

Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions edited by Joseph Bristow. Toronto: U of Toronto P in association with the UCLA Center for 17th and 18th Century Studies and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 2003. xi, 334 pp. + 19 b/w illus. ISBN 0-8020-3532-9. \$60.00 or £32.

Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions represents the state of the art so far as contemporary Wilde scholarship is concerned. Originally solicited for delivery in 1999 at the Clark Library seminar "Oscar Wilde and the Culture of the Fin de Siècle," these essays were selected and arranged with the object of showing how far Wilde scholarship has advanced since the time, barely thirty years ago, when a few dedicated souls laboured hard to dispel the aura of scandal and rumour that shrouded Wilde and his works.

This advance owes much to the Clark Library itself, the principal repository of materials related to Wilde and his circle, whose institutional weight can be felt throughout Joseph Bristow's volume. The cover of *Wilde Writings* reproduces, in more exquisite clarity than ever before, the famous portrait of Wilde by Harper Pennington (once owned by Wilde) that now hangs in the Clark Library. A number of the essays were researched and/or written there; and the library is the co-publisher in association with the University of Toronto Press. In its very fibre, then, *Wilde Writings* aspires to a summational judgment about how far – and how well – Wilde has been integrated into the multiform agendas of the contemporary literary research community. As Bristow puts it in his introduction, "These days the academic world can confidently assert that it possesses greater understanding than ever before of a gifted man whose widely publicized successes and failures were often misrepresented both during his lifetime and in the years that followed his premature death."

To a certain extent, this results in a volume that emblematises the state of contemporary literary studies as a whole: *Wilde Writings* approaches Wilde from so many distinct (and often irreconcilable) points of view that it becomes a challenge to see the overall coherence of the "greater understanding" Bristow points to. This is a problem built into the structure of the volume, which is divided into four parts titled, respectively, "Wilde Writings," "Wilde Stages," "Wilde Contexts," and "Wilde Legacies." As importantly, Bristow's subtitle *Contextual Conditions* sits in tension with his main title, enacting an uncertainty about the status of text or "writings" for the study of an author whose cultural relevance, for many, lies in matters that cannot be located strictly or simply within the written domain; and this tension is only heightened by the decision to print these competing phrases in different typefaces on the book's dust jacket and spine. (*Wilde Writings* is printed in a calligraphic typeface, suggesting the determining force of the author's hand, while *Contextual Conditions* appears mechanically, without serifs, as if wanting to