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Stoke-on-Trent celebrates one hundred years of 'The Card'

A remarkable celebrity of his time - and someone who, today, would have been both prolific *and* extraordinarily well-followed on all social media channels - Arnold Bennett died exactly 80 years ago, in 1931.

And it is also 100 years ago, this year, that he completed and published one of the most famous and enduring of all his novels, *The Card*, which was also made into a classic movie, starring Sir Alec Guinness.

Bennett's literary legacy is vast. He was a writer of books, novels, plays and philosophical musings. He was a journalist, a travel writer, a raconteur and wit, and the Head of War Propaganda during the First World War. He was a resident of the (recently re-opened) Savoy Hotel, in London. He gave his name to an Omelette (still cooked and served by many of the leading chefs and top restaurants in Britain today). He lived in France. And Stoke-on-Trent. And London. And was mourned nation-wide when he died.

He also explained to the world how easy it is to spot someone from Stoke-on-Trent (just watch for the people who turn-over their cups, saucers and plates to see where they were made!). Most importantly of all, however, it was Arnold Bennett who best illustrated the enormous debt which Britain owes to The Potteries of Stoke-on-Trent: "You cannot drink tea out of a tea-cup without the aid of the Five Towns, you cannot eat a meal in decency without the aid of the Five Towns."

Universally recognised as ranking alongside Thomas Hardy's Wessex in the description and depiction of a specific region and the provincial life it embodies, Bennett's novels of the 'Five Towns' have attracted an enormous world-wide following for well over a century now.

The towns he described in great detail in novels such as *The Old Wives' Tale*, *Anna of the Five Towns*, *Clayhanger* and (exactly 100 years ago) *The Card* were filled with "pitheads, chimneys and kilns, tier above tier, dim in their own mists" - very different from the six towns of current day Stoke-on-Trent, but for all that, a fitting tribute to the history and heritage of The Potteries.

Born in Hanley in 1867, Bennett eventually moved to London; but, as *A Man from the North* (the name of his first novel), he never lost sight of his native Potteries - despite becoming one of the most financially and socially successful writers of this century.

A Man from the North appeared in print in February, 1898. A thinly veiled version of Bennett's own adolescent experiences in London, its principal character is Richard Larch who "had lived in the full glow of an impulse to write" and "discerned that he possessed the literary gift". Bennett certainly did; and The Potteries became the setting for many of his novels and short stories, with the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent reduced to five by the omission of Fenton.

Bennett detected a "grim and original beauty" in the industrial landscape of the region where he spent his formative years, and his descriptions of Bursley (Burslem), Hanbridge (Hanley), Knype (Stoke), Longshaw (Longton) and Turnhill (Tunstall) have helped to put The Potteries on the literary map of Great Britain.

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Major redevelopment projects have helped to transform the city in recent years, but local scenes connected with Bennett's work are still there to be seen. And those which do remain have now been linked together by a self-guided walk called *Arnold Bennett's Bursley Trail*, which can be downloaded free of charge from the visitstoke.co.uk website.

There is also a tribute to Bennett in the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, which not only houses the best ceramics collection in Britain, but also a permanent display of the recently uncovered Staffordshire Hoard.

And to mark the 100th anniversary of *The Card*, The Arnold Bennett Society will be opening up its conference to all-comers for an event featuring speakers from as far afield as Ireland and Istanbul! That event, on June 11th, will be held at the North Staffordshire Medical Institute. Full details will appear on their website shortly: www.arnoldbennettsociety.org.uk, and the full cost for the day, including lunch, will be £25.

John Shapcott, former Chairman of the Bennett Society, meanwhile, has edited a Centenary Edition of *The Card*, which is scheduled for publication this July. The book will include a full Critical Introduction, Background Notes to each chapter (identifying, for example, Burslem street names) and many illustrations from the 1952 film starring Alec Guinness. (These have been made available by kind permission of ITV).

For further details, log on to www.visitstoke.co.uk.

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