

One woman's trials and tribulations

A secret affair and a hidden connection with Oscar Wilde make for a compelling tale

FICTION

BELINDA SMITH

THE DIARY OF MARY TRAVERS
by EIBHEAR WALSHE

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It was a trial that rocked Dublin and animated the city's gossips. In 1864, a young woman sued Jane Wilde for libel, during which she made an accusation of rape against Dr William Wilde, Jane's husband. Eibhear Walshe, a lecturer in English at University College Cork, takes up the story nearly 30 years later at the time of an even more notorious public scandal. The Wildes' son, Oscar, is on trial in London for gross indecency.

Back in Mitchelstown, Co Cork, Mary Travers, the plaintiff in the libel case against Jane Wilde, is now 57 and leading a demure spinsterly existence with her sister, Emily. She keenly follows reports of Oscar Wilde's trial, fearing that her own part in the previous libel case will be alluded to, and she will be exposed. We discover that she lied in court about being raped, and we learn the true nature of her relationship with William Wilde.

Subdued and shame-ridden, Travers reflects on her youthful past, which includes staging a dramatic incident involving overdosing on laudanum in the doctor's study, publishing a pamphlet under Jane's pseudonym Speranza, and sending the Wildes poetry that vilified them.

Walshe's novel purports to be the journal of Travers, and he certainly shows

empathetic sensitivity. Travers does not shy away from confronting every aspect of unglorified womanhood, from sexual desire to vituperative anger — both of which were seen as unseemly, even dysfunctional, in Victorian society. A modern sensibility directs the narrative, and the reader may well consider that issues revealed in the Wilde trial might not get any more sympathetic a hearing in today's tabloids.

Walshe's rendering of a young woman intoxicated by her first — and last — taste of passion is insightful. The ageing spinster remains haunted by memories of illicit love with the doctor.

This compelling story is based on known facts, but the author embellishes those aspects about which the truth is unclear. He invents some characters in order to animate the tale. Travers is

particularly fascinating, as she not only relives her shame and humiliation, but also explores the effect of her actions on family and friends.

The novel follows Travers's journey from Cork to Dublin and then to London, and includes an attempt to right the wrongs done to Jane Wilde, now a broken old woman, beaten down by poverty, the alcoholism of her elder son, Willie, and the degradation of her younger son, Oscar, who has been sentenced to two years' hard labour in Reading jail.

By the time the voyage is complete, Travers is alone and lonely. Her burden has not been shed and she seems destined to have to live with her culpability for all the sufferings she has caused. The reader is left to ponder the failings of those who should have protected her and to ask who has been the most wronged.