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# *An Unpublished Letter by Oscar Wilde Found in Brazil*

## *Uma Carta Inédita de Oscar Wilde Encontrada no Brasil*

Fábio Waki

**Abstract:** *When Oscar Wilde accepted Wemyss Reid's offer to serve as editor-in-chief of The Woman's World in 1887, one of his first initiatives was to write a series of letters to eminent women of the period inviting them to contribute essays reflecting on modern society. Among the women he approached was Dame Millicent Fawcett, a prominent advocate for women's rights who would later become one of the most influential figures in the British suffrage movement. During a recent visit to the Biblioteca Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, I was able to confirm in its Manuscripts Section the existence of an unpublished letter that Wilde wrote to Dame Fawcett as part of this project. This article, originally published in The Wildean 67 (2025), examines the form and content of this message and provides a brief perspective on Dame Fawcett's activities in the social and cultural landscapes of late nineteenth-century Britain.*

**Keywords:** *Oscar Wilde; Millicent Fawcett; The Woman's World; Biblioteca Nacional; Manuscripts.*

**Resumo:** *Quando Oscar Wilde aceitou a proposta de Wemyss Reid para assumir o cargo de editor-chefe da The Woman's World em 1887, uma de suas primeiras iniciativas foi escrever uma série de cartas a mulheres eminentes da época convidando-as a contribuir com ensaios que refletissem sobre a sociedade moderna. Entre as mulheres com as quais ele entrou em contato estava Dame Millicent Fawcett, uma destacada defensora dos direitos das mulheres que mais tarde viria a se tornar uma das figuras mais influentes do movimento sufragista britânico. Em uma visita recente à Biblioteca Nacional no Rio de Janeiro, pude confirmar na Seção de Manuscritos a existência de uma*

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*carta inédita que Wilde escreveu a Dame Fawcett como parte desse projeto. Este artigo, originalmente publicado na The Wildean 67 (2025), examina a forma e o conteúdo dessa correspondência e oferece uma breve perspectiva sobre as atividades de Dame Fawcett no cenário social e cultural da Grã-Bretanha do final do século XIX.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Oscar Wilde; Millicent Fawcett; The Woman's World; Biblioteca Nacional; Manuscritos.*

The XIX Symposium of Irish Studies in South America, organised by the Brazilian Association of Irish Studies, took place at the University of São Paulo from 14 to 16 October 2024. During this event, Peter O'Neill, an independent researcher, informed me of the existence of a letter by Oscar Wilde to Dame Millicent Fawcett (1847–1929) currently held at the Biblioteca Nacional in Rio de Janeiro.[1] Mr O'Neill said it came to light in March 2023 in the context of the exhibition *Irish in Brazil/Irlandeses no Brasil*, of which he was the intellectual author and a co-curator, on display at the library from 16 March to 16 June 2023. The goal of the exhibition, organised by the Consulate General of Ireland in São Paulo with support of the Biblioteca Nacional, was to showcase material from the library's collection about the physical and intellectual presence of the Irish in Brazil since 1578, the year Thomas Field (1549–1625), an Irish priest and explorer, first set foot on its shores. Upon examining Wilde's letter at the Biblioteca Nacional, I realised it was likely an unpublished piece by the writer, a suspicion I soon confirmed by comparing it with his other letters and manuscripts. For this confirmation, I specifically relied on the letters compiled in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (2000), edited by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, as well as on the manuscripts held at the British Library in London, the Morgan Library in New York, the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in Los Angeles.

## Description and Transcription

Oscar Wilde's letter housed today at the Biblioteca Nacional in Rio de Janeiro is a four-page paper manuscript, undated, 7in × 8.85in (18cm × 22.5cm), written in black calligraphic handwriting, no images or marginalia by the author, circular stamps and minor pencil marginalia by the library. Wilde's address, 16 Tite Street – Chelsea S.W., is printed in a black letterhead at the top of the first page, while his signature can be clearly read at the bottom of

the last one. The letter bears no date, but it was probably written between May and July 1887 (see below).

This letter is included in an Autograph Album (BNMS Reg. 50/1274) purchased by Luiz Leopoldo Brício de Abreu (1903–70) from a man named Carlos Ribeiro in Brazil on 15 September 1950 for Cr$ 30,000. Brício de Abreu, one of the most influential men of letters in mid-twentieth century Rio de Janeiro, was notable for his role as chief editor of *Dom Casmurro* (1937–44), a literary magazine that, despite its left-wing leanings, remained one of the most significant cultural publications during the Estado Novo (1937–46). The name Carlos Ribeiro, exceedingly common in Brazil, probably refers to the original owner of Livraria São José, a bookshop in Rio de Janeiro celebrated as the oldest in the city and as home to one of the largest rare books collections in Latin America until its closure in 2021 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no known provenance for the letter before it came into the possession of Carlos Ribeiro.

**16. TITE STREET.**
**CHELSEA. S.W.**

Dear Mrs Fawcett.

Allow me to thank you for your kind promise to write. Any subject you choose is sure to be interesting.

Perhaps I should mention that Miss Sickert, a Girton graduate, has promised to write on the Development of Political Economy, a subject on which she gives lectures in connection with the University Extension Scheme.

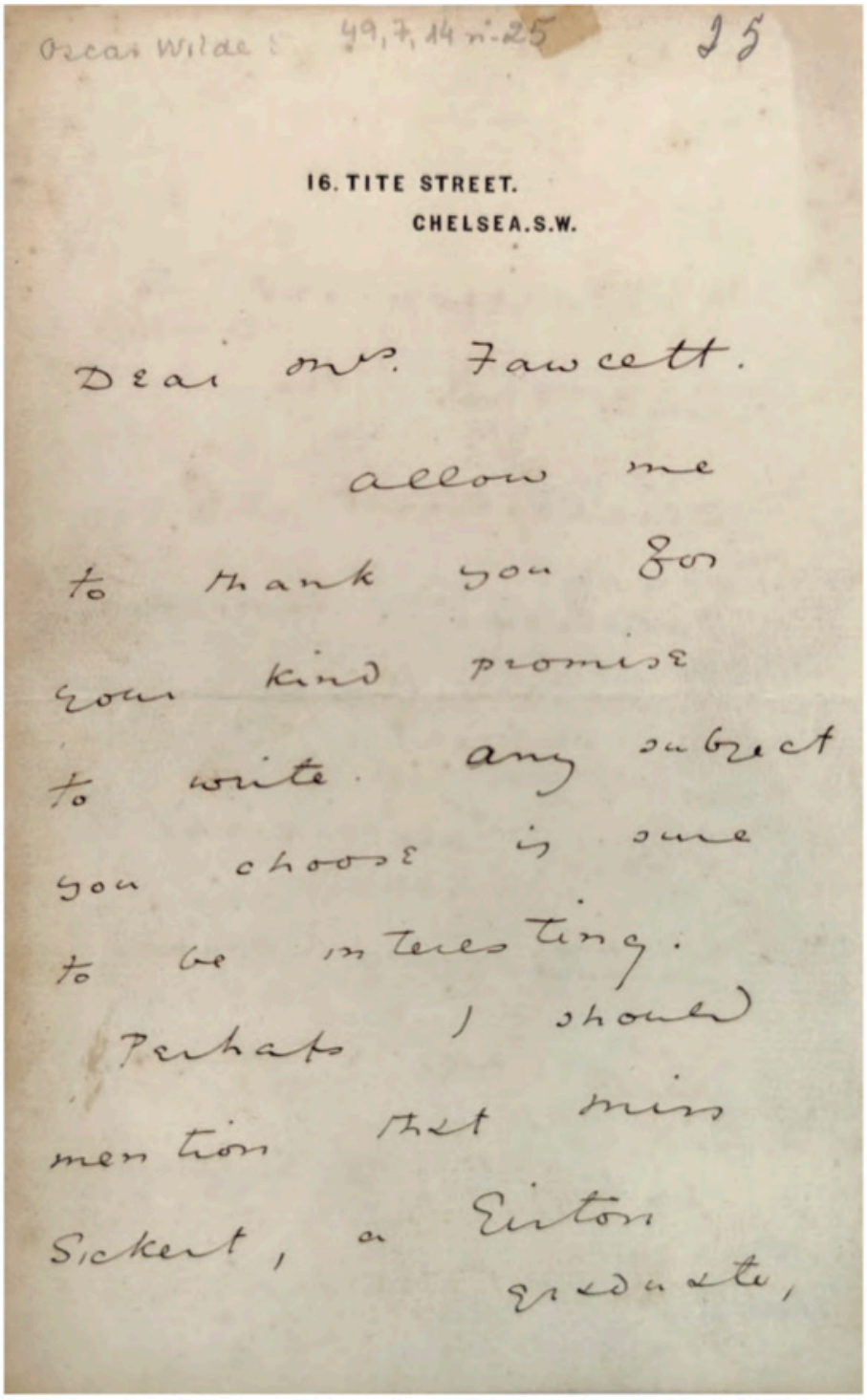
I would esteem it a great favour, and so would Messrs Cassell & Co. the proprietors of the magazine, if you would favour us from time to time with any suggestions that may occur to you — or send me the names of any ladies whose work could be of value, or who would wish to have an interview with literature. The magazine will always be open to any of your friends or protégés, and I am anxious to get some young writers, especially any who have received a University Education —

Believe me

yours very truly

Oscar Wilde

Text of the letter © The Estate of Oscar Wilde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A.r.º 50/1274

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Biblioteca Nacional Manuscritos

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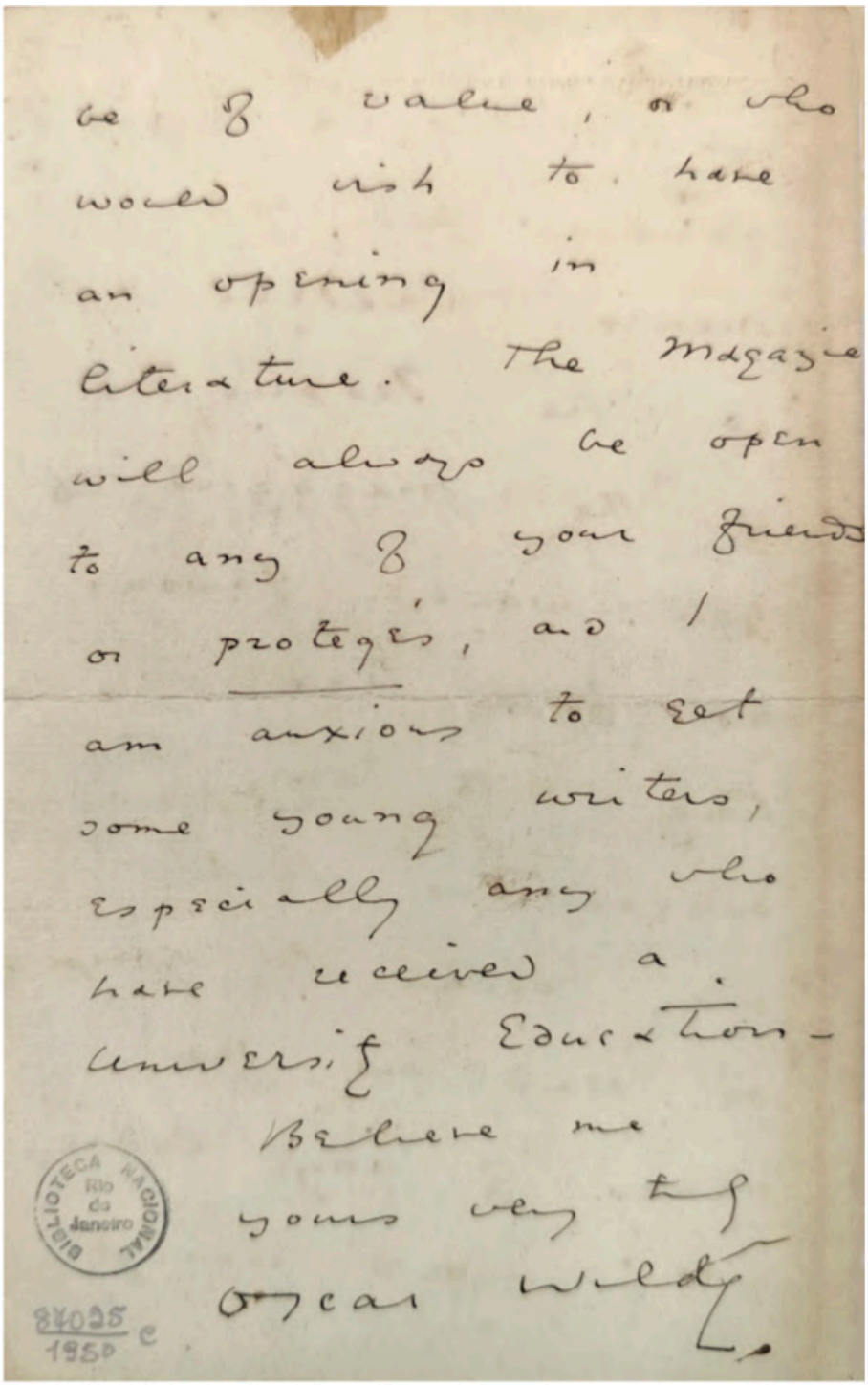
may occur to you -
or send me the
names of any ladies
whose work would

Biblioteca Nacional Manuscritos



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BIBLIOTECA NACIONAL Rio de Janeiro
84035
1950

## Context

When Oscar Wilde took on the role of editor of *The Lady's World* in 1887, one of his first changes was to rename it *The Woman's World*. While the original title suggested a magazine tailored for elite women, with content centred around fashion and household management, the new one indicated it would now be targeted at a broader female readership, encompassing topics such as society, politics, ethics, education, work, and art. This transformation of the periodical from what Cassell & Co. originally planned as a "new high-class magazine for ladies" into what Wilde conceived as a new "organ of women of intellect, culture, and position" (Holland and Hart-Davis 297) was also evident in the modifications made to its front cover. While the original layout featured an idealised woman admiring herself in a hand-held mirror, a book only casually placed in her other hand, the new one would now headline a list of contributors, showcasing within a frame of siren-caryatids the women who had authored articles for that edition. Wilde's project, therefore, was to redesign both the form and content of the magazine to explicitly connect the authors' names to their perspectives on issues that resonated with the interests of an increasingly complex class of women in fin-de-siècle reality. This approach was truly bold for its time. Not only did it acknowledge women as competent individuals capable of sharing their own experiences of and opinions about modern society, but it also recognised the ever-growing stratification of this society in ways that could no longer be understood solely from the perspective of its higher echelons.

Eleanor Fitzsimons writes about Wilde's conception of the magazine:

> Under Wilde's editorship, *The Woman's World* featured regular columns and commissioned articles, almost all of them written by identifiable rather than anonymous women. [...] Authors were identified by their forename and surname at the bottom of each article, with no mention of title or marital status, following the convention used by professional writers, who were generally men. This put women writers on a level with their male counterparts, allowing them a status not often extended to them. (Fitzsimons 11-12)

Wilde outlines this plan in his first response to Thomas Wemyss Reid (1842–1905), general manager of Cassell & Co. who in April 1887 had formally invited him to take on the post of editor of the magazine. He first writes about his conception of the publication as a whole:

> It seems to me that at present it is too feminine, and not sufficiently womanly. No one appreciates more fully than I do the value and importance of Dress, in its relation to good taste and good health: I have treated the subject on which I have constantly lectured on before Institutes and Societies of various kinds, but it seems to me that the field of the modernities, the field of mere millinery and trimmings, is to some extent already occupied by such papers as the Queen and the Lady's Pictorial, and that we should take a wider range, as well as a high standpoint, and deal not merely with what women wear, but with what they think, and what they feel. The Lady's World should be made the recognised organ for the expression of women's opinions on all subjects of literature, art, and modern life, and yet it should be a magazine that men could read with pleasure, and consider it a privilege to contribute to. (Holland and Hart-Davis 297)

He then explains his ideas on how to reconstruct it:

> We should get if possible the Princess Louise and the Princess Christian to contribute to it: an article from the latter on needlework for instance in connection with the Art School of which she is President would be very interesting. Carmen Sylva and Madame Adam should be got to write: Mrs Julia Ward Howe of Boston should be invited to contribute, as well as some of the other cultured women of America, while our list should include such women as Lady Archibald Campbell, a charming writer, Lady Ardilaun, who might give us some of her Irish experiences, Mrs Jeune, Miss Harrison, Miss Mary Robinson, Miss Olive Schreiner, the author of South African Farm; Lady Greville, whose life of Montrose is a very clever monograph, Miss Dorothy Tennant, Lady Verney, Lady Dilke, Lady Dufferin, Lady Constance Howard, Matthew Arnold's daughter, Lady Brassey, Lady Beatrice, Lady Rosebery, Lady Dorothy Nevill, who could write on the Walpoles, Mrs Singleton (Violet Fane), Lady Diana Huddleston, Lady Catherine Gaskell, Lady Paget, Miss Rosa Mulholland, Hon Emily Lawless, Lady Harberton, Mrs Charles McLaren, Lady Pollock, Mrs Fawcett, Miss Pater (sister of the author of Marius) and others too numerous to name in a letter. (Holland and Hart-Davis 297)

Wilde agreed terms with Cassell & Co. in May 1887, and Reid wanted to start paying him from 1st June, ready for the appearance of the first issue edited by him in November. However, Wilde asked that his pay be backdated to 1st May as he was already doing a great deal of work for the magazine (Holland and Hart-Davis 299), much of which involved writing letters to the

women he had mentioned in his proposal and others, asking them to contribute articles. In his letter to Fawcett, Wilde mentions that he has already invited Helena Sickert to contribute an article, and Holland and Hart-Davis propose a date for this letter of 27 May 1887. (Holland and Hart-Davis 301n. The letter is dated, but not in Wilde's hand.) He also wrote to Eleanor Sidgwick (1845–1913), campaigner for women's suffrage and higher education who would later serve as principal of Newnham College at the University of Cambridge (1892–1910):

> [July 1887?]
> 16 Tite Street
>
> Dear Mrs Sidgwick, I am very anxious to have your assistance in a scheme I am engaged in. I have been asked by Messrs Cassell to edit one of their monthly magazines and am anxious to make it the recognised organ through which women of culture and position will express their views. Mrs Fawcett, Miss Thackeray, Lady Dorothy Nevill, Lady Wentworth, Miss Orme, Mrs Francis Jeune, Lady Archibald Campbell and others have promised to write, and I hope you will allow me to add your name to the list of contributors, and, when you have leisure, write an article on any modern subject, or indeed on any subject you select. (Holland and Hart-Davis 307)

As Wilde tells Sidgwick that Mrs Fawcett has already agreed to write for The Woman's World, his letter to Fawcett must have been written after 27 May (the date of the letter to Helena Sickert proposed by Holland and Hart-Davis) and before July 1887, the proposed date for the letter to Sidgwick.[2] Furthermore, the letter to Fawcett is clearly a response to one he has already received from her agreeing to his proposal, so there were at least two other letters before this of which the location is unknown.

## Dame Millicent Garrett Fawcett

Dame Millicent Garrett Fawcett was an English feminist, activist and writer, who became particularly known in Victorian society for her leading role in the women's suffrage movement. She began her activism in 1868, with the London Suffrage Committee, and delivered her first public speech in 1869, at a women's suffrage meeting in this city. In 1870, her connection to Oscar Wilde became evident through her association with Sir William Wilde (1815–76) and

Lady Jane Wilde (1821–96) during a suffrage meeting in Dublin after which she spoke at the Wildes' house on Merrion Square in Dublin. She later maintained her relationship with Lady Wilde in London, where they attended further gatherings focused on women's suffrage and political participation.[3] In 1888, the year in which her article appeared in *The Woman's World*, Millicent Fawcett and Constance Wilde were both on the Committee of Women 'formed in connection with the international Peace and Arbitration Society'.[4] This close association and shared interests probably influenced her decision to accept Wilde's invitation to contribute an article to the magazine.

Fawcett led the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies from 1897 to 1919, frequently suggesting nonviolent initiatives for legislative reforms to secure women's voting rights. Her arguments often challenged tired contrary claims such as that women's physical differences made them unfit for political participation. She refuted these claims by dismissing the idea that physical combat should be a prerequisite for political involvement, emphasising, instead, the complementary roles of men and women in society and their shared responsibility for the nation's welfare. Her reasoning was that women's perspectives and contributions were essential for balanced and effective governance precisely because they so often contrasted with those of their male counterparts.

Fawcett also championed the political involvement of women through organisations such as the Primrose League and Women's Liberal Associations, emphasising their growing power to influence political discourse and election outcomes. Interestingly, she noted that, although political corruption was typically driven by men, women were often compelled to shoulder the financial burdens that resulted from it, all while being denied the very voting rights these men enjoyed.

Fawcett's advocacy for women's suffrage extended to global issues, tackling oppressive practices in places like British-controlled India, where women were often called upon to challenge injustices such as child marriage. This perspective reflected her conviction in the universal applicability of women's rights and the moral responsibility of English women to influence reforms in foreign communities.

Also an advocate for equal rights in education, Fawcett co-founded Newnham College at the University of Cambridge in 1871, furthering higher education opportunities for a growing class of women in the country. In his letter, Wilde seems especially interested

in her work on women's education as a topic for the magazine, but her contribution would eventually focus on her broader interest in women's political rights.

Fawcett's article 'Women's Suffrage', which appeared in the November 1888 edition of *The Woman's World*, was a lightly edited transcript of a paper Fawcett had delivered at a meeting of the Cambridge Women's Suffrage Association at the Guildhall on Wednesday 16 February 1887.[5] It offered a strong critique of the exclusion of women from political enfranchisement, framing it as both an 'absurdity' and an 'anomaly'. She argues that, while men of all capabilities, including uneducated men, are normally granted the right to vote, women, regardless of their intelligence, responsibility, contribution, or education, are denied this basic right, even when they actively contribute to society. She ultimately advocates for incremental reforms of truly realistic nature, such as the Women's Suffrage Bill, which sought to enfranchise female householders.

A distinctive aspect of her perspectives on the advancement of women's rights, as evident in this essay, is in fact their pragmatism. Her ideas ultimately gravitate around the idea that granting women the right to vote is less about fairness and more about challenging laws unjust to women. While fairness may be a moral premise too abstract to yield tangible results, challenging unjust laws inevitably leads to the reorganisation of society into a more beneficial and productive collective structure.

Fawcett was throughout her life a tireless advocate for equality, education, and justice, especially as a pathway to a more effective enfranchisement of women as integral members of society. Her efforts culminated in significant recognitions, including her appointment as Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire (GBE) in 1925 and her memorial in Westminster Abbey. In 2018, she became the first woman honoured with a statue in Parliament Square, a testament to her enduring legacy in the fight for women's rights.

## Conclusion

Oscar Wilde's letter to Dame Millicent Fawcett, recently found in Brício de Abreu's manuscript collection at the Biblioteca Nacional in Brazil, confirms Wilde's relationships with important figures in Victorian society, sheds new light on his work as a magazine editor, reaffirms his commitment to women's interests, and hints at the possible existence of yet other letters that could further help reconstruct the mosaic of his life. This manuscript, however, is not the first one to come to light in connection with Brazilian sources.

In 2008, Lúcia Moreira Salles (†2009), widow of businessman Walther Moreira Salles (1912–2001), gifted a collection of Wilde's letters and manuscripts to the Morgan Library & Museum in New York. This volume includes messages Wilde exchanged with Alfred Douglas (1870–1945) as well early versions of several of his shorter prose works. Despite its remarkable content, however, few Brazilian scholars seem to be aware of its provenance and existence.

It is widely recognised in Brazilian literary studies today that Wilde deeply influenced writers such as João do Rio (1881–1921) and Mário de Andrade (1893–1945)[6], both of whom drew inspiration from his works and used them as a creative resource to reaffirm their homosexuality within Brazilian society. Still, this letter in Rio de Janeiro and his manuscripts in New York indicate that the role played by Brazilian collectors in bringing his literature into Brazilian culture remains an unexplored subject. His letter has been housed at the Biblioteca Nacional for more than seventy years but has only recently been recognised as a subject of scholarly interest. Similarly, his manuscripts have been housed at the Morgan Library for nearly two decades, yet only a handful of Wildean scholars, even in Brazil, are currently aware of their preservation.

Tracing the exact origins of Wilde's writings is not always possible, but their eventual acquisition by figures such as Brício de Abreu and Moreira Salles highlights his lasting impact as an artist with cultural circles reaching as far afield as Latin America. This article therefore seeks to bring to light the discovery of Wilde's letter in Brazil while emphasising how this finding also exposes the need for further investigation into the influence of his literature and its enduring presence in cultures beyond his own.

## Acknowledgements

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to Merlin Holland, for agreeing to the publication of the letter, to Joseph Bristow and Eleanor Fitzsimons for helpful suggestions, and to Vanessa Heron for the photograph of the statue of Millicent Fawcett. This study was financed, in part, by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), Brasil. Process Number 2022/09946-3.

## Notes

1. Wilde's manuscript can be found online on Biblioteca Nacional's portal: https://objdigital.bn.br/objdigital2/acervo_digital/div_manuscritos/mss87025/mss87025.pdf
2. Like the letter to Helena Sickert, the letter to Eleanor Sidgwick is dated but in another hand. Helena Sickert would write 'The Evolution of Economics: Competition – Combination – Cooperation' which appeared in the February 1889 issue of *The Woman's World*. No article by Eleanor Sidgwick appeared.
3. In 1880 they were on the platform for a meeting on female enfranchisement at the St James's Hall, Piccadilly (Morning post, 7 May 1880, 2); in 1883 they attended a meeting in the Prince's Hall, Piccadilly on the relative freedoms of women in the USA and Britain (Morning post, 26 June 1883, 3).
4. *Echo*, 20 February 1888, 1.
5. Fawcett in Fitzsimons, 75–9. It was also reproduced in full on page six of the *Cambridge Independent Press* on 12 February 1887, with the heading 'Mrs Henry Fawcett on women's Suffrage. Meeting at Cambridge'. Her speech, one of several delivered in support of the movement by members of the university and others, was applauded frequently throughout.
6. See Braga-Pinto and Vergara.

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