

BERNARD SHAW

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin on 26 July 1856 and worked as a clerk between 1871 and 1876. He moved to London aged twenty. His early years here, between 1876 and 1884, were filled with frustration and poverty. During this period, he depended on his mother's income as a music teacher and a pound a week sent by his father from Dublin (he said, later, "I did not throw myself into the struggle for life: I threw my mother").

Shaw spent his days in the British Museum reading room writing novels and reading, and his evenings attending lectures and debates by the middle class intelligentsia. He became a socialist and a skilful orator. He became a vegetarian in 1881 in the hope of curing his chronic headaches. A driving force behind the Fabian Society, he threw himself into committee work, wrote socialist pamphlets, and spoke to crowds several times a week. Shaw began his journalism career as a book reviewer and art, music, and drama critic, always downgrading the artificialities and hypocrisies he found in those arts.

In 1884, Shaw began writing the dialogue for a play, after drama critic William Archer wrote the plot. It was abandoned until 1892 after Shaw used up all the projected plot in half the play. His strength lay in dialogue; he admitted he was not "a plot-monger".

Shaw remained a boarder in his mother's home until 1889, leaving only when he got married. Though Shaw experimented with drama from his early twenties he did not see a play of his produced on stage until 1892 with

Widowers' Houses, a dramatized socialist tract on slum landlordism.

Early plays such as *Arms and the Man* and *Candida* displayed intellectual wit, but his first real success was the American run of *The Devil's Disciple* (1897). In 1898, he married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, a rich Anglo-Irish Fabian who had nursed him through illness. In 1906, they moved to Ayot St Lawrence in Hertfordshire.

In 1904, King Edward VII laughed so much at John Bull's *Other Island* that he broke his seat at the Royal Court Theatre; other triumphs at that London theatre were *Man and Superman* (1905), *Major Barbara* (1905) and *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906). Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912) was destined to have a second success as the musical comedy *My Fair Lady*.

Shaw received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925 after the success of his play *Saint Joan*, and the Academy Award for Best Screenplay for *Pygmalion* in 1938. He remains the only person ever to have received both awards.

In 1943, Charlotte died. Shaw continued writing plays until his own death in 1950. VS Pritchett wrote in his obituary that Shaw was "the last of the Victorian prophets". He is widely recognised as one of the finest playwrights of the twentieth century.

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