inexplicable decision to press charges against Queensberry for libel, after the marquis's entirely accurate accusation that Wilde was "posing as a sodomite," McKenna believes Wilde's action was "both an expression of his love for Bosie and an article of his Uranian [gay] faith." This book reads like the great tragedy Wilde's life was. One of the greatest joys of writing it undoubtedly came from the numerous Wilde aphorisms that McKenna was able to intersperse in the text. Wilde once remarked that there were only three ways to get into society: feed it, amuse it or shock it. "He used all three tactics simultaneously," McKenna observes, and the results are magnificently recorded in these pages. ed by Charles Kaiser