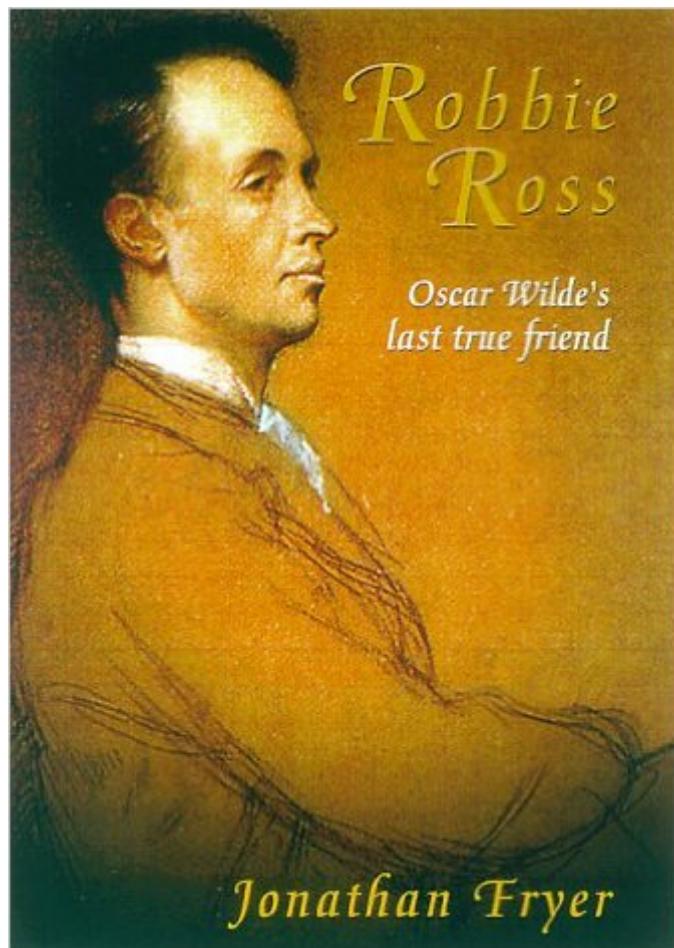


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Robbie Ross: Oscar Wilde's Devoted Friend



Synopsis

Celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of Oscar Wilde's death in Paris, this is the biography of the man who sat at his deathbed and unfailingly defended his reputation. Robert Baldwin Ross left Cambridge University without a degree, but he'd nonetheless become a pivotal figure in London's literary and artistic circles by his early twenties. By then he had also disclosed his homosexuality to his family - to no shock or horror - and had seduced the flamboyant Irish wit and playwright Oscar Wilde. Unlike Wilde, however, Robbie Ross managed to live his life openly at the same time that he placed himself firmly within the London establishment as a writer, critic, and art dealer, not to mention as a frequent guest of the Asquiths at 10 Downing Street. How he did it, in an era when disgrace and imprisonment were the order of the day for sexual 'inversion', make of this biography a compelling narrative of moral courage and personal integrity. When all of England condemned Oscar Wilde, Ross stood by his mentor and later served as his literary executor. The pluckish Ross also provided a haven for young literary figures like Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Osbert Sitwell, and Robert Graves during the years of World War I, and less happily, he suffered the persecution of Oscar Wilde's nemesis, Lord Alfred Douglas. Peopled with three generations of such illustrious characters, Robbie Ross brightly illuminates the changing attitudes and social mores that brought late Victorian and Edwardian London into modern times.

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Customer Reviews

Oscar Wilde was author of some of the merriest jests and plays in the English language and subject of one of the saddest banishments and deaths in literature. Oscar was unfortunate in his enemies,

and in many of his friends, but he was very fortunate in the friendship of Robbie Ross, a friendship that displayed itself throughout Oscar's successes and worst trials, and for long after Oscar's death. It cannot be said that Ross was a particularly important figure, but as a friend to Wilde, he influenced Oscar in many good ways. Ross is a footnote, but he was an exceptionally good friend and a good man, and now he has a good biography, *Robbie Ross: Oscar Wilde's Devoted Friend* (Carroll and Graf Publishers) by Jonathan Fryer. It will be a welcome volume for any interested in Oscar's life. As a youth, Robbie met Oscar and introduced him to homosexual lovemaking. Oscar took other lovers afterward, as did Robbie, and Robbie had not the slightest jealousy about Oscar's affections. Throughout Oscar's life, Robbie was there to give him help and good counsel, although Oscar sadly didn't often take his advice. When Oscar wound up in jail, Robbie came back, and made himself indispensable with visits to the jail and with taking up collections from the friends Oscar still had. Robbie received the deserved admiration of Oscar's friends, and of Oscar: "When I see you, I shall be quite happy, indeed I am happy now to think I have such wonderful friendship shown to me," and "Your love, your generosity, your care of me in prison and out of prison are the most lovely things in my life." Robbie oversaw the publication of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and of *De Profundis*. He was on hand at Oscar's death, and oversaw the temporary internment and the arrangement of the final resting place in Paris.

Robbie Ross: Oscar Wilde's Last True Friend by Jonathan Fryer is the engrossing story of Oscar Wilde's closest and most loyal friend (excluding of course "Bosie" Douglas who was a more intimate if untrue friend). As well as examining the life of this minor turn of the century writer, Fryer provides insights into the lives of English (and English-Irish) gay men of the comfortable classes in late Victorian and Edwardian society. The story of the Ross/Wilde friendship is very touching and the retelling of Oscar Wilde's odyssey is an engaging one. The years following Wilde's death saw the pathologically immature "Bosie" Douglas descend from selfish lover to vicious loather. His turn to sexual conventionality and his adoption of a shockingly hateful crusade against Ross is a chilling reflection on personal perfidy and the ugliness of social reaction. Douglas was joined in his crusade by horrific anti-gay bigots, and their mad-dog litigation against Ross and others certainly contributed to Ross's ill health and early death at 49. Ross had a mysogynistic side, which we learn about only in passing: his establishment of a modest scholarship for art students was restricted to males, and Fryer lamely posits an excuse. The retelling of this episode here, and the biography's almost complete absence of comments on Ross's political opinions, leads one to wonder about the broader context of Ross's life that is still left to tell, not that this minor figure will ever get another biography.

We get only provocative snippets of another life. We're told that Ross felt very strongly about the intense events in Ireland at the time, but are never informed what these feelings are!

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