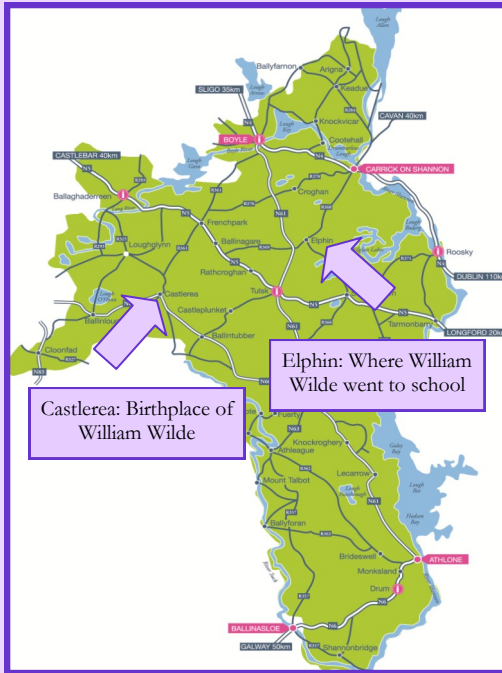




Roscommon Literary Heritage Series

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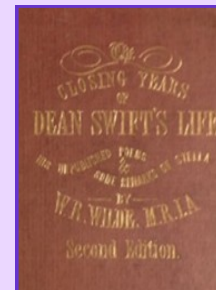
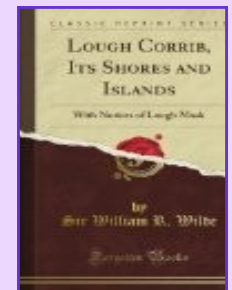
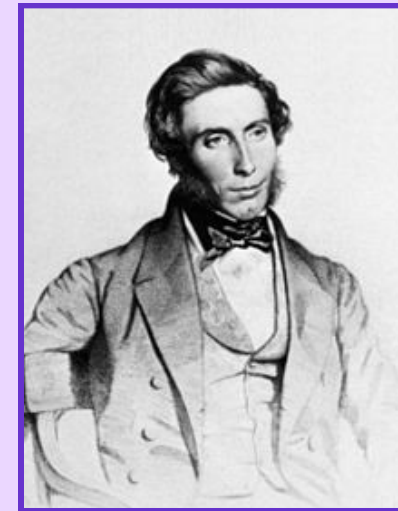
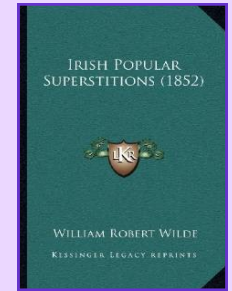


Roscommon County Council Library Services hold a collection of the works and material relating to Sir William Wilde at the Local Studies Section, County Library, Abbey Street, Roscommon. Full details can also be accessed through Library link on www.roscommoncoco.ie

Roscommon Anthology and Literary Map

Co-edited by Roscommon-born brothers, Michael and John O'Dea, *The Roscommon Anthology* is a beautifully produced book comprising selected writings by thirty-one writers with close associations to the county. Available online at www.theroscommonanthology.com

To commemorate the bicentenary of his birth in 1815, a William Wilde Symposium will be held in Castlereagh between 16th-18th April 2015.



William Wilde

Also available in the Roscommon Literary Heritage Series:

Douglas Hyde: a gifted writer, scholar and first President of Ireland who played a crucial part in the preservation of the Irish language, through his translations of near-forgotten Irish folk tales, poems and songs.

Percy French: a remarkable man, a unique talent. One of Ireland's greatest songwriters and a fine watercolourist whose charm and wit won over everyone with whom he came in contact.

John McGahern: often referred to as 'Ireland's Chekhov', McGahern lived the writer's life, quietly yet determinedly writing novels and short stories of great depth and beauty.

Oliver Goldsmith: the most naturally gifted writer of his generation, who was also a conundrum: a poet who didn't write many poems, a novelist who wrote one novel, a playwright who wrote one successful play.

B. M. Croker: with fifty published books to her name, Croker is without question one of Ireland's most prolific writers of fiction. During her lifetime, she was a hugely popular author.

More editions in the series will follow.

Text: Gerry Boland Design and Layout: Jacinta Carlos Ward

Roscommon has a proud history and a rich literary heritage. Its writers and poets have made a significant contribution to the national literature of Ireland. Roscommon County Council welcomes the production of these literary guides in promoting its cultural tourism. This second edition of the Roscommon Literary Heritage Series features three more major literary figures in the county.

An oval plaque on the wall of number one Merrion Square in Dublin reads: Sir William Robert Wills Wilde, 1815 – 1876, aural and ophthalmic surgeon, archaeologist, ethnologist, antiquarian, biographer, statistician, naturalist, topographer, historian, folklorist, lived in this house from 1855 to 1876.

Wilde was a complex man with a brilliant mind who was also a force of nature. His unrelenting drive, together with the personal traumas and tragedies that afflicted him and his family, combined to drain him of all energy and brought about an all too premature death at the age of sixty-one. His greatness lay in his versatile and brilliant mind, the energy and passion he brought to each project, and the quality of the finished product.

Publications

In 1839, a young William Wilde published *Narrative of a Voyage to Madeira, Teneriffe, and along the shores of the Mediterranean, including a visit to Algiers, Egypt, Palestyne, Tyre, Rhodes and the Holy Land*. The book came out of an eight month trip he had made in 1837/38 as the medical companion to a wealthy Glaswegian, Robert Meiklam, on board Meiklam's 130-ton steam yacht, *Crusader*.

Two years later, he published *Census – Report of Medical Advisor to the Irish Census and Tables of the Causes of Death from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*.

And in 1843, he published *Austria, its Literary, Scientific and Medical Institutions*.

Here we have three very different publications in a period of less than five years, early evidence of a man with an exceptional brain and a work rate that was truly astonishing.

The research and the writing continued unabated.

In 1849, he published *The Closing Years of Dean Swift's Life*.

In 1850, *The Beauties of the Boyne and Blackwater* appeared and was an immediate critical and popular success.

And in 1851, *An Essay on the Epidemic Ophthalmia which has prevailed in ... Tipperary and Athlone*.

Then came the publication of what was widely acknowledged as a major achievement when he undertook the *1851 Census – Report of Medical Commissioner to the Irish Census*.

This massive project he completed again in 1861 and once more in 1871.

William Wilde Locations

In Roscommon

(Left) Birthplace in Castlerea.

(Right) Elphin, where a young William attended

School in Elphin Diocesan School.



Outside Roscommon

(Left) Number One Merrion Square North,

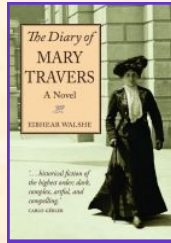
where William Wilde lived between 1855 and 1876.

(Right) Commemorative plaque on 21 Westland Row,

location of second family home and birthplace of Oscar.



In 1864, William Wilde became Sir William Wilde, the knighthood conferred on him in the Throne Room of Dublin Castle. It was yet another high point of an already remarkable life, yet the high would not last for long. That same year, Mary Travers, a long-term patient of his, claimed that he had seduced her two years earlier. The case went to court and Mary Travers won, but it was a pyrrhic victory as she was only awarded a farthing in damages.



Then, early in 1867, a much greater tragedy occurred. Isola, their nine-year old daughter and light of their lives, died of a fever. William began to withdraw from Dublin to Moytura. He appeared to lose interest in his medical practice and spent much of his time working on the book that would become *Lough Corrib, its Shores and Islands*.

His health, now in decline, was dealt a further blow with the shocking news that his two illegitimate daughters, Emily and Mary, were badly burned when their dresses caught fire at a local ball in county Monaghan. They died nine days later. They were twenty-four and twenty-two respectively.

Despite these deeply traumatic events, and his poor health, William began work on three new books. He also completed the medical census return for 1871 and received from the Royal Irish Academy its highest honour, the Cunningham Gold Medal.

William Wilde died on 19 April 1876. His large funeral cortege made its way through the Dublin streets to the family vault at Mount Jerome Cemetery, where he was laid to rest.



In between these enormous undertakings, he wrote:

Irish Popular Superstitions (1852). The book contains an account of his early childhood in Elphin and the surrounding countryside.

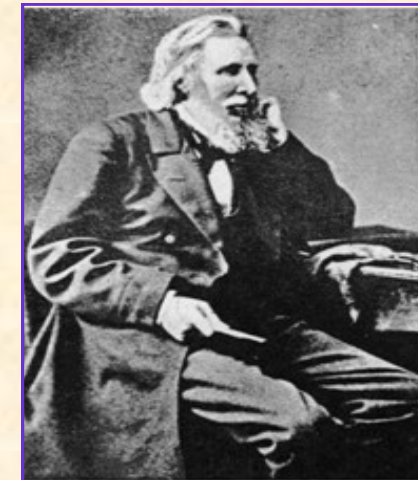
Practical Observations on Aural Surgery and the Nature and Treatment of Diseases of the Ear (1853) became the standard textbook on surgical matters relating to the ear.

On the Physical, Moral and Social Conditions of the Deaf and Dumb appeared in 1854.

Another major work followed in 1857. This was *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Antiquities in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy, Vol. 1*. Four years later, he published *Volume 2*, and he completed the vast undertaking the following year with *Volume 3*. Together, these three volumes alone would have guaranteed his reputation as a scholar of exceptional ability and determination, for they were achieved in the middle of a hectic work and domestic schedule. That he completed them at all is amazing: that the finished work was of such exceptional quality was recognised and acknowledged by every expert in the field.

An Essay on the Malformations and Congenital Diseases of the Organs of Sight was published in 1863.

In 1867 he published *Lough Corrib, its Shores and Islands*, this one a labour of love that he'd been working on for many years and that remained a popular book for generations to come.



A Brief Biography

William Wilde was born in the parish of Kilkeevin in Castlerea in March 1815 to Protestant, Unionist stock. His father, Thomas Wills Wilde, was a general practitioner (he is buried in the Holy Trinity Church of Ireland graveyard in Castlerea). William's grandfather, Ralph Wilde, was a dealer and agent for the Lord Mount Sandfords of Castlerea House and Estate. William's mother was Emily (or Amelia) Fynn. She came from landed gentry at Ballymagibbon estate, along the northern shores of Lough Corrib near Cong in county Mayo. William was the youngest of three sons and two daughters and he attended school at the Elphin Diocesan School in Elphin.

In 1832, he went to Dublin to study medicine. He was a brilliant student and obtained his medical degree from the Royal College of Surgeons at the age of twenty-two.

Almost immediately after qualifying, he went on an eight-month trip to the Mediterranean as doctor attending a wealthy patient. He would later write a book about it, which ran to two volumes, with maps and engravings from William's own drawings.

Back in Dublin, he became involved in an important archaeological survey of a site near Dunshaughlin in county Meath. He then travelled to London to study eye surgery at the Royal Ophthalmic Hospital in London. From London, he travelled to Vienna and spent six months of further study before setting off on a tour of European cities.

When he returned to Dublin, he established his own practice at 15 Westland Row, specialising in the eye and the ear. His reputation rapidly rising, he was offered the position of Medical Commissioner for Ireland for the 1841 census. In 1844, he reopened the old St Marks Hospital off Great Brunswick Street as an Ophthalmic Hospital and Dispensary for Diseases of the Eye and Ear. It quickly became the only hospital in the United Kingdom teaching aural surgery. He was also lecturing on the eye and ear at Park Street School.

In 1845, he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and in the same year he assumed the role of editor of the Dublin Journal of Medical Science. During all this, he managed to find time for his antiquarian research and spent much time wandering along the banks of the Boyne River and its tributary, the Blackwater. He wrote many articles based on his findings and these – as was his pattern of work – he eventually assembled into a book, *The Beauties of the Boyne and Blackwater*, published in 1846.

During the Famine of 1845-52, he wrote extensive reports on the medical aspects of that great tragedy and these were published over four issues of the Journal of Medical Science. The individual features ran to sixty pages each.

Around this time, he met and married Jane Francesca Elgee, a well-known poet who published under the pseudonym 'Speranza' (Italian for 'hope'). The couple had three

children: William, Oscar and Isola. In addition to his children with his wife, William was the father of three children born out of wedlock before his marriage: Henry Wilson, born in 1838, and Emily and Mary, born in 1847 and 1849, respectively, of different parentage to Henry.

In 1853, William was appointed to the position of Surgeon Oculist in Ordinary to the Queen in Ireland, an appointment which entailed little or no work yet carried much prestige. Two years later, he bought one of Dublin's most desirable town houses, number 1 Merrion Square North, and the family moved in. The new house became the scene of lively dinner parties and was also the setting for Speranza's Saturday afternoon salons, which attracted guests from the arts, as well as from political and academic life.

William, in addition to his busy work schedule, had recently undertaken the cataloguing of the very large number of artefacts belonging to the Royal Irish Academy. The completion of this immense task within a narrow time frame consolidated his reputation as an outstanding antiquarian.

The couple always found time for family excursions and holidays: to the Victorian seaside resort of Bray, where he had built four houses on the seafront, and to a farmhouse in Glencree in county Wicklow. Mostly, however, William took them west to Illaunroe, a hunting and fishing lodge on nine acres of land he had leased near Killary Harbour in Connemara. The remote house stood on the banks of Lough Fee and can still be seen today.



Looking across Lough Fee to Illaunroe, where William had a fishing lodge.

Ten years later he would build Moytura House, a two-storey, gabled lodge overlooking Lough Corrib on land belonging to his mother's ancestors. This was to become his western retreat, especially as he grew older and the traumas and deep sorrows of his life began to take their toll. The family frequently joined him there for the holidays, where William would take his children fishing and boating.