

Introduction

The writing of this new life of Shaw was largely inspired by a compulsive curiosity and fascination similar to that which drives the central characters in A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance*, which deals with a biographical quest. Having been familiar with Shaw's work since schooldays, and having written about various aspects of his life and career in other books and essays, I became obsessed with the idea of trying to come to grips with the man and his inner life and personality in a biographical study. The materials for such a study are dauntingly numerous and very widely scattered. During the course of his long life, Shaw wrote over fifty plays and playlets, five novels, and several short stories. He is estimated to have written more than a quarter of a million letters, many of which are still being published in special editions that supplement the four-volume collection edited by Dan H. Laurence. The prefaces he wrote to his own works and those of others, his music and theater criticism, book reviews, and his autobiographical writings are published in multiple volumes. His other nondramatic writings—such as political tracts and polemical works like *Common Sense About the War* (1914)—also fill many volumes. His contributions to periodical literature number in the thousands—enough to fill the CVs of dozens of academics. Apart from Shaw's published writings, there are large collections of unpublished materials relevant to biographical study in various institutions in the United Kingdom, North America, and Canada. Small caches of Shaviana have a way of turning up in almost every corner of the world. Some of the material used in the present work was found in a private house belonging to descendants of one of Shaw's uncles in Tasmania, an island state of Australia lying off the southern coast of the mainland—the next stop being the South Pole.

The vast size of the subject is not the only problem in the field of Shaw biography. In William Golding's classic tale *The Lord of the Flies*—to invoke another novelist—the group of schoolboys who are cast up on a desert island without any adults work out a way of controlling their early discussions about

their situation and plans by passing round a large seashell, which they call “the conch.” The person who holds the conch has a right to speak without interruption. As far as the story of his own life was concerned, Shaw went to great lengths during his lifetime to ensure that the biographical conch remained firmly in his own hands. Even in his collection of autobiographical essays called *Sixteen Self Sketches* (1949), published in his ninety-third year, he was still tenaciously in control of his story. One of the last chapters in the book is called “Biographers’ Blunders Corrected.” The Shavian stamp on his life story began to be asserted in the 1890s and early twentieth century, when he was gradually becoming a well-known figure in literary and intellectual circles, with the writing of autobiographical articles about himself with catchy titles such as “Who I Am, and What I Think.” The early biographies of Shaw by Archibald Henderson and Hesketh Pearson were in many ways forms of surrogate autobiography in that Shaw fed both writers with large quantities of material that became the staple of their works. “The best authority on Shaw is Shaw,”¹ the playwright told Archibald Henderson; but even Henderson, influenced as he was by Shaw, came to realize that his hero’s word was not always to be trusted. The Shavian account of his life, particularly of its early years, has been uncritically adopted and lavishly embroidered by all of his major biographers. One of the aims of this book has been to pass the conch around and let other voices from the past relate the story of Shaw’s life and associations.

The subjects of Shaw’s long life and extraordinarily productive career lend themselves to a wide range of biographical approaches. Like all other forms of human knowledge, biography does not stand still. New information continually comes to light, as it has during the writing of this book, both through my own research and that of others. With changes in intellectual, cultural, and social history, new ways of looking at existing sites of biographical study naturally emerge. The present study interprets Shaw’s life and defines its major themes in ways that differ from those found in the earlier biographies by Archibald Henderson, Hesketh Pearson, St. John Ervine, and Michael Holroyd.² Drawing extensively on previously unpublished and overlooked material, this book radically challenges existing views of Shaw, creating a portrait of the man that is new in both its factual and conceptual foundations.

Bernard Shaw: A Life presents a completely revised account of Shaw’s family background and upbringing—especially regarding the characters of his parents and the early days of their marriage—and newly identifies a number of key influences on Shaw’s development during his Dublin childhood. His attitudes toward sex and his own sexuality are reexamined, and fresh perspectives are presented on those subjects, and more generally on Shaw’s emotional life and psychological makeup are presented. His relations with the nu-

merous women in his life—with both his close relatives and his numerous female friends and lovers—and their influence on his creative writing are more fully explored here than in previous biographies. His contribution to changing attitudes toward gender roles in Victorian society, and his creative involvement in the formation of new paradigms of male-female relations, and new theatrical values, liberated from the constraints and delusions of nineteenth-century ideals and conventions, are among other subjects that are freshly explored in this book. His politics and his “religion,” as he called it, of Creative Evolution are closely examined in the context of other aspects of Shaw’s life, as are his attitudes toward Ireland and his Irish background and identity.

The numerous unpublished materials that are drawn upon in this study include: the only surviving piece of autobiographical writing by Shaw’s mother, Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw; correspondence from Shaw’s father, George Carr Shaw, to Lucinda Elizabeth in the early years of their marriage; letters from his father to Shaw himself during the latter’s early years as a struggling novelist and journalist in London; letters to Shaw from his uncle, Richard Frederick Shaw; diaries and correspondence of Shaw’s wife, Charlotte; correspondence written by various women friends of Shaw and his lover, Mrs. Jane Patterson, during the early London years; letters to Shaw from his friend William Archer; autobiographical material Shaw supplied in response to questionnaires from an Irish American scholar, Thomas Demetrius O’Bolger; and correspondence from Shaw to Janet Achurch, Pakenham and Ida Beatty, Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, Denis Johnston, Lady Stanley (wife of the British explorer), Rachel Mahaffy, and various Australian relatives. The present study also draws upon extensive research carried out in connection with my previous publications, including *Shaw: Interviews and Recollections* (1990) and *A Bernard Shaw Chronology* (2001). A number of illustrations—including reproductions of juvenile sketches by Shaw and portraits by an unknown artist of his paternal grandparents—are published here for the first time.

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In one of his letters to Archibald Henderson, Shaw described himself as a man “up to the chin in the life of his own time.”³ Earlier he had boldly declared in a letter to a friend that “my business is to incarnate the zeitgeist.”⁴ Shaw’s engagement with his epoch was indeed remarkably full; he was, in manifold ways, a herald and creator of cultural and social change. Thus, a biography of Shaw has to trace his career in relation to a wide spectrum of factors that shaped the spirit of the age in which he lived. There was, however, another side of Shaw that I hope this biography will bring out. In the final

scene of Shaw's play *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1899), the brooding, Byronic rebel Captain Brassbound pays a fine compliment to the heroine, Lady Cicely Waynflete, by saying:

4 | Since you saw me for the first time in that garden, youve heard me say nothing clever. And I've heard you say nothing that didnt make me laugh, or make me feel friendly, as well as telling me what to think and what to do. Thats what I mean by real cleverness.

The special kind of “cleverness” celebrated here—an intelligence of the heart characterized not by mental pyrotechnics or logic but by sensitivity, warmth, and friendliness of feeling, coupled with psychological shrewdness—is a recurrent theme in the Shavian comic universe. In his comedies, instinctive life, feeling, and passion repeatedly triumph over reason and system. The disorderly Life Force—whose embodiment in Shaw's creative imagination is more often female than male—sweeps away the pretensions of rationality. The present study is dedicated to a greater understanding not only of Shaw the controversialist and social critic but also of the man who celebrates, and often exemplifies in his many friendships, the intelligent heart.