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Books

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Mah-velous, dah-ling

by [Mark Steyn](#)

On *The Letters of Noël Coward*, edited by James Sexton.

James Sexton, editor

The Letters of Noël Coward.

Knopf, 800 pages, \$37.50

In the very first of *The Letters of Noël Coward*, the eponymous epistler writes:

Darling Mother

I hope you are well. Girlie has taught me to row with two oars and I row her along. I had some little boys over yesterday afternoon to tea and I dressed up in a short dress and danced to them and sung to them and we all went round the lake and on it.

XXXXXOOOOOXO

I am writing this in the kitchen with love from Noël Coward.

He was seven and already inventing himself. The letters got longer in the years ahead but the subject matter didn't change much: tea, dressing up, singing and dancing, though not as many boys as you might think. The snobbery was in place a mere half-decade or so later: Of some blameless lady in Wolverhampton who gave him tea and indeed the tuppenny bus fare to get to her house, the child actor sighs wearily, "I've never met anyone so painfully provincial in all my life." Which seems a mite affected for a lower-middle-class boy from one of the drearier outskirts of London. By 1934, one of his last surviving non-celebrity friends, Esme Wynn, was warning that the construction of "Noël Coward" was overshadowing all else:

I wonder if you realize how you, personally, are getting to dwarf your achievements... .

It gets more noticeable every time I see you... . Nothing to do with your writing—though, of course, it will affect that.

I'm not sure that it did. If anything, his later writing suffers from not being soaked in Noël Coward's personality: There were cloying neo-Mitteleuropean operettas and Oscar Wilde adaptations and a London-lowlife musical, and a terrible novel and plays about a fictional island called Samolo. But, from the 1940s on, there weren't a lot of what we think of as "Noël Coward plays." I was at a small dinner in Palm Beach recently with one of the executive supremos of this fine publication and also a famous London boulevardier a little the worse for wear by that stage of the evening. And in mid-anecdote our pal found himself struggling to recall the precise name of the play he was referring to: "You know. The one with the balcony. *Brief Lives*."

Close enough. *Private Lives*, not *Brief Encounter*. But, in the third of a century since Noël Coward's

own life came to an end, his plays, out of favor in the West End of the early 1970s, have come to embody what's left of the theatergoing habit to a middle class for whom "the theater" means, you know, a play with a balcony, and people in evening dress on it saying smart brittle things about the potency of cheap music and the flatness of Norfolk. He created his own persona and then produced a huge body of work to service it. The *Letters* are, in that sense, merely one more platform. There are Noël Coward plays, Noël Coward songs, Noël Coward television specials—and now Noël Coward missives. In most of the fields in which he intermittently practiced, he's not a major figure, except as a figure—as the very personification of 'tween-wars wit and sophistication. It was a reputation he wore lightly. In 1954, he wrote to the Lunts:

I have been having a terrible time with *After The Ball*, mainly on account of Mary Ellis's singing voice which, to coin a phrase, sounds like someone fucking the cat. I know that your sense of the urbane, sophisticated Coward wit will appreciate this simile.

So how about that urbane sophistication? Well, I would wager no other epistolary anthology has as diverse a range of intros and outros. To his doting mother: "Ducky old Diddleums. Ever your own, Dinkybobs." To Broadway leading man Clifton Webb: "Darling Mr. Webb. Love and mad mad kisses, Mr. Coward." And that's one of his more sparingly fulsome sign-offs. To Lynn Fontanne: "Darling, darling, darling. Love, love, love, love, love, love, Noëlie."

Dah-ling, you were mah-velous! It is said that, until *The Vortex*, Coward's hit play of 1924, nobody called anyone "Darling" except as a declaration of love. Today, everyone in show business from Zsa Zsa Gabor to the Pet Shop Boys calls everyone "Dah-ling." Coward himself had been addressing the world as such—including the fishmonger—since his suburban boyhood. But it's striking that his first great contribution to the language was to strip a word of its power and passion and make it a camp throwaway. When a writer devalues his own currency—words—he's forced to start wheeling around barrows of cash. Hence, the verbal pile-ups: Writing to the last Viceroy of the Indian Empire and first Governor-General of independent India, Admiral of the Fleet the Earl Mountbatten of Burma, Coward begins "Dear dainty Darling."

Does the relentless blizzard of "darlings" and "luvvies" ever cease? Well, yes, but it takes the death of the Sovereign to do it. Confronted by the passing of King George VI, the flamboyant theatrical suddenly lurches into stiff-upper-lipped *In Which We Serve* mode. "I do wish you to know," he writes to the Queen Mother, "how much you are in my thoughts and how very, very deeply I feel for you." Like Coward's Norfolk, it's very flat, with only that "very, very" to betray the author, if only by reminding us that, at critical moments in his writing, dear dear Noël very very often mistakes quantity for depth. Still, a few pages after the "I have the honor to be your Majesty's loyal and devoted servant" stuff, the "darlings" are once again dropping like flies. When Noël Coward sits right down to write *anyone* a letter, like the song says, kisses on the bottom/ You'll be glad you got 'em.

Coward himself liked to rhyme, of course, and, instead of thank-you letters, which he felt were either contrived or boring, he preferred to dash off a verse or two. After a wartime visit to the Royal Navy's finest in Malta, he wrote to his host:

Dear Admiral, a Bread and Butter letter
To writer and receiver is a curse
And so this time I feel it would be better
To write to you in lilting, lyric verse.

Very lilting. Rare is the naval base whose filing cabinets can boast a thank-you note like this:

Try to forget my frequent interference
When you saw fit to reprimand your staff,

Rather recall my exquisite appearance
Wearing a spotted Yugo-Slavian scarf.

A little of that goes a long way, as the actress said to the bishop.

The Letters of Noël Coward are “edited and with commentary by Barry Day”—indeed, so edited and with so much intervening commentary that Coward’s voice often gets lost. Mr. Day seems to reserve most of his creative energy for bitchy photo captions: “The two ladies [Vivien Leigh and an unnamed acquaintance] seem to be comparing the curtain material each is using for a dress.” Catty asides aside, the author breaks the letters into fragments, includes as many letters sent by others to Coward plus ones from third parties to fourth parties (Winston Churchill to the King, nixing Noël’s knighthood), plus diary entries and other snippets, all punctuated with a rather pedestrian commentary. Life has been good to Mr. Day: He lives, the jacket informs us, in London, New York, and Palm Beach, which if not “painfully provincial” is perhaps a little obvious. One of the last guardians of the Coward legacy, he has outlived all the others, including my late friend Sheridan Morley. As Coward’s first official biographer, Morley was forbidden to mention his subject’s homosexuality, and in subsequent years, possibly a little defensive about his sin of omission, he liked to advance the theory that the Master was bisexual—mainly on the grounds that, in one adolescent fumble, Gertrude Lawrence gamely attempted to demonstrate the facts of life to a reluctant Coward. Well, I once saw a small dog try to hump Sheridan’s leg, but I’d be reluctant to conclude from that that he was into bestiality. When Gertie appeared on Broadway in *Lady in the Dark*, Noël sent her a cable—“HOPE YOU GET A WARM HAND ON YOUR OPENING”—but he had no intention of providing it himself. Nevertheless, in his highly successful compilation show *Noël and Gertie*, Morley came close to passing Coward off as a conventional heterosexual, suggesting that, while he could never love her “in *that way*,” this was the most important relationship in his life. There doesn’t seem to be much evidence in Mr. Day’s voluminous work to support that.

On July 4, 1940 Gertie married Richard Aldrich and Noël wired his congratulations:

Dear Mrs A
Hooray hooray
At last you are deflowered
On this as every other day
I love you, Noël Coward.

Even Mr. Day calls this telegram “predictable.” It’s typical of Coward’s wit at least to this extent: it’s about him. In light verse, the jokes are the rhymes, and he saves the big rhyme for himself. Were it not my wedding day, when I had other things on my mind, I might resent the fact that, although supposedly a close friend, I appeared to have received some sort of generic insert-name-of-recipient here witticism from Hallmark’s upscale “*Very Noël Coward*” line.

“On this as every other day”: Professional life aside, this day was as every other day, for 750 pages. Coward is observant, gossipy, and relentless in an almost weirdly consistent way. He inspired lifelong loyalty in his employees—mumsy secretaries and fetching young men who started as lovers but stayed on the payroll once “that old black magic” (as Coward coyly referred to it) had lost its spell. But it’s a strange world in which all your friends are either employees or celebrities, and with neither is there any evidence of closeness. Marlene Dietrich, going through a turbulent affair with Yul Brynner, sends Noël long confessional letters detailing the hell she’s going through, and Noël sends back a four-line reply:

I’ve just returned from a holiday to find your sweet letter awaiting me. I am thinking of you so much. Don’t get too frustrated—there is obviously nothing to be done but ‘wait and see’—and please, please remember that I love you dearly always.

Yrs, etc. After another rambling Dietrich letter, he offered, less perfunctorily:

DO NOT, repeat DO NOT be so bloody vulnerable. To hell with God damned 'L'Amour'. It always causes far more trouble than it is worth. Don't run after it. Don't court it. Keep it waiting off stage until you're good and ready for it and even then treat it with the suspicious disdain that it deserves.

We do learn that Miss Dietrich calls her sleep-inducing suppositories "Fernando Lamases," on the grounds that Mr. Lamas was the most boring actor she knew. Still, it's hard, after 750 pages, not to feel there was something missing in Coward's personality: He seems genuinely to have had no need whatsoever of intimacy. "Had a long think about what I really want to do," he once confided to his diary, "a play for Gertie or me or both, short stories, a book or a musical. Wrote three lyric refrains for *Josephine*, worked at the piano. Suddenly a new and lovely tune appeared. Felt the authentic thrill. All right, the musical it shall be."

And for much of his life that's how easy it was. Today the books and short stories are unread, and the musicals and operettas are unperformed, as, for the most part, are the songs. Not just the comedy numbers intimately tied to his cabaret persona—"Mad Dogs And Englishmen," "In A Bar On The Piccola Marina," "Don't Put Your Daughter On The Stage, Mrs. Worthington"—but the ballads, too. Years ago, I discussed with Tom Lehrer "I'll See You Again" and in particular one tender, literate line: "Though my world may go awry." "That's lovely," said Lehrer. "What other songwriter of the time would use a word like that?"

Very true. But the general thrust of the song is a bit stiff: "I'll See You Again/ Whenever spring breaks through again/ Time may lie heavy between/ But what has been/ Is past forgetting." The detachment that aids light versifying is less helpful to a love song. Today every aging rocker undergoing a mid-life crisis has his album of standards—*Rod Stewart Slays The Great American Songbook*, etc.—but no Coward love song ranks with the endlessly revived work of his contemporaries, not just the big-name Americans but also the bit-part Brits (Rod, for example, covered "These Foolish Things" by a moonlighting BBC producer called Eric Maschwitz). Cole Porter, his fellow wit, fellow rhymester, and fellow gay, had terrific, intense passion, musically and lyrically: "And this torment won't be through/ Till you let me spend my life making love to you." And his romantic images are intimate and personal: "In The Still Of The Night/ As I gaze from my window."

By contrast, Noël Coward couldn't say it lyrically, couldn't feel it musically. In *Shadow Play*, one of his characters refers to "small talk, a lot of small talk with other thoughts going on behind." That's why the best plays play on, and so well. But, in forms requiring a direct expression of the "other thoughts going on behind," Coward is not good. Cumulatively, these letters get rather wearing ("Betty Bacall called Hedda Hopper a lousy bitch and kicked her up the bottie") and sometimes seem almost embarrassingly obtuse (September 1939: "Paris is beautifully 'War gay.' Nobody ever dresses and everybody collects at Maxim's"). But they help explain why *Present Lives* endures and "I'll Follow My Secret Heart" languishes. If he had a secret heart, there's no sign of it here. As he put it:

Free from love's illusion
My heart is my own
I Travel Alone.

Mark Steyn's most recent book is *America Alone: The End of the World As We Know It* (Regnery).

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