

Oscar Wilde Trial Re-enactment

Overview

This project, carried out by young members of the Franco-British Lawyer Society, intends to re-enact parts of the trial of Oscar Wilde's trial(s) at the UK Supreme Court. This aims more at providing a theatrical performance than a word for word reconstitution. The event will take place on the 19th June 2019.

We are looking for solicitors or barristers willing to play the part of the prosecution, the defence or possibly a witness during the trial. Lady Dorrian will be our judge.

Background

Oscar Wilde is an Irish author best known for *The portrait of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and his poems. Wilde was homosexual and it is his sexual orientation that led to his involvement in three criminal trials. He was particularly fond of Lord Alfred Douglas, with whom he had an affair for four years prior to Douglas' father, the Marquess of Queensberry, writing him the famously flawed note: "To Oscar Wilde, posing a sodomite".

The first trial: *Wilde v. Queensberry*: Wilde was the one instigating those proceedings accusing the Marquess of Queensberry of criminal libel following reception of the famous note. The trial started on 3rd April 1895 at the Old Bailey. After intensive cross-examination by Queensberry's defence and the involvement of private detectives, Wilde is accused by Queensberry's defence of soliciting 12 other young men to commit sodomy. Wilde's works, including *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, are used for cross-examination due to its homoerotic themes. After three days in court, Wilde's lawyer withdraws the lawsuit. This is seen as a sign of implied guilt. A warrant for Wilde's arrest is issued on indecency charges.

The second trial: *Regina v. Wilde*: On April 26th 1895 at the Old Bailey, Wilde is tried on twenty-five counts of gross indecencies and conspiracy to commit gross indecencies. He pleads "not guilty". Many witnesses testify against him. Some of his literary work is brought to examination, including the letters he exchanged with Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde's poem *Two Loves* is examined for its homosexual implicit content. On May the 7th, the jury is unable to reach a verdict. Wilde is released on bail for three weeks.

The final trial: *Regina v. Wilde (continued)*: This time, Wilde is convicted for gross indecency and sentenced to two years of hard labour in prison, the maximum sentence allowed for this crime. What differs from the first trial is that the government was determined to secure a conviction in order to dissipate suspicions that Rosebery, the Prime Minister at the time, had been himself involved in a homosexual affair when he was Foreign Minister. This resulted in much stronger witnesses being presented at court.

Wilde died at the age of 45, bankrupted because of the cost of the trials and the compensation demanded by the Marquess of Queensberry for false accusation of libel.

Although we intend to focus on the second trial as it is the richest in terms of content and interest, some elements will be taken from the other trials in order to give a more general view of Wilde's interactions with the justice system.

Timetable for the evening

- Introduction to the case (30 mins):
FBLS member (5 mins): Presentation of the evening
Defence (10 mins): Legal/historic background
Defence (10 mins): Presentation of the case
Judge (5 mins): Evolution of the law
- Defence v. prosecution (75 mins (60 mins + 15 mins break)):
Prosecution (30 mins)
Defence (30 mins)
- Outcome of the case (15 mins)
Judge (10 mins): Judgment
FBLS member (5 min): Acknowledgements

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