

## *Preface*

Unlike for some writers of the modern period, scholars need not be defensive about reading Bernard Shaw in context, nor suggest that doing so presents a radical departure in scholarship. As countless studies and biographies of Shaw attest, he is the consummate subject to be read in context. His writing was not only informed by many of the popular modes, genres, and trends of his day – from melodrama and farce to the New Drama, from the Victorian novel to the New Journalism – but also bent them into idiosyncratic forms. ‘Make It New!’ commanded Ezra Pound. But Pound was coming rather late to the party: Shaw and his colleagues had already been making it new for decades.

From the time in 1876 that he quit the provincial backwater that was his native Dublin for the lures of London – the capital of the all-powerful British Empire enjoying perhaps its most dynamic century – Shaw sought to be in the thick of things and of the moment in which he lived. He first made his name as a reviewer of art, music, and theatre, using his columns not merely to comment on culture and society, but to mould public tastes and to forge his identity. In tandem, he circulated in almost every fashionable, avant-garde, and radical organisation, movement, and body of thought there was, from the Fabian Society to the Stage Society, from vegetarianism and evolutionary theory to feminism and continental philosophy. Not happy to take a back or passenger seat to history, he often imposed himself in many of these arenas, becoming a key player by lecturing and pamphleteering on their behalves and, almost inevitably, coming into conflict with many like-minded individuals and friends.

In addition to his perennial writing and lecturing, Shaw held public office as a vestryman and councillor in the Borough of St Pancras from 1897 to 1903 and was active on a wide range of policies that would affect the lives of his fellow citizens. In his travels, socialising, political work, and writing, he enjoyed relationships with luminaries in several fields and attracted the admiration of individuals who would transform the world

in significant ways: Albert Einstein, W. B. Yeats, Bertolt Brecht, Oscar Wilde, Gene Tunney, Auguste Rodin, Charlie Chaplin, Emmeline Pankhurst, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Lenin, and Jawaharlal Nehru, to name a small but revealing sampling. All of this activity made him distinctly of his time.

When Archibald Henderson contacted Shaw about the articles that he had written in the late-nineteenth-century press, Shaw responded that Henderson would have to consider ‘mispending several weeks at the British Museum’ to go through what he estimated to be over a million words. Shaw further warned him that ‘many of them become absolutely unintelligible now that they can no longer be read with the context of the events of the week in which they appeared’ (*CL* II: 425). Fortunately, the same cannot be said for the majority of Shaw’s writings for which he is best-known, especially his plays. But there is no doubt that a more profound understanding and perhaps even greater enjoyment of Shaw’s works can be achieved by reading them through the filter of Shaw’s times. In turn, it could be argued that the times in which he lived can be better understood through the filter of Shaw, such was his personality, scope of thought, and breadth of influence. Henderson would, after all, subtitle the last of his three biographies of Shaw ‘Man of the Century’ – rather provocative, considering that it was published only in 1956. Yet as early as 1889 Shaw himself had declared that it was his business in life ‘to incarnate the *Zeitgeist*’ (*CL* I: 222).

The essays collected in this volume are arranged in six sections: People and Places; Theatre; Writing and the Arts; Politics; Culture and Society; and Reception and Afterlife. Broadly speaking, they move from the factors that were formative in Shaw’s life, to the artistic work that made him most famous and the institutions with which he worked, to the political and social issues that consumed much of his attention, and, finally, to how he has influenced and been received by others. Although there are over forty subjects surveyed, that number could very well have been much higher owing to the diversity of Shaw’s activities and interests.

It should be noted that while context is the distinguishing emphasis of these essays, the notion of context is approached in various ways, focused to different degrees on Shaw and the specific subject under discussion. There is also some range of opinion on Shaw and his legacy, and while the contributors by and large celebrate him for what he did, many hold him up to critical scrutiny. As Shaw regularly courted controversy, such discordance is both inevitable and welcome.

The reader will find that the volume treats a number of the more studied aspects of Shaw's life with new critical insights and makes some forays into less explored terrains. In drawing up the projected table of contents, it became abundantly clear from the outset that each of these entries, which run to approximately three thousand words, could easily have been twice as long. In fact, some of these topics have been the subject of a number of books already. But these essays reveal that there is still plenty of work out there for the interested scholar, with many debates far from settled and piles of archival material waiting to be mined. Moreover, while Shaw has featured prominently in accounts of modern British theatre and studies of British socialism, he has yet to be adequately addressed in such fields as Modernism and Irish Studies, both of which are threaded through several of the essays. It is hoped that readers will find other avenues to explore that are perhaps only noted here in passing.

Throughout his career, Shaw cultivated a Mephistophelean persona, and one might mistake him for the devil-as-serpent in *Back to Methuselah*, proclaiming: 'You see things; and you say "Why?" But I dream things that never were; and I say "Why not?"' (*CPP* V: 345). Yet utopia was not merely enough to theorise or dream about: it needed action to come into being. In *Mrs Warren's Profession*, Vivie, one of Shaw's most independent-minded characters, says to her mother: 'People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them' (*CPP* I: 310). This was, to some extent, Shaw's mantra: not satisfied with the world as it was ordered, he sought to create opportunities to re-order it. He wrote of his perspective in a letter to the American novelist Henry James: 'I never idolized environment as a dead destiny. We can change it: we must change it: there is absolutely no other sense in life than the work of changing it' (*CL* II: 828). Indeed, as he once remarked:

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no "brief candle" to me. It is sort of a splendid torch which I have a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it over to future generations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1911), 503–4.

And thus did he live for most of his ninety-four years, feverishly working to change his context and, along the way, reflecting it – with all of his contradictions and paradoxes – perhaps more than any writer of his lifetime. As popular as he has been, Shaw remains a compelling figure who deserves continued scholarly and public attention, not only for how important he was to his day, but for how relevant he is to ours.