THE OSCAR WILDE FORGERIES

Was Wilde's Dada-ist nephew behind an elaborate plan to fake documents by the great writer?

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The New York Antiquarian Book Fair is the most exciting event of its kind in the world. This year's, held in a former military drill hall on Park Avenue, drew a particularly glamorous crowd, following a pronouncement in American *Vogue* that book collecting was the fashionable hobby of the moment. Among the works for sale were a fourth folio of Shakespeare's plays and a first edition of *Frankenstein*; but for curiosity, few competed with the three leather-bound volumes being touted in that last week of April by the owner of a small shop in Greenwich Village.

Doing the rounds of the dealers' stalls, Kim Herzinger explained that the volumes contained six Oscar Wilde manuscripts recently inherited by one of his clients. Here in the Irish genius's hand were the opening of *A Woman of No Importance*; a fragment of another play, never published or produced; a letter; a poem; the essay *The Tomb of Keats*. Most exciting of all, there was the manuscript of one of Wilde's best-love stories, *The Happy Prince*, which even if sold separately could be expected to fetch £200,000 or more – provided it was genuine.

And there was the rub. Because although Wilde manuscripts are highly sought-after, some of them have a history which is chequered to say the least; and none of the dealers Herzinger approached was more aware of this than Ed Maggs, proprietor of one of London's oldest-established book emporia, Maggs Brothers of Berkeley Square.

Examining the pages of *The Happy Prince*, Maggs came to the conclusion not only that the manuscript was 'wrong' (as dealers commonly describe fakes), but that its origins lay in a batch of papers which had caused anxiety and financial embarrassment to some of the book world's most distinguished experts ever since the 1920s – his own family firm among them. It is a story involving avarice, forgery, two of France's leading authors – and very possibly Wilde's prize-fighting, poetry-writing nephew and his beautiful Surrealist wife.

So extraordinary and far-reaching were these events that the evidence is still kept as a ready source of reference by Maggs Brothers more than eight decades later. Inside a folder held at the company's rambling, high-ceilinged offices are piled letters, telegrams, poems and the handwritten texts of several of Wilde's works. The earliest letter, sent from 11 rue Scribe, Paris, is dated 8th April 1921 and reads as follows:

Dear Sir,

It has been suggested to me by Messrs Brentano's here that you might be interested in the original manuscript of Salome by the late Oscar Wilde. This manuscript is complete, written in ink and the first page bears the inscription "A Mon Ami Pierre Louys", same as the dedication page of the published version, and signed in full. I could not consider its sale for less than ten thousand francs and I will thank you to advise me if you are interested.

Very truly yours,

Pierre Louys

Since Loüys, a celebrated – and reviled – writer of erotic poetry and novels, was known to have helped Wilde with the text of his play *Salomé* (written in French), Maggs Brothers had every reason to be excited. Wilde had been dead for twenty years, and though in Britain his reputation remained overshadowed by the scandal of his homosexuality

and imprisonment, there were enthusiasts elsewhere – particularly in America – who were willing to pay large sums for his papers. As the next letter from rue Scribe, dated 13th April, makes clear, Maggs Brothers were quick to declare their interest, though they balked at the price. The figure eventually settled on was 5,000 francs.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Irish Sea, similar letters were arriving at one of Dublin's leading bookshops. Also sent from 11 rue Scribe, and bearing the signature of the novelist and future Nobel Prize-winner André Gide, they offered Hodges, Figgis & Co the original manuscript of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Again, the combination of a mouth-watering literary treasure and an eminent living writer proved irresistible. In the months that followed, the firm's senior director William Figgis bought this and every other item that he was offered.

For any present-day collector tempted by the manuscripts being sold in New York, the most interesting point about Figgis's purchases is that they included one of the very same pieces, *The Tomb of Keats*. It was not a substantial or especially famous work, but it was to play a vital part in the events that followed.

If collecting Wilde papers is an unusually complicated business, it is partly because of the chaotic dispersal of his possessions after he was imprisoned and declared bankrupt in 1895. The auction sale of his house and its contents became such a free-for-all that the police had to be called; as a result, the provenance of a particular document is often impossible to establish. In addition, Wilde's handwriting had, in his own words, 'gone to bits' by the end of his life, giving anyone inclined to copy it a helpful margin of error

There are, however, certain helpful clues to authenticity, one being the type of inscriptions Wilde wrote. 'You can tell a Wilde inscription a mile

off, because it's always rather good,' says Jeremy Mason, a London antiquarian who has collected Wilde papers for over 30 years. 'Oscar never just signed books, he always went the whole mile: "In Oxford, in June, to my beautiful red-rose-lipped boy of my desires" – that kind of thing.' Kim Herzinger insists that one of the manuscripts in his possession bears just such an inscription, revealing 'some very inside things about Wilde', but refuses to divulge exactly what it is.

Another clue is the type of paper Wilde used – and it was this that set the cat among the pigeons in 1921 when Maggs Brothers sold the manuscript of *Salomé* on to a New York book dealer called Gabriel Wells. Noticing that the pages on which the play was written bore the watermark of the Strathmore Paper Company in Massachusetts, Wells made some enquiries. His conclusion was that the paper in question had not gone on the market until 1915 – fifteen years after Wilde's death.

Given such obvious evidence of fraud, one might have expected Maggs Brothers to call in the police and put an end to the matter. But a strange feature of this story is the reluctance of those duped to acknowledge their mistakes and take decisive action. Instead, Maggs Brothers sent 'Pierre Loüys' a letter which is a masterpiece of huffing and puffing. 'Dear Sir,' it begins, 'A most extraordinary thing has happened, the genuineness of the Wilde Salome MS has been questioned, indeed declared to be a forgery…'

Equally surprising is the forger's determination to brazen things out: his long typewritten reply tells a complicated tale of Wilde leaving a package of manuscripts with him shortly before being sent to prison. But in the meantime Maggs Brothers had discovered that 11 rue Scribe was not a private house but a poste restante. It seemed not only that the manuscripts they had bought were fakes, but that the person claiming to be Pierre Loüys was an impostor.

At this point the forger seems, not surprisingly, to have ended his correspondence with Maggs Brothers. But he had not finished with William Figgis: indeed, so successful was his continuing deceit that, having sold them everything of Wilde's he claimed to own, 'André Gide' promised to obtain further material from the widow of another of Wilde's friends.

It was at the end of the year that the penny finally dropped, when Figgis sold *The Tomb of Keats* and a Wilde prose poem called *The Disciple* to another dealer, who questioned their authenticity. Figgis decided to seek an opinion from Maggs Brothers – only to discover that they had a similar story to tell.

Figgis, as his memoirs make clear, was not a man to take a swindle lying down, and he immediately set off for France to confront the fraudster. On arriving in Paris, he found no sign of 'Gide'; but he did make contact with 'one Dorian Hope who came to see me after dinner. He was dressed like a Russian count with a magnificent fur-lined overcoat; a plausible well-turned out youth of about 25. He represented himself as secretary to André Gide, who, he said, was unavoidably absent in Italy…I had a long chat with this emissary and did my best to catch him out.' Although Hope said nothing that immediately incriminated him, Figgis later came to believe that he was 'the prime mover in the whole business'.

The appearance of a con man calling himself Dorian – or Sebastian – Hope is first recorded in New Orleans in 1919. The choice of alias is significant: 'Dorian' obviously derives from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, while 'Sebastian' may have been borrowed from Sebastian Melmoth (the name Oscar Wilde used after his release from jail), or from Saint Sebastian, long associated with homosexuals. In this incarnation, says Ed Maggs, Hope's game was 'to batten on to discreetly homosexual

clergymen and try to take money off them'. From New Orleans he travelled to Washington DC and then Toronto, before arriving in London in 1920. Here, as genuine letters in the Maggs Brothers archive reveal, he became friendly with Wilde's former boyfriend Lord Alfred Douglas, who offered criticism of his poetry and invited him to Brighton for the weekend ('I have ordered a room at the Metropole Hotel. So if you came down we could spend a couple of days together…').

None of this, however, was yet known to William Figgis, whose next step was to visit the home of the real André Gide. The novelist, furious that his name had been used by an impostor, contacted the French police, who suggested that Figgis help them set a trap. But Figgis revealed in a letter to the forger that some of his manuscripts were considered suspect, at which point Sebastian Hope fled Paris for London.

How Hope was allowed to get away is another baffling aspect of this narrative. London should have been no safer for him than Paris: Gide even managed to discover his address there. All that was required was for Figgis to ask the police to arrest him – but he didn't. Why not?

The answer seems to lie in a letter Figgis received at the end of April 1922 from one of the leading Wilde experts of the day, Christopher Miller, asking to see the manuscripts he had bought. Figgis agreed, whereupon Miller declared them all to be genuine, and offered to buy as many as he could afford.

Perhaps Figgis, in spite of everything, believed that Miller was partly or wholly right. It is a classic con man's ploy to use a few genuine items to pass off a mass of counterfeit ones, and it is possible (given his association with Lord Alfred Douglas) that at least some of Hope's material was authentic. At any rate, Figgis sold *The Tomb of Keats* and *The Disciple* to Miller, who promptly sold them on to American clients. In view of this, prosecuting Hope can no longer have seemed so

desirable; and by the time Miller set eyes on the forgeries Maggs Brothers had bought, and realised his mistake, Hope's trail had gone well and truly cold.

To sell an Oscar Wilde manuscript as genuine when it is known to be fake is clearly a criminal offence. In many cases, however, it is impossible to be 100 per cent sure one way or the other. According to Jeremy Mason, even well-known auction houses have sometimes been less than thorough in their research, covering themselves with a standard note in small print that the buyer's money will be returned if an item is 'not as described'; but prosecutions for deliberate deceit are few and far between. If ever there was a case of 'buyer beware', this is it.

The curious thing is, though, that even an acknowledged fake can have a market value, as Bruce Whiteman of the William Andreas Clark Memorial Library in Los Angeles explains. Whiteman – another possible buyer contacted by Herzinger – not only keeps several Sebastian Hope forgeries as part of a magnificent Oscar Wilde collection, but admits that he knowingly bought two counterfeit other 'Wilde' letters, pasted into an edition of *Salomé*, for $1,000.

'There's always interest in famous people,' he says, 'and these things are part of their canonical status: minor writers don't get forged. The two letters I bought were supposedly to Pierre Loüys, which was a very important relationship, and they were fairly well done visually, though according to the dates on them one would have had to be written when Loüys was only 15. I also think it's good to institutionalise these things so that they don't keep resurfacing.'

As far as the Sebastian Hope forgeries are concerned, their worth hinges on a single question – what was Hope's real identity? The most plausible theory, advanced by the Wilde expert Dudley Edwards in 1956,

is that he was Fabian Lloyd, the nephew of Oscar Wilde's wife Constance.

Born in 1887, Lloyd was a larger-than-life character, fond of making mischief – and of using aliases. Intelligent, handsome and well-built, he was useful both with a pen and with his fists, and in 1916 even fought a boxing match against the world champion Jack Johnston. According to Roger Lloyd Conover in the recently published anthology *4 Dada Suicides*, 'When he stepped into the ring he invariably announced himself as the "Poet and Boxer Arthur Cravan", as if dividing himself in two. This was usually followed by a long string of pedigrees (hotel thief, snake-charmer, grandson of the Queen's Chancellor, nephew of Oscar Wilde, poet with the shortest haircut in the world…)'.

It was under the name of Cravan that Lloyd established himself in Paris shortly before the First World War as one of the forerunners of the anarchic literary and artistic movement known as Dada. He seemed to cause a commotion wherever he went, arriving clad only in a jockstrap or firing a pistol in the air; in New York he was bundled away by police after starting to strip during a lecture he was giving.

Cravan edited (and wrote all of) a magazine called *Maintenant*, two of whose articles are particularly interesting. One is an interview which makes merciless fun of André Gide; the other tells of a supposed meeting with Oscar Wilde thirteen years after his official date of death.

In the Wilde 'interview', Cravan refers to his own 'detestable nature, which…makes me sometimes honest, sometimes deceitful'. There is no doubt that he would have enjoyed making fools of book dealers, and that he was extremely resourceful, as his life after the outbreak of the First World War indicates. Determined not to fight, he managed to escape to New York; when America entered the war, he slipped into Canada and eventually made his way to Mexico. Here he started a boxing school and

wrote to his lover, the Surrealist poet Mina Loy, asking her to join him. The couple were married in January 1918.

But surviving in Mexico was not easy, and as the war drew to a close Cravan and Loy decided to return to Europe. It was agreed that Loy – now pregnant – would travel ahead to Buenos Aires and Cravan would meet her there. Cravan, however, failed to make the rendezvous: he vanished while sailing a small boat, and was presumed to have drowned.

But no body was found, and Loy, for one, believed that her husband (an excellent swimmer) was still alive. To fake his own death would have been typical of Cravan, and she was convinced that he would dramatically reappear in a classic piece of performance art. To her lasting sorrow, he was never seen again.

Or wasn't he? The theory that Cravan and Hope were the same person is based partly on the fact that the first sighting of Hope in New Orleans in 1919 comes suspiciously soon after Cravan's disappearance. Cravan was sexually ambiguous and could make himself agreeable to clergymen or anyone else – and of course his fascination with his Uncle Oscar would have given him the background knowledge he needed to create the forged manuscripts.

The argument against this runs as follows: how could someone as well-known as Cravan reappear in Paris without anybody recognising him? And if the forgeries were a Dada-ist prank, why did Cravan never claim credit for them?

Ed Maggs finds this persuasive, though he adds, 'It is feasible that he got so far with the forgeries and then some sort of disaster befell him – he got knocked on the head and thrown into the Seine or something like that. One would love this to be so, because then the forgeries in our archive would be a great Dada work of art.' This would not make them as

valuable as an original Wilde manuscript, but still worth several thousand pounds.

On the other hand, it is possible that Cravan seriously wanted to disappear, and seriously needed to make money. He and Mina Loy had had a bad time in Mexico, almost starving at one point; perhaps, being a stranger to responsibility, he found the prospect of looking after a family daunting. Forty years after these events a Wilde enthusiast called Guillot de Saix wrote a memoir in which he claimed to have met 'the forger Arthur Cravan' in Paris in the 1930s. Cravan, he said, 'had continued to make a living forging Wilde manuscripts for Charles Carrington, the shady publisher and purveyor of erotica in the rue du Châteaudun.'

Kim Herzinger acknowledges that there are difficulties with the New York manuscripts, among them a lack of provenance: 'They were bought by a relative of the owner back in 1935, who was a very, very good book collector but not a Wilde expert, and we don't know where he bought them or who from. We're trying to get them authenticated, and we've had some very savvy people look at them: at least two of them are certain that *The Happy Prince* is genuine, though others have been in two minds.' According to Ed Maggs, however, this is being economical with the truth, since he for one made it perfectly clear to Herzinger that he believed *The Happy Prince* to be a fake.

The final authority will probably be Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson and an expert on his papers. Holland has so far only seen scans of the manuscripts, but thinks it unlikely that he will be convinced by the actual documents. His prediction is that they will be withdrawn from sale and returned to the owner – 'who will then wait for five years and try to sell them through another channel.'

Holland believes that there was another prolific Wilde forger as well as Sebastian Hope operating in the 1920s, and has made it a personal mission to identify and root out the work of both. 'When these things come up for sale, I always try to take a look at them,' he says. 'It's not that I'm an altruist – I just think it's very sad if people who want a little bit of Oscar Wilde pay £1,500 for a nice but not exceptional letter at a small auction house in the West Country, and then show them to a friend who says, "I'm afraid this is a forgery". The disappointment must be terrible – and someone ought to stamp on it.'