Shaw, George Bernard

by Nicholas Grene

Shaw, George Bernard (1856–1950), playwright, was born 26 July 1856 at 3 Upper Synge St., Dublin, third child and only son of George Carr Shaw (1814–85) of Synge St., clerk, Four Courts official, then corn merchant, whose English ancestor (of originally Scottish descent) had been granted lands in Kilkenny after service in the Williamite wars, and Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw (née Gurly; 1830–1913), gifted amateur singer and music-teacher from a family with landholdings in Carlow. He had two sisters: Lucinda Frances (1853–1920), actress and singer in musical comedy, and Elinor Agnes (1854–76). A member of what he styled the ‘downstart’ classes, the younger sons of younger sons, he was educated at the Wesleyan Connexional School, briefly at the Central Model Boys' School, Marlborough St., and at the Dublin English Scientific and Commercial Day School. He did not attend university but started work in 1871, first as clerk and then as cashier with the Dublin land agency Uniacke Townshend. Leaving Dublin for London (where his mother had already moved) at the age of 20, he never returned to reside in Ireland and, except for one brief period as an employee of the Edison Telephone Company (1879–80), never again held a full-time salaried post.

**Early years in London** In his first years in London, he was largely supported by his mother, eked out by some small income from journalism, while he laboured to produce five novels, from *Immaturity* (written 1879, published 1930) to *An unsocial socialist* (written 1883, published 1887). These were all initially rejected for book publication, though most of them did find their way into print, serialised in socialist magazines of the 1880s, and the best-known, *Cashel Byron’s profession* (1886), achieved a certain success. In the novels what were to become Shaw's most notable characteristics as a dramatist – polemically unconventional opinions, clear and forceful prose style, antiromantic plotting and characterisation – are all discernible.

As an unemployed Irishman in London in the 1880s, with inordinate ambition but considerable insecurity, Shaw set about remaking himself as an individual personality in ways that defined his identity outside and against the normal hierarchies of class and culture. Acquiring, sometimes arbitrarily or accidentally, distinctive personal practices and beliefs, such as vegetarianism, opposition to vaccination, interest in phonetics and rationalised spelling, the wearing of all-wool clothing, he made these into lifelong attributes of the persona known as G.B.S. Central to this self-fashioning was his conversion to socialism, initially by the encounter with Henry George, the American land reformer (1882), and then by the crucial experience of reading Marx (1883), though his Marxist economic thinking was to be substantially modified by the theories of Stanley Jevons. Joining the Fabian Society, the middle-class socialist debating-society and pressure-group, soon after its establishment in 1884, he found there his future long-term political associates
Sidney (1859–1947) and Beatrice Webb (1858–1943), and an influential forum for his political activity. The detailed engagement diaries which he maintained most fully between 1885 and 1897 record his constant speaking engagements as a publicist for the Fabian cause, never receiving more than his expenses as remuneration. A skilful if unconventional committee man in his many years on the council of the Fabian Society, he was the editor of and one of the chief contributors to *Fabian essays in socialism* (1889), a book of remarkable continuing popularity.

The death of his father in 1885, and the consequent removal of his 30s. a week support to the family expenses in London, forced Shaw to look for more regular employment as a journalist. This he found as book-reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1885–8), as art critic for the *World* (1886–90), and notably as musical critic for the *Star* (1889–90), writing under the pseudonym ‘Corno di Bassetto’, and for the *World* (1890–94). From their first meeting in 1883, he was to form one of his many continuing and productive friendships with the drama critic and Ibsen translator William Archer (1856–1924): Shaw's first play, *Widower's houses*, though not completed until 1892, was started as a collaboration with Archer in 1884. His theatre criticism, predominantly for the *Saturday Review* (1894–98), was animated by a polemic advocacy of the avant-garde theatre of Ibsen, and an often devastating critique of the fashionable society drama deriving from the French plays of Victorien Sardou, which he labelled Sardoodledom. His book *The quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), composed initially as a lecture for the Fabian Society, is a key text for the understanding of both Shaw's theatre practice and his intellectual beliefs, just as his later book *The perfect Wagnerite* (1898) helps to define the centrality of Wagner to his music criticism.

**Plays, 1894–1914** The plays for which Shaw was eventually to become best-known evolved both out of his social and political thinking and his reforming theatrical zeal. The works that were to be collected as *Plays unpleasant* (1898) were based on the dialectic principles of Ibsen, designed to shock audiences into a reconsideration of their conventional beliefs. Thus as *Widower's houses* exposed the tacit complicity of middle-class rentiers in slumlordism, the even more controversial *Mrs Warren’s profession* (written in 1893 but denied public performance in Britain until 1926) used the figure of a brothel-keeper to equate marriage with prostitution, both being governed by the cash nexus. Already, however, in *Arms and the man*, the comedy premiered at the Avenue Theatre in 1894 in a double-bill with the first-produced play of W. B. Yeats (qv), *The land of heart’s desire*, Shaw had lightened his touch in ridiculing the absurdities of military romance, and his later farce *You never can tell* (written 1895–6) was typical of the spirit of the collection *Plays pleasant* (1898). Popular as these plays eventually became, and frequently revived as they continue to be more than a hundred years later, they were considered too unconventional to be performed in mainstream theatres in the 1890s, as were Shaw's attempts at melodrama in *The devil's disciple* (written 1896) and at historical epic in *Caesar and Cleopatra* (written 1898). The only substantial income Shaw achieved from his
playwriting before 1900 came from a highly successful American production of *The devil's disciple* by the actor-manager Richard Mansfield (1854–1907) in 1897.

Under the pressure of an enormous workload of journalism, political activity, and playwriting, Shaw's health broke down in 1898, when he was saved from any future financial anxieties by marriage to Charlotte Frances (1857–1943; daughter of Horace Payne-Townshend (1824–85) of Ross Carbery, Co. Cork, and Mary Susanna Payne-Townshend (née Kirby; 1830–91)), whom he had met through the Fabian Society and who was to provide important backing for the Fabian project of the London School of Economics; from 1899 to 1927, the Shaws' London home was to be in a flat at 10 Adelphi Terrace above the LSE. Though extremely attractive to women, Shaw had been a late developer sexually, losing his virginity to an older woman, Jenny Paterson (c.1840–1924), at the age of 29. He did have one further affair with the actress Florence Farr (1860–1917), who also had a liaison with Yeats, but his relationships with women had generally been intense flirtations where it was possible for him to avoid full commitment. His most passionate love-letters were addressed to actresses such as Ellen Terry (1847–1928) – a correspondence conducted for five years (1895–1900) without their meeting – and later Stella Campbell (1865–1940). His marriage to Charlotte was childless and appears to have been unconsummated, though it was to be an unwavering, lifelong partnership of forty-five years. The relative lack of importance that the physical expression of love had in his own life had its counterpart in his drama, where he consistently resisted the primacy of romantic motivation, attracting criticism that his plays were bloodless and asexual.

*Man and superman* (1903), Shaw's first major play of the twentieth century, was a provocative response to such criticism, a rendering of the Don Juan story where it is the male who is the prey rather than predator. This outsize work, 'a comedy and a philosophy', was written without plans for theatrical production, to expound the creed of creative evolution by which the human race is considered to evolve towards ever greater powers of self-understanding; the male urge of the aspirant 'superman' (a Shavian neologism corresponding to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*) to escape the attraction of the material senses in favour of the liberation of thought is matched, in the battle of the sexes, by the woman with her need to conceive the next generation of supermen. A different but equally significant dialectic in Shaw's political thinking is represented in *Major Barbara* (produced 1905), where the salvationist Barbara is forced to see the crucial basis of all moral force in material force, and thus situate her crusading zeal in relation to the amoral power of her arms-manufacturer father and the intellectual passion of her Greek-professor fiancé. With *Man and superman* and *Major Barbara*, the third in what can be regarded as a trilogy of major plays of this period is *John Bull's other island* (produced 1904), Shaw's only full-length play set in Ireland. The intellectual debate in this play is expressed through the three central characters of Broadbent, the Englishman who comes to Ireland full of romantic illusions and hard commercial propositions; Doyle, his engineer partner, the spokesman for Shaw's exposure of the 'real' Ireland and many of his own political
views; and the unfrocked priest Keegan, with a Utopian vision transcending this antithesis.

*John Bull's other island* had been written partly at the urging of Yeats, and it was originally planned for production in what was about to open as the Abbey Theatre (December 1904). However, it proved beyond the capacity of the Irish National Theatre Society and had, in any case, been also scheduled for a simultaneous London production at the Court Theatre, under the management of J. E. Vedrenne (1867–1930) and Shaw's friend the actor-director Harley Granville Barker (1877–1946). In the event this production provided Shaw with his breakthrough as a playwright, a popular success attracting high-level political attention from the then prime minister A. J. Balfour (qv), culminating in a royal command performance. The Vedrenne–Barker seasons at the Court that followed (1904–7) were dominated by Shaw, eleven of whose plays were performed (mostly directed by the dramatist), and made a major contribution to the establishment of the repertory theatre movement in Britain.

In 1905 Shaw made his first return visit to Ireland, staying in his wife's family home in Co. Cork, and this began a pattern in which the Shaws often spent extended holiday stays in the country, most frequently in the south-west. A greater degree of involvement in Irish theatre came also in 1909 when Shaw, in the middle of a polemic campaign against theatrical censorship in Britain, offered the banned play *The shewing-up of Blanco Posnet* for production at the Abbey, as the lord chamberlain's writ did not run in Ireland. In spite of being threatened with the theatre's closure by the lord lieutenant, the Abbey directors stood firm and successfully produced the play in August 1909. This event led to a close personal relationship between Shaw and Lady Gregory (qv), and some degree of support for the Abbey from Shaw, with the eventual outcome (from 1916 on) of a considerable number of Shaw plays (including the originally rejected *John Bull*) joining the Abbey repertoire.

Shaw's later plays for the Vedrenne–Barker partnership, *Misalliance* (produced 1908) and *Getting married* (produced 1910), very loosely structured discussion plays, were less successful, and the enterprise collapsed at considerable financial cost to Shaw. He had, however, his longest-running West End success with *Fanny's first play* (1911), in spite of the fact that it was produced anonymously. In 1914 came one of Shaw's most popular plays, *Pygmalion*, produced by Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1852–1917) with Mrs Patrick Campbell playing the flower-girl turned into grand lady by phonetic training, a part that Shaw had originally conceived for Campbell some seventeen years earlier. The production was preceded by an intense infatuation of Shaw for his leading performer and ended in his fury with Tree's refusal to accept the author's direction for the play, contriving to imply a 'happy' ending in which Higgins marries Eliza.
Public affairs  Shaw had continued to play a prominent part in public affairs, largely through the Fabian Society, serving on the St Pancras vestry, then borough council (1897–1903), orchestrating Fabian policy in the Boer war (in which he supported the British against the Boers), on municipal trading (the subject of a 1904 book), agitating for the establishment of a national theatre in Britain (1909–10) and for Irish home rule (1911–12), and assisting in the setting up of the New Statesman (1913). It was as a supplement to the New Statesman in October 1914 that he published Common sense about the war, the extended essay that won him widespread notoriety and hostility for its cool analysis of the origins of the war and resistance to the fervid patriotism of the time. For some years Shaw was intensely unpopular in Britain, though in point of fact he supported the allied war effort, and his one-act play O'Flaherty VC (1915), written for the Abbey, he subsequently called a ‘recruiting pamphlet’. It was not performed at the Abbey, however, on the advice of the military authorities in Dublin. Shaw's major play of the war period, Heartbreak House (written 1916–17, published 1919) expressed symbolically his sense of the crisis of western European civilisation in its lack of moral, political, or spiritual integrity, which had made the war possible. At the time of the Easter 1916 rising, Shaw defended the actions of the leaders, and subsequently worked to try to save Roger Casement (qv) from execution, even though he had no sympathy with Irish republican nationalism. In 1917 Shaw lobbied his friend Sir Horace Plunkett (qv), chairman of the Irish convention, to be nominated as one of the delegates, believing that he could have a major influence on its deliberations. His failure to obtain this appointment meant an end to his hopes for active political involvement, and thereafter he sought influence only by his writing.

In the period immediately after the war, Shaw's reputation seemed to be on the wane, at least in Britain where his work was regarded as dated. Back to Methuselah (1921), his ‘metabiological pentateuch’, dramatising his doctrine of creative evolution in a sequence of five full-length plays beginning with the Creation and ending in a time ‘as far as thought can reach’, was considered unproduceable. However, his international standing remained high, and his plays were often premiered outside Britain and Ireland, sometimes in translated texts. In Saint Joan (1924) he once again achieved a world-wide success, a play finished in Parknasilla, Co. Kerry, in what proved to be the Shaws’ last visit to Ireland. Capitalising on the still relatively recent canonisation of Joan of Arc (1920), Shaw created a provocatively orginal version of the Maid as a protestant and nationalist before her time, arousing controversy with his epilogue resurrection of Joan in dream dialogue with her friends and enemies, which some critics judged to ruin an otherwise great tragedy. The part, brilliantly created by Sybil Thorndike, has gone on to be a defining role for women actors, including notably Siobhán McKenna (qv), who first played it in her own Irish translation (1950).

Nobel prize winner  With the award of the 1925 Nobel prize for literature, Shaw's canonical status was confirmed, becoming in his later years one of the most famous people in the world, his views regularly solicited – and given – on every possible
subject, an oracle regarded as at once a sage and a clown. Long a favourite subject for painters, with portraits by Augustus John (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), and sculptors, among them Rodin (Musée Rodin, Paris), Epstein (National Portrait Gallery, London), and Troubetskoy (full-length bronze statue, NGI), he was much photographed, filmed, and caricatured in the press. He attracted and encouraged devotion from loyal theatre companies who specialised in his work: the New York Theatre Guild of Lawrence Langner (1890–1962), which gave American premieres to Heartbreak house, Saint Joan, and Back to Methuselah; the Macdona Players, who toured for many years with an exclusively Shavian repertoire; Barry Jackson (1879–1961), initially at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre where Back to Methuselah had been staged in 1923, and then at the Malvern Festival, set up by Jackson as a showcase for Shaw, with his political extravaganza The apple cart as its opening production in 1929. He became an early and adept radio broadcaster, and served as chair of the BBC’s committee on spoken English (1930–37). Nor was he wanting in recognition in his own country: he was elected the inaugural president of the Irish Academy of Letters (1932–5) and was made a freeman of the city of Dublin in 1946.

With The intelligent woman’s guide to socialism and capitalism in 1928, Shaw published his major political work, arguing for complete equality of income provided by the state as a key to radical social reform. Long disillusioned with the working of the democratic system, and attracted to centralised control by a highly-trained cadre of meritocratic civil servants, Shaw offended many people by his provocative enthusiasm for the 1930s dictators, Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini. A much publicised visit to Russia in 1931 was the occasion for a brief meeting with Stalin and some very positive statements about the success of communism in the Soviet Union. Shaw had opportunities to air his views on all subjects, including world politics, on extensive travels undertaken with his wife through the decade of the 1930s (South Africa in 1932, a world tour including the Far East and the United States in 1933, New Zealand 1934). His visit to South Africa resulted in The adventures of the black girl in her search for God (1932), voicing his heterodox religious vision.

Later years: 1932–50 Shaw continued to write plays as prolifically as ever, but few of them after 1930 achieved unequivocal success. Fantasy and futurism were features of works such as Too true to be good (1932) and The simpleton of the Unexpected Isles (1935), political satire of On the rocks (1934) and Geneva (1938), and historical debate of ‘In good King Charles’s golden days’ (1939). Pressure mounted for film versions of Shaw’s best-known plays – pressure he had resisted before sound was introduced to the movies. German and Dutch film versions of Pygmalion were followed in 1938 by the acclaimed British film directed by Gabriel Pascal, for which Shaw as screenwriter won an Academy Award. A 1941 Major Barbara, made by the same director, was somewhat less successful, and Caesar and Cleopatra (1945) a downright failure.
In his 80s Shaw maintained a formidable writing and publishing record, with the substantial treatise *Every man's political what's what* appearing in 1944. His movements were restricted, however, during the war, when he lived almost entirely in ‘Shaw's Corner’, the country home in Ayot St Lawrence, Herts., where he had lived with his wife since 1910. A further contraction of Shaw's life came with the death in 1943 of Charlotte, who had been increasingly handicapped with illness. His 90th birthday in 1946 was the occasion for widespread international celebration, largely ignored by Shaw himself, and marked by Penguin Books with the publication of the ‘Shaw million’: ten of his titles issued in a print run of 100,000 each. Plays (*Buoyant billions* (1947), *Farfetched fables* (1948), and *Shakes versus Shav* (1949)) continued to be written until within a year of his death at home on 2 November 1950, after a short illness beginning with a fall while pruning a tree in his 95th year. His body was cremated, as had been his wife's, and their ashes were mingled and scattered in the garden of ‘Shaw's Corner’.

**Archives** He left the bulk of his literary manuscripts to the British Museum (British Library), though his diaries and business papers went to the British Library of Political Science, and the manuscripts of his novels had been donated to the NLI in 1946; major holdings of his papers are to be found in the Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin, and Cornell University (Bernard A. Burgunder collection); other outstanding deposits of Shaviana are the Dan H. Laurence collection at the University of Guelph in Canada, and the Sidney P. Albert collection at Brown University, Rhode Island.

**Assessment** Shaw's hugely active and productive life made for an impact and influence in many different spheres. He cannot be considered a really significant political thinker in his own right, many of his ideas having proved of limited long-term value. However, as a key publicist for the Fabian Society and close associate of the Webbs, his role in forwarding socialism in Britain, to the point where the Labour party could become one of the major forces in politics, cannot be discounted. He was a tireless campaigner for the issues to which he was committed, including such quixotic projects as alphabet reform (to which he left the bulk of his estate), and a generous benefactor of public causes. It was typical that he should have donated his Nobel prize winnings to a foundation for the translation of Swedish writers into English; by means of special Dáil Éireann legislation (1945) he was enabled to make over inherited property to the town of Carlow; his residuary legatees, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, the British Museum, and the National Gallery of Ireland (having won a legal judgement limiting the amount of his estate to be devoted to a new English alphabet), came to benefit substantially from his bequest to them, ironically most of all from the royalties drawn from *My fair lady*, a musical-comedy version of ‘Pygmalion’ such as Shaw had always opposed.

Shaw's impact as a writer and personality went well beyond the direct effect of his formal publications. As a wit and conversationalist who contributed some of the most often quoted epigrams in English, as a colossally prolific letter-writer, Shaw
energised and illuminated the language and thinking of his contemporaries and of
generations after him. The master of a ‘plain’ prose style of extraordinary rhetorical
force and agility, he could make outrageously iconoclastic ideas seem a matter of
cant-cutting commonsense. Though he wrote – and talked – far too much, and could
become tiresomely wordy in his opinionated rhodomontades, he never lost the ability
to hit home to readers or listeners.

The thirty-seven volumes of his Standard Edition (1931–51), the many edited
volumes of his other writings, letters, and fugitive pieces, stand as an imposing
monument, if inevitably of variable quality. His early music- and theatre-criticism
remains astonishingly fresh and lively, the work of a brilliant journalist at the height of
his powers. His thinking in the more doctrinal of his works, promoting the philosophy
of creative evolution, is much less impressive, appearing in retrospect relatively
shallow, a characteristically late-Victorian attempt to combine scientific systematics
with teleological design. Though often accused by his critics in his own time and
since of being a preacher rather than a playwright (an accusation he took to
himself with pride as a badge of honour), Shaw had a highly developed sense of
theatricality, a capacity for genially inventive comic characterisation, and a stage
language of operatic virtuosity. If many of his fifty-two plays have dropped out of the
repertory, some dozen works continue to be regularly and successfully revived as
classics of world theatre. His academic reputation as a writer has not kept pace with
that of his modernist contemporaries Yeats and Joyce (qv). But Bernard Shaw, who
made himself a larger-than-life persona in his ninety-four years, more than fifty years
after his death probably lives on in name and image with a wider public than any
other twentieth-century writer in English.

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