

REUNITING WITH COUSIN MERLIN

By Ken McNaughton

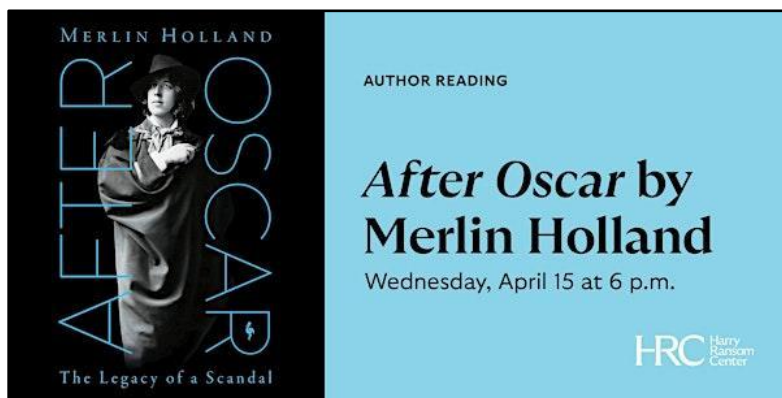
Merlin came to Melbourne with his parents in the summer of 1947, before his second birthday, and I saw him a couple of times when I was in London 1964/65 and he was at Eton. After he lived in France we kept in touch, but had not seen one another for sixty years.

When I was seeking an archive for my writing works, Merlin recommended I register with the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas, Austin. In an HRC email of 2 April 2026, I was delighted to see that he would be reading from his latest book on April 15th. I emailed that I was thinking of coming, and he replied:

*Hi Ken,
Thanks for this. Yes, would be good to meet after so long. Your email surprised me as right from the start and in all my emails the HRC and I had agreed on 16th as I'm flying in late afternoon on 15th from LA. I left 24 hrs leeway in case of delays/cancellations. Now I see they've listed it as 15th on their events website, so probably too late to change it as people like you may have made plans to come from out-of-state. In the circumstances better plan for breakfast on 16th I think. ... I'm staying at the AT&T Conference Hotel
Looking forward to it,
Best, Merlin*



Figure 1. Promotional shot for the April 15th reading.



I had been to Austin before on business, so I decided to keep things simple—fly Wednesday and fly back Thursday, with just a backpack. I am used to checking a suitcase and stowing my old Columbia backpack under the seat in front, but a frozen zipper precluded expansion of that. A Rail-Riders catalog arrived on April 10th and, when I opened it

on the 11th, a caramel-colored weekender bag with back straps drew my attention. Made of soft, tough waxed cotton, it was more versatile, and would still fit under the seat in front. I hated to pay for two-day air delivery, but took the plunge.

Figure 3. Hilton Garden Inn Capitol

The bag had not arrived when I left the house at 6am on the fifteenth, but I managed to stuff most things in the Columbia backpack. A blue waist pack was big enough for my Canon point-and-shoot, wallet, flip phone and glasses case, with drawstring pouch for my mini umbrella or a bottle of water. On the flight from Baltimore-Washington International to Austin there were four empty seats between my window seat and the window seat on the right-hand side.

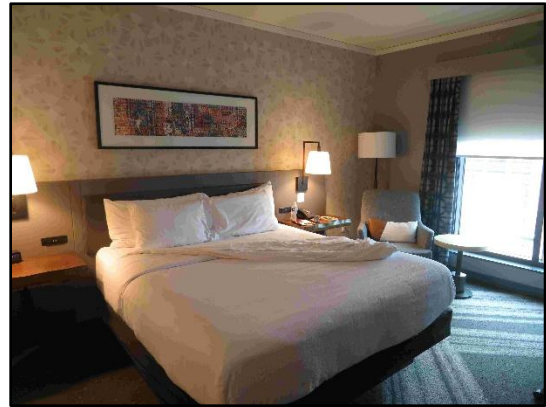


Figure 2. Arturo's Underground Cafe



At the taxi stand, the next available cab was driven by Farid, a Berber from Morocco. He said that the Berber language and faith are different from Arabic and Muslim, and mentioned that they are all haters, but he wasn't. He said he lived alone in Austin and didn't know any other Berbers here, but flew back twice a year. I was disturbed that he didn't have a meter, but handed me his electronic device and said that would be fifty dollars. I drew back my credit card in shock and said that was way too much. He offered to reduce the price, and handed back the

device, now marked forty-seven. What a joke! I said I wouldn't pay that either. He asked what I wanted to pay. I vaguely recalled it should be thirty-five, and blurted out "thirty." He accepted that, acknowledging that I had previously written down his name and home telephone number for a possible return trip. I didn't offer a tip, and he drove off.

Figure 5. Moody Patio, Blanton Museum



It was three years since I had flown interstate, and I was a bit shaken up when I arrived at the Hilton Garden Inn Capitol at noon. I had planned to freshen up, have lunch and explore Austin. Joy said there were no rooms available, and mentioned the possibility of up-charging for accommodation. I said I wasn't feeling very welcome in Austin, before realizing that check-in time was 3pm. She mentioned Arturo's Underground Café across the street, where I had a delicious Thai Veggie sandwich and a hot cup of Vanilla Chai tea. Back at the hotel, Joy found me a City View room, where I could see all the cars in the rooftop parking lot across the street.

On my walk to the Blanton Art Museum Galleries, I saw several white sedans with bulbous tops marked Waymo, but didn't discover until I got home, that these were self-driving taxis. The Moody Patio, between the galleries and the administrative building, is shaded by twelve three-



story-tall perforated “petals.” The entrance space of the museum consists of 3,100 square feet of custom-cast acrylic that covers the walls in horizontal stripes, from deep blue to white at the top.

Figure 3. “tx-mirror” interactive digital art.

I spent an hour browsing the galleries, and was particularly impressed with some of the interactive digital art. When I strolled over to “tx- mirror” (2018) by two artists in Vienna, I thought I recognized a real-time distorted image of myself, but why did I feel disoriented? I was watching a video at two different moments in time, twenty seconds apart! “The World of Irreversible Change” (2022) was created by *teamLab* in Tokyo, and consists of six wall-mounted monitors, with sound, that looks like a Japanese folding-screen panoramic city-view,

bustling with tiny people going about their business. Their movements are synchronized with its physical location and conditions in Austin—day, night, weather, and seasons—even with viewer interactions, which made me feel I was influencing its miniature citizens.

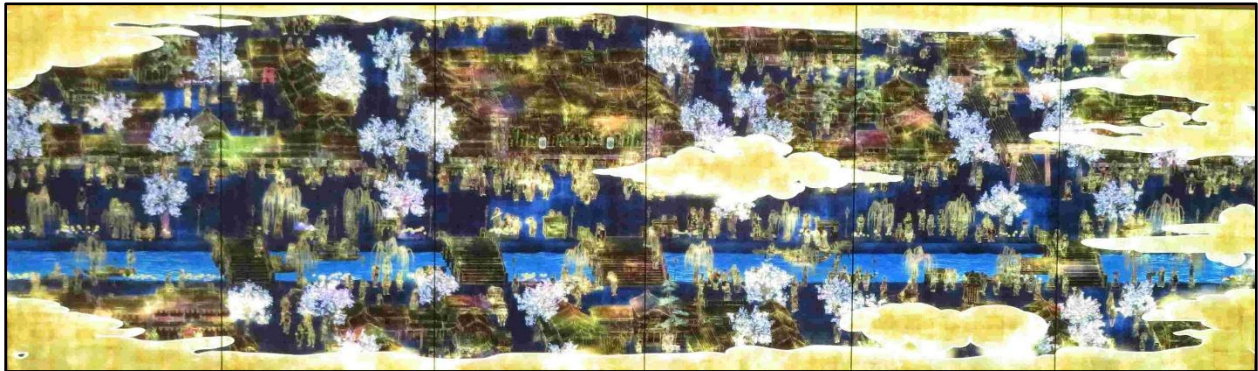


Figure 4. The World of Irreversible Change.

Figure 5. Ellsworth Kelly’s structure “Austin.”

Outside, in the grounds, is “Austin,” the monumental last work by renowned American artist Ellsworth Kelly, a 2,715-square-foot stone structure with luminous glass windows—the only building that the artist designed. To me it looked like a truly non-denominational church. Although cross-shaped, there is no text or religious paraphernalia inside, just one silent black-garbed docent, a plain wooden totem pole, and colored window patterns on each side, including a circle, a sun-burst and a cube. Nearby is the Butler Sound Gallery, a permanent outdoor space devoted to sound art. As I strolled the winding path, I was surrounded by subtle bird song and other sounds of nearby areas, conveyed by the artist’s specialized equipment.

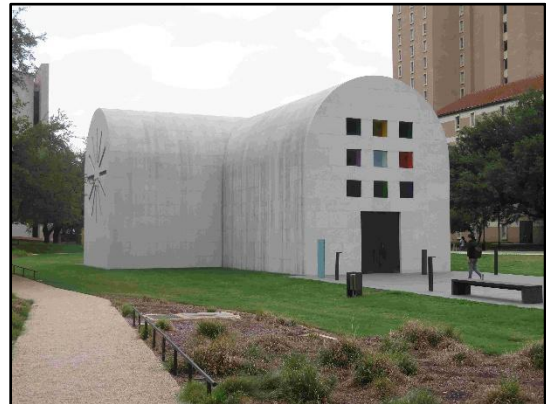
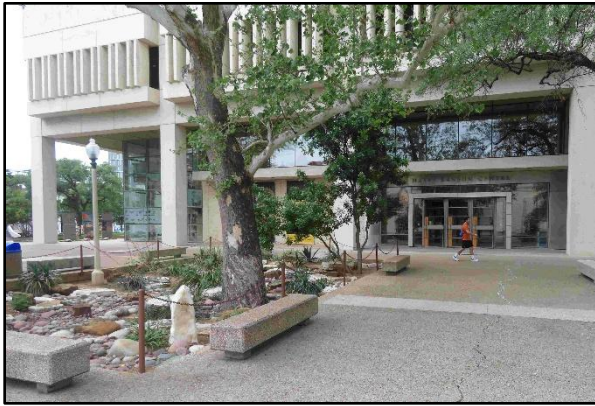


Figure 6. Entrance to the Harry Ransom Center.



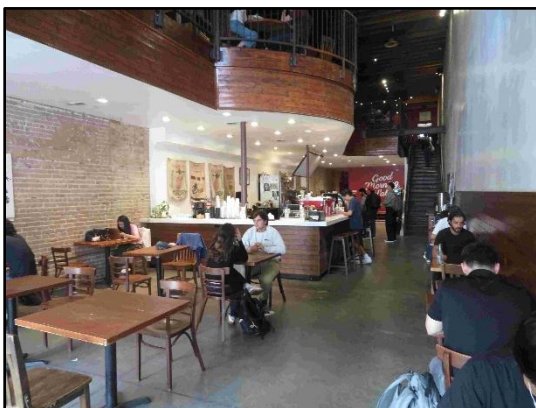
The Harry Ransom Center, also surrounded by the University of Texas, is nearby, so I sampled some of the exhibits: a copy of the first substantial book printed by moveable type with the help of a press, Gutenberg and Fust's *Biblia Latina* (1454-1456) open at the Book of Isaiah; the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, a funerary papyrus that unrolled, once stretched to thirty feet (300-250 BCE); and an Alphonse Mucha poster of the legendary French actress, Sarah Bernhardt, in her gender-defying portrayal of Shakespeare's Hamlet in 1899.

Figure 7. Egyptian Book of the Dead 300-250 BCE.

I started the day with a 5am alarm in Baltimore (4am Texas time), blue jeans, a long-sleeved tee and fleece top, and a host of unfamiliar activities. At one time, I was on a sidewalk, reading a map, and about to encounter three steps that I hadn't noticed until it was almost too late. Walking the Blanton galleries was tiring, and I decided to return to the Hilton and lie down for an hour. I showered, and changed into shorts and a short-sleeved polo, a great relief in the humid heat.



Figure 8. My blue fleece on back of my chair at Medici.



I was surprised to see, kitty-corner across Guadalupe Street from the Ransom Center, local Scientology headquarters, with open door, offering free personality tests. I wondered how many young university students wandered in and joined up. Fortunately, next door was the Medici Coffee House, two floors packed with students in ones and twos with their laptops and casual good looks. I enjoyed a sausage, egg & cheese sandwich for \$9.50 and a cup of Ambrosia black tea. Every meal so far this day had been good, including, while I waited for take-off at Baltimore, a *Pot Belly* Powerhouse salad, and a bottle of water to take on the plane (I had to ask a young man to twist the cap off the bottle, but I will be 86 in July, so did so with aplomb).

The Inner Campus Drive is right across Guadalupe Street from Medici, so I wandered back to absorb some of the atmosphere before returning to the Harry Ransom Center. The semester was winding up, and students seemed in a festive mood.

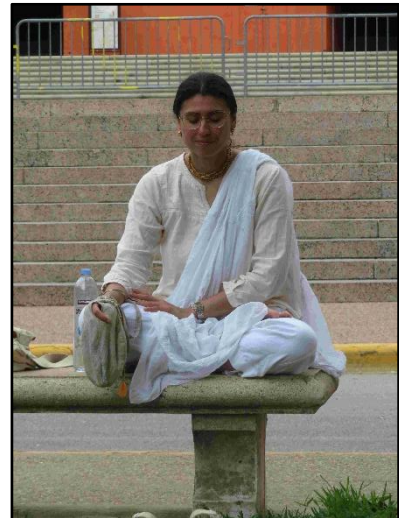
A young couple pause at a fountain, he in his cowboy hat.



A squirrel and a bird square off for some food that may have been left for them on a bench.



A student from India, squatting on a bench, laid out cushions on the grass for a yoga class.



A young woman practiced jubilation for her upcoming graduation.



Great-tailed grackles, Austin's official mascot, have brilliant black/blue/green plumage and beady white/yellow eyes. Some are shedding their enormous tail feathers; females are brown.



I asked why there were so many pedestrian detour notices. Turns out that Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas was making an address in honor of the 250th Anniversary of U.S. at the historic 1,000-seat Hogg Memorial Auditorium; some protests ensued.



It was almost time for Merlin's 6pm reading. But where was my blue fleece? I must have left it on the back of my chair at Medici! I hurried along Inner Campus Drive, crossed Guadalupe, entered Medici, and there it was, draped over the back of the chair, just like in Figure 8.

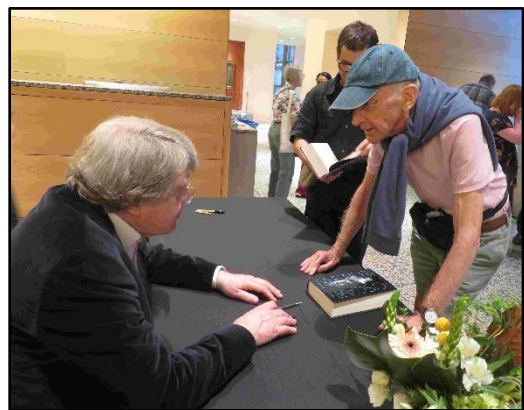
Figure 9. Merlin reads from the podium.

At the door of the Harry Ransom Prothro Theater, I asked Barbara, a volunteer, if it would be OK to take photos. When she came back, she suggested I be discreet and sit up front, so I sat at the right-hand end of the second front row. Shortly after, Annalisa Scott, Membership Manager, said she had spoken to Merlin and, in order to forestall any copycat photographing, I should wait until she got up and said "We have time for one more question." Eric Colleary, Cline Curator of Theatre and Performing Arts, introduced Merlin, who arose from the center of the front row, mounted the steps and walked to the lectern. This was the first time I had seen him in sixty years.

Merlin apologized for a raspy voice, saying he had brought "some of his wife" with him on the trip. He spoke from a sheaf of notes, attempting to convey in about an hour and a quarter, what his almost seven-hundred-page book was about. "After Oscar: The Legacy of a Scandal" covers Oscar Wilde's release from prison, his movements, his family and friends, the stories, true and false about what happened next, his death, burial, monuments, media, and Merlin's own efforts, over decades, to discover and publish the truth. Some of the most intensive work involved unravelling what his own parents, Vyvyan Oscar Beresford Wilde and Dorothy Thelma Helen Besant, had said and published about Oscar. Thelma and my mother, Lilian May Besant, grew up in Melbourne, Australia. Lilian married Charles Dudley McNaughton and produced Eiril Margaret and Kenneth John (that's me). Thelma moved to London and married Vyvyan, who produced Christopher Merlin Vyvyan Holland.

Figure 10. Merlin and I meet for the first time in sixty years.

After one question and answer, Annalisa announced there was time for one more, and I took a few shots with my Canon point-and-shoot on Automatic. Eric thanked Merlin, and the audience, about a hundred, retreated to the lobby. Many bought books from two representatives of First Light Bookshop, and thirty or forty lined up to have Merlin sign. Food and drinks were on hand. I chatted with the volunteer, Barbara, had a snack, and waited till Merlin had chatted with





each person and signed. I asked Annalisa to take some photos with my camera, and approached Merlin—for the first time in sixty years. He signed the title page of the copy I bought, and explained what he had written, “For dear cousin Ken this account of part of our family, and hoping he will forgive my frankness about his aunt! With love, Merlin.”

Figure 11. Merlin explains what he has written in my copy.

We are both professionals, so I said, “What time is good for breakfast tomorrow morning?” Annalisa helped moderate our brief discussion about the restaurant and cafe at the AT&T Convention Center and Hotel where he was staying; we settled on the Carillon at 8:30am. It was a brief but satisfying reunion. Merlin was whisked away by Harry Ransom officials, and I had an appointment at the Cactus Café in the Student Union.

Figure 12. First cousins shake hands.



On my stroll through campus, I had learned there would be a jazz concert in the Cactus Café from 7:30 till 9pm. When I arrived, the 153-seat venue was full, and three students held guard at the door. I put my name down, but the only people leaving were going to the bathroom and returning. I chatted for a while, but I was eleventh on the list, so reluctantly walked back toward Gaudalupe Street.

Inner Campus Drive splits two ways, in and out, with a plaza in the middle and a low stone wall at right angles. I heard some great Latin music, and saw a group of students this side of the wall. It was a social outing for the Salsa and Latin Dance group, the secretary, Victoria, explained. I dropped my things next to a high-fidelity sound box—Merlin’s book wrapped in a plastic bag given to me by the Ransom janitor, my waist pack, and my blue fleece—and leaned with my back against the wall, watching the students practicing their Latin steps. Victoria asked if I would like to dance, but I said I was a creative freestyler, and didn’t know the steps they were doing. She lingered by my side, and I said I didn’t want to make a fool of myself, but maybe we could try, and see what happens.

Just then, the music changed to one of my favorite Latin rhythms. I took Victoria in my arms, took a few steps, and broke into an ecstatic explosion, which she complemented. When the number finished, I thanked her, turned to Marine, a girl sitting on the wall, and asked if she took a video. She did, and I asked if she would be able to email me a clip. She agreed, and asked for my email address, but she was French, and couldn’t catch the “at” symbol, so another student typed it in (Merlin later explained that the French equivalent sounds more complicated).

The eight-second clip arrived three days later, with me and Victoria dancing up a storm. It freezes on the final frame, me in pink short-sleeved polo shirt and blue denim baseball cap, with seven couples scattered in the background, the plaza, and lights under a canopy of green. Playing it on ten-second repeat gives an impression of an extended segment.

The AT&T Convention Center and Hotel was only two long blocks from the Hilton. Merlin graciously asked if I wanted to sit on the inside or outside of the table. He had now finished his tour, with seven readings, including two each in New York City and Los Angeles, and one each in Philadelphia PA and Princeton NJ. We chatted over coffee and decaf, and he talked about the book, the tour, and of course, about Oscar, and the family. He ordered homemade granola with Greek yoghurt, berries and honey, an English muffin and marmalade. I had a salmon bagel with herb-whipped cream cheese and cucumber-tomato relish.

At 10:30am we were the last customers (they closed at 10), so we retired to the lobby. I gave him a greeting card with my 85th birthday portrait by Roy Cox, and an eight-page story I produced, "Making John Adams." I wanted to make sure he would know where to find the two-minute video of me as Virginia Delegate Benjamin Harrison with five of the principals in Episode Two of the HBO nine-part miniseries. He brought his laptop and we googled "John Adams meets George Washington." I pointed out some of the other players, including Paul Giamatti, and Tom Wilkinson who also played the Marquess of Queensberry in the 1997 movie "Wilde."

For a memento photo, Merlin suggested we sit on a stone wall outside in the sun where the valet took some shots. I needed to get back to my hotel and check out by noon. It was a happy three-hour reunion, both of us aware of our advancing years, and both still very active. His son Lucian lives "off the grid" with his wife in the Sierra Nevada, near Granada, having graduated in Classics, which proved to be an advantage for his work in information technology. Merlin and I are both concerned with finding the truth about "what happened," he with multiple books related to his grandfather, Oscar Wilde, and me with my narrative, non-fiction illustrated personal essays. He is already involved with producing a new catalog of Wildean literature in Turkey.

After I checked out of the Hilton, I stored my back pack, and walked around the State Capitol and grounds. The Tejano Monument, commemorating the impact of Tejanos on Texas culture and history, includes nine life-size bronze statues on a 275-ton Texas Sunset Red Granite base, and five plaques describing Tejano history. As on Wednesday, I had lunch at Arturo's Underground Café. There was a photo of Willy Nelson on the wall. He has a ranch west of town, and it wouldn't surprise me if he sometimes ate at Arturo's. Back at the Hilton, Joy found a lovely transparent plastic bag from India for Merlin's book. They called a cab, and I had a comfortable ride, with a meter, and a driver from Nigeria. Near the departure gate I had a sudden urge for yoghurt and fruit. I wasn't sure if this was a bodily need, or because there happened to be a Berry Austin booth right there, where I was able to enjoy a delicious bowl of vanilla yogurt with freshly cut banana and strawberries.

On the way home I started Merlin's book, dedicated "For Emma and Lucian, with love." The image he chose of himself for the back cover flap was taken at our family home, either at 16 Adrian Street in Burwood, or next door where he stayed with his grandparents and nurse while his parents were touring. Merlin is not yet two years old, sitting in a little wooden wheelbarrow. I

was seven and my sister was nine. The barrow was probably mine, made by my grandfather or stepfather. Perhaps I was told I could use it to follow my step-father around the garden, which my grandmother commented I loved to do.

Oscar Wilde and his wife Constance Lloyd had two children. Cyril was born on 5 June 1885 and died on 5 May 1915, killed in France by a German sniper. Vyvyan was born on 3 November 1886. After 1895, when Wilde was convicted of the charge of gross indecency and imprisoned, Constance changed her and the boys' surname to Holland, and relocated with the boys to Switzerland. Vyvyan married Violet Mary Craigie on 7 January 1914. She died on 15 October 1918 at Westminster Hospital, Middlesex, subsequent to injuries caused by her evening gown catching alight near an open fire. In September 1943, he married my mother's sister. Their only child, Merlin, was born in London in 1945. Merlin is the only grandchild of Oscar Wilde and has written extensively about his grandfather.

Waiting half-an-hour for a Long-Term B parking shuttle wasn't my favorite part of the Texas trip, but when I got home, I was delighted with my Rail-Riders Weekender bag, which exceeded my expectations. Although it didn't arrive in time, I will treasure it as the bag I bought for my reunion with cousin Merlin. And Rail Riders refunded the shipping cost.

Twelve days later, the British publication *The Guardian* headlined an article with these three sentences: "Mission accomplished as king's speech to Congress goes down a storm. Charles quoted Wilde and Dickens in measured masterclass – and no tirade as yet from mad monarch in White House. A flick of Oscar Wilde here, a nod to Henry Kissinger there, a sprinkling of Charles Dickens here, a dollop of Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt there. Job done!" The article later revealed the actual quote (from *The Canterville Ghost*): "As Oscar Wilde said, 'We have really everything in common with America nowadays except, of course, language!'"

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