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Roy Morris Jr., *Declaring His Genius: Oscar Wilde in North America*. Cambridge (US) & London: Harvard University Press, 2013. 248 pp.

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Roy Morris Jr.'s new book delivers a much needed up-to-date socio-historical examination of Wilde's 260 day lecture tour of North America. The account is thorough and engaging, if somewhat lacking in the prosaic pep and pizzazz for which his subject was famed. The effect of Morris's nitty gritty dissection is to render the twenty-seven year old Wilde a more fallible, less mythical creature than the countless hagiographic biographies which abound. Here we get a snapshot of a relatively jejune Wilde, his apocryphal declaration of genius notwithstanding, mincing languidly around the states in his satin knee breeches and crushed velvet coat, brandishing a sunflower and making supremely silly pronouncements about the importance of beautiful china, elegant furniture and correctly coloured table cloths. The purported purpose of Wilde's visit was to promote the new wave of Aestheticism, the 'science of the beautiful', although Wilde managed to sidestep the question about how this might be defined: 'You cannot teach anybody what is really beautiful. The true spirit of a painting or a poem cannot by any method be taught—it must be revealed.'

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Aestheticism, a pale and sickly offshoot of Pre-Raphaelitism, proved to be a passing fad and despite his ingenious if specious proselytization Wilde only ever managed to convert the occasional handful of housewives here or the odd flurry of undergraduate fops there. Fortunately, however, Wilde had a far more substantial product than Aestheticism in reserve: himself. In this, the first phase of his fame, Oscar Wilde was famous for very little more than being Oscar Wilde. With only a slim volume of notoriously effete poetry and a wardrobe of even more effete garments to his name, such was Wilde's flair for self-publicity that he managed to stir up excited press attention in every state he visited. No matter that some of his lectures were attended by small numbers, or that he was occasionally challenged by subversive elements in the audience, or even that he was, by his own admission, a far from accomplished public speaker – those column inches kept on piling up. That their content was often of a mocking nature may well surprise the many who had assumed that his tour was an unqualified success.

Of the torrent of journalistic abuse aimed at the 'champion of lahdadahism' he was denounced, among other things, as an 'apostle of intellectual asininity and imbecility', 'a harmless young nobody', a 'spiritless namby-pamby nondescript', a 'mountebank' and, by no less a personage than Henry James, as a 'fatuous fool'. Despite this onslaught Wilde maintained in public an almost seamless urbanity, hospitably entertaining as many journalists as his busy schedule would allow, tossing them impeccably formed witticisms as insouciantly as scraps to a dog. This superlatively suave handling of the press leads Morris to assert that 'Wilde pioneered the way in which modern celebrities are created, cultivated, and commodified.'

Wilde's tour wasn't without its hardships and indignities. The self-proclaimed Lord of Language found himself in minor wrangles with, or else snubbed by, local dignitaries; dispatching angry missives to his manager about his punishing tour schedule; rushing tardily to

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venues only to find the languorous pace of his lecture stonewalled with sarcastic applause, or even, as on one occasion, being chased ignominiously out of the New York Stock Exchange by a horde of inquisitive messenger boys. Nor was intellectual curiosity the exclusive force motivating all those who attended his lectures. Many turned up to gawk at an oddity, the flouncing lily wielding fop from across the seas - after all, Wilde was cashing in on a tradition of circus showmanship then prevalent. P. T. Barnum's Jumbo the elephant also happened to be doing the rounds at the same time.

America, it seems, in the end, altered him more than he it. Whereas Morris contends that the yearlong tour toughened Wilde up emotionally and physically, Wilde's booking agent traces an artistic development: "He had, at the end, broadened and deepened, grown stronger, more self-reliant, had seen the unwisdom of the shallow affectations that at first controlled his actions, and come at last to realize there was something in life better worthwhile than to wear the mask of a poseur and masquerader." This last point is contentious: masks, after all, were Wilde's stock-in-trade.

With that in mind, we can understand Wilde as putting away his American mask and replacing it with something a little more refined. As he told his friend Robert Sherard, the great-grandson of William Wordsworth, upon his return to England: "The Oscar of the first period is dead. We are now concerned with the Oscar Wilde of the second period...".