

## Gerald Weales

an excerpt of

### *The Last Noël*\*

A century or so ago when I regularly lectured on drama, I opened my consideration of one genre—drawing room comedy with an edge—with an uncharacteristic show-and-tell. I passed around a copy of Graham Sutherland's painting of Somerset Maugham and a photograph, torn from an advertisement, of Noël Coward dressed in casual elegance and standing at the edge of the sea. I can see the Maugham portrait, now in the Tate, anytime on the Internet, but the Coward clipping has disappeared.

Coward explained in a 1967 *New York Times* interview with Gloria Steinem that he was not as exotic as people supposed: "All my caricatures show me with a long cigarette holder, an ascot and a blazer, none of which I own." I remember seeing him in ascot and blazer, but that recollection may be at one with my original purpose—to show the two playwrights who had polished their personae as carefully as they did their best plays. I do not trust my memory because, as Coward says at the start of *Present Indicative* (1937), his first memoir, "it is a tricky business tracing the development of a character along the avenues of reminiscence."

Thomas Jefferson—with whom, had it not been for bad timing, Coward (1899–1973) would certainly have lunched—once said, "The letters of a person form the only full and genuine journal of his life." Although "full" and "genuine" may not be the appropriate adjectives for *The Letters of Noël Coward*, the ragbag collection that Barry Day has put together, we get a great many glimpses of Coward at work and play in a volume that is both exasperating and fascinating. . . .

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Day assumed this collection would be richer if he mixed in letters *to* as well as from Coward, which it sometimes is. The chapter on *Quadrille* (1952–54), the play Coward had been promising to write for Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt ever since the three of them had appeared together in *Design for Living* in 1933, is an exercise in controlled congeniality as the letters of all three grow more querulous as the production moves from London to New York; even Cecil Beaton, who designed the show, occasionally gets an acid oar in.

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\*An essay-review of

THE LETTERS OF NOËL COWARD. Edited by Barry Day. New York: Knopf, 2007. 780 pp. \$37.50.

More often, letters simply stand alone, or an exchange involves only a few pieces and stops as abruptly as it began. Sometimes the material seems to have little to do with Coward, except that he provides a shoulder to cry on, as in several letters in which Marlene Dietrich, sounding like a distressed schoolgirl, laments her on-again, off-again (literally) affair with Yul Brynner. There are a great many fragments, snippets that feed Day's commentary and whose sources are not always identified. Day is generally casual as an editor, as his way with informational tidbits indicates. Commenting on Coward's finally getting a knighthood in 1970, Day congratulates his hero on becoming "the first playwright to be ennobled in the twentieth century." Clearly the Coward archives, where Day has spent so much time and energy, did not mention that both J. M. Barrie and Arthur Wing Pinero were knighted long before. The recognition came to Coward at the end of his life, after he had written more than sixty plays—including works like *Hay Fever* (1925), *Private Lives* (1930), and *Design for Living* (1933) that have become part of the standard repertoire of English comedy—and an incredible number of sketches and songs, not to mention a handful of screenplays, collections of short stories, volumes of memoirs, and gatherings of verse.