



Arnold Bennett

Enoch Arnold Bennett (27 May 1867 – 27 March 1931) was an English author, best known as a novelist who wrote prolifically. Between the 1890s and the 1930s he completed 34 novels, seven volumes of short stories, 13 plays (some in collaboration with other writers), and a daily journal totaling more than a million words. He wrote articles and stories for more than 100 newspapers and periodicals, worked in and briefly ran the Ministry of Information in the First World War, and wrote for the cinema in the 1920s. Sales of his books were substantial, and he was the most financially successful British author of his day.

Born into a modest but upwardly mobile family in Hanley, in the Staffordshire Potteries, Bennett was intended by his father, a solicitor, to follow him into the legal profession. He worked for his father before moving to another law firm in London as a clerk aged 21. He became assistant editor and then a women's magazine editor before becoming a full-time author in 1900. Always a devotee of French culture in general and French literature in particular, he moved to Paris in 1903; the relaxed milieu helped him overcome his intense shyness, particularly with women. He spent ten years in France, marrying a Frenchwoman in 1907. In 1912, he moved back to England. He and his wife separated in 1921 and he spent the last years of his life with a new partner, an English actress. He died in 1931 of typhoid fever, having unwisely drunk tap water in France.

Many of Bennett's novels and short stories are set in a fictionalized version of the Staffordshire Potteries, which he called The Five Towns. He strongly believed that literature should be accessible to ordinary people and lamented literary cliques and élites. His books appealed to a wide public and sold in large numbers. For this reason and his adherence to realism, writers and supporters of the modernist school, notably Virginia Woolf, belittled him, and his fiction became neglected after his death. During his lifetime his journalistic "self-help" books sold in substantial numbers, and he was also a playwright; he did less well in the theatre than with novels but achieved two considerable successes with Milestones (1912) and The Great Adventure (1913).

Arnold Bennett



Bennett c. 1920

Born	Enoch Arnold Bennett 27 May 1867 <u>Hanley</u> , Staffordshire, England
Died	27 March 1931 (aged 63) London, England
Occupation(s)	Novelist, playwright, journalist

Studies by Margaret Drabble (1974), John Carey (1992), and others have led to a re-evaluation of Bennett's work. Many of his novels, including *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902), *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), *Clayhanger* (1910) and *Riceman Steps* (1923), are now widely recognised as significant works.

Life and career

Early years

Arnold Bennett was born on 27 May 1867 in Hanley, Staffordshire, now part of Stoke-on-Trent but then a separate town.^{[1][2]} He was the eldest child of the three sons and three daughters^[n 1] of Enoch Bennett (1843–1902) and his wife Sarah Ann, *née* Longson (1840–1914). Enoch Bennett's early career had been one of mixed fortunes: after an unsuccessful attempt to run a business making and selling pottery, he set up as a draper and pawnbroker in 1866. Four years later, Enoch's father died, leaving him some money with which he articled himself to a local law firm; in 1876, he qualified as a solicitor.^[3] The Bennetts were staunch Wesleyans, musical, cultured and sociable. Enoch Bennett had an authoritarian side, but it was a happy household,^[4] although a mobile one: as Enoch's success as a solicitor increased, the family moved, within the space of five years in the late 1870s and early 1880s, to four different houses in Hanley and the neighbouring Burslem.^[2]

From 1877 to 1882, Bennett's schooling was at the Wedgwood Institute, Burslem, followed by a year at a grammar school in Newcastle-under-Lyme. He was good at Latin and better at French;^[5] he had an inspirational headmaster who gave him a love for French literature and the French language that lasted all his life.^[6] He did well academically and passed Cambridge University examinations that could have led to an Oxbridge education, but his father had other plans. In 1883, aged 16, Bennett left school and began work – unpaid – in his father's office. He divided his time between uncongenial jobs, such as rent collecting, during the day, and studying for examinations in the evening. He began writing in a modest way, contributing light pieces to the local newspaper.^[3] He became adept in Pitman's shorthand, a skill much sought after in commercial offices,^[7] and on the strength of that he secured a post as a clerk at a firm of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London.^[8] In March 1889, aged 21, he left for London and never returned to live in his native county.^{[3][9]}

First years in London

In the solicitors' office in London, Bennett became friendly with a young colleague, John Eland, who was passionate about books. Eland's friendship helped alleviate Bennett's shyness, exacerbated by a lifelong stammer.^{[3][n 2]} Together, they explored the world of literature. Among the writers who impressed and influenced Bennett were George Moore, Émile Zola, Honoré de Balzac, Guy de Maupassant, Gustave Flaubert and Ivan Turgenev.^[11] He continued his own writing, and won a prize of twenty guineas from *Tit-Bits* in 1893 for his story 'The Artist's Model'; another short story, 'A Letter Home', was submitted successfully to *The Yellow Book*, where it featured in 1895 alongside contributions from Henry James and other well-known writers.^[12]



Lincoln's Inn Fields in 2018

In 1894 Bennett resigned from the law firm and became assistant editor of the magazine *Woman*. The salary, £150 a year, was £50 less than he was earning as a clerk,^[n 3] but the post left him much more free time to write his first novel. For the magazine he wrote under a range of female pen-names such as "Barbara" and "Cecile". As his biographer Margaret Drabble puts it:

He did a bit of everything. He learned about recipes and layettes, about making-up, making-ready and running-round. He reviewed plays and books ... He acquainted himself with hundreds of subjects that would never have come his way otherwise ... the domestic column told one "How to train a Cook", "How to keep parsley fresh", "How to make money at home", "How to bath the baby (Part One)". The knowledge was not wasted, for Bennett is one of the few novelists who can write with sympathy and detail about the domestic preoccupations of women.^[14]

The informal office life of the magazine suited Bennett, not least because it brought him into lively female company, and he began to be a little more relaxed with young women.^[15] He continued work on his novel and wrote short stories and articles. He was modest about his literary talent: he wrote to a friend, "I have no inward assurance that I could ever do anything more than mediocre viewed strictly as art – very mediocre", but he knew he could "turn out things which would be read with zest, & about which the man in the street would say to friends 'Have you read so & so in the *What-is-it?*'"^[16] He was happy to write for popular journals like *Hearth and Home* or for the highbrow *The Academy*.^[17]

His debut novel, *A Man from the North*, completed in 1896, was published two years later, by John Lane, whose reader, John Buchan, recommended it for publication.^[18] It elicited a letter of praise from Joseph Conrad and was well and widely reviewed, but Bennett's profits from the sale of the book were less than the cost of having it typed.^[19]

In 1896 Bennett was promoted to be editor of *Woman*; by then he had set his sights on a career as a full-time author, but he served as editor for four years.^[3] During that time he wrote two popular books, described by the critic John Lucas as "pot-boilers": *Journalism for Women* (1898) and *Polite Farces for the Drawing Room* (1899). He also began work on a second novel, *Anna of the Five Towns*, the five towns being Bennett's lightly fictionalised version of the Staffordshire Potteries, where he grew up.^[20]

Freelance; Paris

In 1900 Bennett resigned his post at *Woman*, and left London to set up house at Trinity Hall Farm, near the village of Hockliffe in Bedfordshire, where he made a home not only for himself but for his parents and younger sister. He completed *Anna of the Five Towns* in 1901; it was published the following year, as was its successor, *The Grand Babylon Hotel*. The latter, an extravagant story of crime in high society, sold 50,000 copies in hardback and was almost immediately translated into four languages.^[21] By this stage he was confident enough in his abilities to tell a friend:

Although I am 33 & I have not made a name, I infallibly know that I shall make a name, & that soon. But I should like to be a legend. I think I have settled in my own mind that my work will never be better than third rate, judged by the high standards, but I shall be cunning enough to make it impose on my contemporaries.^[22]

In January 1902 Enoch Bennett died, after a decline into dementia.^[23] His widow chose to move back to Burslem, and Bennett's sister married shortly afterwards. With no dependants, Bennett – always a devotee of French culture^[3] – decided to move to Paris; he took up residence there in March 1903.^[24] Biographers have speculated on his precise reasons for doing so. Drabble suggests that perhaps "he was hoping for some kind of liberation. He was thirty-five and unmarried";^[24] Lucas writes that it was almost certainly Bennett's



Rue d'Aumale, Bennett's second address in Paris

desire to be recognised as a serious artist that prompted his move;^[3] according to his friend and colleague Frank Swinnerton, Bennett was following in the footsteps of George Moore by going to live in "the home of modern realism";^[25] in the view of the biographer Reginald Pound it was "to begin his career as a man of the world".^[26] The 9th arrondissement of Paris was Bennett's home for the next five years, first in the rue de Calais, near the Place Pigalle, and then the more upmarket rue d'Aumale.^[27]

Life in Paris evidently helped Bennett overcome much of his remaining shyness with women.^[28] His journals for his early months in Paris mention a young woman identified as "C" or "Chichi", who was a chorus girl;^[29] the journals – or at least the cautiously selected extracts published since his death^[30] – do not record the precise nature of the relationship, but the two spent a considerable amount of time together.^[31]

In a restaurant where he dined frequently a trivial incident in 1903 gave Bennett the germ of an idea for the novel generally regarded as his masterpiece.^{[25][32]} A grotesque old woman came in and caused a fuss; the beautiful young waitress laughed at her, and Bennett was struck by the thought that the old woman had once been as young and lovely as the waitress.^[33] From this grew the story of two contrasting sisters in The Old Wives' Tale.^[34] He did not begin work on that novel until 1907, before which he wrote ten others, some "sadly undistinguished", in the view of his biographer Kenneth Young.^[35] Throughout his career, Bennett interspersed his best novels with some that his biographers and others have labelled pot-boilers.^{[3][36]}

Marriage; Fontainebleau and US visit

In 1905 Bennett became engaged to Eleanor Green, a member of an eccentric and capricious American family living in Paris, but at the last moment, after the wedding invitations had been sent out, she broke off the engagement and almost immediately married a fellow American.^[37] Drabble comments that Bennett was well rid of her, but it was a painful episode in his life.^[38] In early 1907 he met Marguerite Soulié (1874–1960), who soon became first a friend and then a lover.^[39] In May he was taken ill with a severe gastric complaint, and Marguerite moved into his flat to look after him. They became still closer, and in July 1907, shortly after his fortieth birthday, they were married at the Mairie of the 9th arrondissement.^[40] The marriage was childless.^[41] Early in 1908 the couple moved from the rue d'Aumale to the Villa des Néfliers in Fontainebleau-Avon, about 40 miles (64 km) south-east of Paris.^{[42][n 4]}



Bennett, c. 1910

Lucas comments that the best of the novels written while in France – *Whom God Hath Joined* (1906), *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), and *Clayhanger* (1910) – "justly established Bennett as a major exponent of realistic fiction".^[3] In addition to these, Bennett published lighter novels such as *The Card* (1911). His output of literary journalism included articles for T. P. O'Connor's *T. P.'s Weekly* and the left-wing *The New Age*; his pieces for the latter, published under a pen-name, were concise literary essays aimed at "the general cultivated reader",^[3] a form taken up by a later generation of writers including J. B. Priestley and V. S. Pritchett.^[3]

In 1911 Bennett made a financially rewarding visit to the US, which he later recorded in his 1912 book *Those United States*. Crossing the Atlantic aboard the *Lusitania*, he visited not only New York and Boston but also Chicago, Indianapolis, Washington and Philadelphia in a tour that was described by US publisher George Doran as "one of continuous triumph";^[47] in the first three days of his stay in New York he was interviewed 26 times by journalists.^[48] While rival E.P. Dutton had secured rights to such Bennett novels as *Hilda Lessways* and *the Card* (retitled *Denry the Audacious*), Doran, who travelled everywhere with Bennett while in America, was the publisher of Bennett's wildly successful 'pocket philosophies' *How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day* and *Mental Efficiency*. Of these books the influential critic Willard Huntington Wright wrote that Bennett had "turned preacher and a jolly good preacher he is".^[49] While in the US Bennett also sold the serial rights of his forthcoming novel, *The Price of Love* (1913–14), to *Harpers* for £2,000, eight essays to *Metropolitan* magazine for a total of £1,200, and the American rights of a successor to *Clayhanger* for £3,000.^[3]

During his ten years in France he had gone from a moderately well-known writer enjoying modest sales to outstanding success. Swinnerton comments that in addition to his large sales, Bennett's critical prestige was at its zenith.^[41]

Return to England

In 1912, after an extended stay at the Hotel Californie in Cannes,^[50] during which time he wrote *The Regent*, a light-hearted sequel to *The Card*, Bennett and his wife moved from France to England. Initially they lived in Putney, but "determined to become an English country landowner",^[51] he bought Comarques, an early-18th-century country house at Thorpe-le-Soken, Essex, and moved there in February 1913.^[52] Among his early concerns, once back in England, was to succeed as a playwright. He had dabbled previously but his inexperience showed. *The Times* thought his 1911 comedy *The Honeymoon*, staged in the West End with a starry cast,^[n 5] had



Scene from Act 2 of the 1912 play *Milestones*, by Bennett and Edward Knoblauch

"one of the most amusing first acts we have ever seen", but fell flat in the other two acts.^[53] In the same year Bennett met the playwright Edward Knoblauch (later Knoblock) and they collaborated on *Milestones*, the story of the generations of a family seen in 1860, 1885 and 1912. The combination of Bennett's narrative gift and Knoblauch's practical experience proved a success.^[54] The play was strongly cast,^[n 6] received highly favourable notices,^[56] ran for more than 600 performances in London and over 200 in New York,^[57] and made Bennett a great deal of money.^[3] His next play, *The Great Adventure* (1913), a stage version of his novel *Buried Alive* (1908), was similarly successful.^[58]

Bennett's attitude to the First World War was that British politicians had been at fault in failing to prevent it, but that once it had become inevitable it was right that Britain should join its allies against the Germans.^[59] He concentrated his attention on journalism, aiming to inform and encourage the public in Britain and allied and neutral countries. He served on official and unofficial committees, and in 1915 he was invited to visit France to see conditions at the front and write about them for readers at home. The collected impressions appeared in a book called *Over There* (1915).^[41] He was still writing novels, however: *These Twain*, the

third in his Clayhanger trilogy, was published in 1916^[60] and in 1917 he completed a sequel, *The Roll Call*, which ends with its hero, George Cannon, enlisting in the army. Wartime London was the setting for Bennett's *The Pretty Lady* (1918), about a high-class French *cocotte*: although well reviewed, because of its subject-matter the novel provoked "a Hades of a row" and some booksellers refused to sell it.^[61]

When Lord Beaverbrook became Minister of Information in February 1918 he appointed Bennett to take charge of propaganda in France.^[41] Beaverbrook fell ill in October 1918 and made Bennett director of propaganda, in charge of the whole ministry for the last weeks of the war.^[62] At the end of 1918 Bennett was offered, but declined, a knighthood in the new Order of the British Empire instituted by George V.^[63] The offer was renewed some time later, and again Bennett refused it. One of his closest associates at the time suspected that he was privately hoping for the more prestigious Order of Merit.^[63]

As the war was ending, Bennett returned to his theatrical interests, although not primarily as a playwright. In November 1918 he became chairman, with Nigel Playfair as managing director, of the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith.^[64] Among their productions were *Abraham Lincoln* by John Drinkwater, and *The Beggar's Opera*, which, in Swinnerton's phrase, "caught different moods of the post-war spirit",^[41] and ran for 466 and 1,463 performances respectively.^[65]

Last years

In 1921 Bennett and his wife legally separated. They had been drifting apart for some years and Marguerite had taken up with Pierre Legros, a young French lecturer.^[67] Bennett sold Comarques and lived in London for the rest of his life, first in a flat near Bond Street in the West End, on which he had taken a lease during the war.^[68] For much of the 1920s he was widely known to be the highest-paid literary journalist in England, contributing a weekly column to Beaverbrook's *Evening Standard* under the title 'Books and Persons'; according to Frank Swinnerton these articles were "extraordinarily successful and influential ... and made a number of new reputations".^{[69][n 8]} By the end of his career, Bennett had contributed to more than 100 newspapers, magazines and other publications.^[71] He continued to write novels and plays as assiduously as before the war.^{[3][41]}

Swinnerton writes, "Endless social engagements; inexhaustible patronage of musicians, actors, poets, and painters; the maximum of benevolence to friends and strangers alike, marked the last ten years of his life".^[41] Hugh Walpole,^[72] James Agate^[73] and Osbert Sitwell were among those who testified to Bennett's generosity. Sitwell recalled a letter Bennett wrote in the 1920s:

I find I am richer this year than last; so I enclose a cheque for 500 pounds for you to distribute among young writers and artists and musicians who may need the money. You will know, better than I do, who they are. But I must make one condition, that you do not reveal that the money has come from me, or tell anyone about it.^{[74][n 9]}

In 1922 Bennett met and fell in love with an actress, Dorothy Cheston (1891–1977). Together they set up home in Cadogan Square, where they stayed until moving in 1930 to Chiltern Court, Baker Street.^[76] As Marguerite would not agree to a divorce,^[n 10] Bennett was unable to marry Dorothy, and in September 1928, having become pregnant, she changed her name by deed poll to Dorothy Cheston Bennett.^{[78][n 11]} The following April she gave birth to the couple's only child, Virginia Mary (1929–2003).^[78] She



Chiltern Court – Bennett's last home, with plaques commemorating him and H. G. Wells

continued to appear as an actress, and produced and starred in a revival of *Milestones* which was well reviewed, but had only a moderate run.^[82] Bennett had mixed feelings about her continuing stage career, but did not seek to stop it.^[82]

During a holiday in France with Dorothy in January 1931, Bennett twice drank tap-water – not, at the time, a safe thing to do there.^[83] On his return home he was taken ill; influenza was diagnosed at first, but the illness was typhoid fever; after several weeks of unsuccessful treatment he died in his flat at Chiltern Court on 27 March 1931, aged 63.^{[66][n 12]}

Bennett was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium and his ashes were interred in Burslem Cemetery in his mother's grave.^[84] A memorial service was held on 31 March 1931 at St Clement Danes, London, attended by leading figures from journalism, literature, music, politics and theatre, and, in Pound's words, many men and women who at the end of the service "walked out into a London that for them would never be the same again".^[85]



Memorial in Burslem Cemetery^[n 7]

Works

From the outset, Bennett believed in the "democratisation of art which it is surely the duty of the minority to undertake".^[86] He admired some of the modernist writers of his time, but strongly disapproved of their conscious appeal to a small élite and their disdain for the general reader. Bennett believed that literature should be inclusive, accessible by ordinary people.^[87]

From the start of his career, Bennett was aware of the appeal of regional fiction. Anthony Trollope, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy had created and sustained their own locales, and Bennett did the same with his Five Towns, drawing on his experiences as a boy and young man.^[88] As a realistic writer he followed the examples of the authors he admired – above all George Moore, but also Balzac, Flaubert and Maupassant among French writers, and Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy among Russians. In writing about the Five Towns Bennett aimed to portray the experiences of ordinary people coping with the norms and constraints of the communities in which they lived.^[89] J. B. Priestley considered that the next influence on Bennett's fiction was his time in London in the 1890s, "engaged in journalism and ingenious pot-boiling of various kinds".^[90]

Novels and short stories

Bennett is remembered chiefly for his novels and short stories. The best known are set in, or feature people from, the six towns of the Potteries of his youth. He presented the region as "the Five Towns", which correspond closely with their originals: the real-life Burslem, Hanley, Longton, Stoke and Tunstall become Bennett's Bursley, Hanbridge, Longshaw, Knype and Turnhill.^{[91][n 13]} These "Five Towns" make their first appearance in Bennett's fiction in *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) and are the setting for further novels including *Leonora* (1903), *Whom God Hath Joined* (1906), *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) and the *Clayhanger* trilogy – *Clayhanger* (1910), *Hilda Lessways* (1911) and *These Twain* (1916) – as well as for dozens of short stories. Bennett's fiction portrays the Five Towns with what *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* calls "an ironic but affectionate detachment, describing provincial life and culture in documentary detail, and creating many memorable characters".^[20] In later life Bennett said that the writer George Moore

was "the father of all my Five Towns books" as it was reading Moore's 1885 novel *A Mummer's Wife*, set in the Potteries, that "opened my eyes to the romantic nature of the district I had blindly inhabited for over twenty years".^[93]

It was not only locations on which Bennett drew for his fiction. Many of his characters are discernibly based on real people in his life. His Lincoln's Inn friend John Eland was a source for Mr Aked in Bennett's first novel, *A Man from the North* (1898);^[94] *A Great Man* (1903) contains a character with echoes of his Parisienne friend Chichi;^[95] Darius Clayhanger's early life is based on that of a family friend and Bennett himself is seen in Edwin in *Clayhanger*.^[96] He has been criticised for making literary use in that novel of the distressing details of his father's decline into senility, but in Pound's view, in committing the details to paper Bennett was unburdening himself of painful memories.^[97]

These Twain is Bennett's "last extended study of Five Towns life".^[98] The novels he wrote in the 1920s are largely set in London and thereabouts: *Riceyman Steps* (1923), for instance, generally regarded as the best of Bennett's post-war novels,^[99] was set in Clerkenwell: it was awarded the James Tait Black novel prize for 1923, "the first prize for a book I ever had," Bennett noted in his journal on 18 October 1924.^[100] His *Lord Raingo* (1926), described by Dudley Barker as "one of the finest of political novels in the language",^[101] benefited from Bennett's own experience in the Ministry of Information and his subsequent friendship with Beaverbrook.^[102] John Lucas states that "As a study of what goes on in the corridors of power [*Lord Raingo*] has few equals".^[103] And Bennett's final – and longest – novel, *Imperial Palace* (1930), is set in a grand London hotel reminiscent of the Savoy, whose directors assisted him in his preliminary research.^[104]

Bennett usually gave his novels subtitles; the most frequent was "A fantasia on modern themes",^[n 14] individual books were called "A frolic" or "A melodrama", but he was sparing with the label "A novel" which he used for only a few of his books – for instance *Anna of the Five Towns*, *Leonora*, *Sacred and Profane Love*, *The Old Wives' Tale*, *The Pretty Lady* (1918) and *Riceyman Steps*.^[105] Literary critics have followed Bennett in dividing his novels into groups. The literary scholar Kurt Koenigsberger proposes three categories. In the first are the long narratives – "freestanding, monumental artefacts" – *Anna of the Five Towns*, *The Old Wives' Tale*, *Clayhanger* and *Riceyman Steps*, which "have been held in high critical regard since their publication".^[87] Koenigsberger writes that the "Fantasias" such as *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902), *Teresa of Watling Street* (1904) and *The City of Pleasure* (1907), have "mostly passed from public attention along with the 'modern' conditions they exploit".^[87] His third group includes "Idyllic Diversions" or "Stories of Adventure", including *Helen with the High Hand* (1910), *The Card* (1911), and *The Regent* (1913), which "have sustained some enduring critical and popular interest, not least for their amusing treatment of cosmopolitanism and provinciality".^[87]

Bennett published 96 short stories in seven volumes between 1905 and 1931. His ambivalence about his native town is vividly seen in "The Death of Simon Fuge" in the collection *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns* (1907), judged by Lucas the finest of all the stories.^[3] His chosen locations ranged widely, including Paris and Venice as well as London and the Five Towns.^[105] As with his novels, he would sometimes give



Bennett, caricatured by "Owl" in *Vanity Fair*, 1913

a story a label, calling "The Matador of the Five Towns" (1912) "a tragedy" and "Jock-at-a-Venture" from the same collection "a frolic".^[105] The short stories, particularly those in *Tales of the Five Towns* (1905), *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns* (1907), and *The Matador of the Five Towns* contain some of the most striking examples of Bennett's concern for realism, with an unflinching narrative focus on what Lucas calls "the drab, the squalid, and the mundane".^[3] In 2010 and 2011 two further volumes of Bennett's hitherto uncollected short stories were published: they range from his earliest work written in the 1890s, some under the pseudonym Sarah Volatile, to US magazine commissions from the late 1920s.^{[106][107]}

Stage and screen

In 1931 the critic Graham Sutton, looking back at Bennett's career in the theatre, contrasted his achievements as a playwright with those as a novelist, suggesting that Bennett was a complete novelist but a not-entirely-complete dramatist. His plays were clearly those of a novelist: "He tends to lengthy speeches. Sometimes he overwrites a part, as though distrusting the actor. He is more interested in what his people are than in what they visibly do. He 'thinks nowt' of mere slickness of plot."^[108]



The Great Adventure, 1913

Bennett's lack of a theatrical grounding showed in the uneven construction of some of his plays, such as his 1911 comedy *The Honeymoon*, which played for 125 performances from October 1911.^[109] The highly successful *Milestones* was seen as impeccably constructed, but the credit for that was given to his craftsmanlike collaborator, Edward Knoblauch (Bennett being credited with the inventive flair of the piece).^[54] By far his most successful solo effort in the theatre was *The Great Adventure*, based on his 1908 novel *Buried Alive*, which ran in the West End for 674 performances, from March 1913 to November 1914.^[58] Sutton

praised its "new strain of impish and sardonic fantasy" and rated it a much finer play than *Milestones*.^[108]

After the First World War, Bennett wrote two plays on metaphysical questions, *Sacred and Profane Love* (1919, adapted from his novel) and *Body and Soul* (1922), which made little impression. *The Saturday Review* praised the "shrewd wit" of the former, but thought it "false in its essentials ... superficial in its accidentals".^[110] Of the latter, the critic Horace Shipp wondered "how the author of *Clayhanger* and *The Old Wives' Tale* could write such third-rate stuff".^[111] Bennett had more success in a final collaboration with Edward Knoblock (as Knoblauch had become during the war) with *Mr Prohack* (1927), a comedy based on his 1922 novel; one critic wrote "I could have enjoyed the play had it run to double its length", but even so he judged the middle act weaker than the outer two.^[112] Sutton concludes that Bennett's *forte* was character, but that the competence of his technique was variable.^[108] The plays are seldom revived, although some have been adapted for television.^{[113][114]}

Bennett wrote two opera libretti for the composer Eugene Goossens: *Judith* (one act, 1929) and *Don Juan* (four acts, produced in 1937 after the writer's death).^[115] There were comments that Goossens's music lacked tunes and Bennett's libretti were too wordy and literary.^[116] The critic Ernest Newman defended

both works, finding Bennett's libretto for Judith "a drama told simply and straightforwardly"^[117] and *Don Juan* "the best thing that English opera has so far produced ... the most dramatic and stageworthy",^[118] but though politely received, both operas vanished from the repertory after a few performances.^[119]

Bennett took a keen interest in the cinema, and in 1920 wrote *The Wedding Dress*, a scenario for a silent movie, at the request of Jesse Lasky of the Famous Players film company.^[120] It was never made, though Bennett wrote a full-length treatment, assumed to be lost until his daughter Virginia found it in a drawer in her Paris home in 1983; subsequently the script was sold to the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery and was finally published in 2013.^[121] In 1928 Bennett wrote the scenario for the silent film *Piccadilly*, directed by E. A. Dupont and starring Anna May Wong, described by the British Film Institute as "one of the true greats of British silent films".^[122] In 1929, the year the film came out, Bennett was in discussion with a young Alfred Hitchcock to script a silent film, *Punch and Judy*, which foundered on artistic disagreements and Bennett's refusal to see the film as a "talkie" rather than silent.^[123] His original scenario, acquired by Pennsylvania State University, was published in the UK in 2012.^[124]

Journalism and self-help books

Bennett published more than two dozen non-fiction books, among which eight could be classified as "self-help": the most enduring is *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* (1908), which is still in print and has been translated into several languages. Other "self-help" volumes include *How to Become an Author* (1903), *The Reasonable Life* (1907), *Literary Taste: How to Form It* (1909), *The Human Machine* (1908), *Mental Efficiency* (1911), *The Plain Man and his Wife* (1913), *Self and Self-Management* (1918) and *How to Make the Best of Life* (1923). They were, says Swinnerton, "written for small fees and with a real desire to assist the ignorant".^[125] According to the Harvard academic Beth Blum, these books "advance less scientific versions of the argument for mental discipline espoused by William James".^[126]

In his biography of Bennett Patrick, Donovan argues that in the US "the huge appeal to the ordinary readers" of his self-help books "made his name stand out vividly from other English writers across the massive, fragmented American market."^[127] As Bennett put it to his London-based agent J. B. Pinker, these "pocket philosophies are just the sort of book for the American public". However, *How to Live on 24 Hours* was aimed initially at "the legions of clerks and typists and other meanly paid workers caught up in the explosion of British office jobs around the turn of the century ... they offered a strong message of hope from somebody who so well understood their lives".^[127]

Bennett never lost his journalistic instincts, and throughout his life sought and responded to newspaper and magazine commissions with varying degrees of enthusiasm: "from the start of the 1890s right up to the week of his death there would never be a period when he was not churning out copy for newspapers and magazines".^[128] In a journal entry at the end of 1908, for instance, he noted that he had written "over sixty newspaper articles" that year;^[129] in 1910 the figure was "probably about 80 other articles". While living in Paris he was a regular contributor to *T. P.'s Weekly*; later he reviewed for *The New Age* under the pseudonym Jacob Tonson and was associated with the *New Statesman* as not only a writer but also a director.^[130]

Journals

Inspired by the *Journal des Goncourt*, Bennett kept a journal throughout his adult life. Swinnerton says that it runs to a million words; it has not been published in full.^[131] Edited extracts were issued in three volumes, in 1932 and 1933.^[105] According to Hugh Walpole, the editor, *Newman Flower*, "was so appalled by much of what he found in the journals that he published only brief extracts, and those the safest".^[30] Whatever Flower censored, the extracts he selected were not always "the safest": he let some defamatory remarks through, and in 1935 he, the publishers and printers had to pay an undisclosed sum to the plaintiff in one libel suit and £2,500 in another.^[132]

Critical reputation

Novels and short stories

The literary *modernists* of his day deplored Bennett's books, and those of his well-known contemporaries *H. G. Wells* and *John Galsworthy*.^{[133][134]} Of the three, Bennett drew the most opprobrium from modernists such as *Virginia Woolf*, *Ezra Pound* and *Wyndham Lewis* who regarded him as representative of an outmoded and rival literary culture.^[133] There was a strong element of class-consciousness and snobbery in the modernists' attitude.^[135] Woolf accused Bennett of having "a shopkeeper's view of literature" and in her essay "*Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*" accused Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells of ushering in an "age when character disappeared or was mysteriously engulfed".^[136]



Bennett in 1928

In a 1963 study of Bennett, James Hepburn summed up and dissented from the prevailing views of the novels, listing three related evaluative positions taken individually or together by almost all Bennett's critics: that his Five Towns novels are generally superior to his other work, that he and his art declined after *The Old Wives' Tale* or *Clayhanger*, and that there is a sharp and clear distinction between the good and bad novels.^[137] Hepburn countered that one of the novels most frequently praised by literary critics is *Riceyman Steps* (1923) set in Clerkenwell, London, and dealing with material imagined rather than observed by the author.^{[138][n 15]} On the third point he commented that although received wisdom was that *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger* are good and *Sacred and Profane Love* and *Lillian* are bad, there was little consensus about which other Bennett novels were good, bad or indifferent.^[140] He instanced *The Pretty Lady* (1918), on which critical opinion ranged from "cheap and sensational" ... "sentimental melodrama" to "a great novel".^[141] Lucas (2004) considers it "a much underrated study of England during the war years, especially in its sensitive feeling for the destructive frenzy that underlay much apparently good-hearted patriotism".^[3]

In 1974 *Margaret Drabble* published *Arnold Bennett*, a literary biography. In the foreword she demurred at the critical dismissal of Bennett:

I'd been brought up to believe that even his best books weren't very good – *Leavis* dismisses him in a sentence or two, and not many people seemed to take him as seriously as I did. The best books I think are very fine indeed, on the highest level, deeply moving, original, and dealing with material that I had never before encountered in fiction, but only in life.^[142]

Writing in the 1990s the literary critic *John Carey* called for a reappraisal of Bennett in his book *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992):

His writings represent a systematic dismemberment of the intellectuals' case against the masses. He has never been popular with intellectuals as a result. Despite Margaret Drabble's forceful advocacy, his novels are still undervalued by literary academics, syllabus-devisers and other official censors.^[143]

In 2006 Koenigsberger commented that one reason why Bennett's novels had been sidelined, apart from "the exponents of modernism who recoiled from his democratising aesthetic programme", was his attitude to gender. His books include the pronouncements "the average man has more intellectual power than the average woman" and "women as a sex love to be dominated"; Koenigsberger nevertheless praises Bennett's "sensitive and oft-praised portrayals of female figures in his fiction".^[87]

Lucas concludes his study with the comment that Bennett's realism may be limited by his cautious assumption that things are as they are and will not change. Nevertheless, in Lucas's view, successive generations of reader have admired Bennett's best work, and future generations are certain to do so.^[3]

Crime fiction

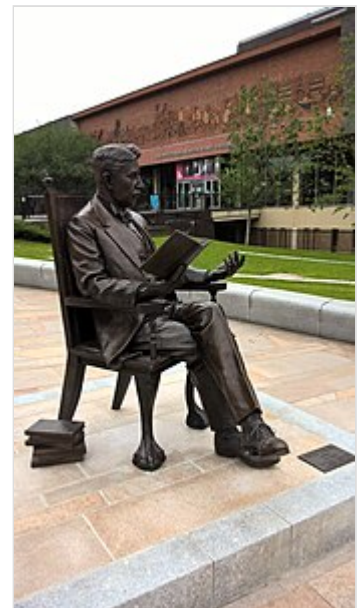
Bennett dabbled in crime fiction, in *The Grand Babylon Hotel* and *The Loot of Cities* (1905). In *Queen's Quorum* (1951), a survey of crime fiction, *Ellery Queen* listed the latter among the 100 most important works in the genre. This collection of stories recounts the adventures of a millionaire who commits crimes to achieve his idealistic ends. Although it was "one of his least known works," it was nevertheless "of unusual interest, both as an example of Arnold Bennett's early work and as an early example of dilettante detectivism".^[144]

Legacy

Arnold Bennett Society

The Society was founded in 1954 "to promote the study and appreciation of the life, works and times not only of Arnold Bennett himself but also of other provincial writers, with particular relationship to North Staffordshire". In 2021 its president was Denis Eldin, Bennett's grandson; among the vice-presidents was Margaret Drabble.^[145]

In 2017 the society instituted an annual Arnold Bennett Prize as part of author's 150th anniversary celebrations, to be awarded to an author who was born, lives or works in North Staffordshire and has published a book in the relevant year, or to the author of a book which features the region. In 2017 *John Lancaster* won the award for his poetry collection *Potters: A Division of Labour*. Subsequent winners have been Jan Edwards for her novel *Winter Downs* (2018), *Charlotte Higgins* for *Red Thread: On Mazes and Labyrinths* (2019) and Lisa Blower for her story collection *It's Gone Dark Over Bill's Mother's* (2020).^[146] The prize was not awarded in 2021 because of the Covid-19 situation, but in 2022 it was won by John Pye, a



Statue of Bennett outside the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent

former detective inspector turned crime writer, for his novel *Where the Silent Screams Are Loudest*.^[147] The prize in 2023 went to Philip Nanney Williams for his book *Adams: Britain's Oldest Potting Dynasty*.^[4]

Plaques and statuary

Bennett has been commemorated by several plaques. Hugh Walpole unveiled one at Comarques in 1931,^[148] and in the same year another was placed at Bennett's birthplace in Hanley.^[149] A plaque to and bust of Bennett were unveiled in Burslem in 1962,^[150] and there are [blue plaques](#) commemorating him at the house in Cadogan Square where he lived from 1923 to 1930 and on the house in [Cobridge](#) where he lived in his youth.^[151] The southern Baker Street entrance of Chiltern Court has a plaque to Bennett on the left and another to H. G. Wells on the right.^[152] A blue plaque has been placed on the wall of Bennett's home in Fontainebleau.^[46]

There is a two-metre-high bronze statue of Bennett^[153] outside [The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery](#) in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, unveiled on 27 May 2017 during the events marking the 150th anniversary of his birth.^[154]

Archives

There are substantial archives of Bennett's papers and artworks, including drafts, diaries, letters, photographs and watercolours, at [The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery](#) in Stoke-on-Trent^[155] and at [Keele University](#). Other Bennett papers are held by [University College London](#), the [British Library](#), [Staffordshire University's Special Collections](#)^[156] and, in the US, [Texas](#) and [Yale](#) universities and the Berg Collection in the [New York Public Library](#).^[157]

Omelette

Bennett shares with the composer [Gioachino Rossini](#), the singer [Nellie Melba](#) and some other celebrities the distinction of having a well-known dish named in his honour.^[158] An omelette Arnold Bennett is one that incorporates [smoked haddock](#), hard cheese (typically [Cheddar](#)), and cream.^[159] It was created at the [Savoy Grill](#) in London for Bennett, who was an *habitué*,^[159] by the chef [Jean Baptiste Virlogeux](#).^[160] It remains a British classic; cooks from [Marcus Wareing](#) to [Delia Smith](#) and [Gordon Ramsay](#) have published their recipes for it,^[161] and a variant remains on the menu at the Savoy Grill.^[n 16]

Notes, references and sources

Notes

1. Three other children died in infancy.^[3]
2. [Somerset Maugham](#), a friend of Bennett and a fellow-stammerer, observed, "It was painful to watch the struggle he sometimes had to get the words out. It was torture to him. Few realised the exhaustion it caused him to speak. What to most men is as easy as breathing was to him a constant strain. ... Few knew the distressing sense it gave rise to of a bar to complete contact with other men. It may be that except for the stammer which forced him to introspection, Arnold would never have become a writer".^[10]
3. £150 in 1894 is approximately equivalent to £22,000 in 2023, according to calculations based on [Consumer Price Index](#) measure of inflation.^[13]

4. "Néfliers" translates into English as "medlar trees".^[43] In Bennett's time the house was called "Villa des Néfliers",^[44] but is evidently now the "Villa les Néfliers".^{[45][46]}
5. The cast included Dion Boucicault, W. Graham Brown, Dennis Eadie, Basil Hallam, Kate Serjeantson and Marie Tempest.^[53]
6. The cast included Lionel Atwill, Gladys Cooper, Dennis Eadie, Mary Jerrold, Owen Nares and Haidee Wright.^[55]
7. The inscription gives the date of his death as 29 March 1931, although in fact he died at 8.50 p.m. on 27 March.^[66]
8. The columns for *The Evening Standard* are collected in *Arnold Bennett: The Evening Standard Years – "Books and Persons" 1926–1931*, published in 1974.^[70]
9. Sitwell recorded that Bennett's practice of anonymous philanthropy was continued by the latter's protégé Hugh Walpole.^[75]
10. Drabble ascribes her obduracy to a combination of the vindictive and the mercenary – no divorce court would award a settlement as advantageous to her as the highly generous terms given to her by Bennett at their separation.^[77]
11. Such recourse was familiar at the time, when unmarried couples were expected to make a token pretence of being married: in similar circumstances Sir Henry Wood's partner changed her name by deed poll to "Lady Jessie Wood",^[79] and as late as the 1950s Jane Grigson similarly took her undivorced partner's surname.^[80] Dorothy was never formally "Mrs Bennett", but after she and Marguerite were both present at the memorial service for Bennett, in St Clement Danes on 31 March 1931, *The Times* addressed the problem by referring to them as "Mrs Dorothy Bennett" and "Mrs Arnold Bennett" respectively.^[81]
12. In his last hours the local authority agreed that straw should be spread in the street outside Bennett's flat to dull the sound of traffic. This is believed to be the last time this traditional practice was carried out in London.^[66]
13. The omitted town is Fenton, an omission that still rankles with some local people in the 21st century.^[92]
14. There were six "Fantasias": *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902); *Teresa of Watling Street* (1904); *Hugo* (1906); *The Ghost* (1907); *The City of Pleasure* (1907) and *The Vanguard* (1927).^[105]
15. *Riceman Steps* won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction in 1923: winners in other years have included D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, Radclyffe Hall, Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, Iris Murdoch, John le Carré, Zadie Smith and A. S. Byatt.^[139]
16. The traditional omelette was served at the Savoy until 2021.^[162] In 2022 the omelette was replaced with a soufflé Arnold Bennett, with the same essential ingredients.^[163]

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