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The first production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* in 1918 touched off a firestorm in London when the play's lead, exotic dancer Maud Allan, was denounced as belonging to the Cult of the Clitoris -- a feminine variation on the Cult of Wilde, the mark of degeneracy and perversion. The ensuing libel trial, brought to life in this authoritative, spellbinding book, raised the specters of hysteria, homophobia, and paranoia that, like Wilde himself, have haunted our century.

Oscar Wilde's Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy, and the Most Outrageous Trial of the Century Details

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From Reader Review Oscar Wilde's Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy, and the Most Outrageous Trial of the Century for online ebook

Dee Arr says

I found this slice of history from the early twentieth century interesting on many levels. There are quirky events that occur throughout time, and this certainly qualifies as one of them. I spent the better part of a Saturday starting and finishing this book.

This is a story that builds over several decades, culminating in a trial that seems to be part witch hunt, part circus. Oscar Wilde, despite being dead for fifteen years, is accused both directly and indirectly throughout the court proceedings. Noel Pemberton Billing printed an article that publicly trashed actress Maud Allen, who played the part of Salome in an Oscar Wilde play. She sued Billing, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Author Philip Hoare has done an outstanding job of thoroughly researching this subject and then presenting it in a way that captivates the reader. The first few chapters concern the main players in the court case, and Mr. Hoare paints detailed pictures of everyone involved. Once the courtroom drama is reached, readers do not have to endure the normal boring transcripts where we see the person's name and what was said. The author provides us with most of the dialogue and continues to present the drama in story form, thus ensuring that the book remains interesting.

Politics and WWI also figure heavily into this story, and Mr. Hoare makes sure we are provided with all the facts of the accusations, sniping, and outright lies. It is amazing to see that what we might consider ho-hum today was considered vile and trashy 100 years ago. I was totally unaware of this case, and thus was able to experience it as if I had been in the courtroom. This is a fantastic read and I highly recommend it. Five stars.

Thomas Mackan says

Don't "not" read this book. I didn't quite finish it myself. It's a massive undertaking by a first rate journalist whose research of this subject is mammoth in scope, in detail, in understanding. The effect of Oscar Wilde on the evolution of society morally, politically, culturally in the tumultuous years spanning the 19th and 20th centuries is laid out with a barely concealed sense of accomplishment and enjoyment. Words, detail and organization are the brickwork of the tome. I got to the ante-penultimate chapters however, quite exhausted, and with what I hope was enough understanding of the crises involved and felt I could take no more. Relevance was bothering me. I seriously felt that the scandal of the Billings trial was not affecting the work already done in setting the scene, and as an octogenarian who has lived most of the 20th century in the wash of the events, I left it... rather I leave it, to you. Enjoy some fine documentary writing.

Dottie says

"The fear of decadence is the fear - and fascination - of the other. It is a fantasy fear of letting go, of the

abandonment of principle. In that it is an essentially middle-class fear, for the upper classes with their privilege - literally, private law - were answerable to no one, while the working class were both expendable and by tradition prone to vice. Billing represented the voice of the outraged British middle class, the defining voice of our era, the voice that calls for punitive measures against anything that threatens its own status quo. In the history of the Billing affair is reflected the sway of middle-class sensibility, and all the safety, reason, and stability that it represents. On the other side is chaos, libertinism, vice, danger and the unknown. and the unknown will always remain so to those who do not choose to explore it."

Sums things up nicely, I believe. The book redeemed itself somewhat in the end and so I wound up appreciating it more than I might have done -- not for everyone as it's a bit uneven in many regards but I overlooked that as I got to the final bits.

Manray9 says

A story of an era of "hysteria, homophobia, and paranoia." Gee, it sounds just like the USA in 2012! Just stir in the threat of sharia, add a hefty dash of racism, and mix in some firearms and it would be a cinch.

Peter Mcloughlin says

The decadence of the 1890s and the love that dare not speak its name. Centers around Wilde and Maud Allen the play Salome and the Billings Trial where prurience and priggishness went on public trial to uphold decency condemning "perversion" while all the salacious details were on public offer. Plus ca change. Drags a little around the Billings trial but it has all the hot-button issues still fought over in the perennial culture wars.

Rose says

I kept going back and forth on how to rate this book... On the one hand, the topic was fascinating, and well researched. On the other hand, the author's prose is hard to follow, and muddled the absolutely fascinating information. Whenever he was focusing on the history of just one person or one event, the story was captivating. Whenever he tried to explain the (admittedly tangled) relationships between the people, it was difficult to follow. I still don't understand the militaristic conspiracy behind the trial, and who was set to gain from it. I was wishing at one point for a "cast of characters" guide, as I kept having to look up the individual people described in the book.

Asha Stark says

Quite a chore to read in all honestly. It was extremely interesting, don't get me wrong, and I did learn quite a bit; But it did take a lot of effort which was a shame.

M2 says

Wilde's Last Stand tells the story of McCarthy-like British MP, Noel Billing, who asserted that 47,000 members of the British establishment were sex perverts under threat of blackmail from the Germans at the end of WWI. This bizarre, nearly forgotten tale pits aesthetes against admirals as they seem to vie for the soul of an empire.

Sketchbook says

Hedline, London, 1918: "The Cult of the Clitoris" -- Hmm, whaaat? Most readers had never heard of the clit; an old duffer burped, "Who's this Greek chap, Clitoris, they're all talking about?" Radical right-wing MP, Noel Billing, ran the headline (& story) in his newspaper, claiming that 47,000 Brit perverts were listed in a German Black Book, and were conspiring to keep Brit from winning W1, along w German-born Jews who also lived in the UK. Billing had burst a vessel because the beautiful American dancer, Maude Allan, who'd been performing her Salome "dance" for a dozen years around the world -- she was as famous as Loie Fuller & Isadora Duncan -- was planning to expand her career and appear in Wilde's play, "Salome," w the help of drama critic J.T. Grein, who also produced new plays. Noel Billing suggested that Maude Allan was a lewd woman and lesbian. Only muff divers, he implied, knew how to give other women pleasure. And why was she always with the PMs wife Margot Asquith, surely among the 47,000 in the secret Black Book. (It never existed: it was fake news, which gives this vastly entertaining slice of forgotten or unknown history a topicality).

Maude certainly had some posh lovers. Sticking to facts at hand, author Hoare can only refer to some of her social outings. She was, however, haunted by the execution of her brother who murdered 2 women in a Baptist Church in San Francisco, which he attended -- personal bio later introduced in the most frivolous trial ever held.....

Sex, drugs, history (W1), sociology, sex, political manipulation, and a court-room trial will keep you glued to this story, which seems like a Monty Python/ Carry On comedy until lives are ruined. Maude Allan unwisely sued MP Noel Billing for libel. *We've been here before!* Invoking the name of Wilde, who'd died 20 years earlier, Billing said his play (which Allan performed once) was about "the physical orgasm" and animal lust. The production was part of a German conspiracy to corrupt Brits and lose the war, he added. War hysteria reigned ! Billing fueled homophobia & anti-semitism.

In the 19-teens there was plenty of worldliness in London; it just didnt "pop" w the 20s, postwar. London had seen Nancy Cunard in men's clothes, Bakst's designs for the Russian Ballet, Nijinsky's narcissistic sexuality, Beardsley's illustrations, Cubism, Vorticism, the author reports, and, further there was an "illicitness of desire" in clubs and private rooms - that added to the excitement. Billing concocted the 47,000 (fake names) and sought to save British morality w Maude Allan /Oscar Wilde as figures who could not be endured. He smeared Maude with leaks about her long dead brother, and called her a genetically sick performer for her interest in the beheaded John the Baptist. The middle-classes, per usual, cheered him.

Early summer, 1918, last months of a preposterous war, Maude's libel suit went to trial. Allan (1873-1956) is

actually a minor player in a big all-star cast. Lord Alfred Douglas was a star witness for Billing. The little prick, who'd married briefly, said OW was a moral and sexual pervert. "He had a diabolical influence on everyone he met. He was the greatest force of evil...he was the agent of the devil in every possible way..." Most healthy people would be "disgusted" by OWs "Salome." Later in the trial he began shouting, waving his arms and had to be ejected while the gallery applauded him.

The trial, writes Hoare, became a medieval inquisition w Maude Allan as a modern witch. Maude lost the libel suit. Billing went on to other mishmash ventures. Critic Grein had a breakdown and lost his job. Maude's career vaporized, but she was helped by Friends in High Places, it seems. The author wonders, discreetly, if Maude had been set up by the government to take down or embarrass Billing. Was she part of a political conspiracy -- had she been encouraged to sue for libel?

This saga is, yes, "outrageous," as the title says. By the 40s, Allan was in LA working briefly for the Douglas Aircraft Company. UCLA didnt need her on the performing arts staff. C 1912 Maude Allan statuettes had been sold in Bond Street, her Salome sandals and costume jewelry were copied for society ladies. Her performance was said to be so hypnotic that many viewers insisted she danced naked. In sum, she was an Edwardian sex symbol. She died in obscurity in Los Angeles.

I keep thinking: this trial could only have happened in Britain.

Eugene Pollock says

I learned a great deal of social history surrounding the period of WWI in Great Britain, and "the most outrageous trial of the century" was indeed outrageous. But I did not enjoy the author's literary writing style. Though the facts demanded that I finish the book, it was, paradoxically, almost dull to read--as if I were slogging through molasses.

Michael Bully says

Couldn't quite give this book 5 stars. But very nearly. The writer's wide historical reference points from the 1890's onward, particularly in looking at, decadence, homosexuality, sexual behaviour generally, drug taking, class differences, are quite extensive and well researched.

In basic terms what started as a libel trial involving American dancer Maude Allen launching an action against Noel Pemberton -Billing MP and newspaper editor, after he described her interpretation of 'Salome' as the 'dance of the Clitrois' transformed into what we would now call a moral panic. Pemberton- Billing and his supporters announced that there was a black book in existence with the names of some 47,000 individuals involved in a conspiracy to ensure that Britain lost World War 1. The trial opened in June 1918, just as the German breakthrough on the Western Front was reaching its height. Supporting Maud Allen was Oscar Wilde's friend and literary executor Robbie Ross. Supporting Pemberton-Billing was Lord Alfred Douglas- 'Bosie' - Wilde's former lover. The court room drama and its repercussions are depicted well. And in any case the story is so sensational in its own right. An incredible read.

A few slight reservations. The book's title had generated some criticism. It must be stressed that this is about Wilde's posthumous reputation. Also there are times when the author is probably too harsh on Pemberton-Billing's supporters. Many of them had suffered a great deal, and statistically a proportion would have lost loved ones in the War. Believing nonsense about 47,000 supporters of the enemy, entrenched in the British

establishment may have offered some perverse comfort. The author does show that by September 1918 the panic about the 47,000 started to reduce as the possibility of a German defeat became more likely. The book ends by showing that the cultural decadence that right wing luminaries such as Pemberton- Billing were so incensed by could start to connect with the emerging Fascism. Perhaps more could have been made of this ? But overall a fascinating read.

Marilyn says

This book concerns the influence of Oscar Wilde's "decadent" reputation on the World War I generation. Wilde's two "boys" - Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas and Robert "Robbie" Baldwin Ross - are middle aged in 1918, and feuding away. Bosie has become Catholic and virulently anti-homosexual. Robbie, Wilde's literary executor, has become a notable literary patron and lionized by Prime Minister and Lady Asquith and other "Souls" and sons of "Souls", political and artistic. His sexuality is an "open secret". The police bother him only when Bosie or another active crusader against immorality reports his activities. [Bosie apparently can't stand that anyone with power and influence likes Robbie and not him. He also seems conflicted about his past with Wilde - he says he hates Wilde, but acts as though he was the only person who really knew him. Wilde was his only claim to fame, it seems - and he hates Ross because Ross has the keys to Wilde's literary estate.]

Part of that literary estate was Wilde's play about Salome and John the Baptist. It had not been produced in England, and Maud Allan, who played the role of Salome in Berlin, wanted to play it. The righteous politicians were furious. Not only was the playwright a decadent homosexual, but since louche Berlin liked it - and Berlin is the enemy, killing all the splendid British chaps - showing "Salome" would endanger the war effort. All those impressionable young people - ruined on purpose by the enemy and the deviant traitors like Maud Allan and Robert Ross. - and Herbert and Margot Asquith, the Tennants, those Souls and Bloomsbury types in government. Treachery in high places indeed! The war had been dragging badly, but the Germans were approaching Paris. It seemed that the Hun might win. Quiet peace feelers from both sides were almost touching. But M.P. Noel Pemberton Billing, right-wing self appointed guardian of family values, will sound the trumpet against all those perverts and Jew-bankers and clean-living Britons will flush them out of office (and Billing in, of course) and win the victory.

So, it's 1917-18 and Wilde's "Salome" has become the tinder in the war between Wilde's old loves, between the decadent aliens [read German spies and Jewish bankers in England] and the pure in heart and blood British, between the old mores of the 19th century and the new, relaxed mores of the 20th; between the young "flappers" [and that's was in Billing's publication in 1917] who should go home to their parents' care instead of drug themselves on cocaine and dancing in London's nightclubs. Maud Allan was no better than Mata Hari, according to Billing and other proto-Fascists or nationalist saviours of Britain. She was an erotic dancer who made her fame in Berlin, so she must be, like Mata Hari, a German spy. A femme fatale. A "vampire" woman who lured men to perdition. ["Vamp" or "vampire" was another word used before the 1920's].

The book is interesting in places; hard to read in others. Faintly humourous at times. Mr. Hoare is not on the side of the extreme rights and the extreme straights. One inaccuracy - minor perhaps, but galling to me because I would have thought an Englishman would at least check the history of one of its former colonies - is that Hoare said Robert Baldwin, Robbie Ross's grandfather, was Governor-General of Canada. Robert Baldwin was not Governor General but c0-Premier of Canada (at that time covering present day southern Ontario and southern Quebec) with Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine in 1848.

[<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca...>] Robert Baldwin was quite a name in Canadian history ["the Father of Responsible Government"], so he was not a petty little politician.

Giu Giu says

It was as Oscar had never died; as if he had survived to cast a world-weary, cynical eye over the war, and beyond.

Cecilia Jones says

Difficult

I wanted so badly to enjoy this book but found it laborious to read. What might usually take 2 maybe 3 days of a few hours each day to complete took weeks. I would put it down and pick up another book and then come back to it. Sadly, if I have started a book I feel obligated to finish it. Yes, I realize I'm throwing time away that I could be using on a hobby or book I do enjoy. If you are looking for a book on Oscar Wilde this is not the book for you. It is on the years following the death of Wilde and the slow grinding of WW 1 and British society decline. If you want a book about the Maud Allan case and trial against Noel Pemberton Billing and the Justice on the case, Justice Darling, this is the book for you. This is more about Billings than Wilde. Perhaps I'm just a simpleton but the author seems to out of his way to use words that you would be advised to keep a dictionary nearby.

Charles Dee Mitchell says

Noel Pemberton Billing was a right-wing populist who held much wider influence than you would have thought possible in WWI era London. He was obsessed by the decadence of the upper classes and the prospect that there might be a peace deal struck with Germany. (Well, judging from this book there was a pretty decadent set among the aristos and that possible peace deal was under review.) To stir things up he created a spurious account of a Black Book, a list compiled by Germany that named 47,000 British citizens who could be blackmailed for sexual perversity. His final target was the American dancer Maud Allan and a proposed production of Oscar Wilde's still banned *Salome*. What landed him in court was the libelous assertion that The Cult of the Clitoris was working its evil influence through the production. (Introducing the word "clitoris" to the newspaper-reading public of 1918 might have been his most notable accomplishment.)

I will not fall into the trap of making contemporary comparisons to this book, but one of Billing's more successful talking points was the proposed incarceration of all enemy nationals in Great Britain. Failing that, he suggested they be made to wear patches on their clothing identifying their country of origin.
