

Noël Coward's Theatre of War

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Matter of Britain

Known for his versatility in several genres, Noël Coward was a major literary figure of the British twentieth century. From 1920 to 1960 he wrote 33 or so plays and he was recognised with a knighthood. What he is not often remembered for is his contribution to the literary genre Matter of Britain, which includes medieval texts, romances and imaginative histories. Plays such as *This Happy Breed* (1942), *Peace in Our Time* (1947), and some would add *Relative Values* (1951) and *The Queen Was in the Parlour* (1926), were to varying degrees Matter of Britain, but the sweep of British history in *Cavalcade* (1931) gives the play a central part in this literary category, and his play *Post-Mortem* (1992) belongs here too.

The First World War (1914-18), with its massive loss of life for reasons most combatants found obscure, was accompanied by an official rhetoric which glorified the combat during which Coward was a teenager. It was fighting for the country, fighting for what was right, fighting injustice. The propaganda urged recruitment. Writers and speakers fell back on familiar tropes, some of them from the Christian tradition. Recruiting posters were designed to appeal to the individual's public spiritedness, or worked by declaring that 'his country needed him', that is, needed him to enlist in the armed forces.

When the British Expeditionary Force suffered its early reverses at Mons in 1914, it seemed that the Allied forces were driven back because they were not numerous enough. Sending in hundreds of thousands conscripts would turn the tide. In the Somme offensive of 1916 wave after wave of British soldiers were sent to their deaths in the belief that victory could be secured by superior numbers. In fact the defensive nature of trench warfare meant that attackers always suffered the heaviest casualties. The foot soldiers realised long before the generals that it was a fool's game, but they had signed up to obey orders. To show a change of mind was to face a court martial and very likely a firing squad.

In 1929-30 Coward was circling the world westward. His success on the London stage of the twenties had been fulsome and all he could wish for, but was it enough? His tour took him to Japan and then to Singapore. During these months he wrote *Bitter Sweet* and *Post-Mortem*, and the highly successful, jingoistic *Cavalcade* was already being planned.

Journey's End

In Singapore he was found by a touring theatre company who were putting on R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*. The author had been a captain in the Ninth East Surrey Regiment from 1917 and his letters home were used for the play. Severely wounded at Ypres 1917 he won the MC, and with help from Bernard Shaw the play, a one-off success, began a long run in 1927 at the Savoy Theatre. The War's glory propaganda, faded for many a few years later, had turned to the cost, suffering and loss of life. Would Coward care to take a lead part in *Journey's End* for three nights in Singapore?

He played Stanhope in *Journey's End*, where the recruit Raleigh (played by John Mills) had been at the same school as Stanhope. Both Sherriff's *Journey's End* and Coward's *Post-Mortem* were set in the trenches. Stanhope, Raleigh's boyhood hero, supported a risky

patrol which captured a German prisoner. It succeeds, but Raleigh is injured by a shell and dies of the injury. Sherriff's play centres on the contrast between the innocence of Raleigh, who is enthusiastically patriotic, hero-worshipping, and sees the battlefield as if it were a rugby field, and the harsh reality of the War which is particularised in Stanhope, once as idealistic as Raleigh but now hardly keeping disillusion and revulsion at bay with a whisky bottle.

During and after the war there was in Britain a conspiracy of silence about its ghastly futility, a conspiracy of propaganda in the name of patriotism. *Journey's End* did not tackle this head-on as Coward did in *Post-Mortem* where John Cavan, son of a newspaper magnate, goes out from the relative safety of the trenches and is mortally hit by a machine gun bullet. The play's character Perry Lomas has written scathingly of the War, with no success, and over six scenes before his suicide there are flashes back and forward in time and exchanges between the living and dead which in some aspects bear a resemblance to Coward's successful comedy *Blythe Spirit* (1941), with its spiritualist shenanigans presided over by Margaret Rutherford who in the first London production played the medium Mme Arcati. *Post-Mortem* was more complex than Sherriff's play, and with its connection with the First World War it is in Coward's *Matter of Britain*. Coward thought 'it might probably be quite effective' when produced, and as social criticism.

Decision

Coward was faced with a decision when he came home from the Far East. What should he put into production next on the London stage? On the world tour through New York, Tokyo, Singapore, and Marseille to London he started to write *Cavalcade* (1931) which in twenty-three episodic scenes took in British history from the Boer War to the present. One of the scenes ends with the revelation of its setting as that of the doomed liner *Titanic*, and there was mass singing of 'Land of Hope and Glory'. In a curtain speech Coward declared that it was 'a pretty exciting thing to be English'.

Should he try to scotch the critics and reviewers who said that although what he wrote for the stage might 'amuse' he lacked weight and seriousness? *Post-Mortem* could give the lie to that and show him to be in tune with those who regarded the War as a disaster, if not as actually against morality in the manner of R. C. Sherriff. He could put it forward as the work of a thinker, an intellectual, as he might with *Point Valaine* (1935). This was one current of popular thought, and it was beginning to find expression in public media.

Cavalcade was the play that won, and it had considerable success and a long run at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. With its complex stage machinery and large cast it made him a lot more money than the War play would have done. It was a historical revue, a pageant, *Matter of Britain*. Within a year there was a film version. *Post-Mortem* was put aside and languished until a BBC television production in 1968 five years before his death in 1973. 'There is, I believe, some of the best writing I have ever done in it' Coward wrote afterwards. But as always he set a high store on what went well in the theatre, and what pleased audiences.

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