

BERNARD SHAW

*His Life, Work
and Friends*

by

ST JOHN ERVINE

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TO
THE MEMORY OF CHARLOTTE

FOREWORD

MY INTENTION in writing this book is to tell the story of Bernard Shaw's life from my personal knowledge of him, with such additions of fact as are essential to proper understanding of his career. I began to write it long before his death, but put it aside because I had work of my own to do; but he knew that I had begun it, had, indeed, read what I had written, and he hoped that I would one day finish what I had begun because, so he said, 'You will understand the Irish side of me better than anybody who is not Irish.'

The Life of a man who lived for more than ninety-four years, and was not only world-renowned as a dramatist who had written about fifty plays in addition to other works, but had been a brilliant musical critic, an even more brilliant dramatic critic, a critic of books and a critic of painting, and also extensively and influentially engaged in political affairs of an advanced and revolutionary character, cannot be compressed into a small space. The fact that he was a founder of the Labour Party is sufficient in itself to show how varied and extensive his life was. His correspondence alone would fill many volumes, and the task of editing it will not be enviable. But when it is accomplished, readers will be amazed by the care and trouble he spent on the least of his letters; which were not surpassed by the care and trouble he took over his major works. There must be, scattered about the world, thousands of letters and postcards, many of them in his handwriting, which are full of wit and wisdom. The man who undertakes the task of collecting them will have to dedicate his life to it.

I knew G.B.S. intimately for more than forty years, and I felt an affection for him that was proof against all mischance or misunderstanding. He could say what he liked to me without hurting my feelings, not only because he was an exceptionally kind man, but also because I would not allow myself to feel hurt. He had the privileges of a friend who was my senior by twenty-seven years, and I had his confidence because he knew that I would not betray it. In the whole of our friendship, I never quoted his words without his consent; and it was this fact which made me, I think, better acquainted with his mind than most people. That happiness was increased by the fact that Mrs Shaw, too, received me, and even more than me, my wife, into her affection.

Few things in my life have given me so much happiness as the friendship of Bernard and Charlotte Shaw, and I find myself bereft

Foreword

without them. Their kindness, and his in particular, was beyond measure, nor was it diminished by the fact that I did not share their views, especially on politics. Of all the men I have known in my life, none was so full of grace of mind and spirit as G.B.S. His generosity was almost incredible. A legend has grown up since his death that he was mean about money. There never was uttered a greater lie about anyone than this. Sir Desmond MacCarthy was fond of telling a story of the response to an appeal he had made to G.B.S. for some cause in which he was interested: it was so large that MacCarthy returned half of it!

The number of books about Shaw is already large, and is likely to become larger. The first biography was the late Holbrook Jackson's:¹ it was published in 1907 when G.B.S. was 51 and still had a great part of his work to do. It has had many followers, including the monumental *Life* by Professor Archibald Henderson, a most useful quarry for other biographers to dig in, and a characteristic and brilliant commentary by G. K. Chesterton, which is the best book on Shaw that has been written and will probably be the best that will ever be written. The reader, with my statement in his mind, may well wonder why I have written this book. The answer is, first, that I wanted to write it, which is sufficient in itself, and, second, that G.K.'s book was written in 1910, forty years before G.B.S. died. Chesterton pre-deceased him by fourteen years, and much that G.B.S. wrote, including, probably, *Saint Joan* and *Heartbreak House*, was unknown to that most likeable man. Memoirs and biographies of other people have been published since G.K.'s death, many of which include accounts of Shaw or references to him; for his interests were numerous and uncommonly varied. It is inevitable, therefore, that all the books about him, written before his death, should suffer from insufficiency; and that the whole life should call for description.

I am deeply in debt to many people in connexion with this book, a debt which is deeper than appears from the footnotes in the book. My obligation to Mr Ivo L. Currall, a close friend of G.B.S., who lent me his numerous volumes of press cuttings about him, is great. This is a debt I have no hope of repaying. Mr Currall, who lives at Luton, was of immense service to G.B.S., when, after the accident which ended in his death, he was taken to Luton and Dunstable Hospital. Mr R. F. Rattray, whose work, *Bernard Shaw: a Chronicle*, is invaluable to the student of Shaw, has been generous with his time in answering questions and giving me information not easily obtainable. Without his aid and Mr Currall's I should have been heavily handicapped. Professor Henderson, too, has been generous with his

¹ But there is some biographical material in the late H. L. Mencken's *Shaw and His Plays*, which was published in New York in 1905.

wide knowledge, and I owe many thanks to the Public Trustee and the Society of Authors, by whose permission as copyright owners I have been able to make use of much unpublished material. I am also grateful to Miss Blanche Patch for permitting me to make use of her transcription of Shaw's shorthand diaries, to the National Trust for leave to reproduce illustration material at Shaw's Corner, and to Mr Harold White, of the Leagrave Press of Luton for the loan of illustrations from the work published by B. & H. White Publications Ltd: *Bernard Shaw through the Camera*. I am also in debt to Mr G. P. Wells and Mr Frank Wells for permission to quote their father.

I have the happy fortune to number among my friends, Mrs Georgina Musters, who is the grand-daughter, by his second marriage, of G.B.S.'s maternal grandfather. She was, until her marriage, G.B.S.'s secretary. Their close relationship, cemented not only by affection from G.B.S., but also from Charlotte, lasted until his death. She has not spared herself in answering my importunate questions on points where I was uninformed or insufficiently informed, especially in regard to his family. Mrs Musters lived for many years with G.B.S.'s mother, and was familiar with many of the figures mentioned in these pages. I owe her gratitude for reading and correcting my proofs, gratitude which is also due to Mr Ivo Currall and Mr R. F. Rattray who read the book in typescript.

I am also in debt to Sir Max Beerbohm for permission to quote his works, and to the Executors of the Passfield Trust for letting me make large quotations from the works of Sidney and Beatrice Webb. In some cases, I have sought and failed to obtain consent, either because the author cited is dead and I have no knowledge of any person from whom consent should be sought, or, as in the case of Mr W. P. Barrett—see page 500—because my letter has been returned by the Post Office as delivery cannot be made. I hope I shall be forgiven if I seem to have been lacking in courtesy to some of my authorities. Failure to obtain permission is entirely due to my inability to find the author.

My last, but not my least debt, is due to my former secretary, Miss Philippa Drake, now Mrs Simon Wills, who patiently disentangled my ill-typed and disorderly script and replaced it by one that was seemly; and I am also indebted to Miss Cecilia Nicholls for secretarial assistance.

Honey Ditches, Seaton, Devon
1952-56

ST JOHN ERVINE

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BERNARD SHAW

BERNARD SHAW



GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, the only son and youngest of the three children of George Carr Shaw and his wife, Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly, was born at 3 Upper Synge Street, now numbered and renamed 33, Synge Street, Dublin, on Saturday, July 26, 1856. He died at Shaw's Corner, Ayot St Lawrence, Hertfordshire, on Thursday, November 2, 1950, at a minute to five in the morning. His age was ninety-four years and fourteen weeks.

I

Ireland, at the time of his birth, was suffering severely from the effects of the Famine of the Forties, which is still known among country people as The Great Hunger. It was not the first famine Ireland had suffered, nor was it the last or worst in its immediate results. Between 1727 and the year of the Union, 1800, there had been eight that were disastrous; and there were numerous failures of the potato crop between 1817 and 1839, some of them partial, some of them complete, each bringing with it sinister attendants of pestilence and death.¹

But Ireland was not the only country which suffered from famine, though the Irish generally talk and write as if it were. The harvest in England failed for fourteen years in succession during the French and Napoleonic Wars, and there were bread riots throughout the country. Famine, indeed, like plague in the Middle Ages, was endemic everywhere, and vast numbers of people could be said, as we say to-day of the Indians, to have been hungry all their lives.

But the Famine of the Forties had a far different effect on the Irish than any that had preceded or followed it. For the first time in their history, they panicked. They had been deprived suddenly of their main supply of food, and the loss had been accompanied by a plague. A man would walk down a street and suddenly collapse and die. The retail trader hesitated to open his door in the morning lest the dead body of someone who had leant against it during the night should fall into his shop. The spectacle of men and women trying to stem the pangs of their hunger by eating grass could sometimes be seen.

¹ Dr George O'Brien gives a detailed account of them in his valuable work: *The Economic History of Ireland from the Union to the Famine*, pp. 225-31.

The frightened Irish went away in vessels that were soon to be called coffin-ships, most of them to America, where many of them died in the Southern swamps. They were called the Shanty Irish, because, being poor and accustomed to hovels, they took to shanties as if they were the natural habitation of people in distress. Some of them crossed the Irish Sea to Scotland and England where they were ill-received by working-men because they reduced the standard of life by taking low wages; though they were innocent of mean intention when they let themselves be thus exploited: for the wages they were offered seemed wealth to them. In a few years, the population of Ireland, which had almost doubled in the first forty years of the Union, rising from about $4\frac{1}{2}$ millions to more than 8 millions, began to drop more rapidly than it had risen. To-day, despite the establishment of a republic, despite, too, a substantial increase in the population of the Six Counties, the population of all-Ireland is less than it was in 1800, and is still declining. In 1851, four years after The Famine had ended, the population, which had been 8,175,124 in 1841, had dropped to 6,552,385. More than $1\frac{1}{2}$ million people had either perished in the Great Hunger or fled their country.

There were other elements of Irish life more deeply affecting Shaw's life than the recent Famine. He belonged to the ascendant minority, the Irish Protestants, who had been planted in the country and were in possession of landed property that had formerly been owned by the older and Roman Catholic population. This fact involved him in a deep social division from the mass of the people, a division which was not only created by difference of racial origin and religion, but by a long, haunting recollection of deprivation and robbery.

Ireland was, and still is, populated by three highly dissimilar groups of men and women whose intercourse is considerably less than that of any groups in, say, England. They are the Roman Catholics, most of them poor and agricultural; the Ascendancy, most of them Protestant and prosperous, though less so to-day than they were, and in any case, rapidly dwindling in number; and the Ulster Protestants who founded and maintain practically the whole of the industrial system of Ireland.

These three highly individualised groups despite the political and social changes in the last fifty years, still dominate the Irish scene. They prevailed with such severity when Bernard Shaw was born that they were, for the most part, strangers to each other. He belonged to the Southern Ascendancy, but to a socially declining section of it; and this fact had a profound influence on his whole life.

Lytton Strachey is said to have begun the singular biographical custom of treating a man's ancestors as if they were irrelevant to his career and character, and were generally unfit to be mentioned. This is a nonsensical custom since all of us are affected far more than we realise by our ancestors; and it will not be followed in this book, especially as Bernard Shaw, whom I shall call G.B.S. hereafter, to distinguish him from his father, was deeply influenced in mind and character by the remarkable collection of distinctive and dissimilar people from whom he sprang.

His parents, two totally incompatible people, brought remarkable strains into his immediate ancestry, strains so strong and diverse that it is a miracle he was not burst asunder by them. The Shaws gave him his wit and power to write,¹ as well as his business ability and his freedom from conventional attachments; and the Gurllys gave him his assurance of his own rightness and his disconcerting indifference to other people's opinions. It was from the Gurllys, not from the Shaws, that he drew the strain of hardness that was sometimes, surprisingly, found in his exceptionally generous mind and heart.

The Irish people, outside Ulster, despite their assumption of pseudo-democracy, are more class-conscious than any other race; and they possess in a high degree the form of inferiority complex which makes a subject people profess superiority to other and better men and women. This is the result of their history.

When a country is inhabited by a large group of people who have been deprived of their power and property, and a small group who have climbed to wealth and authority through conquest and confiscation, snobbery is certain to prevail in both; the first remembering the place from which they have been thrust, the second remembering the place from which they have sprung. When their division into a small group of expropriators and a large group of expropriated is allied to a deeper division, that of religious belief, the ground for separation by snobbery is enormously increased.

We shall see presently how humiliated G.B.S. felt when he was sent to a school in Dublin where the majority of the pupils were Papists. His humiliation was so profound that he not only refused to remain in the school, but concealed the fact that he had ever attended it until after the death of his wife, when he purged the gnawing

¹ 'My mother . . . had no comedic impulses, and never uttered an epigram in her life: all my comedy is a Shavian inheritance.' G.B.S. in the preface to *Immaturity*. He adds, however, that she 'had plenty of imagination'.

His ancestry

secret from his breast by public confession in *Sixteen Self Sketches*. This spirit was inherited from the proud Shaws and the prouder Gurlys.

3

The first Shaw to settle in Ireland was William, a captain in the army of William of Orange. He landed in the island about the year 1689, and was a man of mingled English and Scottish blood. William Shaw's grandson, Robert, became the owner of an estate, called Sandpits, in County Kilkenny, and this Shaw's great-grandson became the father of G.B.S.

The Shaws, who were remarkably prolific even in a period of excessive proliferation, were essentially middle-class and professional people, unlike the Gurlys, who belonged to the landed gentry, though their possessions in land were smaller than those of some of the Shaws, most of whom were lawyers, bankers, civil servants and clergymen; though they laid claim to distinguished ancestry which, however, could not be sustained. They thought they had descended from Oliver Cromwell and Shakespeare's Macduff!

The Gurlys considered them dull, but as the Gurlys were poor and unstable and not notably intelligent, they invented this misbelief to console themselves for their financial inferiority to people whom they considered socially beneath them, although they were, in fact, small fry among the landlords and were far less important, socially, politically, and professionally, than the Shaws.

The Shaws were far from dull. Some of them were exceptionally able, all of them were highly idiosyncratic and inclined to flout routine opinions. Their claim to have descended from the Thane of Fife who slew Macbeth amounted to no more than the claim any clansman in Scotland might make to be related to his chieftain; and their seemingly more substantial and certainly more interesting claim to descent from Cromwell through the marriage of his daughter Bridget to General Fleetwood, has been disproved.¹ The most unorthodox of G.B.S.'s relatives were the parsons. Two of them became notorious for their rebellious interference in public affairs.

One, the Rev. George Whitmore Carr, associated himself prominently with a Roman Catholic priest in a temperance crusade. It is true that the priest was Father Mathew, a sanctified man, superior to sect; but a Protestant minister was expected to be careful in associating with a priest who was not only compelled to doubt the validity of his orders, but had to regard him as an interloper in Irish life and immorally possessed of Roman Catholic property.

¹ In an article in the *Bath and Wilts Chronicle*, April 28, 1949

The second of the rebellious parsons was the Rev. William George Carroll, curate of St Bride's in Dublin,¹ who was G.B.S.'s uncle by marriage, in addition to being his second cousin. Carroll was the first minister of the Episcopal Church of Ireland to become a Home Ruler and a Republican, a conversion which required a great deal of moral courage in a man of his creed and cloth, and one, Mr Shaw told his son, which cost him the bishopric to which he could reasonably expect to have been appointed. He was reputed to have written leading articles in the Nationalist daily paper, *The Freeman's Journal*. Carroll was intimately associated with G.B.S.'s early life, for he not only celebrated the marriage of Mr and Mrs Shaw, and baptised their children, but taught G.B.S. the first Latin he learnt, the only Latin he remembered.

These unorthodox curates and turbulent rectors saved the Shaws from the conventionality which might have been expected to stultify a family so solidly and successfully founded. They brought healing into the pool of Bethesda by disturbing it.

In G.B.S.'s childhood, the Shaws, like minor luminaries, revolved round a great light. This was their rich bachelor relative, Sir Robert Shaw, the banker-baronet, who held court at his fine estate, Bushy Park, Rathfarnham, which was then outside Dublin, but is now one of its suburbs. Sir Robert, the second baronet, was the son of a notable father, also Sir Robert, who had represented New Ross in Grattan's Parliament, and had refused to be bribed into support of the Union. He eventually became member for Dublin in the Imperial Parliament. It was he who founded the Royal Bank of Ireland.

The second baronet, plump and wealthy, looked, according to Charles McMahon Shaw in *Bernard's Brethren*, like 'a truculent bear disturbed out of a doze,' and combined 'an arrogant air' with 'a curious look of assurance, like one who arms his sensitivity with a cruel exterior. It was certainly only an exterior cruelty, for he was a kind and honest gentleman.'

When he died on October 26, 1866, Bushy Park and the title passed to his brother Frederick, a very able and eloquent man, who was renowned for his integrity. He was Recorder of Dublin and sat in the Imperial Parliament as member, first, for Dublin, and second, for Dublin University, which is better known as Trinity College. In 1846, Peel offered him the post of Chief Secretary for Ireland, but ailing health forbade him to accept it. His second son married a

¹ The parish in which the church stood was formerly fashionable, but when its population ceased to be Protestant and opulent, and became Roman Catholic and poor, the purpose of the church as a church was over, and it was diverted to a secular function. Its registers, in which the marriage of G.B.S.'s parents and the birth of his sisters and himself were recorded, were removed to the Four Courts for safe custody, but they perished in the flames which destroyed that building during the Civil War in 1922.

His father

Frenchwoman, became a General, and was the father of Flora Shaw (Lady Lugard), a famous correspondent of *The Times*.¹ Bushy Park remains in the possession of the Shaws, whose coat of arms carries the motto, *Te ipsum nosce* (Know thyself) an injunction which was better observed by G.B.S. than by any of his relatives.

4

George Carr Shaw, who was born on December 30, 1814, and died on April 18, 1885, was the eighth of the fifteen children borne in twenty-two years to Bernard Shaw by his wife, Frances, one of the numerous children of the Rev. Edward Carr, rector of Kilmacow, Co. Kilkenny.

This Bernard Shaw, according to his grandson and namesake, was 'a combination of solicitor, notary public, and stockbroker that prevailed at that time' in Dublin; and he inherited the original home of the Shaws, Sandpits. He became High Sheriff of Kilkenny, and seems, thereafter, to have neglected his profession in his ardour to perform his shrieval duties, for he was ruined when his partner decamped with, it is said, £50,000 of his money, together with large sums belonging to their clients. The shock was too much for the High Sheriff, who collapsed and died while he was seeking spiritual consolation from his brother, the Rev. Robert Shaw, leaving his widow and large family almost destitute.

It was fortunate for her children that their mother was made of sterner stuff than their father. She was a woman who could face adversity with fortitude, and was disinclined to run moaning to the Almighty with complaints about misfortune she herself had caused: a woman of vigorous mind and determined character, as her powerful and prominent nose denoted. How she maintained herself and her large family is not now known, but she retired from the grandeur of Sandpits and a shrieval life to a cottage with Gothic windows at Roundtown, near Terenure, not far from Bushy Park, which, like Rathfarnham, is now a Dublin suburb; and there, at the age of eighty-eight, she died in 1871.

The cottage was let to her rent free by Sir Robert, whom she is reputed to have refused in marriage, both before she became a wife and after she had become a widow; and it is possible that he made her an allowance, though G.B.S. thought that enough money was recovered from her husband's ruined estate to enable her to live un beholden to anybody. Whatever her means of subsistence may have been, her eldest son, William Bernard, was able to enter Trinity College, Dublin, and to take holy orders.

¹ See her Life, *Flora Shaw*, by E. Moberly Bell.