



ANZAAB *Aspects of Book Collecting* Oscar Wilde & his Circle

Roz Greenwood Old and Rare Books

Background: Poet, satirist, playwright, novelist, classicist, raconteur, star in the firmament of fashionable London of the 1890's, martyr in the dock at the Old Bailey, convicted felon, prison reformer and devoted lover of Bosie Douglas, the male beauty of the day. These are just a few of the reasons that many books, plays and films have been produced on Oscar Wilde and his friends and others who form the background to his rise and fall as an eminent man of letters. Most of his literary works are available in reprint. Books of reminiscences by people who knew Wilde are relatively inexpensive and enjoyable to hunt for. Wilde's letters contain some of his best writing and most have been published over the years, notably by Rupert Hart-Davis.

Subject range: Wilde's juvenilia, his early publications, copies of editions of the now classic plays including 'The Importance of Being Ernest' and his novel 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' are all rarities most likely to be sighted at book auctions. Magazines under his editorial guidance such as *Woman's World* 1887-1889 are sometimes found locally. The first (scarce) bibliography by Stuart Mason (C Millard) 1914 is important to any collection but more material has come to light since then and the Ellman Biography (1987) is a good source of reference.

Subject availability: With the updating and republication of the 'Letters' in 2000 by Wilde's grandson Merlin Holland, copies are not difficult to find. Copies of the "Works" in early editions and illustrated editions of 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' are generally available locally. Sets of the first 'Collected Works' edited by Wilde's literary executor, Robert Ross, have come up at auction in Australia relatively recently.

Subject price-range: First editions of the Plays, signed copies, and original letters are highly sought-after. At the London Sale to mark Wilde's 150th birthday in 2004 a signed copy of the Poems (1881) was sold for over \$20,000. One of the more common pirated editions of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* should sell for around \$120, whilst a signed copy of an earlier, legitimate edition of 99 has reached over \$8000. (After Wilde's death his publisher Leonard Smithers issued extra copies of his works to boost a struggling business, making collecting Wilde's works doubly difficult.) American publishers also pirated Wilde's work.

Footnote: The Stuart Mason Bibliography, the Hart-Davis Holland 'Letters' and the biography by Richard Ellman are essential for background and reference. Oscar Wilde's Circle is a wide source for collectors, and ranges through books by and about his parents, eminent surgeon Sir William Wilde, his wife, Irish patriot and poet, Jane Wilde (Speranza), as well as those related to Wilde's mentors at Oxford University Walter Pater, and John Ruskin. His great supporter at the time of his disgrace, Ada Leveson, called by Wilde "The Sphinx", wrote autobiographical material and novels. There are several crime novels that feature Wilde as a detective. The Oscar Wilde Society of London publishes a magazine of scholarly material as well as a newsletter. (www.oscarwildesociety.co.uk)