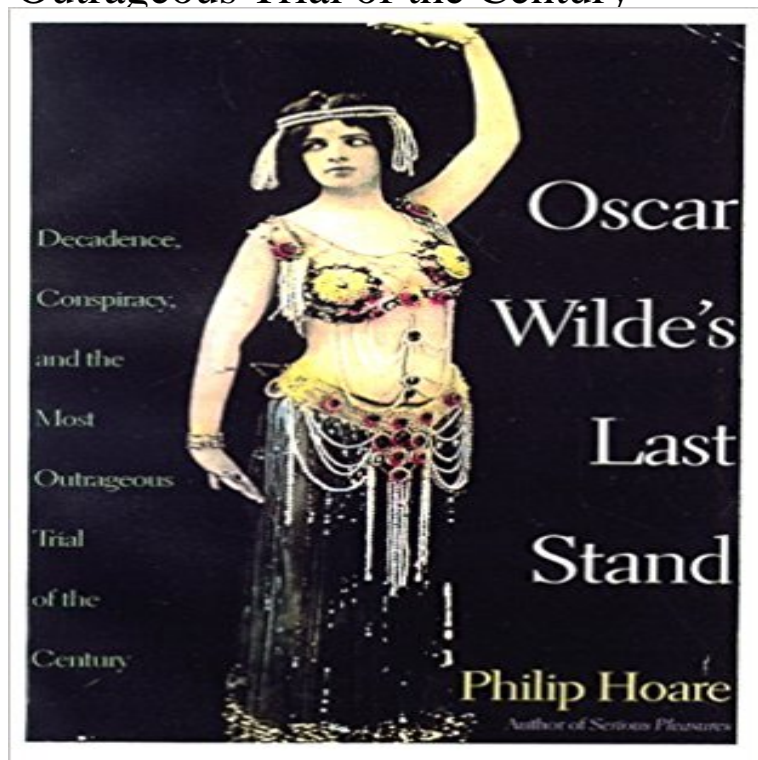


Oscar Wilde's Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy, and the Most Outrageous Trial of the Century



Even though Oscar Wilde--playwright, wit, critic, and convicted sodomite--died exiled and disgraced in 1900, his memory and influence remain central to British culture. In 1918 the specter of Wilde manifested itself in what social historian Philip Hoare calls the trial of the century. This shocking libel case was brought by American actress Maud Allan, who had just appeared in a production of Wilde's *Salome*, against Noel Pemberton Billing, an arch-conservative M.P., who accused her of being a member of the cult of the clitoris: his catch phrase for a sexual and social degeneracy that he saw as destroying England. Billing also claimed that the German government (with whom, you will recall, England was at war) had a black book containing the names of 47,000 prominent members of the British society who were in the cult of Wilde--a euphemism for "degenerate homosexuals"--and who were potential blackmailers, subversives, and traitors. As in the Wilde trials 23 years earlier, the real issue here was an attack by conservatives and moralists against social and sexual freedom. As in his earlier work, *Serious Pleasures: The Life of Stephen Tennant and Noel Coward: A Biography*, Hoare proves himself to be an incisive social critic and a vigorous historian who illuminates the paradoxes of the recent past with insight and passion. But the real power of *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand* (that Hoare makes clear again and again) is its understanding that Wilde--social rebel and martyr to artistic and sexual freedom--remains, in so many ways, under attack by conservative social forces even today. --Michael Bronski END

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