

From treading boards to the Book Society: Clemence Dane and her circle in the 1920s-1950s

At the Institute of English Studies, University of London
Thursday 6th to Friday 7th October 2022
The conference will run Thursday afternoon and all day Friday.

Abstracts, alphabetically by author

Rebecca Cameron

Fate, Fortune-telling, and Feminism in Clemence Dane's Early Plays

Accounts of Clemence Dane often note that she served as the inspiration for Madame Arcati, the medium and clairvoyant in her friend Noel Coward's comedy, *Blithe Spirit*. Coward's dynamic character draws on Dane's unconventional personality as well as her longstanding interest in the supernatural, both in life and in her writings. Recent criticism by Louise McDonald and Alexis Weedon has called attention to Dane's use of ghosts and spirits in her plays and novels. Building on this work, my paper examines Dane's use of fortune-telling and cartomancy as a thematic and a structural device in her early plays, *Will Shakespeare* (1921) and *The Way Things Happen* (1923). While card-reading was a popular pastime in the Victorian era, several modernist works demonstrate a renewed interest in cartomancy, perhaps most famously in Mme Sosostri's "wicked pack of cards" in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Both *Will Shakespeare* and *The Way Things Happen* make use of fortune-telling in early scenes, predicting major events, including the endings, of these plays. However, as Aunt Lucy, the card-reader in *The Way Things Happen*, explains, "The cards don't tell you the way things happen. They only fortell the happenings" (6).

I argue that the distinction between "the happenings" and "the way things happen" provides insight into Dane's feminism in her early plays, including *A Bill of Divorcement* (1921). While the outcomes for Dane's female protagonists plays do not always correspond with feminist ideals, Dane does accord her female characters considerable agency over "the way things happen." In keeping with Aunt Lucy's advice to her protégé, Shirley, women in Dane's plays "stand up for [their] rights" (73) as modern women as they move toward their predicted fates. Likewise, one could characterize Dane's feminist approach in her early drama as emerging less from "the happenings" in her plays and more from her imaginative, at times fantastic or subversive characterization of "the way things happen."

Vivian Colbert

Dane's *Will Shakespeare* and Female Collaboration

This paper derives from my doctoral research, which analyses the relationship between history and feminism in British history plays of the interwar period. A special focus lies on the role of feminist playwrights, such as George Bernard Shaw, Clemence Dane and Laurence Housman and their appropriation of female historical figures to make political statements about women in contemporary society. Theatre as an institution offers several ways and opportunities of networking for actors, playwrights, critics and others. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach combining history, theatre studies and theories of gender performativity, this research evaluates newspaper articles and private letters to reconstruct

not only how theatre represented and shaped the role of women during this period but also the experience of those attending these performances and the impact the plays had on them. Through its reflection on femininity, masculinity and eventually also feminism, *Will Shakespeare* (1921) by Clemence Dane is a perfect example of such a play. Its characters reflect modern expectations and criticisms of these matter, when, for example, Anne Hathaway fights for her rights, Elizabeth I accepts her heavy burden of responsibility and Shakespeare himself succumbs to his weaknesses. As a proud and well-connected feminist of her period, Dane was supportive of women's advancement in society and in doing so she was very well connected, as is proved, for example, by her long collaboration with *Time and Tide*. This paper aims to analyse the aspect of collaboration among women in the context of Dane's *Will Shakespeare* and in doing so shall reflect upon Dane's public stance on feminism and the importance of female networking.

Rose Collis

Clemence Dane and Noel Coward: Logical Family

In 2007, I became the designated Clemence Dane biographer after recommendations from notable biographer Andrew Lownie, and literary critic and Cambridge University lecturer, Alison Hennegan, with the full permission and co-operation of the Dane executors, literary estate and the Noel Coward Archive Trust. Several years ago, I was vouchsafed long-term custody of a vast private Dane archive, which contains a wealth of unseen material pertaining to Dane's personal and professional lives.

I have given popular talks about Dane at the V&A, the National Portrait Gallery, public libraries in Worthing and Brighton, and at Equity HQ. In 2016, I wrote and performed the one-woman stage play, *Wanting the Moon*, based on my research, and the show was staged in London, Brighton, Hove and Worthing. Dane's long relationship with Noel Coward – including his wish that she play Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit* – was central to the play and its themes. I wrote a feature for the NCAT website and Home Chat magazine to coincide with the acclaimed exhibition Noël Coward: Art & Style at the Guildhall Art Gallery in 2021. This exhibition paid special attention to the key women in Coward's life whose importance had often been overlooked and negated – especially Clemence Dane. Dane was one of four women (the others being Gladys Calthrop, Lorn Loraine and Joyce Carey) at the heart of what Coward and his companions called 'the family'. As Graham Payn explained, 'The "family" was our support system. And we were family. Not your conventional Victorian family, but in many respects something better, more alive, because we chose each other. We got together and stayed together because we wanted to be together.'

In today's presentation, I'll be speaking about the ups and downs of the Dane/Coward relationship – including their political differences and their experiences in Hollywood and on Broadway – featuring excerpts from their diaries and the many letters and original unseen poems they exchanged until shortly before her death.

David Cottis

Clemence Dane – *Broome Stages*

Clemence Dane's 1930 novel *Broome Stages* tells the story of the Broomes, a theatrical dynasty, from the eighteenth century to the then-present day. In its connection of family, theatrical, and national histories, it is a British cousin of Edna Ferber's *Show Boat* (1926),

and a distant ancestor of Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1991) and Karen Joy Fowler's *Booth* (2022). Together with Ferber's novel and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), it is also one of the possible influences on *Cavalcade* (1931) by Noel Coward, who was friendly with Dane, Ferber and Woolf.

Despite its popularity, *Broome Stages* has never been adapted for film, although there was a BBC TV version in 1966. In the 1950s, Dane had corresponded with her friend the film director Michael Powell, who was interested in making a film adaptation, possibly imagining a film that would combine the theatrical milieu of *The Red Shoes* (1948) with the historical panorama of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943).

Powell and Dane were unsure about proposing the project as a film; therefore, Dane wrote a stage adaptation of the novel, with the intention of producing it as a step towards getting the film made. Powell maintained an interest in the theatre throughout his film career, describing the theatre in his autobiography as 'my great love' and even directing a stage play, *The Fifth Column*, in 1944.

Broome Stages was never produced, either as a play or a film. The BFI Reuben library holds a copy of Dane's playscript, and the correspondence between Dane and Powell concerning their plans. My paper would examine the play as an adaptation of the novel, and look at the friendship between Dane and Powell, and what a collaboration between these two English eccentrics might have been like.

Nicola Darwood

Side by Side: Clemence Dane and Elizabeth Bowen

In his introduction to the second volume of *Modern English Short Stories* (The World's Classics: 1956), Derek Hudson discusses the literary trends which had to be negotiated by short story writers in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. They 'had to steer between the Scylla of popular journalism and the Charybdis of preciosity' in a period when 'some of our most distinguished writers were bent on establishing an era of plotlessness which might drive the intellectual short story out of the reach of even a 'general reader' sympathetically disposed to experiment' (xii-xiii). Hudson hoped that among these short stories in the anthology, 'perhaps one or two will live to speak, fifty years hence, for English literature' (xiv); the anthology includes writers who are well known to a twenty-first century reader, for example Somerset Maugham, Virginia Woolf, C S Forester, Evelyn Waugh, H E Bates and Graham Greene, and others who are not so familiar such as Fred Urquhart, V S Pritchett, Francis Tower, Erik Linklater, William Plomer or A L Barker.

Sitting side by side in this collection, and sandwiched between Nigel Kneale's 'The Putting Away of Uncle Quaggin' and Rosamund Lehman's 'A Dream of Winter', are stories by Elizabeth Bowen and Clemence Dane: 'Maria' from Bowen's collection of short stories *The Cat Jumps, and Other Stories* (1934) and Dane's 'The Dearly Beloved of Benjamin Cobb' which was published in *Fate Cries Out* (1935). Focusing particularly on Bowen and Dane, this paper explores connections between the writers and their writing in this collection, tracing friendships and professional relationships, as the writers engage with (and in some stories, move away from) the experimental form of the short story of the Modernist era, and they negotiate their way through the treacherous waters inhabited by Hudson's Scylla and Charybdis.

Stella Deen

Clemence Dane, Literary Critic for *Good Housekeeping* Between the Wars
(To be presented as a recorded talk)

In its 1922 inaugural issue, the UK edition of *Good Housekeeping* announced its mission in a two-column, full-page “Reason for *Good Housekeeping*.” Its first paragraph promised to meet the needs of “the homekeeping woman of today” in the same breath as, perhaps contradictorily, it announced that “we are on the threshold of a great feminine awakening.” As early as the second paragraph, however, thinking, reading, and enjoying life are recognized as priorities for women’s budgeting of time. Additionally, the editors vow to address “the burning questions of the day” and to provide a platform to air “both sides of every open question.” They kept this promise. Clemence Dane formed part of a network of professionals recognized in their fields, public figures, authors, and artists, many of them women, who helped thousands of *Good Housekeeping* readers conceptualize modernity and engage with public life as newly enfranchised citizens. Dane paid relatively little attention to the “homekeeping” woman, but during her decade-long tenure as literary critic for the magazine, she consistently fostered women’s preparation for their expanded role as citizens. She did so in articles on social and political questions as they affected women, as well as in book essays.

I call Dane’s articles about books and reading “book essays.” This designation acknowledges Dane’s work as a literary critic and makes a distinction between a book review and an essay of complex structure and, often, cross-national and cross-century literary references. Dane’s book essays also feature a persona, a common-reader version of Dane who sets her discussion of books in the context of the varying material conditions of her reading.

In this paper I plan to focus on what I have elsewhere called Dane’s “para-curricular” role with respect to her readers. Since only a minority of *Good Housekeeping* readers would have attended university, I ask how our conception of this domestic magazine might change when we consider how loyal readers of Dane’s essays learned about literary traditions while she cultivated their love of reading and encouraged such practices as re-reading and intertextual reading. An early example of Dane’s interest in education is “The Educational Value of Acting in Schools” (November 1922), a topic that relates to some conference participants’ interest in theater and performance studies. In addition to this early essay, I will discuss “Interesting People” and “A Sex of Queens” and place them in the context of Volume 7 of *Good Housekeeping*, which focused on women’s associational power.

Cynthia Johnston

Outside the circle; inside the networks: Dorothy Whipple and Clemence Dane’s New Bloomsbury

In 1936, publisher Michael Joseph wrote ecstatically to his author, Dorothy Whipple, upon receiving Clemence Dane’s comments on Whipple’s childhood memoir, *The Other Day*. Dane wrote that she found the book, ‘enchanted reading.’ She has ‘always admired and liked Miss (sic) Whipple’s work but I think this is the best thing she has ever done. It has enormous charm and freshness.’ It is a testament to Dane’s power as a critic that Joseph values these remarks so highly; the comments eventually found their way to the book’s dust-jacket. In 1936, Dorothy Whipple was the best-selling author of four novels, two of which had been Book Society choices (*Greenbanks* in 1932 and *They Knew Mr Knight* in ’34). Whipple was

one of the stars of the John Murray stable. The surviving correspondence held by the author's estate indicates that Whipple was befriended and admired by many of those within Dane's literary circle including E. M. Delafield, Hugh Walpole, Sylvia Lynd and J. B. Priestley, who famously called Whipple 'the Jane Austen of the 20th century'. For some, Whipple makes a Brontesque figure, with her Blackburn roots and Nottingham address, encountering snobbery and ridicule dealt out by literati like Dane and her cohort. But the correspondence tells a different story, with Whipple's deep engagement not only with her publishers and mentors, Lord Gorrell and Jock Murray, but especially with her collaborators in the worlds of film and theatre. The Whipple archive held by the Blackburn Library contains annotated scripts for adaptations in television, Hollywood films, the West End and radio.

This paper will address Whipple's use of the networks newly available to authors from the 1920s onwards in terms of multi-media engagement for the dissemination and transformation of their work. Dane's central position in these networks was useful not only via endorsements in reviews for outsiders like Whipple, but also, I will argue, as a template for engaging powerful multimedia connections.

Sylvia Kent

Clemence Dane CBE – A Remarkable Woman

(To be presented as an article)

Clemence Dane CBE, born Winifred Ashton in 1888, was a welcome and enthusiastic member of the Society of Women Journalists from the 1930s until her death in 1965. This international pioneering women's writing organisation had been founded in 1894 by the Fleet Street newspaper proprietor and philanthropist Joseph Snell Wood who supported our Society during its first three years. Members originally met in London's Bond Street and other venues, before settling into Stationers' Hall, which is still used today.

In the 1935-6 SWJ Council Miss Dane became President of the Society and in our Diamond Jubilee year – 1954 (by which time 'Writers' had been added to our title) – she accepted the office of Honorary Life President. This talented member's personality and experience in the Arts was appreciated by everyone, particularly during her World War II tenure.

A widely acclaimed multi-talented personality, actor (stage-name Diana Cortis), novelist, dramatist, poet, artist, sculptor, Miss Dane enjoyed considerable recognition from the time her first novel, *Regiment of Women*, was published by Heinemann in 1917. Dozens of best-selling books and plays followed. One best-remembered book is *Broome Stages*, published in 1931, which follows a famous theatrical family, and *London Has a Garden*, published in 1963. Her work in the Arts during her thirty previous years had been phenomenal. The screenplay *A Bill of Divorcement* was published in 1921 to wide acclaim and brought the world's eminent film producers, directors, actors and novelists to her beautiful Covent Garden home. Many of her books and plays were made into films and are still appreciated today.

Clemence Dane introduced Joyce Grenfell and Vera Brittain to our Society in 1942 by giving them copies of our magazine *The Woman Journalist*. It was renamed last year as the *SWWJ Journal* and is read on page and through the internet, bringing new young writers to our current membership list.

Louise McDonald
Clemence Dane's *The Flower Girls*

Clemence Dane's last novel, *The Flower Girls*, set in 1946 and published in 1955, is her mature and final reflection on the preoccupations which characterise her work as a whole, and the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the novel's importance to understanding Dane's life, mid-century Britain, and the theatre culture which she knew so well and writes of in such accurate and meticulous detail. It is a semi-autobiographical text, not in the sense of any representation of Dane through one central character, but in terms of the way that it holds a mirror to Dane's theatrical and cultural community and takes the reader round her special English places, many which she made her home. It provides an insight into Dane's vast knowledge – she was incredibly well-read – of literary and theatre history, and reflects her preoccupation with the future of British theatre, and of England, which the theatre comes to symbolise.

The novel combines Dane's enthusiasm for English Shakespearian theatre with an understanding of the need to modernise in the light of post-war shifting hegemonies in Britain and the reality of British culture becoming changed by American influences, particularly the rise of the Hollywood film industry. She suggests that the theatre needs continuity, but as a medium of entertainment it also requires an understanding of the necessary death of the author over time, whereby playwrights and actors must freely adapt to suit changing audiences, frequently modernising and re-interpreting original works and acting techniques. The novel was published by American company, W.W. Norton and Company, and its American readership perhaps shaped Dane's method of exploring the relationship between England and America at this point in time, through showcasing England's history, culture and nature at its finest, with considerable affection for the Old World, while forging a sense of connectedness between England and the New World, including in her contemporary and historical analysis, the fraught and exploitative relationship between original British settlers and Native American peoples. Through her central character, a young American male playwright who leaves California for England to trace his family of British thespians, she draws on her own time spent in America, to-ing and fro-ing, visiting theatrical and literary friends there, including Rebecca West, with whom she and G. B. Stern stayed in 1924, and collaborating on Hollywood film and theatre projects. In the absence of any published biography, *The Flower Girls* plays an important role in shedding light on Dane and her life and world.

Alexis Weedon
Who was Clemence Dane's circle? Location and biography through the archive

In researching British writers and their forays into the new media of film and radio in the early twentieth century, I came across repeated references to Clemence Dane, yet could not find out much about her. There is only a biographical sketch to tell us about her life. In the course of my work, I gleaned fragments of a life, often revealed through views of her, or notices about her rather than an informed narrative from her own correspondence. I now have a timeline of her life which I offer here and am building a picture of her network and her influences. In studying Dane and her circle, piecing together where she was and who she was with becomes an important reference. Such a resource is helpful when researching her theatrical and literary connections and in analysing her novels. Facts from the archive provides some correlation when thinking of who she influenced and who influenced her. So,

introducing the idea which underpins this conference I ask can you help me situate her within an influential circle of actors, directors and writers which overlap film, theatre and literary circles?

Nicola Wilson

Selling books for a living: Clemence Dane and the Book Society

In a discussion behind the scenes on the *Femina-Vie Heureuse* literary prize committee – a French-British book prize that Clemence Dane had been involved with since its beginnings in 1919 – Dane called attention to the committee’s role in the business of book selling: ‘The majority of us here live by selling books and we are a Committee to help young authors to sell theirs. The names of the books we consider good are now made public in the press.’ (Cambridge, MS8900, Oct 15th 1929).

This paper examines Dane’s contribution to selling books in the 1920s and ’30s via her involvement with the Book Society. The Book Society, established in 1929, was the first celebrity-backed subscription book club in Britain, choosing and sending books out monthly to tens of thousands of readers across Britain, its colonies, and dominions for over forty years.

Dane was on the first set of judges and stayed with the selection committee – which was headed up her friend Hugh Walpole – until 1937. My paper will look at the practice of her reviews for the club, tracing key themes and choices, and consider Dane’s work for the Book Society in relation to her parallel committee work on the *Femina-Vie Heureuse*. Like Sylvia Lynd, her colleague on both clubs, Dane’s work should be seen in light of women’s professional bookwork and early attempts to democratise and open up book-buying that made a significant impact on interwar print culture: work that has been largely overlooked.

Speaker biographies

Rebecca Cameron is an Associate Professor of English at DePaul University in Chicago. She is currently working on a monograph on games in twentieth-century British drama, but is excited to have this opportunity to revisit Clemence Dane and to return to her longstanding interest in British women playwrights of the interwar period.

Vivian Colbert is a doctoral student at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany, in the department for British Studies in Gernersheim. She earned degrees in History and English at the University of Education Heidelberg, Germany. In her dissertation she examines the relationship between history and gender in history plays of the British interwar period. She has previously published articles on the reception of Queen Zenobia in the British women’s suffrage movement and an interview with Stella Duffy, author of the historical novels about Empress Theodora.

Rose Collis is an internationally acclaimed and award-winning author, playwright, performer, singer, musician, historian, producer, journalist and film-maker. Her work spans five decades and includes full-length and short biographies, stage plays, documentary films, social and cultural histories, journalism, short fiction, online content, exhibitions, lectures, apps, workshops, literary talks and educational tours. During lockdown, she single-handedly

created her first film, *The Boy and The Bear*; it has now been an ‘Official Selection’ in 18 global film festivals and won 12 awards, including three for ‘Best Feature Documentary’.

David Cottis is Senior Lecturer in Scriptwriting and Programme Leader for Film at Middlesex University. He has contributed chapters to *The Oxford Handbook of the British Musical* (2016) and the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of the Global Musical*. He received his Ph.D from Birkbeck College for his thesis on ‘The Well-Made Screenplay: the Screenwriting of British Stage Playwrights 1930-1956’.

Nicola Darwood is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. She has published work on Elizabeth Bowen, Stella Benson and Nancy Spain, is a co-founder and co-chair of the Elizabeth Bowen Society, and is co-editor of *The Elizabeth Bowen Review*.

Stella Deen is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York, New Paltz, where she teaches courses in British literature, critical theory, and women’s literature. She has published work on twentieth-century British writers E. H. Young, Elizabeth Bowen, and Enid Bagnold. Her interest in the dialogic exchanges of literary texts assigned to diverse “brows” have led to two current research projects: a study of critic and short story anthologist Edward O’Brien and an investigation into the role played by the British *Good Housekeeping* in cultivating its readers’ literary taste.

Cynthia Johnston is a Lecturer in the History of the Book and the Director of the MA/MRes in the History of the Book at the Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London. A medievalist by training, she has recently focused on the history of book collecting and book culture.

Sylvia Kent from the Society of Women Writers and Journalists is their archivist and VP. She is a columnist and author of 12 books and five anthologies. Awarded Freelance Writer of the Year via *Writing Magazine*, she researched SWWJ history and the resulting book, *The Woman Writer*, was published by The History Press in 2010, coinciding with the centenary of the birth of former SWWJ President Joyce Grenfell.

Louise McDonald is a Senior Lecturer in English at Newman University, Birmingham. She has been researching the life and works of Clemence Dane for over fifteen years, and in addition to articles, she has produced the first monograph on Dane: *Clemence Dane: Forgotten Feminist Writer of the Inter-War Years* (London: Routledge, 2020).

Alexis Weedon is Professor of Publishing Studies at the University of Bedfordshire and author of *The Origins of Transmedia Storytelling in Early Twentieth Century Adaptation* (2021) which features the work of Clemence Dane and three of her circle, G. B. Stern, Hugh Walpole and A. E. W. Mason. She has a book on the novelist and film director Elinor Glyn (1864-1943) and has published research in book history and new media.

Nicola Wilson is Associate Professor in Book and Publishing Studies at the University of Reading, Co-Director of the Centre for Book Cultures and Publishing, and the Modernist Archives Publishing Project. She currently has a University Research Fellowship to complete a monograph on the Book Society Ltd.