

Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend edited by Joseph Bristow. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2008. 448 pp. +35 b/w illus. ISBN 0-8214-1837-6. \$59.95(cloth). ISBN 0-8214-1838-3. \$28.95(paper).

If Oscar Wilde was, by all accounts, the most desirable guest of his time – magnetic, provocative, and outrageously funny – then Joseph Bristow is, on the evidence of this volume, the most accomplished host of our own age. The labours of a great host include creating the illusion that each person present is crucial to the success of the occasion and, when necessary, intervening to frame wayward monologues in a way that allows them to fit within and to advance the larger conversation. *Pace* Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, the ideal host does not assemble everyone and then merely stand, however radiantly, at the top of the stairs; he or she actively works the room to make everyone else look and sound brilliant.

The duties of an editor are remarkably like those of a host, and few editors perform them with the grace that Joseph Bristow shows here. His challenges are evident immediately. No sooner has he set out, in his "Introduction," the thesis of this collection – that "Oscar Wilde is with us still, and he will remain so into the foreseeable future" because, ever since his death, creators and audiences alike "have frequently wanted him to return from the past to answer present needs" – than the reader encounters a contributor who strays from this point. The opening selection, Lucy McDiarmid's "Oscar Wilde, Lady Gregory, and Late-Victorian Table-Talk," is a delightfully informative account of the political as well as social importance of conversation among the elites at fin-de-siècle London parties, and of how the writings of both Lady Gregory and Wilde reflected the dinners they attended. But the section on Lady Gregory, interesting though it is in itself, has nothing to do with Wilde, and it diverts attention from the argument of this volume, while the discussion of how Wilde's plays, such as *A Woman of No Importance*, described the social scene that he knew is equally off the point. Every essay in this collection ought to be telling us that Wilde did more than mirror existing realities – rather, that he created and shaped new ones, especially those in the next century. This is, after all, a book specifically about Wilde's legacies, and its *raison d'être* is to trace his meaning to others after his death.

Fortunately, Bristow has already done the work for McDiarmid tactfully and well in his "Preface," when summarizing her chapter. There, he uses McDiarmid's mention of Herbert Asquith having furthered his political career through dinner party conversation as a way to introduce Wilde's afterlife among the Asquiths. This included not only the surprisingly harsh condemnation of Wilde that appeared in Margot Asquith's 1930 memoir, but the marvellous 1952 film version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* adapted