



JOHN GRAY (1866-1934)



Charles Hazelwood Shannon.
John Gray. Lithograph, 1896.
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection,
University of Delaware Library,
Museums and Press.

On 10 March 1866, John Henry Gray was born to working-class parents in Bethnal Green, London. Gray demonstrated an academic ability at an early age and trained for the civil service until his father, who resisted his wife's middle-class ambitions for their children, pulled him out of Roan School at 13, in order to apprentice him as a metal-turner. Gray's poem, "The Forge," published in *The Savoy*, would later draw on his trade experience of that period and demonstrate his appreciation for the craft he learned. Making the most of the situation, Gray was eventually promoted to the drawing room at Woolwich Arsenal and studied independently to complete his Civil Service examinations. He began his civil service career in the Post Office Savings Bank, moving later to the Foreign Office.

Gray had won an essay prize in school before his apprenticeship, and later began writing poems for publication. Early in his civil service career, he met the artists and designers Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, who gave him his first writing job. It was a critical piece for their occasional periodical, *The Dial*, called "Les Goncourt," on the

French naturalists and brothers Edmund and Jules de Goncourt. It was through Ricketts and Shannon, both directly and indirectly, that Gray met the avant garde of London and Paris: the aesthetes and decadents of his day, including Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper (“Michael Field”), Aubrey Beardsley, Félix Fénéon, William Rothenstein, Paul Verlaine, and Oscar Wilde.

Gray’s poetry was influenced by the French decadents and Symbolists, but it was with Wilde’s guidance that he developed his own public persona and avant-garde reputation. Ricketts and Shannon introduced Gray to Wilde in 1889 and they immediately developed a close relationship. Gray was a public companion to Wilde for a time amongst fashionable society. At the 1893 premier of Michael Field’s play, *A Question of Memory*, for example, the *Bingham Gazette* reported that Wilde, “looking bronzed and slightly bored, shared a private box with his friend, John Gray, the Poet” (Lady Corresp. 1893). He was also the rumoured inspiration for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the novel that Wilde wrote during the most intimate period of their relationship (Hanson 312). Their public display of intimacy raised speculations about the nature of their relationship, though no evidence exists to confirm it was sexual. Regardless, their relationship had a passion that surpassed mere friendship and Gray was remembered fondly by Wilde in *De Profundis* as someone with whom he shared his “higher life” as an aesthete (Wilde 686).

Wilde’s letters and the John Lane Company records reveal the process that led to the publication of Gray’s first collection of poems, *Silverpoints* (1893). Wilde originally offered to fund the book’s publication. However, Lane and Mathews ultimately agreed to publish it at their own expense, with the understanding that Gray was responsible for compensating the book’s designer, his mentor Ricketts. The 37-page book was designed to resemble a Renaissance-era saddle book in shape, while the gilt on its green cloth evoked a delicate birdcage. The poems inside are presented in an Aldine Italic font and are as much accomplished examples of Ricketts’s typographical artistry, as they are reflective of Gray’s decadent persona. Through the use of dedicatory subtitles, Gray’s poems address his relationships with some of the most important poets, artists, and thinkers of the period: “Heart’s Demesne: To Paul Verlaine,” “Complaint: To Félix

Fénéon,” “Mishka: To Henri Teixeira de Mattos,” and “Summer Past: To Oscar Wilde,” to name a few.

Silverpoints places the beauty of nature into conversation with decadent forms of artificial beauty. For example, the poem “The Barber” celebrates the decadent artifice of cosmetic beauty, as a woman goes from dull shades of grey to the exotic beauty that comes from being elaborately coiffed. Her transformation reflects Gray’s own transformation during this period from the working-class civil servant to the handsome dandy at Wilde’s side in London society. By the time that *Silverpoints* was released in 1893, Gray had already given up his coiffed persona and begun his path to the Catholic Church.

In November 1892, Gray ended his friendship with Wilde. According to Jerusha Hull McCormack, possible reasons include Gray’s turn to Catholicism and Wilde’s growing friendship with Alfred Douglas. Nevertheless, his interest in aestheticism remains apparent in such works as the short story “Light” (*The Pageant*), which depicts a woman who has an ecstatic experience of God during a Catholic mass full of ritualistic and liturgical beauty. Gray’s story gives spiritual ecstasy the characteristics of an aesthetic epiphany more powerful than that of a sexual orgasm.

During this period of crisis, Gray turned to another aesthete, poet, and writer Marc-André Raffalovich, author of the sexology text *Uranisme et unisexualité* (1896). In this work, Raffalovich extols the value of chastity, particularly for those who experience same-sex desire, as a means of accessing creative energy that would better benefit society and the arts. To their friends, this presentation of suppressed desire was a defining feature of their bond as they both became Catholics and Gray was ordained as a priest in 1901 (Sewell 94). Gray moved in with the wealthy Raffalovich and shared a home with him for the rest of their lives. Gray’s new life of spiritual devotion is reflected in his second poetry collection, *Spiritual Poems* (1896). Aestheticism lingers in this collection, which offers a medievalism in both Gray’s spirituality and Ricketts’s design.

Father Gray continued to write throughout his life, contributing to periodicals such as *Blackfriars*, *Downside Review*, and *The Poetry Review*. He remained close friends with many fellow aesthetes and counselled some through their conversions to Catholicism, including Beardsley before his 1896 death and Bradley and Cooper in the early twentieth century. Gray and Raffalovich eventually settled in Edinburgh, Scotland, where Gray did parish work and Raffalovich hosted meetings for artists and intellectuals. Through these new aesthetic connections, they became acquainted with *Evergreen* artist John Duncan, whom Raffalovich commissioned to paint the Stations of the Cross for St. Peter's Church in 1907 (Kemplay 58). Gray's focus in the twentieth century was his work as a priest. He served as Rector of St. Peter's Church in Edinburgh beginning in 1905. In 1930, after a 25-year residency, he was made Canon Gray "of the cathedral chapter of the diocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh" (Sewell 162). He died in 1934 and, by that time, had long since distanced himself from his decadent past. Regardless of his own reticence, *Silverpoints* and his contributions to aesthetic periodicals – *The Dial*, *The Savoy*, and *The Pageant* – remain important and valuable examples of aesthetic and decadent literature.

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Biography

Frederick D. King is contract faculty with both Huron University College and the University of Western Ontario. His research has appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as *Victorian Periodicals Review*, *Contemporary Literature*, and *Victorian Review*. His work examines literature associated with British aestheticism and decadence through queer theory, textual studies, and the digital humanities. As an affiliated member of the Centre for Digital Humanities at Ryerson University, Frederick is editing a digital edition of *The Pageant* for the *Yellow Nineties Online*.

Selected Publications by John Gray

"The Forge." *The Savoy* no. 2, 1896, pp. 97-98.

"Les Goncourt." *The Dial* no. 1, 1889, pp. 9-13.

“The Great Worm.” *The Dial* no. 1, 1889, pp. 14-18.

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Rupert Hart-Davis, Henry Holt, 2000.