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Elizabeth Adams

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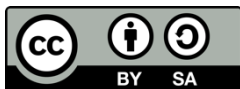
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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

‘A strange breath of salty air’:
Revealing Walter Edwin Ledger’s Decadent Collection

Elizabeth Adams

University College Oxford

In his autobiography, Arthur Ransome provides a compelling glimpse of Walter Edwin Ledger:

He used to come to town dressed as an old-fashioned Jack Tar, with open neck and a blue-and-white sailor collar and bell-bottom trousers. He was an extremely efficient seaman, [...] and in general brought a strange breath of salty air into the somewhat greenhouse atmosphere of the literary Nineties.¹

Although Ledger would probably have been flattered that Ransome placed him within the sphere of the literary 1890s, he was not a novelist, playwright, poet, or artist. It was as a devoted collector and bibliographer of Oscar Wilde’s works that Ledger became known to many of the individuals connected to the decadent tradition. Though less well known than figures such as Robert Ross and Christopher Millard, who famously engaged in efforts to ensure Wilde’s literary legacy and posthumous reputation, Ledger played an important role in this work and was a friend to both these men. Ledger, in fact, chose to name his magnum opus, ‘The Robert Ross Memorial Collection’, after his close friend. According to the memorandum left with Ledger’s will, the collection was a ‘tribute of admiration and affectionate esteem to [his] friend the late Robert Ross in appreciation of his chivalrous and selfless devotion to and friendship in adversity for Oscar Wilde’. Ledger’s desire to memorialize his friend resulted in a remarkable decadent archive, now housed at University College Oxford. In this brief account, I shall look at what we know about Walter Ledger and the origins of the collection and suggest why it is important.

Beyond glimpses in memoirs such as Ransome’s, much of the personal detail known about Walter Ledger comes from Donald Cree, his friend and executor. Cree tells us that Ledger was a gifted pianist, an accomplished sailor, and the world expert on ceropoegias, a type of ornamental plant.² Cree also confirms Ransome’s account by asserting that Ledger, for the last thirty-odd years of his life, dressed as a Blue Jacket, with the name of his boat, The Blue Bird, embroidered on his cap [fig. 1]. Walter Ledger was born in Lille, France, on 13 April 1862. By the time he was ten, the family had moved to England where Ledger attended University College School in Hampstead from 1872 to 1876.³ Ledger had a sister, Anne Marie (1847-1928) and a brother, Percy George (1860-1947). By the time of the 1881 Census of England and Wales, he was living with his widowed mother, Clara Eugenia, in Chertsey, Surrey. In 1882, he became an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects, articulated to the architect William Henry Crossland. By the time of the 1891

Census Ledger had moved to Wimbledon, Surrey, where he lived with his unmarried sister and one servant. He remained in the Wimbledon bungalow until his death in 1931. Ledger identified himself as an architect in the 1891 Census but by 1901 both he and his sister declared that they lived through ‘private means’.



Fig. 1: Walter Ledger: ‘In the garden that I love.’
Source: Ross d.209: Walter Edwin Ledger, *The "Blue Bird" in the South* (London: [Privately printed], 1913), frontispiece.

Although he did not officially resign from his post until Crossland’s death in 1908, at some point in the late 1890s Ledger abandoned his architectural practice and devoted himself to the creation of his decadent archive. His collection contains almost every edition (and every variant therein) of Wilde’s works published either in journal- or book-form. Ledger also sought out all of the many translations and foreign publications of Wilde’s works, as well as anything written about Wilde by other authors. Following Ledger’s death, Donald Cree believed that his collection was unique and that its only possible rival was that belonging to an American collector.⁴ This American was, of course, William Andrews Clark Jr., whose collection is now considered the most comprehensive of its kind in the world.⁵ It is worth quoting in full a piece written by Donald Cree in the course of his duty as Ledger’s executor:

Mr. W. E. Ledger's service to literature in forming the Robert Ross Memorial Collection: No better cenotaph could have been constructed in memory of a famous writer and his friends than the collection of books and manuscripts made by Mr. W. E. Ledger and entitled by him the Robert Ross Memorial Collection. He brought together books and documents indispensable to the study of a significant period in English art and letters. But for his vigilance and patient purpose, much that is now preserved would have been scattered and irrevocably lost. In completeness, catholicity and scholarship, it is in its own sphere unsurpassed, if not unrivalled.

In future, the student of certain phases of the literary and social life of England will find indispensable the Collection which Mr. Ledger made and dedicated in memory of Oscar Wilde's faithful friend, Robert Ross.⁶

Cree gives no indication, in this piece from 1932, of the difficulties Ledger faced in finding a home for his collection. In 1930, when corresponding with the manager of Faber & Faber, C. W. Stewart, Ledger suggested that current feeling against Wilde might prevent his collection being accepted by Magdalen College Oxford.⁷ As it happened, Ledger was right and Wilde's own college, Magdalen, turned down his offer. It was not until after Ledger's death in December 1931, that his executor, Donald Cree, offered the collection to University College.⁸ The Master at the time, Sir Michael Sadler, was able to persuade the Fellows of the College to accept the donation but a lack of secure storage meant that it was placed on long-term deposit at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.⁹ These difficulties in securing a place for an important Wilde collection may strike us today as surprising, but they demonstrate the high degree of contingency involved in collecting and archival enterprises. They are a reminder, too, of how much Wilde's non-normative sexuality served as a hindrance to an open appreciation of his works and to efforts to establish his importance as a major literary figure in this period.

Wilde's printed works form only part of the Robert Ross Memorial Collection. A large and largely unexplored proportion consists of the 'miscellanea'. Along with Ross and Christopher Sclater Millard, Ledger spent more than thirty years trying to establish and preserve Wilde's literary canon and,¹⁰ in doing so, he accumulated a vast archive of correspondence, booksellers' catalogues, prospectuses, and other ephemera. It is this material, as well as the meticulous notes that Ledger left in his books, that is unique to the collection and that is proving so interesting to researchers. In addition to well-known figures like Ross, Ledger corresponded with publishers, translators, collectors and enthusiasts as far afield as Calcutta, Vienna, Moscow, and Mexico. He also corresponded with a number of notable figures of the 1890s who were still living, including Lord Alfred Douglas; Theodore Wratislaw, one of the minor 'minor poets' of the 1890s; Ada Levenson, affectionately known as 'The Sphinx' by Wilde; and Marc-André Raffalovich, French poet, novelist, and one of the early writers on homosexuality, who had a lifelong relationship with John Gray, a reputed inspiration for Dorian Gray. Though Raffalovich, who had converted to Roman

Catholicism, wanted his works on homosexuality that were in Ledger's possession to be destroyed, it is certainly telling that he signed his correspondence with an adopted middle name – Sebastian – the name of the saint that homosexual aesthetes of the 1890s identified as an icon of homosexual desire.¹¹

A cataloguing project is underway to make this material more available, but to date there are twenty folders which do not appear to have been examined.¹² Only one reference to the folders has been found, dating from the late 1970s. In his book, *Oxford Libraries Outside the Bodleian*, Paul Morgan writes that Ledger's collection includes 'the manuscript of Stuart Mason's Bibliography' of Oscar Wilde.¹³ Although Morgan was one of the few researchers given access to this material, he incorrectly identifies the nature of the contents of these folders. The 'manuscript' consists of twenty spring-back folders containing Ledger's, rather than Millard's, bibliographic findings, accumulated over a period of more than thirty-five years. Although Ledger and Millard intended to collaborate on the Bibliography,¹⁴ Millard's imprisonment for gross indecency in 1906 led Ledger to take a step back. On publication, Millard acknowledged Ledger's assistance, but Ledger continued with the project, adding translations, foreign publications, works about Wilde by other authors, and the numerous forgeries. Dipping into the folders proves fruitful. They have so far revealed the identities of two women with Wilde connections: Marie Franzos, a previously unrecognized correspondent, and Anna Marie von Boehn, the first German translator of Wilde's works.¹⁵ With the archival turn in humanities scholarship, the richness of this collection comes to the fore in new ways. Scholars can find interest not only in what the collection contains but also in what its provenance and creation might say about Wilde and his legacy. Gregory Mackie's recent monograph, *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (2019), for example, makes use of this collection and other archival material of this kind to investigate the 'restorative bibliograph[ic]' work undertaken by this queer community of bibliophilic men.¹⁶ Collections such as Ledger's can tell scholars important things not only about the lives but also about the afterlives of their subjects and about the figures invested in constructing these afterlives.

Perhaps the most poignant symbol of Ledger's success in embedding himself within Oscar Wilde's circle has recently been uncovered in the Robert Ross Memorial Collection: a wedding invitation postmarked from Paddington on 29 December 1913, addressed to Walter Ledger, Esquire. The invitation [fig. 2] is for the wedding of Oscar Wilde's younger son, Vyvyan Holland and Violet Craigie, which took place in January 1914. There is no indication as to whether Ledger accepted the invitation, but it is certain that he would have been chuffed to receive it. We found it safely tucked into a slip of paper within his remarkable collection.

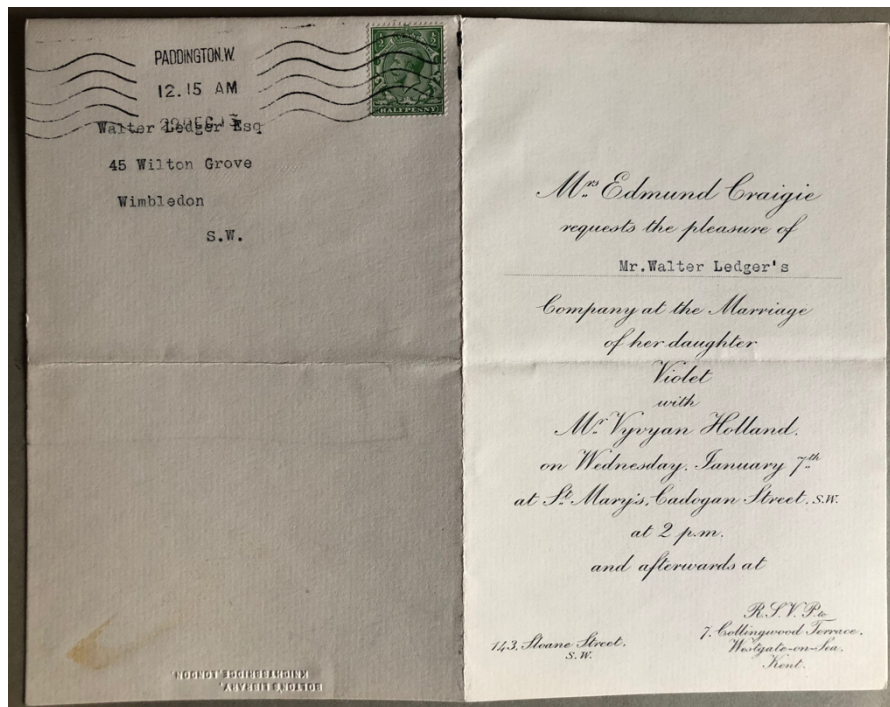


Fig. 2: Ledger's invitation to the wedding of Vyvyan Holland and Violet Craigie.
Source: Ross Miscellaneous items, Box 6 (not yet numbered) in the Robert Ross Memorial Collection, University College Oxford.

¹ Arthur Ransome, *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome* (London: J. Cape, 1976), p. 142.

² See letter from Donald Cree to Sir Michael Sadler, dated 15 January 1932, in the Archives of University College Oxford: UC:MA44/7/C1/1.

³ *Alphabetical and Chronological Register of University College School, London, for 1831-1891*, ed. by T. E. Orme (London: University College School, 1892), p. 177.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ William Andrews Clark Memorial Library website, 'Oscar Wilde and the fin de siècle': <https://clarklibrary.ucla.edu/collections/oscar-wilde/> [accessed 18 September 2019] (para. 1 of 2).

⁶ Papers relating to the bequest of the Robert Ross Memorial Collection (hereafter cited as RRM) in the Archives of University College Oxford: UC:MA44/7/C1/1.

⁷ See Ross Box 1.23.iii in RRM, University College Oxford.

⁸ Robin H. Darwall-Smith, 'An Oscar for Master Sadler: The Acquisition of the Robert Ross Memorial Collection', *University College Record*, 12 (1997), 46-54.

⁹ The RRM returned to University College from the Bodleian Library, by mutual consent, in 2013.

¹⁰ Gregory Mackie, *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), p. 35.

¹¹ For a thorough discussion of the significance of St. Sebastian to decadence, see Richard A. Kaye, "'Determined Raptures": St. Sebastian and the Victorian Discourse of Decadence', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), 269-303.

¹² The 'miscellanea' in the RRM is being catalogued, with current progress found on the website: <https://www.univ.ox.ac.uk/learn-at-univ/library-collections/> [accessed 15 June 2020].

¹³ Paul Morgan, *Oxford Libraries Outside the Bodleian: A Guide* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 1980), p. 146.

¹⁴ Stuart Mason [Christopher Sclater Millard], *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1914), p. viii.

¹⁵ See Ross f.101: Oscar Wilde, *Der Geist Canterville*, trans. by A. M. von Boehn (München: [C. Brügel & Son], 1897).

¹⁶ Mackie, pp. 34-37.