

GREAT  
CONTEMPORARIES

by

Winston S. Churchill



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## GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

**M**R BERNARD SHAW was one of my earliest antipathies. Indeed, almost my first literary effusion, written when I was serving as a subaltern in India in 1897 (it never saw the light of day), was a ferocious onslaught upon him, and upon an article which he had written disparaging and deriding the British Army in some minor war. Four or five years passed before I made his acquaintance. My mother, always in agreeable contact with artistic and dramatic circles, took me to luncheon with him. I was instantly attracted by the sparkle and gaiety of his conversation, and impressed by his eating only fruit and vegetables and drinking only water. I rallied him on the latter habit, asking: 'Do you really never drink any wine at all?' 'I am hard enough to keep in order as it is,' he replied. Perhaps he had heard of my youthful prejudice against him.

In later years, and especially after the war, I can recall several pleasant and, to me, memorable talks on politics, particularly about Ireland and about Socialism. I think these encounters cannot have been displeasing to him, for he was kind enough to give me a copy of his magnum opus, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism*, remarking (subsequently and erroneously), 'It is a sure way to prevent you reading it.' At any rate, I possess a lively image of this bright, nimble, fierce, and comprehending being, Jack Frost dancing bespangled in the sunshine, which I should be very sorry to lose.

One of his biographers, Edward Shanks, says of Bernard Shaw: 'It is more important to remember that he began to flourish in the 'nineties than to remember that he was born in Ireland'; and it is true that Irish influences are only found in him by those who are determined to find them. The influence of the 'nineties, on the other hand, is strong – not the pale influence of the decadents, but the eager impulsion of the New Journalism, the New Political Movements, the New Religious Movement. All the bubbling and conceit of New Movements (in capitals) took hold of him. For nine years he had been living in London under the pinch of poverty and the sharper

twinges of success denied. His snuff-coloured suit, his hat turned (for some obscure economy) back to front, his black coat blending slowly into green, were becoming gradually known. But in all these years he only earned, he says, £6, of which £5 were for an advertisement. Otherwise he depended on his mother, and wrote, unrecompensed, a few mediocre novels. He was still so obscure that he had to arrest and startle even in the very first sentence of his articles. Jobs slowly came in – musical criticism, dramatic criticism, political squibs and paragraphs, but it was not until 1892 that his first play, *Widowers' Houses*, appeared.

His early years in Ireland had given him a loathing of respectability and religion, partly because they were the fashionable butts of youth in those days, and Shaw has always been a child of that age; and partly because his family, either in an effort to be worthy of their position as cousins of a baronet or to counteract their poverty, dutifully upheld them both. Being dragged to Low Church and Chapel, and forbidden to play with the tradesmen's children, gave him strong complexes from which he has never recovered, and made him utter loud outcries against 'custom-made morality', against the tame conformity of the genteel; in short, against all that is nowadays summed up by what Mr Kipling called 'the fatted soul of things'. When at length he emerged it was as a herald of revolt, a disconcerter of established convictions, a merry, mischievous, rebellious Puck, posing the most awkward riddles of the Sphinx.

This energetic, groping, angry man of about thirty, poor, the author of some unsuccessful novels and of some slashing criticisms, with a good knowledge of music and painting, and a command of the highlights of indignation, meets in middle age Henry George; and at once joins the Fabian Society with eager enthusiasm. He speaks at hotels and at street corners. He conquers his nervousness. He colours his style with a debating tinge which comes out in every preface to his plays. In 1889 he shows for the first time a little Marxian influence. Later on he throws Marx over for Mr Sidney Webb, whom he has always acknowledged to have had more influence than anyone in forming his opinions. But these sources are not enough; something must be found to replace religion as a binding force and a director. Mr Shanks says, 'All his life he has suffered under a handicap, which is that he is shy of using . . . the name of God, yet cannot find any proper substitute.' Therefore he must invent the Life Force, must twist the Saviour into a rather half-hearted Socialist, and establish Heaven in his own political image.

'Fine Art,' declares our hero in another foray, 'is the only teacher, except torture.' As usual, however, with his doctrines, he does not

submit himself to this master's discipline. He never trifles with unprofitable concerns, and a few years later he writes, 'All my attempts at Art for Art's sake broke down; it was like hammering 10d. nails into sheets of notepaper.' His versatile taste leads him to associate himself with Schopenhauer, Shelley, Goethe, Morris, and other diverse guides. In a moment when his critical faculty is evidently slumbering, he even ranks William Morris with Goethe!

Meanwhile he continues to attract all the attention he can. 'I leave,' he says in *Diabolonian Ethics*, 'the delicacies of retirement to those who are gentlemen first and literary workmen afterwards. The cart and trumpet for me'; and the trumpet, being used to arouse and shock, sends forth a quantity of bombinating nonsense such as (in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*): 'There are just as good reasons for burning a heretic at the stake as for rescuing a shipwrecked crew from drowning; in fact, there are better.'

It was not until the late 'nineties that real, live, glowing success came, and henceforth took up her abode with Mr Bernard Shaw. At decent intervals, and with growing assurance, his plays succeeded one another. *Candida*, *Major Barbara* and *Man and Superman* riveted the attention of the intellectual world. Into the void left by the annihilation of Wilde he stepped armed with a keener wit, a tenser dialogue, a more challenging theme, a stronger construction, a deeper and a more natural comprehension. The characteristics and the idiosyncrasies of the Shavian drama are world-renowned. His plays are today more frequently presented, not only within the wide frontiers of the English language, but throughout the world, than those of any man but Shakespeare. All parties and every class, in every country, have pricked up their ears at their coming and welcomed their return.

The plays were startling enough on their first appearance. Ibsen had broken the 'well-made play' by making it better than ever; Mr Shaw broke it by not 'making' it at all. He was once told that Sir James Barrie had completely worked out the plot of *Shall We Join the Ladies?* before he began to write it. Mr Shaw was scandalized. 'Fancy knowing how a play is to end before you begin it! When I start a play I haven't the slightest idea what is going to happen.' His other main innovation was to depend for his drama not on the interplay of character and character, or of character and circumstance, but on that of argument and argument. His ideas become personages and fight among themselves, sometimes with intense dramatic effect and sometimes not. His human beings, with a few exceptions, are there for what they are to say, not for what they are to be or do. Yet they live.

Recently I took my children to *Major Barbara*. Twenty years had

passed since I had seen it. They were the most terrific twenty years the world has known. Almost every human institution had undergone decisive change. The landmarks of centuries had been swept away. Science has transformed the conditions of our lives and the aspect of town and country. Silent social evolution, violent political change, a vast broadening of the social foundations, an immeasurable release from convention and restraint, a profound reshaping of national and individual opinion, have followed the trampling march of this tremendous epoch. But in *Major Barbara* there was not a character requiring to be redrawn, not a sentence nor a suggestion that was out of date. My children were astounded to learn that this play, the very acme of modernity, was written more than five years before they were born.

Few people practise what they preach, and no one less so than Mr Bernard Shaw. Few are more capable of having the best of everything both ways. His spiritual home is no doubt in Russia; his native land is the Irish Free State; but he lives in comfortable England. His dissolvent theories of life and society have been sturdily banished from his personal conduct and his home. No one has ever led a more respectable life or been a stronger seceder from his own subversive imagination. He derides the marriage vow and even at times the sentiment of love itself; yet no one is more happily or wisely married. He indulges in all the liberties of an irresponsible Chatterbox, babbling gloriously from dawn to dusk, and at the same time advocates the abolition of Parliamentary institutions and the setting up of an Iron Dictatorship, of which he would probably be the first victim. It is another case for John Morley's comment upon Carlyle, 'the Gospel of silence in thirty volumes by Mr Wordy'. He prattles agreeably with the tame English Socialists, and preens himself with evident satisfaction in the smiles alike of Stalin or Mussolini. He promulgates in stern decree that all incomes should be equalized and that anyone who has more than another is guilty, unconsciously perhaps, of personal meanness, if not fraud; he has always preached the ownership of all forms of wealth by the State; yet when the Lloyd George Budget imposed for the first time the slender beginnings of the super-tax, no one made a louder squawk than this already wealthy Fabian. He is at once an acquisitive capitalist and a sincere Communist. He makes his characters talk blithely about killing men for the sake of an idea but would take great trouble not to hurt a fly.

He seems to derive equal pleasure from all these contrary habits, poses and attitudes. He has laughed his sparkling way through life, exploding by his own acts or words every argument he has ever used

on either side of any question, teasing and bewildering every public he has addressed, and involving in his own mockery every cause he has ever championed. The world has long watched with tolerance and amusement the nimble antics and gyrations of this unique and double-headed chameleon, while all the time the creature was eager to be taken seriously.

I expect that the jesters who played so invaluable a part in the Courts of the Middle Ages saved their skins from being flayed and their necks from being wrung by the impartiality with which their bladder-blows were bestowed in all directions and upon all alike. Before one potentate or notable could draw his sword to repay a scathing taunt, he was convulsed with laughter at the condition in which his rival or companion was left. Everyone was so busy rubbing his own shins that none had time to kick the kicker. Thus the jester survived; thus he gained access to the most formidable circles, and indulged in antics of freedom under the dumbfounded gaze of barbarism and tyranny.

The Shavian cow, to change the illustration, has no sooner yielded its record milking than it kicks the pail over the thirsty and admiring milker. He pays an incomparable tribute to the work of the Salvation Army, and leaves it a few minutes later ridiculous and forlorn. In *John Bull's Other Island* we are no sooner captivated by Irish charm and atmosphere than we see the Irish race liveried in humbug and strait-jacketed in infirmity of purpose. The Liberal Home Ruler, who so hopefully expected from Bernard Shaw justification and approval for his cause, found himself in a trice held up as an object of satire rarely equalled upon the stage. The intense emotions aroused in our breasts by the trial and martyrdom of Joan of Arc are immediately effaced by the harlequinade which constitutes the final act. 'The Red Flag', the international hymn of the Labour Party, is dubbed by this most brilliant of Socialist intellectuals 'the funeral march of a fried eel'. His most serious work on Socialism, a masterly piece of reasoning, the embodiment of the most solid convictions of Bernard Shaw's long and varied experience, a contribution to our thought upon which three whole years, sufficient to produce half a dozen famous plays, were lavished, is read with profit and amusement by capitalist society and banned by Labour politicians.

Everyone has been excoriated, every idea has been rattled, and everything goes on the same as before. We are in the presence of a thinker, original, suggestive, profound, but a thinker who depends on contradiction, and deals out thought as it flashes upon his mind with-

out troubling about its relation to what he has said before, or its results upon the convictions of others. Yet, and it is the essence of the paradox, no one can say that Bernard Shaw is not at heart sincere, or that his life's message has not been consistent.

Certainly we are all the better for having had the Jester in our midst.

I was diverted some years ago by the accounts which were published of his excursion to Russia. For his co-delegate or comrade in the trip he selected Lady Astor. The choice was happy and appropriate. Lady Astor, like Mr Bernard Shaw, enjoys the best of all worlds. She reigns on both sides of the Atlantic in the Old World and the New, at once as a leader of fashionable society and of advanced feminist democracy. She combines a kindly heart with a sharp and wagging tongue. She embodies the historical portent of the first woman Member of the House of Commons. She denounces the vice of gambling in unmeasured terms and is closely associated with an almost unrivalled racing stable. She accepts Communist hospitality and flattery and remains the Conservative member for Plymouth. She does all these opposite things so well and so naturally that the public, tired of criticizing, can only gape.

'It is now some sixteen or seventeen years ago,' to parody Burke's famous passage, 'that I first saw the present Viscountess Astor in London Society, and surely never lighted on these shores, which she scarcely seemed to touch, a more delightful vision.' She had stepped out of a band-box from the United States to animate and charm the merry and still decorous circles through which she had then begun to move. Every door opened at her approach. Insular and masculine prejudices were swept aside, and forthwith the portals of the House of Commons, barred by immemorial tradition to women, always difficult of access to those of foreign birth, were thrown wide to receive her. In a trice she was escorted to her seat by Mr Balfour and Mr Lloyd George, was soon delivering her maiden speech and offering a picture of the memorable scene to be preserved in the Palace of Westminster. These are indeed startling achievements.

It must have been with some trepidation that the chiefs of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics awaited the arrival in their grim domains of a merry harlequinade. The Russians have always been fond of circuses and travelling shows. Since they had imprisoned, shot or starved most of their best comedians, their visitors might fill for a space a noticeable void. And here was the World's most famous intellectual Clown and Pantaloon in one, and the charming Columbine of the capitalist pantomime. So the crowds were marshalled.



Multitudes of well-drilled demonstrators were served out with their red scarves and flags. The massed bands blared. Loud cheers from sturdy proletarians rent the welkin. The nationalized railways produced their best accommodation. Commissar Lunacharsky delivered a flowery harangue. Commissar Litvinoff, unmindful of the food queues in the back-streets, prepared a sumptuous banquet; and Arch-Commissar Stalin, 'the man of steel', flung open the closely guarded sanctuaries of the Kremlin and, pushing aside his morning's budget of death warrants and *lettres de cachet*, received his guests with smiles of overflowing comradeship.

Ah! but we must not forget that the object of the visit was educational and investigatory. How important for our public figures to probe for themselves the truth about Russia, to find out by personal test how the Five Year Plan was working. How necessary to know whether Communism is really better than Capitalism, and how the broad masses of the Russian people fare in 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' under the new régime. Who can grudge a few days devoted to these arduous tasks? To the aged Jester, with his frosty smile and safely invested capital, it was a brilliant opportunity of dropping a series of disconcerting bricks upon the corns of his ardent hosts. And to Lady Astor, whose husband, according to the newspapers, had the week before been awarded three millions sterling returned taxation by the American Courts, all these communal fraternizings and sororizings must have been a pageant of delight. But it is the brightest hours that flash away the fastest.

If I have dwelt upon the comical aspects of these scenes it is to draw a serious moral. Well was it said that the genius of comedy and tragedy are essentially the same. In Russia we have a vast, dumb people dwelling under the discipline of a conscripted army in war-time; a people suffering in years of peace the rigours and privations of the worst campaigns; a people ruled by terror, fanaticisms, and the Secret Police. Here we have a state whose subjects are so happy that they have to be forbidden to quit its bounds under the direst penalties; whose diplomatists and agents sent on foreign missions have often to leave their wives and children at home as hostages to ensure their eventual return. Here we have a system whose social achievements crowd five or six persons in a single room; whose wages hardly compare in purchasing power with the British dole; where life is unsafe; where liberty is unknown; where grace and culture are dying; and where armaments and preparations for war are rife. Here is a land where God is blasphemed and man, plunged in this world's misery, is denied the hope of mercy on both sides of the grave; his soul, in the striking, protesting phrase of Robespierre, 'no more than

a genial breeze dying away at the mouth of the tomb! Here we have a power actively and ceaselessly engaged in trying to overturn existing civilizations by stealth, by propaganda, and when it dares, by bloody force. Here we have a state, three millions of whose citizens are languishing in foreign exile, whose intelligentsia have been methodically destroyed; a state nearly half-a-million of whose citizens reduced to servitude for their political opinions, are rotting and freezing through the Arctic night, toiling to death in forests, mines and quarries, many for no more than indulging in that freedom of thought that has gradually raised man above the beast.

Decent, good-hearted British men and women ought not to be so airily detached from realities that they have no word of honest indignation for such wantonly, callously inflicted pain.

If the truth must be told, our British island has not had much help in its troubles from Mr Bernard Shaw. When nations are fighting for life, when the Palace in which the Jester dwells not uncomfortably, is itself assailed, and everyone from Prince to groom is fighting on the battlements, the Jester's jokes echo only through deserted halls, and his witticisms and commendations, distributed evenly between friend and foe, jar the ears of hurrying messengers, of mourning women and wounded men. The titter ill accords with the tocsin, or the motley with the bandages. But these trials are over; the island is safe, the world is quiet, and begins again to be free. Time for self-questioning returns; and wit and humour in their embroidered mantles take again their seats at a replenished board. The ruins are rebuilt; a few more harvests are gathered in. Fancy is liberated from her dungeon, and we can afford, thank God, to laugh again.\* Nay more, we can be proud of our famous Jester, and in regathered security rejoice that we laugh in common with many men in many lands, and thereby renew the genial and innocent comradeship and kinship of mankind. For, when all is said and done, it was not the Jester's fault there was a war. Had we all stayed beguiled by his musings and his sallies how much better off we should be! How many faces we should not have to miss! It is a source of pride to any nation to have nursed one of those recording sprites who can illuminate to the eye of remote posterity many aspects of the age in which we live. Saint, sage and clown; venerable, profound and irrepressible, Bernard Shaw receives, if not the salutes, at least the hand-clappings of a generation which honours him as another link in the humanities of peoples, and as the greatest living master of letters in the English-speaking world.

\* Alas, we laughed too soon.