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George Bernard Shaw, An Unlikely Literary Giant

by

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George Bernard Shaw hated the name 'George.' We will respect his preference in this article by referring to him as 'GB' or simply 'Bernard.' Shaw was a citizen of Great Britain and Ireland. He was a playwright, a political and cultural critic, le and polemicist, whose influence evolved from 1880 until this present day. The author of sixty plays, his most significant were the cultural icons of his era.

He was born at Dublin in 1856 in relatively poor circumstances, to a Scottish-Presbyterian family. He was one of three children. His father was a failed corn-trader and suffered from the curse of alcoholism. His mother was a professional singer, the sole disciple of Vandeleur Lee, a voice teacher claiming to have a unique and original approach to singing.

Shaw was basically self-educated. While he did attend school, he had an aversion to anything that was organized and that included school. Early on, Shaw explored the worlds of music, art, literature under his mother's guidance and through regular visits to the National Gallery of Ireland.

In 1872, Shaw's mother left her husband and took Shaw's two sisters to London where she set up a household with Vandeleur Lee. Four years later Shaw, around the time of his sixteenth birthday, followed his mother to London, after his younger sister had died. He had decided to become a writer. He struggled financially, and his mother essentially supported him while he spent time in the British Museum reading room, working on his first novels.

It may not be accidental, then, that Shaw's plays, including *Misalliance*, are filled with problematic parent-child relationships: with children who are brought up in isolation from their parents; with foundlings, orphans, and adopted heirs; and with parents who wrongly presume that they are entitled to their children's obedience and affection.

The Writing Life Begins

His writing career began as a novelist. He wrote five novels that were generally unsuccessful. The semiautobiographical novel and aptly titled *Immaturity* (1879; published 1930) repelled every publisher in London. His next four novels were similarly refused, as were most of the articles he submitted to the press for a decade. Shaw's initial literary work earned him less than 10 shillings a year. A fragment posthumously published as *An Unfinished Novel* in 1958 (but written 1887–88) was his final false start in fiction. He was still living with his mother and accepting support from her

Following a political awakening, he joined the gradualist Fabian Society in 1884 and became its most prominent pamphleteer. The Fabian Society was a socialist organization dedicated to the transformation of England through a more vibrant intellectual base. It was gradualist because it posited the transformation of government through elections. He became Fabian's most prolific pamphleteer and one his most famous tracts was published in *Fabian Essays in Socialism*.

About a year after joining the Fabian Society, Shaw began a job with the *Saturday Review* as a Theater and art critic. Before long, he enjoyed a reputation and a following. Through this work, he was inspired to write plays of his own.

Shaw had been writing plays for years before his first public success, 1894's *Arms and the Man*. Influenced by Henrik Ibsen. He sought to introduce a new realism into English-language drama, using his plays as vehicles to disseminate his political, social and religious ideas. By the early twentieth century his reputation as a dramatist was secured with a series of critical and popular successes that included *Major Barbara*, *The Doctor's Dilemma* and *Caesar and Cleopatra*.

Shaw's expressed views were often contentious: he promoted eugenics and alphabet reform while opposing vaccination and organized religion. He courted unpopularity by denouncing both sides in the First World War as equally culpable. He castigated British policy on Ireland in the postwar period, and became a citizen of the Irish Free State in 1934, maintaining dual citizenship.

He was prolific, finishing during the inter-war years a series of often ambitious plays which achieved varying degrees of popular success. His appetite for politics and controversy remained undiminished; by the late 1920s he had largely renounced Fabian gradualism and often wrote and spoke favorably of dictatorships of the right and left—he expressed admiration for both Mussolini and Stalin. In the final decade of his life, he made fewer public statements, but continued to write prolifically until shortly before his death, aged 94, having refused all state honors, including the Order of Merit in 1946.

Since Shaw's death, opinion has varied about his works. He has at times been rated as second only to William Shakespeare among English-language dramatists; analysts recognize his extensive influence on generations of playwrights. The word "Shavian" has entered the language as encapsulating Shaw's ideas and his means of expressing them.

The Dramatist

Shaw's first plays were published in volumes titled "Plays Unpleasant" (containing *Widowers' Houses*, *The Philanderer* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*) and "Plays Pleasant" (which had *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, *The Man of Destiny* and *You Never Can Tell*). The plays were filled with what would become Shaw's signature wit, accompanied by healthy doses of social criticism, which stemmed from his Fabian Society leanings. These plays would not go on to be his best remembered, or those for which he had high regard, but they laid the groundwork for the oversized career to come.

The Literary Giant

(For this section I am indebted to a variety of sources including the Encyclopedia Britannica, The Irish Encyclopedia, George Bernard Shaw Biographical for the Nobel Prize for Literature, Bernard Shaw, a Brief Biography, University of Pennsylvania, Cary Mazur, among other sources that can be found in your local library)

In *Man and Superman* (performed 1905) Shaw expounded his philosophy that humanity is the latest stage in a purposeful and eternal evolutionary movement of the “life force” toward ever-higher life forms. The play’s hero, Jack Tanner, is bent on pursuing his own spiritual development in accordance with this philosophy as he flees the determined marital pursuit of the heroine, Ann Whitefield. In the end Jack ruefully allows himself to be captured in marriage by Ann upon recognizing that she herself is a powerful instrument of the “life force,” since the continuation and thus the destiny of the human race lies ultimately in her and other women’s reproductive capacity. The play’s nonrealistic third act, the “Don Juan in Hell” dream scene, is spoken theatre at its most operatic and is often performed independently as a separate piece.

Shaw had already become established as a major playwright on the Continent by the performance of his plays there, but, curiously, his reputation lagged in England. It was only with the production of *John Bull’s Other Island* (performed 1904) in London, with a special performance for Edward VII, that Shaw’s stage reputation was belatedly made in England. Shaw continued, through high comedy, to explore religious consciousness and to point out society’s complicity in its own evils. In *Major Barbara* (performed 1905), Shaw has his heroine, a major in the Salvation Army, discover that her estranged father, a munitions manufacturer, may be a dealer in death but that his principles and practice, however unorthodox, are religious in the highest sense, while those of the Salvation Army require the hypocrisies of often-false public confession and the donations of the distillers and the armourers against which it inveighs. In *The Doctor’s Dilemma* (performed 1906), Shaw produced a satire upon the medical profession (representing the self-protection of professions in general) and upon both the artistic temperament and the public’s inability to separate it from the artist’s achievement. In *Androcles and the Lion* (performed 1912), Shaw dealt with true and false religious exaltation in a philosophical play about early Christianity. Its central theme, examined through a group of early Christians condemned to the arena, is that one must have something worth dying for—an end outside oneself—in order to make life worth living.

Possibly Shaw’s comedic masterpiece, and certainly his funniest and most popular play, is *Pygmalion* (performed 1913). It was claimed by Shaw to be a didactic drama about phonetics, and its antiheroic hero, Henry Higgins, is a phonetician, but the play is a humane comedy about love and the English class system. The play is about the training Higgins gives to a Cockney flower girl to enable her to pass as a lady and is also about the repercussions of the experiment’s success. The scene in which Eliza Doolittle appears in high society when she has acquired a correct accent but no notion of polite conversation is one of the funniest in English drama. *Pygmalion* has been both filmed (1938), winning an Academy Award for Shaw for his

screenplay, and adapted into an immensely popular musical, *My Fair Lady* (1956; motion-picture version, 1964).

Works after World War 1

World War I was a watershed for Shaw. At first, he ceased writing plays, publishing instead a controversial pamphlet, "Common Sense About the War," which called Great Britain and its allies equally culpable with the Germans and argued for negotiation and peace. His antiwar speeches made him notorious and the target of much criticism. In *Heartbreak House* (performed 1920), Shaw exposed, in a country-house setting on the eve of war, the spiritual bankruptcy of the generation responsible for the war's bloodshed. Attempting to keep from falling into "the bottomless pit of an utterly discouraging pessimism," Shaw wrote five linked plays under the collective title *Back to Methuselah* (1922). They expound his philosophy of creative evolution in an extended dramatic parable that progresses through time from the Garden of Eden to 31,920 AD.

The canonization of Joan of Arc in 1920 reawakened within Shaw ideas for a chronicle play about her. In the resulting masterpiece, *Saint Joan* (performed 1923), the Maid is treated not only as a Roman Catholic saint and martyr but as a combination of practical mystic, heretical saint, and inspired genius. Joan, as the superior being "crushed between those mighty forces, the Church and the Law," is the personification of the tragic heroine; her death embodies the paradox that humankind fears—and often kills—its saints and heroes and will go on doing so until the very higher moral qualities it fears become the general condition of man through a process of evolutionary change. Acclaim for *Saint Joan* led to the awarding of the 1925 Nobel Prize for Literature to Shaw (he refused the award).

In his later plays Shaw intensified his explorations into tragicomic and nonrealistic symbolism. For the next five years, he wrote nothing for the theatre but worked on his collected edition of 1930–38 and the encyclopaedic political tract "The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism" (1928). Then he produced *The Apple Cart* (performed 1929), a futuristic high comedy that emphasizes Shaw's inner conflicts between his lifetime of radical politics and his essentially conservative mistrust of the common man's ability to govern himself. Shaw's later, minor plays include *Too True to Be Good* (performed 1932), *On the Rocks* (performed 1933), *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (performed 1935), *Geneva* (performed 1938), and *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939). After a wartime hiatus, Shaw, then in his 90s, produced several more plays, including *Farfetched Fables* (performed 1950), *Shakes Versus Shav* (performed 1949), and *Why She Would Not* (1956), which is a fantasy with only flashes of the earlier Shaw.

Impudent, irreverent, and always a showman, Shaw used his buoyant wit to keep himself in the public eye to the end of his 94 years; his wiry figure, bristling beard, and dandyish cane were as well known throughout the world as his plays. When his wife, Charlotte, died of a lingering illness in 1943, in the midst of World War II, Shaw, frail and feeling the effects of wartime

privations, made permanent his retreat from his London apartment to his country home at Ayot St. Lawrence, a Hertfordshire village in which he had lived since 1906.

Shaw lived the rest of his life as an international celebrity, travelling the world, continually involved in local and international politics. (He visited the Soviet Union at the invitation of Stalin; and he came briefly to the United States at the invitation of William Randolph Hearst, stepping on shore only twice, for a lecture at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, and for lunch at Hearst's castle in San Simeon in California). And he continued to write thousands of letters and over a dozen more plays.

In 1950, Shaw fell off a ladder while trimming a tree on his property at Ayot St. Lawrence in Hertfordshire, outside of London, and died a few days later of complications from the injury, at age 94. He had been at work on yet another play (*Why She Would Not*). In his will, he left a large part of his estate to a project to revamp the English alphabet. (Only one volume was published with the new "Shaw Alphabet": a parallel text edition of Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion*). After that project failed, the estate was divided among the other beneficiaries in his will: the National Gallery of Ireland, the British Museum, and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Royalties from Shaw's plays (and from the musical *My Fair Lady*, based on Shaw's *Pygmalion*) have helped to balance the budgets of these institutions ever since.

Honors and Awards

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1925 was awarded to George Bernard Shaw "*for his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty*".

The Academy Award, 1934. George Bernard Shaw was not present at the ceremony. When presenter Lloyd C. Douglas announced that *Pygmalion* has won the Oscar he joked "Mr. Shaw's story now is as original as it was three thousand years ago". Shaw's reaction to the award was not enthusiastic as he is quoted as saying "It's an insult for them to offer me any honor, as if they had never heard of me before - and it's very likely they never have. They might as well send some honour to George for being King of England". Although popular legend says Shaw never received the Oscar, when Mary Pickford visited him she reported that he was on his mantle. When Shaw died in 1950 his home at Ayot St Lawrence became a museum. By this time his Oscar statuette was so tarnished, the curator believed it had no value and used it as a door stop. It has since been repaired and is now on displayed at the museum.

Other awards are too numerous to mention including several that he simply turned down.

O'Donovan Rossa: An Irish Revolutionary in America

Publisher: Nuascéalta Teoranta (<http://www.nuascealta.com/item.php?item=173>)

Author of original work: Seán Ó Lúing

Translator from Irish to English: Patrick McWilliams

Paperback and e-book, 360 pp. including extensive index

Available: from Barnes & Noble and Amazon

Seán Ó Lúing's fascinating account of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa's unrelenting commitment to the Irish cause on American soil, translated from Irish to English after a Herculean effort by Belfast scholar Dr Paddy McWilliams, is an essential chapter in Irish nationalist history.

This work presents the human face of one of Ireland's greatest revolutionary fighters. The indomitable spirit of this Fenian leader is evoked by Patrick Pearse's prophetic words over his grave in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, 1915, which heralded the Easter Rising eight months later: "While Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at rest".

Background

This book is the first-ever English translation of *Ó Donnabháin Rosa II*, the second of a two-volume biography of Rossa (1831-1915) written in Irish by Ó Lúing and published by Sáirséal agus Dill (Dublin, 1979). Much of what is covered in Ó Lúing's first volume (*Ó Donnabháin Rosa I*) is recorded in Rossa's own recollections of his imprisonment in England (*Prison Life*) and is not translated here. By contrast, a lot less is known about his subsequent life and struggle in the New World, and that is where this new work comes into its own in by making available in English an unrivalled source for a crucial post-Famine Irish revolutionary figure in the United States.

This work opens with moves in the mid-1860s to seek a pardon for the Fenian prisoners already incarcerated in England for several years and serving terms of penal servitude. There followed a commission of inquiry in 1870 and the subsequent release, in January 1871, of Rossa and a dozen or so others on condition of a twenty-year banishment from British and Irish soil. It was to America that Rossa headed, and his life from his base in New York City is recounted up to his death there in 1915 and burial back in Ireland.

On his arrival in the New World, Rossa addressed the adoring masses in the heart of New York City and conceded that the Fenian movement had not earned victory in battle: "We failed in our effort and it is as a failure that we are here with you; and first of all, the aim we have in coming here is to ask you to lend us a helping hand to complete our unfinished work". For many years, therefore, Rossa was to plough a lonely, contentious furrow in America as he sought to unite the disparate Irish-American nationalist groupings. All the while, he gave constant encouragement to those young Turks that sought to challenge English rule in Ireland by using dynamite in Great Britain. He failed to create a single, strong Irish voice in the American diaspora and the advance of Parnellism and the Land League saw him become sidelined. Still, for the substantial physical abuse he had suffered under the British, Rossa remained a figure of enormous inspiration and respect for subsequent generations, and well over 100,000 people attended his funeral in Dublin.

Three constants for Rossa were a deep attachment to his homeland, an uncompromising, militarist approach to achieving Irish freedom and the love of his Irish wife, Mary Jane. What also comes through is the man's humanity – not the bomb-throwing ogre beloved of *Punch* or *The Times* – but an engaging person without hatred for ordinary English people or for his fellow Protestant Irishmen.

Irish Food & Drink Trivia

What ingredients make Irish coffee?	Hot coffee, Irish whiskey, sugar and cream
What were the main ingredients in Póitín?	Póitín (Poteen) is a drink distilled from potatoes or malted barley
Colcannon is a traditional Irish dish, what is it made from?	Mashed potatoes, with kale or cabbage and spring onions
What are the ingredients for Coddle?	Sausage, streaky rashers, potatoes and onions
Which part of Ireland is Coddle traditionally associated with?	Dublin
What are Crubeens?	A traditional Irish food made of boiled pigs' feet
What is Drisheen?	A type of black pudding, unique to County Cork
What is Boxty made from?	A traditional Irish potato pancake, often cooked on a cast iron griddle over an open fire
What ingredients go into Irish Stew?	Lamb, potatoes, carrots and onions
What is Champ made from?	Mashed potatoes, chopped spring onions with butter and milk, (like Colcannon)
What dish is often referred to as a 'full Irish'?	A breakfast meal of bacon, sausages, eggs, black & white pudding, tea, toast & brown bread
What is dillisk (or dulsk?)	A sea vegetable which is harvested and dried, can be eaten on its own or as an accompaniment to salads or other dishes
What is Carrageen Moss?	An edible seaweed
What culinary uses has Carrageen Moss?	It is used in soups and desserts and is also a traditional remedy, as a hot drink, for respiratory ailments
What is Porter Cake?	A rich fruit cake made with Guinness
What is Bairín Breac (pronounced 'bawreen brac')	Barmbrack or Irish Hallowe'en Cake
What would you expect to get if you ordered a 'Baileys'?	An Irish whiskey and cream based liqueur