

1978

Oscar Wilde and Williamsburg: A Study

Terry L. Meyers

William & Mary, tlmeyer@wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/aspubs>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meyers, Terry L., Oscar Wilde and Williamsburg: A Study (1978).

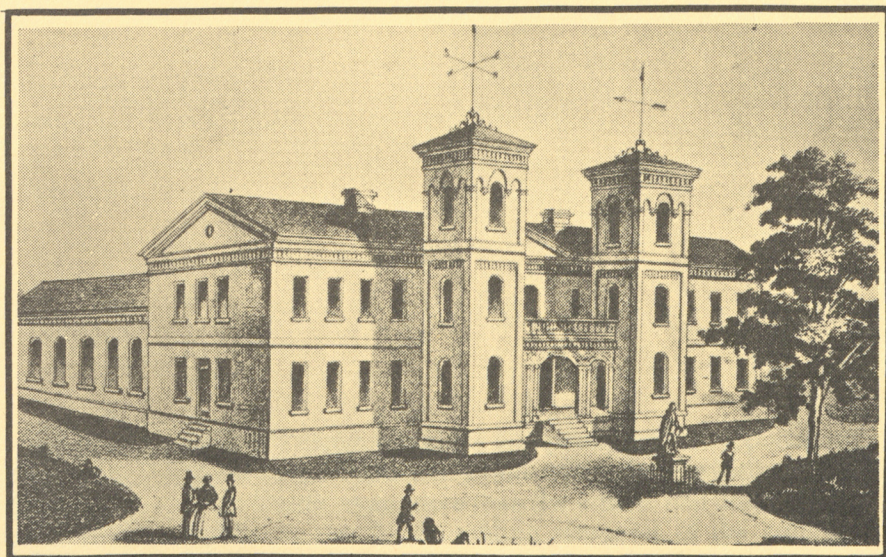
<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/aspubs/2140>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts and Sciences at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Articles by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

OSCAR WILDE AND WILLIAMSBURG: A STUDY

by

T. LENTTON MEYERS, A.B., M.A., Ph.D.



The Society for the Preservation
of
Nineteenth-Century Williamsburg

Significant Monograph
Series: No. 1

Price:
\$1.50

Williamsburg, Virginia
1978

Archives

F234

W7M93

1978

1000494270

Many of the great Victorian novelists and poets had the opportunity of visiting Williamsburg, Virginia, at a time when it was relatively free from tourists. Oscar Wilde, even more than the others, had only to alter his itinerary slightly to see the crumbling remnants of the colonial capital and to spur the renaissance of the College of William and Mary, the oldest college in America.¹ In his extensive tour of America, Wilde spoke at Norfolk on July 10, 1882. The next day he was in Richmond, where on July 12 he gave still another lecture.²

Although Wilde is well known for his affected contradiction of society's customs, in this instance he obeyed convention. Instead of making the daringly aesthetic gesture of traveling from Norfolk to Richmond by way of the Peninsula, Wilde, sheep-like, took the train, which went south of the James River.³ He made no recorded effort to protest.⁴

Whether Wilde actually knew of Williamsburg and the College of William and Mary is, to be sure, uncertain.⁵ But the certain fact of his not having visited either suggests that Wilde was cast from a common mold--he was simply following the example of such Victorian sages as Dickens, Thackeray, Clough, and Trollope.⁶ Wilde was, alas, more thoroughly a child of Victoria's England than he would have us think.

FOOTNOTES

1. As eloquently and disinterestedly argued by J.E. Morpurgo, *Their Majesties' Royall Colledge: William and Mary in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Williamsburg: The Endowment Association of the College of William and Mary in Virginia, 1976), pp. 1-3.

2. Lloyd Lewis and Henry Justin Smith, *Oscar Wilde Discovers America* (1882) (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967), pp. 375-376. Apart from its inexplicable reticence on Wilde and Williamsburg, this is an excellent account of Wilde in America.

3. Had Wilde navigated his way from Norfolk to Newport News, he would have found excellent train service to Williamsburg and on to Richmond (see Parke Rouse, Jr., "The Day the Railroad Came to Town," *Cows on the Campus: Williamsburg in Bygone Days* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1973), pp. 70-76.

4. As far as I can determine, all historians who treat the subject agree that the College was closed between 1881 and 1886, apparently implying a reason for Wilde's not making an effort to appear there. Is it possible, however, that the townspeople were mistaken in thinking that the College was closed? No football schedules from the time survive to settle the question.

If Wilde had spoken at the College, he might have lectured on "The House Beautiful." Though Kevin H.F. O'Brien casts little light on this vexed question, he does present the text of the lecture ("The House Beautiful": A Reconstruction of Oscar Wilde's American Lecture," *Victorian Studies*, 17 [June, 1974], 395-418).

5. The evidence here is inconclusive; an examination of *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962) and *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 12 vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1923) shows only that neither Williamsburg nor the College of William and Mary is mentioned.

6. Dickens visited America in 1842 and 1868, coming as far south as Richmond the first time, Washington the second; Thackeray in 1852-53, also visiting Richmond; Clough also in 1852-1853 (though rather strangely and provincially ensconcing himself in Cambridge, Mass., perhaps a reaction from his childhood experience of the South); and Trollope in 1859, 1861, and 1868, visiting Washington on the last two trips.

In 1883-84, when Matthew Arnold came to America, he visited Richmond, but not Williamsburg; it is hard to escape the conclusion that in bypassing Williamsburg (as well as Norfolk), Arnold may have been acting on what he might have heard of, and learned from, Wilde's own journey in Virginia.

Similarly, in 1886, when Tennyson pondered a visit to America, he was willing, and even eager, to go to "the provincial town of Baltimore" (*New York Times*, February 13, 1886, p. 2, col. 6). But again, no desire to visit Williamsburg. Had Tennyson too talked to Wilde?

Though limits of space restrict me to only the Victorian experience of Williamsburg, the enterprising scholar might well ponder the visit to the city in 1804 of Thomas Moore; Jerome Hamilton Buckley has reminded us of how the Victorians "were forced to reject certain romantic values, to repudiate specific attitudes and gestures, in order to secure their own orientation" (*The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* [New York: Vintage, 1951], p. 17).