

*Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews* edited by Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2010. 208 pp. + 2 b/w illus. ISBN 978-0-252-03472-5. \$40.00.

“I have nothing to declare but my genius,” Wilde is supposed to have said to custom officials soon after he stepped off the *Arizona* onto American soil. This is perhaps the most famous line (whether he really delivered it or not) that general readers will know from Wilde’s American tour in 1882 – a visit which lasted nearly a year (January 2 – December 27). His breathless travel and lecture schedule took him across the country from New York to San Francisco and numerous places between, including north to Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal. Travelling from the Midwest to the Wild West, he lectured in venues ranging from the high (the Minneapolis Academy of Music) to the (literally) low – the silver mine in Leadville, Colorado, into which he descended by means of a bucket to preach aestheticism to the miners. Thanks to Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst, we now know a lot more of what Wilde said (and perhaps more important, how often he said or repeated it), as well as how it was received by the American press. This extremely useful collection of interviews fills an important biographical and critical gap. As the editors note, there has never been a “complete or reliable record” of Wilde’s American interviews, until now.

One of the real pleasures of the book is in seeing how much these interviews act as meta-commentaries on the practice of American journalism, as well as both the function and effect of satire. Some interviews predictably insist on adhering to the vocabulary of du Maurier’s cartoons and Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *Patience*. For example: “Mr. Wilde had thrown himself back upon the skins in a very picturesque attitude.... Then he relapsed into an utterly utter attitude and caressed his cigar thoughtfully.” Yet a surprisingly large number are dedicated to debunking what they see as misrepresentations of Wilde. “He is scholarly, studiously polite, a gentleman, shrewd, fearless, observant, self-possessed and of poetic temperament. He has been considerably misrepresented and unduly ridiculed.” Next to being asked what aestheticism is (a question Wilde claims to have answered “two hundred times” on his first night in America), Wilde is almost always asked his opinion about the way in which he has been represented in the newspapers. Wilde’s response evolves from one of disbelief in the cruelty and outlandishly fictional nature of the accounts to a studied superiority. Even this latter response evolves from a disdain for the inexperienced young boys sent up to interview him (he claims to have offered one an “orange”) to a more general sense of the rightness of the aesthetic cause and a lament that although he is “not injured ... the public is deceived.” While one can certainly read the