

May 1951

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 3, no.02, May 1951, p.26-33

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of speech" and was "a story of fine sentiment and delicate manners, with an entirely worthy and touching ending."<sup>3</sup>

Despite these and other laudatory remarks, and despite the fact that the play ran successfully for five weeks, James never forgot the shock of the first night. Discussing the experience four days later in a letter to his brother William, Henry described himself as "weary, bruised, sickened, disgusted." On February 2, 1895, he wrote to his brother again, expressing relief at the prospect of the ending of the "troubled little life" of his play, which had given him the "horriddest" four weeks of his existence.

One thing, however, is clear. James's belief, as expressed in the Colby letter, that Miss Terry's "whole performance" was "perfectly beautiful and right" is borne out by the judgment of the critics. In the *Illustrated London Magazine* Clement Scott called Marion Terry "one of the sweetest and most womanly actresses of our time"; and in the *Saturday Review* George Bernard Shaw pronounced her "altogether charming." He thought that "every movement, every tone, harmonized perfectly with the dainty grace and feeling of her lines."



### A TALK WITH GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

By CARL J. WEBER

THE January issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* carried on its outside cover a portrait of George Bernard Shaw and on its inside pages a report by Vincent Sheean of the last visit he had paid to Shaw before his death on November 3, 1950. This is only one of an impressive series of articles which have been published in all sorts of magazines and newspapers since last November—articles indicative of the deep impression which the dramatist had made on his generation, nay, on *many* generations; for he was more than ninety-four years old when he died, and his long ca-

<sup>3</sup> *Saturday Review*, LXXIX (January 12, 1895), 44.

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reer had enabled him to include far more than one generation in the army of those who had been stirred by his restless mind and entertained by his Irish wit.

In his *Atlantic* article, Sheean confessed that, in his association with Shaw, he had at first found "a slight impediment to a correct appreciation of Shaw's personality" in the fact that the Irish playwright had, in conversing with Sheean, an annoying "habit of giving unnecessary information about his own work. . . . He once said to me: 'I wrote a comedy some years ago called *Pygmalion*,' and I was convulsed with an internal fury. I know now that I was foolish and he was right . . . but for some years . . . every time he gave me information of this sort it only meant (to me) that he regarded me as an ignoramus" who had to be told what Shaw had written.

As I read these words of Vincent Sheean, I was carried back in memory to the day when Shaw had given *me* the same sort of "unnecessary information," regarding me, too, as an ignoramus to whom it was necessary to explain that *Major Barbara* was "a play of mine" and that *The Apple Cart* was (in 1929) "my latest play." That date reminds me that it is now nearly twenty-two years since I met Shaw, but I still retain a vivid picture of his appearance and a clear recollection of the things we talked about. (I say "we" here in the same way that the man who pumped the bellows of the organ talked about the music that "we" played — the organist and I.) Fortunately for my purpose now, I followed Boswell's practice in recording Johnson's conversation: just as soon as I had parted from Shaw I made some detailed notes on what he had said. Vincent Sheean's article sent me to the pigeon-hole in my desk where I had kept these notes; they now lie before me to guide my powers of recollection as I write the present report.

My meeting with Shaw took place during the summer of 1929. I was in England, and having been invited to a garden-party at Taplow-on-Thames, I went there from

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Oxford on July 9 and was surprised and delighted to find George Bernard Shaw among the guests. At the time of my arrival he was surrounded by a veritable throng of admirers, listening to his "rapt oration flowing free," but at one subsequent point during the afternoon, I observed the playwright momentarily alone. Thereupon I stepped up to him and spoke of the pleasure with which I had, for the past ten years, been reading his plays and prefaces with students at Colby College.

Upon learning that I was a teacher of literature in an American college, Shaw at once showed his awareness of a topic that was then receiving widespread attention in American educational circles. Magazines and journals had been giving not a little space to discussions of the injurious effects of co-education, and a number of heated attacks had been written—by men—on the feminization of American culture.

"I understand," Shaw remarked, in a musical but high, almost-soprano voice which surprised me, "I understand that many of your people are at present very much disturbed over co-education. I must say that I can see no reason for being at all alarmed."

"Well," I replied, "where there is co-education in the study of literature—in the study of your plays, for example—classes in America are quite likely to be heavily overloaded with women, while the men go off to study political science and economics. One of the results of this may be that men come to regard literature as a feminine affair. 'Poetry is a sissy subject,' they'll say."

"Oh!" Here Shaw made a slight pause, as if the idea were quite new to him. "How strange! But of course I don't know much about schools and universities. I never could read textbooks. I spent all my time reading literature."

I mumbled something to the effect that textbooks were indeed not the same thing as literature.

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"Do you know," Shaw went on, "I am continually getting appeals from some American college or university teacher or other, asking for permission to let him 'edit' my plays. Now if I permitted that, I know perfectly well what would happen. People would open a book supposedly by me and would find only half the page filled with what *I* had written, and all the rest of the space taken up with remarks by some wholly illiterate university person!"

I can still hear Shaw's voice striking the word "wholly" at the very top of his musical scale and then running rapidly down through two whole octaves, as he said "illiterate university person," ending with a *basso profundo* that expressed the depth of his disgust at the very thought of such a person. I was completely flattened, but Shaw seemed not to notice, or not to care! Without a pause he went on:

"Observe what has happened to Shakespeare! When you name Shakespeare, you can see people shudder. I don't want the name of Bernard Shaw to affect people that way. That is why I have refused all requests for permission to 'edit' my plays."

He took a deep breath. "Shakespeare is to many persons what Beethoven is to women of my generation. Beethoven was forced upon them from their earliest years, and now his music is a very horror to them. No, I don't want to get into the class with Shakespeare." And his eyes twinkled at the terrible thought. Then he went on:

"Of course, one trouble with Shakespeare is that we don't understand him. His English is too old. The Germans are more fortunate in this respect than we are. Their translations of Shakespeare are only a century old. And in other parts of Europe, the natives are luckier still. In Budapest they are acting Shakespeare every week in a perfectly modern translation."

"They must miss the Shakespearean poetry, though," I interposed.

"Oh, yes," Shaw replied, "they miss the rhetoric; but

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they get the fun, the action, the dramatic situations, and some knowledge of the characters. I once had a chauffeur"—Shaw pronounced it "chauf*f*eur"—"who was very fond of the actor Forbes-Robertson. He once went to see him in *The Merchant of Venice*. I was very curious to learn what he would get out of it. So, when he returned from the theatre, I asked him how he had liked the play. He said that he thought the old Jew was great, but that he couldn't tell what any of the Italian characters were talking about! You see, the Euphuisms of Salarino and Salanio were quite lost on him."

"I noticed, Mr. Shaw," said I, breaking in as he paused in his monologue on Shakespeare, "that you said 'chauf*f*eur.' We in America usually say 'sh*ow*-fer.' Is that regarded here as not good English?"

"Oh," said Shaw with a chuckle, "we say 'g*ar*-idge' where you say 'gar*age*.' But no one speaks English well now-a-days, except telephone operators and wireless announcers." He was, of course, referring to radio broadcasters.

"Now take the six of us on the British Broadcasting Corporation's Committee on the Pronunciation of Doubtful Words. Robert Bridges is the chairman, and the others are Forbes-Robertson the actor, Professor Daniel Jones, Mr. A. Lloyd James, Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith, and myself. We all speak 'perfectly good English.' That is to say, any one of us might be made a King or a Lord Chief Justice without being disqualified because of our speech. And yet no two of us talk alike. Of course, when *I* say something differently, they say: 'Oh, well, that is your accent!' You see, I am an Irishman!" Again the twinkle in his eyes. "Take, for example, the word *cross*. Charing Cross, King's Cross, St. Paul's Cross, New Cross, Waltham Cross: we have a lot of them in London. Now *I* say *cruss*—short and crisp; but you can hear everything from that down to a lazy *crawz*."

Shaw was warming up to what was obviously a favorite

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lecture on phonetics. "Our English vowels," he said, "are enough to knock a Frenchman over. Just say 'hot, hit, hat,' to a Frenchman and watch him jump! Well, to go back to our Broadcasting Committee: I was discussing with the other members how to pronounce 'f-r-a-c-a-s,' and after we had agreed to call it *frah-cáh*, some one told us: 'But in America they call it *fráy-cuss!*' "

"That's true," I said, "we do! Did you ever hear an American company try to handle the Cockney speech in your *Pygmalion?*"

"No," Shaw replied.

"Perhaps that is fortunate!" said I.

"Cockney speech is rich and full," Shaw went on. "It is like a harmonica. *Our* speech is flat in comparison. No Cockney girl would ever fall in love with you or me: our speech would be too dull to interest her! Most of us today suppress our consonants. When I was a boy, people said *modeRn*; then they began to say *mode'n*; and then they came to say *mo'e'n*; and now we have to use some other word altogether, in order to be understood."

"I think we Americans drop our consonants," I volunteered, "or change them, even more than you."

"Yes," Shaw agreed. "*Some* Americans learn to disguise their speech, but there is one way I can always detect them. I ask them to count! When they come to 20, 30, 40, they say *twenny, thirty, forty!* The 't' is lost in their speech."

Here Shaw smiled, as he recalled "a story" on the subject of American speech, and he promptly launched himself into it.

"I was once at an afternoon party at which a Mrs. Hurst from America was present. Among the guests was Lord Berners, who presently came and sat down near Mrs. Hurst and me. After he had gone, she said to me: 'What was the name of that gentleman?' 'Lord Berners,' I replied. 'What did you say?' asked Mrs. Hurst. 'Lord Berners,' I repeated, quite distinctly. But I could see that she did not

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understand me. Some time later, she turned to me and said: 'I know it is stupid of me, but would you mind telling me once again what the name of that lord is?' 'Lord Berners,' I said once more. Still she did not comprehend. 'Would you mind writing it for me?' she asked. I did so. At once her face lit up. 'Oh!' she exclaimed, 'Lloyd Boy-noise!' "

"You know," Shaw went on, "you can tell from a person's face whether he understands or not. I was once directing a play of mine called *Major Barbara*. In the company there was an actor who, I could see, did not understand his lines. Without his saying anything to me, I knew it. I could tell from his face. After this actor had been on tour to America, he came back to England and then admitted to me that he had, while away, learned for the first time what those words meant. 'Impossible!' I said to him, and never let him know that I had found him out long before!"

"It is no doubt harder," said I, "for an American actor to follow your lines than for an English actor."

"It is hard," Shaw rejoined, "to find a real American actor today. In getting the cast together for my latest play, called *The Apple Cart*, we sent over to New York for an American of the Abraham Lincoln build, and we couldn't find one anywhere! You Americans as a race are reverting to the Red Indian type."

"What makes you think that?" I asked. This was, quite obviously, just the question that Shaw wanted me to ask; it was just what he paused and waited for.

"Well," said he, "you watch them any day in London. There are thousands of Americans over here this summer, and they are always walking the same way: Indian style! A male guide out in front, and the squaws strung out, single file, behind him!"

And with these words, enjoying his own joke to the full, Shaw turned away to talk to another guest, and I took this



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to be my signal to withdraw. Like Boswell, I hurried off to make written notes on my conversation with the Great Man.

That was a memorable day—July 9, 1929! Even though I knew at the time that Shaw was quite capable of talking a lot of nonsense, and even though I now see that he was partly humbug, even at his most impressive moments, even so, Shaw in his tweed knickers, with his twinkling eyes, his snowy white beard, his strong, hearty voice and ready speech, was a man one does not quickly or easily forget.



### GRAY'S ELEGY AND "PREXIE" ROBERTS

By EDWARD H. MERRILL, '25

THE very interesting and scholarly essay on Gray's *Elegy* in the last issue of the *Colby Library Quarterly* impressed me deeply and recalled to my mind the way "Prexie" Roberts used the poem in my own student days. He made us memorize much of the *Elegy* in Freshman Public Speaking and had us recite many of the stanzas, with their lines which stay with me to this day.

The essay of last February also brought to mind a summer day in 1949 when I stood in the venerable New Jersey churchyard which surrounds the old church in which soldiers wounded in the famous battle of Monmouth were treated for their wounds. My companion was an elderly gentleman for many years editor-in-chief of a nationally-known publishing company. I remarked that the churchyard where we were standing reminded me of the one that inspired Gray to write his famous *Elegy*. My friend then quoted the first two stanzas and said that I could go on from there. I surprised him by doing just that. I then told him about the course I had taken under President Roberts during my undergraduate days at Colby.

Roberts had an extraordinary ability "to point a moral,"