**Bennett, Arnold (1867–1931)**

A prolific and popular author, English writer Arnold Bennett was one of the most important Realist/Naturalist writers of the early twentieth century. Strongly influenced by George Moore, Bennett made valuable contributions to this literary tradition, achieving distinction alongside contemporaries H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy.

Enoch Arnold Bennett was born in Burslem, Staffordshire in 1867. Bennett showed promise as a student, but at sixteen left school to work in his father’s law office and then later as a clerk in a London law office. In 1893, Bennett left his job to become assistant editor of the journal *Woman*, later becoming editor-in-chief. He had been writing occasional pieces for the *Staffordshire Sentinel* for several years before he published his first story, “A Letter Home” (1895), in *The* *Yellow Book*. His first novel, *A Man from the North,* appearedin 1898. Modeled after the fiction of George Moore, it tells the story of a man from the pottery district of Bennett’s youth who tries to acclimate to a life as a clerk in London. Emboldened by his initial literary success, in 1900 Bennett gave up his position with *Woman* to become a full-time writer.

Like *A Man from the North, Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) is set in the pottery district of Bennett’s youth. The novel considers Anna Tellwright and her socially restrictive life. *The Old Wives’ Tale* (1908) focuses on sisters Constance and Sophia Baines and the changes resulting from the movement of time in their lives, emphasizing the absurdities of life. *Clayhanger* (1910) is the first of the *Clayhanger* trilogy (*Hilda Lessways* (1911) and *These Twain* (1915) being the other volumes) and chronicles the provincial life of Edwin Clayhanger. *Hilda Lessways* follows Hilda’s journey through life, before and after she marries Edwin. *These Twain* then investigates the ebb and flow of Edwin and Hilda’s relationship. *Riceyman Steps* (1923)is the novel of a miser whose stinginess ultimately causes the deaths of both him and his wife. After *Riceyman Steps*, Bennett continued to produce a steady stream of books, most notably *Lord Raingo* (1926) and *Imperial Palace* (1930). After a trip to Paris, where Bennett ill-advisedly drank tap water, he contracted typhoid and died on March 27, 1931. As a pubic tribute, the streets near his apartment were strewn with straw to lessen the noise for the dying man.

Along with his serious fiction, Bennett produced plays, popular fiction, and popular journalism, becoming quite wealthy in the process. Bennett’s popularity, however, was double-edged. It brought him fame and fortune, but some detractors, such as Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf, were strongly critical of Bennett’s literary choices and viewed his popularity as pandering to the public. Bennett’s literary prominence has been overshadowed by the High Modernism of Eliot, Woolf, Conrad, Joyce, and others, but among the realist/naturalists he yet holds a prominent place.

**Key Works**

(1902) *Anna of the Five Towns*

(1908) *The Old Wives’ Tale*

(1910) *Clayhanger*

(1911) *Hilda Lessways*

(1915) *These Twain*

(1923) *Riceyman Steps*