

‘I was more “dinkum” than had been anticipated’: Noël Coward’s 1940 Tour of Australia, Waving the Wartime Flag for Britain

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On the afternoon of November 17 1940, a gay white English thespian 13,000 miles from home, with a pianist he had engaged at Romano’s nightclub at 2 o’clock that morning before taking three aspirin and going to bed, faced hundreds of testosterone-soaked Australian soldiers at the Ingleburn Army Camp south of Sydney.¹ After three songs the pianist staggered off stage, ill, upon which the entertainer, then one of Britain’s most successful playwrights and actors, and a celebrity throughout the English-speaking world, took off his jacket and, on his own account, ‘fended for himself’.²

Noël Coward was 40 years old. Haunted by his poor showing as a vulnerable teenager in the Great War, he determined to ‘prove my own integrity to myself’ in the succeeding conflict.³ He was fiercely patriotic, and intensely networked into Britain’s interlocking artistic, aristocratic and political elites. He was privately scathing about the fascist sympathies of parts of those elites, his own circle featuring Mountbattens rather than Moseleys. Coward admired the stubborn bravery of British working people facing the Axis onslaught at home and abroad. In class terms his origins were not that far from theirs. His father Arthur was a musically-gifted, financially-stricken, piano salesman. His mother Violet (née Veitch) was a product of genteel, peripatetic poverty, who infused the family’s psychic landscape with tales of superior historical colonial connections which had no practical bearing on the Coward family’s actual lived existence. Noël’s early earnings as a child actor contributed to the family’s material survival as he struck out from the English suburbs on a professional theatre career aged 11 years old.

Coward’s admiration for ordinary Britons’ doughty approach to World War II was in inverse relation to his view of the managerial capabilities and martial nous of the ruling class. He privately excoriated inefficiencies in, and the ineffectiveness of, aspects of the Chamberlain and Churchill governments’ war efforts in his vast contemporaneous correspondence and voluminous diaries from World War II. This paper focuses on Coward’s personal fight to contribute to the British war effort – a struggle against against shadowy,

¹ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 142; first published London, 1937).

² Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 144; first published London, 1937).

³ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 44-45; first published London, 1937).

unrelenting internal government opposition, and British press hostility, as unremitting as Coward's desire to help Britain win the war. It shows how cosmopolitan patterns of circulation, and connections built on British empire foundations at the very time its boundaries were being transformed, enabled Coward to find a useful role, if not his preferred one. It highlights the role of sexual identities and sensibilities in those patterns of circulation and connection. It focuses on the path to his 1940 tour of Australia and New Zealand and the wider British world connections that were being complicated, and dramatically weakened, by the immense forces unleashed in World War II.

The methods of the successful entertainer and the successful propagandist are almost indistinguishable: both elicit emotion purposefully to engender a particular belief without the subject being aware of the ruse. The conscious behaviour of the successful actor and the successful spy bear a similar relationship: each produces actions and affects creating an effect furthering the attainment of undeclared goals. It is unsurprising, therefore, given Coward's then vast celebrity and success as a dramatist and actor, that he was quickly identified as potentially a useful purveyor of influence and gatherer of a certain kind of intelligence for the British war effort. In the year running up to the declaration of war in September 1939, Coward was part of a shadow intelligence network whose members reported on their European travels to British government official Sir Robert Vansittart, permanent undersecretary of the Foreign Office and later the government's chief diplomatic advisor.⁴ In November 1938 Coward reported to Vansittart from Switzerland, and in June and July 1939 undertook a lengthy trip for him to Warsaw, Danzig, Moscow, Leningrad, Helsinki, Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen 'to see what was going on'.⁵

When war broke out Coward moved to France to head the British government's Bureau of Propaganda in Paris, established to influence opinion in western Europe, especially Nazi Germany. He was recruited by Sir Campbell Stuart, a longstanding director of the *Times* who had played an important role in Britain's Great War propaganda effort, and who in the early part of World War II served as the government's director of propaganda in enemy countries.⁶ Coward found he had little scope to change the turgidly bureaucratic approach to

⁴ Barry Day (ed.), *The Letters of Noël Coward* (London: Methuen, 2007), 368-375.

⁵ Barry Day (ed.), *The Letters of Noël Coward* (London: Methuen, 2007), 371.

⁶ Stuart's deputy-director of propaganda for enemy countries was Dallas Brooks, later a long-serving Governor of Victoria, Australia. 'Stuart, Sir Campbell Arthur', William Haley, revised by Robert Brown, *Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb->

propaganda being driven from London.⁷ Coward's direct counterpart at the French *Commissariat d'Information*, André Malraux, was a writer too, as was Malraux's boss, the French Minister for Information, Jean Giraudoux. The gap between the potential of the personnel involved and the propaganda effort that resulted is vivisected by Coward in his post-war memoir, *Future Indefinite*.⁸ He contrasted the German propaganda flooding into France at the time, 'lurid and most effective cartoons depicting carnal British officers raping French ladies in looted châteaux; and baths of blood into which grinning English Tommies were pushing French *poilus* (infantrymen)', with the leaflets dropped in their tens of thousands by the Royal Air Force into Germany. These were 'closely printed admonishments translated from speeches by Mr Chamberlain and Lord Halifax...concerned mainly with the fact that war was wicked and peace was good and that...the Allies were very strong indeed and prepared to fight to the death to defend the democratic way of life'. Coward considered that, while expressing admirable sentiments, they were verbose, somewhat inaccurate and, by implication, hopeless as propaganda: 'Some time later I wrote in a memorandum that if the policy of His Majesty's Government was to bore the Germans to death I didn't think we had enough time. For this I was reprimanded.'⁹ To his close friend, stage designer Gladys Calthrop, he wrote, 'It's a strange life and oh dear, what material for a writer!'¹⁰

Coward's frustration that 'We all move around as if in treacle' did not diminish his determination to remain in official harness for the war rather than return to the theatre.¹¹ A letter in January 1940 from his business partner and former lover, the American producer John C. 'Jack' Wilson, saying Wilson was being urged by friends in New York to induce Coward back to the stage, was rebuffed. 'I am using my intelligence and my brains for my country until the war is over,' Coward replied. 'Some of my work is interesting and a lot of it is dull but at least I know I am doing the only thing possible for me... This play hasn't been

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⁷ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 45-92; first published London, 1937).

⁸ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 45-92; first published London, 1937).

⁹ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 60-61; first published London, 1937).

¹⁰ Noël Coward letter to Gladys Calthrop, 21 September 1939, in Barry Day (ed.), *The Letters of Noël Coward* (London: Methuen, 2007), 378. In typical Coward style, the salutation to very lesbian Calthrop was 'Hallo, Cock' and his signoff was 'Love and kisses, Germaine de Staël'. A letter to Calthrop the following month said he had 'a lot of very secret information, because I am very mysterious and doing a very important job for my country but you couldn't expect me to tell you anything because you are so garrulous.... Love and Kisses, Charlemagne.' 25 October 1939, *ibid.*, 379-380.

¹¹ Barry Day (ed.), *The Letters of Noël Coward* (London: Methuen, 2007), 388.

very well directed so far and the first act, according to many, is too long and rather dull. I am afraid however that I cannot walk out on it.’¹²

Coward’s period in Paris was dogged by adverse attention from the British press, ‘irritated, I suppose, naturally enough,’ he later wrote, ‘because they had been given no information about the job I was doing’. That Coward worked for the British government could have been easily clarified but was not and, since he was forbidden to give interviews or otherwise publicly discuss the Bureau’s role, his status remained opaque. Coward pressed on, he recounts in his memoir, ‘in exasperated silence against a rising tide of absurd mis-statements and far-fetched rumours’.¹³ The *Telegraph* wrongly reported him, for example, ‘sauntering along the Rue Royale in naval uniform’, which developed into a florid two page *Sunday Pictorial* attack demanding to know why a ‘Playboy’ like him was allowed to wear a uniform of the fighting services.¹⁴ This triggered a flood of letters, some signed, some anonymous, variously insulting, abusive, contemptuous and disappointed. ‘I found this hard to bear,’ Coward wrote, ‘but what annoyed me most was the thought that such shameless and bland inaccuracy should be read, believed and commented on by many thousands of my countrymen whose affection and respect I had striven to gain through all my professional years.’¹⁵ One *Daily Express* journalist attempted to gain a reportable angle on him by lying in wait in his office. The journalist reported that, ‘Mr Noël Coward, in impeccable civilian attire, sits all day behind a vast desk in a luxury office in the Place de La Madeleine, issuing orders to officers of the highest rank’.¹⁶ Suppressed by the British censor it was not published but remains an interesting example of the way adverse portrayals of Coward’s role could morph into the kind of stereotyped disparagement to which diplomats generally were not infrequently subjected. His role, and that of the Bureau, ended when Paris fell to the Germans in June 1940.¹⁷

¹² Noël Coward letter to Jack Wilson, 29 January 1940, in Barry Day (ed.), *The Letters of Noël Coward* (London: Methuen, 2007), 391-392.

¹³ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 84; first published London, 1937).

¹⁴ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 84-85; first published London, 1937).

¹⁵ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 85; first published London, 1937).

¹⁶ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 87; first published London, 1937).

¹⁷ Coward was *en route* back to France from a visit to the US when Paris fell to the Germans and he was diverted to London narrowly missing a fatal meeting with the Nazi invaders. ‘If anyone had told me at that time that I was high up on the Nazi black list, I should have laughed and told him not to talk nonsense. In this, however, I should have been wrong, for, as it ultimately transpired, I was. In 1945, when the Nazi list of people marked down for immediate liquidation was unearthed and published in the Press, there was my name. I remember that Rebecca West, who was one of the many who shared this honour with me, sent me a telegram which read: - ‘My dear – the people we should have been seen dead with.’ Coward, *Future Indefinite*, 92. For an account of the operation of the XXX, see William Stephenson, XXX ()

The problem followed him to his next role, working this time for the secret, New York-based British Security Coordination (BSC), established in 1940 at the Churchill Government's behest by William 'Little Bill' Stephenson, a wealthy Canadian businessman with long-standing British links. BSC was Britain's covert propaganda arm in the US, charged with creating a climate of opinion supportive of the United States' entry into World War II, which at this stage Britain was badly losing. Stephenson saw Coward's potential to covertly reach, report on and influence otherwise hard to get to American opinion leaders at a time when isolationist sentiment raged, and opinion – popular and elite – favoured leaving beleaguered Britain to its fate. Coward had worked and lived in the US off and on since first visiting in 1921 and regarded it as his 'second home'.¹⁸ Stephenson considered him well suited to the task and throughout Coward's travails thereafter did not change his view.

A 'confusing talk' Noël had with Winston Churchill prior to his departure from London for the US suggested the prime minister's reluctance about the BSC involvement. 'He knew I'd done something in France for intelligence but couldn't get it into his head that what I wanted was to *use* my intelligence... he kept saying, "No use, you'd be no good – too well known." I said, "That's the whole point... nobody will think I'm doing anything special"... Eventually I got it through to him...' ¹⁹ Coward's very celebrity was his disguise. The conversation was a reprise of a similarly discouraging one with Churchill prior to taking up the Paris appointment at war's beginning. 'I saw Mr Churchill's point clearly,' he wrote of that earlier discussion. 'In his view I was primarily an entertainer, a singer of gay songs, and that, come rain or shine, peace or war, victory, defeat or bloody chaos, that was what I should remain.... But what he failed to realise was that I didn't sing and play nearly as well as he thought I did, and that I could do one or two things a good deal better.'²⁰

While the government havered, Coward prepared and took early steps to begin what Philip Hoare describes as a 'summer of sweaty diplomacy and part-time espionage'. Public engagements around the British war effort were his cover.²¹ Critical press attention, even questions in the House of Commons, arose as to why Coward was in the US, and whether wealth and celebrity eased his way there at a time of stress anxiety at home. British MP and former diplomat Harold Nicolson, then parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Information Duff Cooper, responded that, 'His qualifications are that he possesses a contact

¹⁸ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 95; first published London, 1937).

¹⁹ Philip Hoare *Noël Coward, A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 310.

²⁰ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 43-44; first published London, 1937).

²¹ Philip Hoare *Noël Coward, A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 315.

with certain sections of opinion which are very difficult to reach through ordinary sources'. Nicolson said the question's implications were 'grossly unfair'.²²

As press criticism continued in Britain in ignorance of Stephenson's BSC plans for Coward, an additional line of attack emerged. Isolationist elements of the American media introduced a homophobic element, impugning Coward's masculinity. One commentator asserted that Noël has been 'worshipped by so many weak young men, who thought of him as their belle ideal of playwright, society darling and paragon of virtue', and drew attention to an MP's remark that Coward should be called home to England, alleging he was 'a poor representative of British democracy'.²³ This was the background against which Britain's ambassador to Washington, Philip Kerr, Lord Lothian, became ever more ambivalent about Coward's presence in America. Further, shadowy resistance to Stephenson's plans for him from within the government in London also exerted a gravitational pull. Coward found himself increasingly at an impasse in the United States where, Philip Hoare notes, his growing 'sense of uselessness sometimes reduced him to tears'.²⁴ It was at this point that a diplomat from a far-flung British dominion assumed pivotal performance.

The narcissism of empire is such that if one is from the centre, the outlying parts tend to attract merely functional attention, if any at all.²⁵ So it was that Noël Coward had given little if any thought at all to Australia, or Australians, during his forty years on earth, least of all during 1940 when he worked in France and headed to the US. Nor was nationality a relevant factor a year earlier, in November 1939, when in Arras, France, Coward asked visiting British minister Anthony Eden to introduce him to a Dominion representative in Eden's touring party whose 'taut and virile fighting speech' he had just read and admired in the *Continental Daily Mail*.²⁶ This was Richard 'Dick' Casey, Minister for Supply and Development in Australia's Menzies Government. 'Feeling like a film fan with an autograph book', Coward recalled, 'I went straight up to him and told him firmly what I thought of his speech and how delighted I was to have the opportunity to shake his hand. He seemed

²² Philip Hoare *Noël Coward, A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 313.

²³ Philip Hoare *Noël Coward, A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 313-314..

²⁴ Philip Hoare *Noël Coward, A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 314.

²⁵ In Britain's case, though its empire no longer formally exists, the tendency to nationalistic narcissism lives on in the popular delusion that it won World War II itself, when in fact it took Britain; its then dominions of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and South Africa; and the United States and Russia to defeat the Axis powers of Germany, Italy and Japan.

²⁶ Diane Langmore, *Glittering Surfaces: A Life of Maie Casey* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 71-72.

pleased...'²⁷ To Noël's eyes, Casey was a 'a good-looking Australian of middle height with a forceful personality', who spoke 'lovingly and with humour of his own land'.²⁸ 'I liked him so much,' Coward wrote in his memoir, 'that I found myself agreeing that, whenever the opportunity offered, I would fly straight to the Antipodes.'²⁹ Coward observed there was 'nothing equivocal in Casey's speech or his manner'.³⁰ Similarly, on one of his American trips the next year, he was drawn to Dick's wife Maie Casey, who introduced herself to Coward when seated together at a British Embassy lunch in Washington: 'She was gay and intelligent and there obviously was no nonsense about her'. This characteristically Australian lack of 'side' appealed to Coward, buffeted, as he was then, by press criticism on both sides of the Atlantic, and covert erosion by unseen others within the British government, frustrating his efforts to get on with his BSC work for Stephenson. Dick 'very much wanted to see me again', Maie told Coward.³¹ Late the next evening, after Coward had dined at the White House with the Roosevelts, he joined Dick and Maie Casey at journalist Walter Lippman's home where dinner was long over and most of the guests gone. Noël, Dick and Maie sat on Lippman's front porch, in the cool Washington night air.

As I had noticed when I first met him in Arras, Casey's whole personality lit up when he talked of his native land; Maie...shared his enthusiasm, and when finally I had left them and retired to bed in the Carlton...I lay in the darkness while a procession of Koala bears, kangaroos, sheep and wallabies...whirled through my brain together with a series of confused visions of stately eucalyptus trees, mountains, valleys, deserts and limitless sandy beaches. I ultimately fell into a deep sleep troubled by regret that Mother and Father had not had the sense to emigrate with me in 1905 instead of merely moving to Lenham Road, Sutton, Surrey.³²

It was the beginning of what Casey's biographer, W. J. Hudson, describes as an oddly intimate friendship: "'oddly" intimate in that Coward scarcely bothered to hide his sexual orientation, while Casey gave every appearance of rigorous social orthodoxy'.³³

²⁷ Noël Coward, diary, cited in W. J. Hudson, *Casey* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1986), 110-111 and Diane Langmore, *Glittering Surfaces: A Life of Maie Casey* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 71-72.

²⁸ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 87; first published London, 1937).

²⁹ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 87; first published London, 1937).

³⁰ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 87; first published London, 1937).

³¹ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 99; first published London, 1937), 99.

³² Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 103; first published London, 1937).

³³ W. J. Hudson, *Casey* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1986), 110-111.

Coward had got lucky. In the Caseys he found kindred spirits: empire insider/outsiders. With the addition of Casey's press aide, Australian journalist Patricia 'Pat' Jarrett, who lived with them at the Australian Legation in Washington, the four formed a friendly quartet underpinned by several shared feelings: a sense of Britishness, intense loyalty to their own countries, frustration at governments' lagged, and in key respects inadequate, response to the war crisis, and, to varying degrees, a gay sensibility.

Dick Casey (born 1890) was an Australian-born, Cambridge-educated engineer, businessman, diplomat and politician who that very year, 1940, had resigned from parliament and moved to Washington to establish Australia's first independent diplomatic mission. Australia was still a dominion. When Britain declared war in 1939, Australia was automatically at war too. Its citizens were still British subjects. The Australian colonies federated in 1901 but the newly born country, while it had views on foreign policy, continued to outsource its external relations to the Foreign Office in London. It took the threat of Japanese aggression in the Pacific to shake the Australian government out of its torpor and establish the legation in Washington, housed in 'White Oaks', once the home of General Patton.

Maie Casey (née Ryan, born 1892) was an Australian-born artist, writer and aviator who accepted a 'late life' marriage proposal from Dick when both were in their thirties and living in London. Dick occupied a liaison post for Australia in Whitehall, working closely with British cabinet secretary Sir Maurice Hankey, while Maie lived a cosmopolitan life with close friends in London including the Labour peer Kit, Baron Thomson. Press notices of Maie's engagement to Dick included at least one which commented how amazed Maie's friends back in Melbourne were at this development. Maie enjoyed intense, intimate relationships with women, something that did not change with her marriage. Like Coward, Maie Casey lived not so much hiding her sexuality in plain sight but rather not hiding it at all. Like Coward, she observed correct social forms and proprieties and got on with things. Pat Jarrett (born 1911), loaned to the Caseys by Australian press baron Keith Murdoch during their Washington tenure, shared Maie's approach to life. Consistent with the observation of the correct social forms and proprieties of the Caseys' very public and deeply loyal marriage, Maie and Pat formed a lifelong relationship. Later in life, Pat would build a house adjacent to the Caseys on their property outside Melbourne, and live there for many years. The troika developed many shared lifelong friendships, often rooted in their Washington years and

otherwise arising from interlocking national and international networks each developed in their respective lives and sometimes overlapping work.

Dick, Maie, Pat and Noël became firm friends. When Noël shared his quiet fury and frustration at his situation in the US, it was Dick who came to the rescue, commissioning Coward's 1940 tour of Australia and New Zealand as a stop gap activity while Noël's situation regarding his BSC work clarified. Noël, in Dick's view 'one of the rare entertainers of the world', was to 'raise the spirits of tired and disgruntled troops' and otherwise rally Australians and New Zealanders behind their heavily bombed British empire 'kin' – not Coward's first preferred war work but at least a contribution and one he could make so well.³⁴

So it was that Noël found himself on that November afternoon at Ingleburn Army Camp south of Sydney, alone on the stage, his pianist having bailed after three songs; jacketless, and breathing deep the testosterone-charged air of the hundreds of diggers before him. Coward pulled it off. The tour was a hit. 'The word must have got round that I was more 'dinkum' than had been anticipated', Coward reflected.³⁵ It was a view which, unfortunately, narrow-minded parts of the British government did not share. On Noël's return from Australia and New Zealand to the US in early 1941, Bill Stephenson disconsolately shared the cable he had received, unsigned, from London ending Coward's association with BSC. Noël, with Dick Casey more often than not again fulfilling a de facto commissioning agent role, would go on to tour the Middle East, South Africa and India during the rest of the war, as well as writing, co-directing with David Lean, and starring in one of the great propaganda films of the 20th century, *In Which We Serve*, for which in 1943 he won an honorary Academy Award. Coward made a contribution – his own kind, if not his preferred kind – after all.

³⁴ Richard Casey, diary, July 13 1944, in *Personal Experience 1939-1946* (London: Constable & Co, 1962), 227.

³⁵ Noël Coward, *Future Indefinite* (London: Methuen Drama, 1986), 142; first published London, 1937).