



## Ada Leverson (1862-1933)

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Perhaps best remembered as [Oscar Wilde](#)'s (1854-1900) friend and confidante, Ada Esther Leverson (née Beddington) is often overlooked in literary studies of Aestheticism and Decadence. Leverson's contributions to periodicals such as *Punch* (1841–1992) and [The Yellow Book](#) evidence her comical perspective on 1890s culture, and the novels she published in the early twentieth century demonstrate an ongoing engagement with literary and artistic figures. The eldest of eight children, Leverson was born in London on 10 October 1862 to Zillah Simon and Samuel Beddington. The Beddingtons were a wealthy Jewish family and the children were well brought-up and fittingly educated. Leverson's mother Zillah was a talented amateur pianist, a skill perhaps inherited from her great-grandmother, Rachel Samuel, who had been tutored by Charles Burney (1726-1814). However, if musical ability passed through the generations, it stopped at Ada. Uninterested in music, Leverson was instead drawn to books. Educated from a young age in French and German, and later tutored in Latin and Greek by a Girton College graduate, Leverson read widely. She also read for pleasure; she grew up reading F. C. Burnand's (1836-1917) "Happy Thoughts" column in *Punch*, and later *The Diary of a Nobody* series by George (1847-1912) and Weedon (1854-1919) Grossmith. As she grew older, Leverson enjoyed drawing-room entertainment, and Violet Wyndham describes how the entertainer and songwriter Corney Grain (1844-1895) frequented the parties Ada attended (20). These early influences informed Leverson's deep understanding of literature and inspired her satirical outlook.

In 1881, at the age of nineteen, Ada married Ernest Leveson (1851-1921). Like Ada, Ernest was from a wealthy Jewish family; his father, George, was a second-generation diamond merchant, and Ernest too worked in London as an East India Merchant, perhaps trading diamonds and gemstones himself (“Ernest Leveson”). He was twelve years her senior, and Ada’s acceptance of his proposal was perhaps a hasty act of rebellion against her father who, for unknown reasons, did not approve of the marriage (Speedie 14). Ernest had a temper and was not a particularly good match for Ada’s jovial personality. Soon after the marriage, she was upset to learn that his alleged “ward,” a young girl being brought up in a French convent, was in fact his illegitimate daughter. Their marriage was unhappy, and Ernest’s fickle nature and gambling habit often left Ada at the periphery of her husband’s attentions. A son, George, was born in 1888 (he would tragically die four months later from meningitis), and in 1890 Leveson gave birth to a daughter, Violet. Violet married army soldier Guy Wyndham in 1923, and went on to write one of the few substantial biographical accounts we have of her mother.

Soon after their marriage, Ernest turned his affections to Ada’s sister Evelyn, causing a family rift that would last several years (Speedie 18). Ada, too, had extra-marital romantic attachments. In the early 1880s the Levesons visited Monte Carlo and Ernest spent much of the trip gambling in casinos. Reputedly, during this vacation, Ada fell in love with prolific writer William Cuffe, 4th Earl of Desart (1845-1898). There is also an air of intimacy in letters written throughout the 1890s between Ada and [George Moore](#) (1852-1933). In their correspondence they discuss writing and literature, but they also share more personal exchanges. In an undated letter Leveson writes: “I am not afraid of death but I am of scandal, of which I have a special horror.” Ada’s fear of scandal goes some way to explain why she did not divorce Ernest despite their mutual unhappiness. Later in life, around the time Leveson began publishing novels, she allegedly became romantically involved with her publisher, Grant Richards (1872-1948); Julie Speedie suggests that Leveson was “rather in love” with him (2). These romantic connections with writers, and subsequently her publisher, perhaps demonstrate that Leveson was drawn towards those with a literary mind-set, and there was much to gain from these artistic connections that Ernest was unable to provide.

Leverson found comfort and happiness in literary networks. She was extremely close friends with Ernest's cousin Marguerite Thomas, and Ada and Ernest were frequent visitors at the Thomas household. Brandon Thomas, Marguerite's husband, was a member of several clubs including the Savage, a "club for working men in literature and in art" (Watson 33). Following the Thomas's marriage, Brandon often brought his friends home, where he hosted late night parties. Julie Speedie speculates that it was these gatherings that introduced Leverson to many of the key literary figures of the 1890s. Leverson's friendships and interactions with contemporaries such as Mabel Beardsley (1871-1916), [Max Beerbohm](#) (1872-1956) and Robert Ross (1869-1918) would go on to influence her parodies, and literary figures such as these are reflected in Leverson's fictional characters. Throughout the 1890s Leverson herself hosted lively gatherings that were close in nature to French salons, and she came to be very well acquainted with many key literary and artistic figures of the period.

By 1892 Ada was beginning to make a name for herself publishing satirical pieces in magazines such as *Black and White* (1889–1912) and *Punch*, and in the mid-nineties she published two stories in *The Yellow Book*: first came "[Suggestion](#)" in April 1895, followed by "[The Quest of Sorrow](#)" in January 1896. Both are told from the perspective of Cecil Carington, a caricatured dandy who is comically excessive and seemingly uninterested in the consequences of his actions. These stories provide a general critique of the aesthete. Leverson gently mocks [Walter Pater](#)'s (1839-1894) advocacy of an "art for art's sake" (Pater 221) mentality while also criticising the dramatic nature of individuals who have what she describes in "Suggestion" as an "artistic temperament" (Leverson 250).

Although Leverson's criticism of the aesthete is quite vague in *The Yellow Book*, Ada's parodies are more direct in her contributions to *Punch*. In "The Boot-Bills of Narcissus," her parody of *The Book-Bills of Narcissus*, [Richard Le Gallienne](#) (1866-1947) becomes "Richard Medallion" and Leverson adds the damning subtitle of "An Irrelevant Biography." Ada's parodies were not necessarily intended to be hostile; they were often meant as tributes. She was quite often close friends with those whom she parodied: Alan Roy in "The Scarlet Parasol" seems to be a reflection of [Aubrey Beardsley](#) (1872-1898)

and Gilbert Hereford Vaughan in *The Limit* is a tribute to Levenson's close friend William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965), who later co-edited *The Venture* (1903/1905). During the course of her literary career Oscar Wilde's work provided a consistent influence, and throughout the 1890s pages of *Punch* magazine we frequently see Wilde's characters being rewritten from Levenson's comic perspective. In "An Afternoon Party," published in *Punch*, Levenson parodies Wilde's *Salomé*. Salomé stands over the buffet and gives a monologue on mayonnaise:

"Is that mayonnaise? ... I think it is mayonnaise. I am sure it is mayonnaise. It is the mayonnaise of salmon, pink as a branch of coral which fishermen find in the twilight of the sea, and which they keep for the King." (13)

In this excessive description of mundane mayonnaise, Levenson mocks Wilde's complex characterisation of *Salomé*. Although Salomé's dialogue is suitably ridiculous, however, Levenson's careful simulation of Wilde's writing shows a thorough appreciation for his style. Unlike other satirists, she resists commenting on Wilde's personal characteristics, focusing instead on his characters and his writing. Her perspective derives from a position of close and intimate friendship. Violet Wyndham describes how Levenson was "dazzled" (28) by Wilde, and she recalls her mother's statement that his remarkable gifts and personality could not be gauged by his published works. Perhaps, then, Levenson's parodies praise Wilde's authorial technique while also constituting a personal tribute between friends; other more superficial satires of Wilde fail to provide this perspective.

Levenson and Wilde first met at a party in 1892, and, as Violet Wyndham notes, Ada was "ideally conditioned to respond to Wilde's lightheartedness" (24). It is perhaps her *Punch* parody of Wilde's *The Sphinx* (1894) that had the most significant impact on her legacy. After discovering that "The Minx: A Poem in Prose" had been written by Levenson, Wilde wrote an admiring letter, addressing Levenson herself as the "Sphinx": "Dear Sphinx, Of course you have been deeply wronged. But there are many bits [...] not unworthy of your brilliant pen ...". "Sphinx" became a long-lasting nickname for Levenson, both in her literary networks and in her personal life. The nickname was used in different contexts. Sometimes Wilde described her as the "Gilded Sphinx," alluding to her distinctive golden hair, and sometimes as "the Sphinx of Modern Life," referring to her fast, sharp witty responses to topics of the day. That Wyndham entitled her

biography of Levenson *The Sphinx and Her Circle* suggests a sense of pride in this personal connection with Wilde and his work.

Levenson is remembered for being a particularly dedicated and brave friend to Wilde during and after the scandalous Queensbury trials of 1895. When hotels, clubs, friends, and family refused to accommodate him in the periods between the infamous trials, the Levensons invited Wilde to stay with them. Ada and Ernest offered their servants a month's wages if they wished to leave while he stayed with the household, but, as Levenson recalls in her memoir of Wilde, their servants seemed proud to wait on him and promised to keep his location a secret (Levenson 38). Later, the Levensons were among the first to greet him when he was released from prison in the early hours of a cold May morning in 1897 (Levenson 44). Around 1907 Levenson began her memoir of Wilde, including many of the letters she had received from him (although they appear to be heavily edited) along with reminiscences and anecdotal stories. She worked on it for many years and it was eventually published in 1930, reviewers agreeing that her memoir was of much greater value than the miscellaneous letters included (Speedie 266).

In 1905 Ada and Ernest separated when he emigrated to Canada with his illegitimate daughter. Soon after, Levenson began publishing novels. In 1907 she published *The Twelfth Hour*, and five more novels appeared between 1907 and 1916. Throughout these texts, Levenson's parodical reflections on aesthetes remain a central concern. Her *Little Ottleys* trilogy, comprised of *Love's Shadow* (1908), *Tenterhooks* (1912) and *Love at Second Sight* (1916), is loosely autobiographical. Edith Ottley, like many of Levenson's heroines, is a complex character who makes mistakes and fails to meet Victorian ideals of femininity. Levenson contrasts female characters like Edith with male characters like Bruce Ottley, Edith's husband, who is ignorant, selfish and superficial. Like Cecil Carrington in Levenson's *Yellow Book* stories, Bruce only considers his own happiness, and this trilogy of novels shows Edith's journey towards being freed from an oppressive and comically arrogant husband, perhaps reflecting the breakdown of Levenson's own marriage in the preceding years.

Leverson's novels received mixed responses when they were published. Some critics disliked her tendency to depict her friends and acquaintances in her work. Some reviewers also considered Leverson's handling of narrative structure and plot to be inadequate. Discussing Leverson's *The Twelfth Hour*, *The Daily Telegraph* argued that "moving through the maze of character and caricature there is a thread of story, just strong enough to engage the attention without making too exigent a demand upon it" (14). However, others suggested that the weak plot did not inhibit the novel's charm, and the reviewer of the *Westminster Gazette* stated that "it is not exactly a strong plot, perhaps, but what does that matter? One is perpetually amused by the delicate irony, the ingenious fun, and absurd inconsistencies, the happy comments of the narrator" (3). Likewise, *The Daily Mail* described Leverson's first novel as "witty, good-humoured, and charmingly clever" (3). Her later novels also attracted positive comments for their perspective on society. In 1962 the *Little Ottleys* novels were reprinted as a trilogy for the first time. Colin MacInnes contributed his 1961 essay on Leverson as a foreword for the omnibus edition in which he describes Leverson as a "very great artist" who was "ultimately a finer writer" than Wilde himself, drawing particular attention to her utilisation of double meanings and ironic observations shown through throwaway comments (47). MacInnes's essay shows how Leverson's technique withstands the test of time; her comic observations are valued beyond the eras she satirised. In 2011 *The Little Ottleys* trilogy was adapted by Martyn Wade for BBC 4 Radio 4 featuring Haydn Gwynne as Ada Leverson, Juliet Aubrey as Edith and Bertie Carvel as Bruce. This dramatized series was repeated in 2018, offering today's audience an insight into fin-de-siècle literary circles and Leverson's "witty and wonderful" writing (BBC).

Later in life, Leverson began to lose her hearing. Ever afraid of shouting, she would talk quietly and softly, so much so that friends would struggle to catch what she said. Osbert Sitwell (1892-1969) described her naturally low voice as the "expression of a diffident and gentle disposition," "the true vehicle of her personality" (131). Many accounts describe Leverson's tendency to shake with silent laughter at the humour of miscommunication when she misheard what someone had said to her. From personal recollections of Leverson, we can tell that she was a delightful companion and she kept her friends very close to her heart. Around 1923 Leverson moved into the Washington

Hotel on Curzon Street, making it her home while she was in London. She travelled frequently to Florence, where she would spend many months each year. In 1933 she fell ill while in Italy, and on her return to London she developed pneumonia. After a series of visits from her loved ones, Ada passed away on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1933 at the age of 70.

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