

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE SHAW SOCIETY

by Barbara Smoker

The Shaw Society is the only Shaw society that dates from Shaw's lifetime. It was founded by Dr Fritz Loewenstein, a Jewish refugee from Germany in the 1930s, who, in November 1941, finally wore down Shaw's opposition to his plan for a society to promote Shavian ideas. He called the inaugural meeting, putting back the official date of its foundation to Shaw's 85th birthday, 26 July 1941. An early member of the Society, the late Eric Batson, who was both able and energetic, gradually took over its administrative work from Loewenstein, becoming first the London Secretary, then General Secretary, and also editing the *Shaw Society Bulletin*, which he later re-named *The Shavian*.

In October 1950 he was largely responsible for the Society's putting on the premiere of Shaw's play *Farfetched Fables*, with an excellent cast (including himself). It filled a club theatre in central London for thirty performances from 6 September 1950, closing three weeks before Shaw's death. It naturally attracted wide press coverage—but one theatre critic was stupid enough to complain that Shaw introduced no new ideas in it. At the age of 94!

When the Society of Authors, as Shaw's literary executor, did a lucrative deal in about 1955 with the entrepreneurs of *My Fair Lady*—whereby Shaw's original play, *Pygmalion*, was not allowed to be seen anywhere in the world for the next two decades—Eric Batson used his PR skills to campaign vigorously against this outrage, and a national newspaper dubbed the Society "the fighting 300". Barbara Smoker had now become Batson's assistant, and she then took over from him as General Secretary—and, with a few short breaks, she remained the Society's secretary for the next 35 years. She also edited *The Shavian* from 1958 to 1964, when she handed over the editorship to T F Evans, who finally retired in 2005. He was succeeded by the current editor, Ivan Wise, a young Shavian scholar just turned thirty. Presidents of the Society have included famous actors Esmé Percy, Ellen Pollock, Barry Morse and now the Shaw biographer Sir Michael Holroyd.

In the Chancery Court case of February 1957 to establish the legal standing of Shaw's alphabet bequest, Barbara Smoker briefed the barrister representing the Attorney General on behalf of the bequest—but unsuccessfully. Funded by Shaw's friend I J (later Sir James) Pitman, the Society then lodged an official appeal against the judicial decision, but Pitman decided to accept a meagre out-of-court settlement of £8,300.

By this time, in addition to the Society's monthly meetings in central London (which continue to this day) and his own "lecture recitals" on a widespread circuit, Eric Batson had launched an annual open-air performance by the Society at Shaw's Corner on the Sunday nearest to Shaw's birthday. At first it was merely an amateur reading with a very small audience, but it gradually expanded over the years, until now it is a professional production running from the Friday to Sunday.

Shaw had given his house to the National Trust, which at first regarded it as a liability, as he had left nothing for its upkeep; but the success of the Shaw Society's "Birthday Tribute" there demonstrated to the Trust that the property could be turned into a money-spinner. Now they have not only taken over this annual event, but hold other activities there during the year and open-air theatre at other National Trust properties.