

## The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

### Ohio State Engineer

**Title:** The Engineer's Bookshelf

**Creators:** Dumble, Wilson R.

**Issue Date:** 1940-02

**Publisher:** Ohio State University, College of Engineering

**Citation:** Ohio State Engineer, vol. 23, no. 3 (February, 1940), 4-5.

**URI:** <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/35670>

# The Engineer's Bookshelf

By PROF. WILSON R. DUMBLE

## TO STEP ASIDE

Noel Coward, England's brilliant playwright, composer, lyricist, actor, director, and producer, has been at it again. This time Mr. Coward has written a collection of short stories, seven of them, all published in a volume called "To Step Aside",\* all crisp and all the acme of sophistication.

As if it were yesterday, I recall so well when Mr. Coward first came to my attention. It was the summer of 1922—he was then only twenty-three years of age—and I was spending several weeks in London. Friends thought it would be quite fine to take me to see a play, a new type play, indeed, that was a current attraction in the city. It was called "The Vortex", and it was written by a newcomer, one Noel Coward who also starred in the production. If I recall correctly Miss Gertrude Lawrence was also a member of the cast.

"The Vortex" had had a long run in London with a premiere in Autumn 1921; it was being held over during the following summer for the benefit of the traveling Americans of whom I happened to be one. Highly successful, the following season it was crated up and sent to New York where its reception was equally happy.

At any rate that was Mr. Coward's introduction to American audiences, both as an actor and as a playwright and since then he has been an indispensable factor to the American stage. There followed in quick succession his "Hay Fever" in 1925, his "Bitter Sweet" in 1927, his "Private Lives" in 1930, and his "Post Mortem" in 1931. And those are only a few of his better ones; some of those not so successful include "Cavalcade", which however was made into a splendid motion picture several years ago.

Now has arrived a time when Mr. Coward is turning out prose in great fashion. His first attempt came last year when he wrote his autobiography, "Present Indicative"; now we have his collection of short stories, published in December for the Christmas trade. He calls his volume "To Step Aside", a quality that is in the possession of most of his characters. In the stories, Mr. Coward's bitter wit runs rampant. With a straight eye he sees human weaknesses and treats them with restrained sympathy; at the same time the virtues of his characters seem to be crushed into their backgrounds. Probably, Mr. Coward believes, virtues are not worth mentioning.

Mr. Coward's characters always know when and what to do. The reader will find them at Nice seated in pink cane chairs, sipping their brandy and soda, gazing out over the blue Mediterranean. Or perhaps they are dining at a front table—they always occupy front tables in restaurants and have box seats at the opera; they are those kinds of people—in Lucerne with the snow-capped Alps for a background. In only one story will the

reader find sordidness, and that a sordidness slipped from former glory. If they are in New York they are attending literary cocktail parties and viewing the jagged Manhattan skyline; if they are weekending on Long Island they are lulled to sleep by the gentle sound of the surf, and they dash madly about in expensive motor cars to attend cocktail parties and to see polo matches. An enjoyable life, indeed, for Mr. Coward's characters!

In fact, Mr. Coward's best story in the volume tells of a Long Island weekend. It is called "What Mad Pursuit?", and it recounts the experiences of one Evan Lorrimer, a celebrated British novelist who comes to America for a speaking tour. His publishers meet him at the pier, promptly arrange a cocktail party in his honor, and shove him off on a Long Island hostess when the action of the story takes place. And what action! From noon Sunday until six o'clock Monday morning Mr. Lorrimer is wined and dined, carted about the country side from bar to swimming pool and back to bar again, is pawed over by the queerest assortment of stage and literary folk ever congregated in one story, and finally is poured into his bed with the general American belief that "he couldn't take it." Surely it is a biting comment on our curious American way of entertaining guests.

"The Wooden Madonna" no doubt ranks second in the volume. It is a sardonic little tale of an ex-antique dealer who has turned playwright, and upon a trip to the Continent finds himself almost hopelessly embroiled in a plot of international intrigue. Although he is seeking material for a new play, he fails to understand the situation in which he is placed; so he travels on into Italy entirely escaping the tightness of the circumstances. Naturally he also passes up the very plot material he was seeking.

Mr. Coward's "To Step Aside" makes splendid reading if you do not take him too seriously and if you do not read all the stories at one sitting. They are almost unbelievably alike, and too much brittle brilliance, like too much Biscuit Tortoni, begins to cloy after a time.

\*To Step Aside, Doubleday Doran, \$2.50.

## "Tobacco Road" Again

Six years ago I read Erskine Caldwell's "Tobacco Road", and in the March issue of *The Ohio State Engineer*, published a review of the book and made a few comments about seeing the play. Since that review was written, however, I have seen the play twice, both times at the Hartman theatre, and since it spent the first week of the new year back at the Hartman again—this was its seventh visit—I thought that it might be interesting to see what I said about the book and play some six years ago.

With no further comments, here is the March 1934 article:

Good novels, as a rule, it seems, cannot be converted into good plays. Please do not ask me why; I do not know, nor do I understand why it cannot be done. I merely know from watching the theatre during the last twenty years that such is not the case. The most outstanding exception, however, was "Rain", made over from the short story, "Sadie Thompson," by W. Somerset Maugham. "Rain" had a splendid run in New York City with the late Jeanne Eagles as Sadie, and then, for several years to follow, it was played throughout this hinterland by various stock companies. It was even put in the movies, Gloria Swanson doing it for the silent films several years ago, and Joan Crawford for the talkies. But on the other hand, one remembers such wide-selling novels as "Elmer Grantry" and "Main Street," both by Sinclair Lewis, lasting only a few weeks after they were transcribed from the novel to the stage.

But at long last Broadway is seeing a play made from a book which is a huge success, despite the first night critics who said that it could not live more than the first week or so. I refer to "Tobacco Road" by Erskine Caldwell, which opened on Broadway during the height of the Christmas theatrical season and which is one of the outstanding attractions. No doubt its success is due to the splendid acting of Henry Hull who takes the chief role of Jeeter Lester. All critics, naturally, praised the fine work of Mr. Hull, but in the same breath claimed that the theme of the piece was too revolting to guarantee its existence on the stage.

When I read the criticisms in the New York newspapers I was interested to read the novel, published in 1932. Somehow I had missed it. Anyway, after securing a copy, and reading it I discovered that all the

critics said about it were quite true. It is strong meat, and a good many people are properly licensed to be shocked by the candor of the author. "Tobacco Road" is the story of the disintegration of the Lester family, a family of poor white trash in the God-forsaken backwoods of Georgia; one has only to read it to grasp its full meaning. There is humor, there is pathos and there is tragedy; and I suppose it does touch the universal when old man Jeeter tearfully leaves the soil from which he has wrenched a miserable existence to go to work in a factory in neighboring Augusta. But the sordid side far offsets these points. The sight of old Jeeter, lazy, slow-witted, dishonest, waiting on his back porch for his decrepit old mother to bring in branches for the fire; the glimpse of Jeeter's wife, shabby and terrible, whose one ambition is to have a stylish dress to be buried in; or the presence of the hairlipped daughter, gabbling while she scratches in the earth to find roots to feed on; these are the coals which feed the terrible plot.

And throughout the novel this joyless picture does not change. Old Jeeter gives his youngest and fair-haired daughter to a neighbor as a wife for the sum of seven dollars; Grandma Lester dies in the woods but no member of the family goes to find her—although they mean to do it some day; the worthless son marries a traveling woman preacher, twice his age, on her promise to buy him a new Ford car, the same car which runs over and kills his mother. That is about all that happens; and yet, as a novel it is interesting to read. However, does that explain why it is a current attraction on Broadway? Is it the sordid side of life, a life that is so off-key from what one generally believes American life to be, that draws the crowd? I do not know; I only know that since reading the book I do not wish to see the play.