

# Scarlet letters lift the lid on Wilde's dalliances

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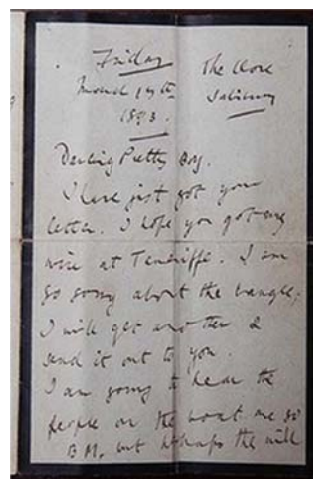


Oscar Wilde.

THE love letter, written in March 1893, begins with the words "My darling Pretty".

But it is the signature that links the Mardi Gras parade this weekend with the most celebrated gay legal case in history - the trials of Oscar Wilde.

"Goodbye now my dear darling beautiful Maurice; I send you all my love and millions of kisses all over your beautiful body. I am your loving boy-wife, Bosie."



Letter from Lord Alfred Douglas to Maurice Schwabe dated 5 March 1892. Photo: Simon Alekna



Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, circa 1893. *Photo: Simon Alekna*

Bosie was Lord Alfred Douglas, the son of the belligerent Marquess of Queensberry. Bosie and the married Irish playwright were already lovers. But Bosie was writing to Maurice Schwabe, another lover banished by his family to Sydney that year.

Two of Bosie's letters to Schwabe have just been discovered in the State Library of NSW by the curator Margot Riley. She'd never heard of Schwabe. But she found a photograph of Bosie sitting on the lap of "his friend" Schwabe in Oxford. Further investigation revealed Schwabe was "a catalyst" in the events that led to Wilde's being convicted of gross indecency in 1895.

Schwabe had gone to the same school as Alfred Taylor who went bankrupt and set up London's most notorious male brothel.

"It had long been a tradition in [upper class] English society for young men to explore their sexuality at school," says Riley. "And for gentlemen to pursue their homosexual interests as long as they were discreet. But a problem occurred when there was a crossover between the gentlemen and the underclass. And Maurice Schwabe seems to have been a conduit between the gentlemen and the rent boys.

"Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas were taking rent boys to dinners and parties, flaunting their sexuality."

As Schwabe was being banished to Australia, Wilde was being blackmailed by a rent boy, Alfred Wood. In his first letter to Schwabe, Bosie writes: "That boy is the worst

blackguard of all the renters in London. He is trying to rent [blackmail] Oscar with letters which Oscar had written to me and which AW [Wood] stole from my pocket."

Schwabe accompanied Wilde and a rent boy to Paris. But Schwabe's name was airbrushed from history - largely because of his uncle, Frank Lockwood, who was solicitor-general. In his first letter, Bosie wrote: "I went to the Savoy [hotel] with Oscar for two nights; and I was sentimental enough to go down to the old room 123 next to the restaurant where we used to sleep together.



Bosie posing with his boyfriend, Maurice Schwabe.

"My darling pretty boy, I do love you so much & miss you every minute ... I really love you far more than any other boy in the world, & shall always be your loving boy-wife, or your 'little bitch' if you prefer it."

How long Schwabe stayed in Sydney, and what happened to him, is still a mystery to Riley.

Gay culture historian Garry Witherspoon said Ms Riley's discovery was highly significant. He said references to "pretty boy" and "bitch" still resonated today. "There's nothing antiquarian about them."

So what would Wilde and Bosie have thought about the Mardi Gras parade?

"I think they would be amazed," says Witherspoon. "But they would be overjoyed to know that 'the love that dare not speak its name' is now shrieking like mad in a Sydney street."