

Noël Coward, Print Culture, and Popularity

This project by Faye Hammill was funded by a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship (2015).

Lay Summary:

Noël Coward, who is always seen as a popular entertainer, aspired to be taken seriously in literary circles. Surprisingly, he was part of a social scene that included writers we associate with high culture, such as Virginia Woolf, TS Eliot, and Rebecca West. At the parties he attended in London, New York and Paris, encounters between modernists and film stars, writers and dancers, duchesses and journalists, were commonplace. 'I consider myself a writer first and an actor second', Coward said. He published numerous books, including fiction and poetry, and contributed to many periodicals. Yet his responses to modern literature and drama were complicated, and often hostile. In the 1920s, he mockingly parodied the experimental poetry of Edith Sitwell, while in his newspaper articles of the early 1960s, he launched a controversial attack on the socially conscious 'New Movement' dramatists - Samuel Beckett, Shelagh Delaney, Arnold Wesker – for their 'torrents of words, propaganda, self-pity, vituperation, pretentiousness'.

Academic Abstract:

This project reorients the study of Noël Coward from performance to print culture, revealing his place in literary history and his relationship to modernism. Today, he is firmly categorised as a popular entertainer, but during his lifetime, his career was understood in more complex terms. In press coverage, Coward's name signaled tensions between 'art' and 'entertainment', 'popular' and 'modernist', 'sophisticated' and 'sentimental.' Similar oppositions structure his own writing, especially his contributions to newspapers and magazines, which have been ignored by previous critics. They include parodies of experimental poetry and provocative articles on modern drama. The project investigates periodical texts by and about Coward in order to explore broad questions about the impact of celebrity on cultural hierarchies, and about the way the language of value worked in the early to mid-20th century.

Publications:

Hammill, F. 2015. "[Noël Coward and the Sitwells: enmity, celebrity, popularity.](#)" *Journal of Modern Literature* 39.1. 129-48.

Hammill, F. 2016. "[Noël Coward, Rebecca West and the Modernist Scene.](#)" *Modernist Cultures* 11.3. 351-69.

Partnerships and engagement:

Research was carried out in the [Noël Coward collection](#) at the Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, with crucial support from Mark Eccleston and Jessica Clark.

I contributed advice to the exhibition held at the Cadbury library, '[Noël Coward: An Entertainer Abroad](#)', which is accompanied by an [online exhibition](#), curated by Lucy Mounfield. I gave a public lecture on 'Noël Coward and Transatlantic Style' in Birmingham on 15 October 2015, in association with the exhibition and with the city's Book to the Future Festival.

I collaborated with the 'Noël Coward Society and published two pieces in their magazine, *Home Chat*: one on [Coward and the Sitwells](#) (summer 2015) and one on Coward and Transatlantic Style (spring 2016, not online).

Academic events:

These included talks at the Edinburgh Centre for the History of the Book and at the London Modernism Seminar, as well as a workshop on 'Print Culture and Popularity' at the Modernist Studies Association conference (Boston).