have been an enormous treat to have Staley’s additional interpretations of this era, such as his perceptions on how Pre-Raphaelite landscapes have influenced artists from other countries, or at least more generous expansion of his 1960s perspectives. Yet despite some wishful thinking by the reader who admires Staley’s profound mastery of the subject—and his impact on fellow scholars and countless students—*The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* remains a classic, “must-have” on bookshelves of those interested in the field of nineteenth-century landscape, much less devotees of the ever-popular subject of Pre-Raphaelitism.

Susan P. Casteras

*The Holland Park Circle: Artists and Victorian Society* by Caroline Dakers.

Today context is everything, and this book is a fine contextual study of some of the best known artists of the late Victorian era. Caroline Dakers demonstrates the influence of one small artists’ community in Holland Park on the formation of late Victorian architecture, art, and design. Its simple geographical framework throws new light on the art of Edward Burne-Jones, G.F. Watts, Frederic Leighton, J.A.M. Whistler, and Philip Webb, among a host of others. It lays bare many of the economic and geographical forces that brought high Victorian art into being. It is a study of Victorian class structure and wealth that offers a splendidly researched account of the physical creation of the late Victorian art world.

One might expect that Dakers’s approach, so grounded in class, price, and place, would be the foundation for a Marxist-leaning treatise, an exposé of capitalist decadence, or at the very least an analysis of gendered stratification in the late Victorian economy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Her approach is richly detailed and profoundly sympathetic, as she attempts to define what is remarkable in late Victorian art. This is a study in patronage, in influence by propinquity, and in the economics of high art in a community that worked hard to earn its name and its artistic incomes. Above all, Dakers’s approach is architectural, focusing in particular on the houses in Holland Park designed by Philip Webb. She pays attention to the obvious. She reminds us, with no browbeating along the way, that paintings always exist on a wall of a specific building, in a specific place, produced by a very specific physical and cultural context. She helps us to understand that the place for studying Victorian art is not today’s Tate Britain or the Yale Center for British Art, but rather Leighton House, the Linley Sambourne House, Whistler’s Peacock Room, and those few locations where physical context allows art to speak in its original tongue. Where physical context is lost, Dakers reconstructs it from extensive research. To present that physical context, she offers never before seen paintings from private collections, never before published manuscripts, and never before published architectural views. She lays out her findings with constant reference to physical mapping. The result is a wealth of new information for seasoned Victorian scholars, and a wonderfully entertaining read for the novice.

Dakers’s writing style is remarkably Edwardian. With wit and a keen sense of a good story line, she introduces us to the heroes and comedians of her story and sells their moment in history to the reader. The result is a grand collection of society pages set in an historical structure of birth, maturity, and decay. Readers may be forgiven for forgetting that they are reading a book printed near the dawn of the twenty-first century. Dakers’s quoted sources flow seamlessly into her text. She works very hard to eliminate critical distance, and that lack of critical distance will make some readers uncomfortable indeed.

In some ways Dakers’s book parallels the superb research found in Dianne Sachko Macleod’s *Art and the Victorian Middle Class* (1996), but whereas Macleod makes it her business to analyze and cast a Marxist and skeptical eye on the excesses of late Victorian capitalism, Dakers is all praise. Her heroes are gentlemen, philanthropists, supporters of women artists, lovers of children, and luminaries of a refined period. Don’t go to Dakers’s book seeking a cultural critique, because you will not find it within its pages. She briefly includes quotations from Joseph Kestner, Pamela Gerrish Nunn, and others who maintain a critical edge; but only to lay their analyses against more flattering anecdotes of the stars of her book. Leighton, for instance, is portrayed as a kind-hearted philanthropist, champion of women artists, generous supporter of his mistress and illegitimate son, and the nearly unanimously admired head of the Holland Park Circle. We don’t come to know the Leighton whom Ruskin loathed, whom Watts attacked, who played to the corruptions of Victorian capitalism, and who raised a petition against women’s suffrage. She also omits the fact that numerous women and men of the Holland Park Circle actively opposed Leighton’s politics. The importance of the women’s rights movement to many members of the Circle completely escapes Dakers’s notice. Politics are glossed over lightly at best. Very little that will allow criticism of Leighton as
the book’s linchpin is tolerated. Dakers’s story also slights the work of many women artists of the Holland Park Circle. Her treatment of Henrietta Rae is a welcome and noteworthy exception, however, as is her extensive and valuable discussion of an important female patron in Lady Airlie.

Dakers keeps the story simple, and in doing so she minimizes the political history of the Holland Park Circle. Reading this book, one has to wonder if we are not slipping back into the hero worship and adulation of the upper crust that characterized academic writing at the start of the last century. Dakers certainly works against the political grain of today’s art history. She tries to lead the reader to admire the aesthetic centre of London by leaving many of its dark corners entirely unmapped. Dakers’s focus is on money and taste. She traces the history of the Holland Park Circle from its nearly avant-garde roots to its ascent to the highest circles of London culture, and she touches on its low point in the 1960s when its art was marked for the wrecking ball and the rubbish heap. It is very much an estate agent’s history of the neighbourhood, from a fledgling community, to its apex, to its near demolition and then regeneration. It begins with a once-forgotten hero, George Frederic Watts, and ends with a photo of a rock icon, Jimmy Page, near his home in Holland Park.

As a political and critical treatise it is lacking, but as a resource for cultural history it is an essential and dazzling piece of research.

David Stewart

was not ended by his imprisonment for “gross indecency” in 1895, but that he continued to publish after emerging from prison and indeed that “his most popular and most profitable book” was The Ballad of Reading Gaol (1898), published the year after his release.

The first challenge confronting the reviewer of Oscar Wilde’s Profession is to identify the book’s genre. The authors begin by stating, “This book is an account of a writer’s career, but it does not claim to give a complete explanation of Wilde’s creativity, nor does it aspire to be a biography” (as that term is usually understood). Yet the book does, in fact, present a biographical argument that is specifically designed to refute the orthodoxy established by Richard Ellmann’s momentous 1987 biography. Asserting that Ellmann’s “unapologetic revaluation of Wilde’s sexuality placed desire at the centre of both his personal and creative life,” Guy and Small lament the consequence that Ellmann “overlooked many of the details often thought to be important to a writer’s life.” This insistence on separating the professional and personal lives of Wilde is central to both the strengths and weaknesses of Guy and Small’s argument.

The book presents substantial evidence in support of its central thesis: that Oscar Wilde, far from being either a remote dandy-aesthete solely concerned with the purity of his work’s form and style, or a sexual outlaw seeking to introduce oppositional meanings into his works, was a professional man of letters concerned to the point of obsession with the commercial aspects and material qualities of his work. Rather than emphasizing the eclectic nature of Wilde’s career—as poet, journalist, novelist, playwright—Guy and Small stress the underlying continuity of his commercial concerns, interpreting his “apparent flitting from one genre to another” as “an attempt to exploit or ‘keep up’ with rapidly changing market conditions.” What this book demonstrates for the first time is that Wilde was preoccupied not just with the commodification of his own image or persona as “aesthete,” as Regenia Gagnier argues in Idylls of the Marketplace (1986), but with the mundane details of composition, design, and production—defined as “the look of a book”—and, most of all, with marketing and pricing. What Guy and Small term Wilde’s “dogged professionalism” is evident in the changes he made to The Picture of Dorian Gray following its periodical publication in 1890, when he was accused of writing for “perverted telegraph boys.” Rather than wishing to tone down the homoerotic content of the book, Guy and Small argue, Wilde’s “initial reason for expanding the novel... was a straightforward commercial one; purchasers of the book version had to be given something more for their extra five shillings.” This substitution of a mundane and commercial explanation for a scandalous or romantic one typifies their argument that Wilde’s motives were always in large part commercial.


The dominant perception of Oscar Wilde’s life and career over the last quarter century appears in the two-part structure of H. Montgomery Hyde’s 1976 biography: “Success” followed by “Nemesis.” Oscar Wilde’s Profession, co-authored by Josephine Guy and Ian Small, does much to undo and revise this distorted perception of one of Victorian Britain’s most compelling figures. First, the authors show, through a meticulous study of publishing and production history, that Wilde’s success was never as great as popularly believed. Second, the book makes a convincing argument that Wilde’s career
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