

## GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin in 1856 into a middleclass family, he was the second child and had an elder sister. The family lived a life of genteel poverty but his mother always had hopes that someday something would happen and his father drank.

Neither of his parents concerned themselves with his upbringing. He went to a horrible school, where they crammed latin and grammar, and where he learnt nothing of interest or use. His mother relieved her frustration with life and her family by learning to sing. She had a wonderful voice and later taught singing in London. Her singing teacher in Dublin was almost a magician, George John Vandaleur Lee. He made his living by giving concerts and used Shaw's mother as one of his unpaid performers. Vandaleur Lee had invented a wonderful way of singing, which did not stress the voice and allowed his pupils to carry on singing into old age. In fact Shaw at the age of eighty-seven sang to his wife as she was dying.

Vandaleur Lee took a room in the Shaw house and brought with him his library of interesting and unusual books. This and the British Library in London were Shaw's education.

After working in an estate agent's office for four years, Shaw followed his mother and Vandaleur Lee to London, and wrote six very bad novels. Fortunately he found a freelance job as a theatre critic, which he did badly. Fortunately the music critic for the publication got fed up and the editor handed the job to Shaw. Shaw's amazing musical abilities helped him to produce some of the best music criticism ever written. It was better than being at the concert, which was often very bad, given the quality of instruments and players at that time. Shaw continued with this work and started to write plays and speak on the street corners of London. This changed George Bernard Shaw to GBS. He played this new role for the rest of his life, a very difficult role he played well.

Shaw's political interest had been developed after he read Marx in French in the British library. He was soon working with and writing for the other members of the Fabian Society, Sidney Webb and his future wife Beatrice. Through the Webbs he met Charlotte, his future wife, a very rich Irish heiress. It was her wealth which initially funded what was to become the LSE, not the London Stock Exchange but the London School of Economics.

Charlotte at that time was at a loose end. She travelled a lot and had returned to England to visit her sister. In order to pass the time she had considered studying medicine, which would have made her one of the first medical doctors. Having been disappointed in her marriage hopes on two previous occasions, she unfortunately ended up with Shaw, the middle-aged author, socialist and philanderer. She took Shaw into her flat because he had a fatal illness, narcosis of a big toe. Before antibiotics narcosis would normally lead to death.

Living together they had to get married. St Pancras town hall was the place of the ceremony with the Webbs attending and the town clerk officiating. She nursed him for a year before he was fit and well, and thus their married life started.

Shaw had now enough time, living until he was 94, to become the most prolific author in the English language. Of his 63 plays, *Pygmalion*, *Major Barbara* and *Man and Superman* are perhaps the best known. These plays were mainly performed at the Royal Court Theatre in Sloan Square in London, and from which Shaw was able to derive a small income. The USA discovered his work quickly and performances were soon given in New York and Chicago. The USA was essentially the wild west as far as copyright so it cost Shaw a lot of effort to establish his rights there. This could only be done by making sure the first performance was given quickly in New York. GBS's plays were much too political for an English audience. London theatre-goers preferred soap operas and bad Shakespeare, as performed by Sir Henry Irving. English audiences also enjoyed anything French, which they did not understand. Fortunately Shaw quickly became popular in Germany, where the Austrian playwright Treibitsch did the necessary translation badly. Shaw did the same for him by converting his three act tragedy, *Julia's Confession* into a four act comedy. In spite of the popularity of *Pygmalion* or *My Fair Lady*, the same play with different endings, *Pygmalion* only received its first major London production when Shaw received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1925. Fortunately by that time he did not need the money and donated the money to charity.

Shaw's witty plays helped to convert Victorian melodrama into a form where moral, feminist, political and economic issues were considered. This was possibly his most lasting and important contribution to dramatic art. In this, he considered himself indebted to Ibsen, who pioneered modern realistic drama, which tries to heighten awareness of some important social issue. We are all grateful that Shaw's published plays come with lengthy prefaces. These are mainly Shaw's views on the issues contained in the plays than about the plays themselves. These are often considered by many to be better than the plays they introduce. His advice to Eliza at the end of *Pygmalion* about running a small business, could be read by many today. It is both pertinent and humorous.

He has written more than 250,000 letters, often enclosing a cheque to help some person or cause. His secretary, the formidable Blanche Patch, often complained about his generosity. In 1906 the Shaw's moved into a house, now called Shaw's Corner, in Ayot St Lawrence, a small village in Hertfordshire; it was to be their home for the remainder of their lives, although they also maintained a residence at 29 Fitzroy Square in London.