A Writing Life

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Chapter 11
Victorian Sunset

The World War I years are an extension of the Victorian century. *Journey to Heartbreak* had chronicled the close of Victorian optimism and the decline into post-Edwardian disillusion. Discussing the war years with Leonard Woolf, he recalled to me how he and Virginia had quietly celebrated November 11, 1918. The Armistice had never left my mind, and in the early 1970s I began to research, as a challenge in micro-history, how the end of the war had been marked worldwide. I was going to title the book *When the Shooting Stopped*.

Source material was mammoth and myriad. Where to begin? I found that in a stupid blunder to get the edge on his journalistic rivals, Roy Howard, the youngish, mustached head of United Press, then pausing in the port of Brest as he was about to voyage home, saw that the local morning daily had quoted an erroneous German dispatch that the war was over. “*Finie la guerre!*” French sailors were shouting. Howard thought he had a beat and cabled the news to New York. It was November 7, and the war was not over, but by 11:59 AM (French time was six hours ahead) the news was on the UP wire, spreading across the continent and raising an unstoppable carnival. I had my opening chapter—“The False Armistice.”

I knew that I could begin work on the real thing easily from Pennsylvania, as the U.S. Army Military History Institute (and War College) was in Carlisle, two hours from home. With summer 1978 approaching I planned to go to England—to the Imperial War Museum across the Thames south of London. Almost every morning from a flat in Bow Street across from the Royal Opera House, I walked across Waterloo Bridge, often with Rodelle, to research the Armistice.
Visiting our friends Ken and Jenny Emrys-Roberts in West Byfleet on our first free Sunday, I mentioned my newest project (of several ongoing ones). Ken was a composer, largely for TV series like *Poldark, Dracula, My Son, My Son,* and the public-school saga *To Serve Them All My Days.* He composed at home at his grand piano in three-minute intervals, as the trackage from Devon to London was on the far side of his bountiful garden.

“Did you know,” Ken asked, “that BBC radio did a program last year to capture soldier reminiscences of the Armistice before all the veterans were gone? I know the producer, Alan Haydock.” He rang up Haydock, who invited Rodelle and me to slog through his bursting files of letters from veterans. I arranged a visit, which turned into weeks. The BBC collection of letters from combatants and transcripts of interviews was enormous. The day before we were to fly home, we conceded to Haydock that we had much more to examine, and would have to return the next year. “That’s unnecessary,” he said. “Take any papers you want with you. Photocopy them back home, and post the batch back.” We did.

We had also found, as expected, a plethora of letters, diaries, memoirs and military records dealing with the Armistice at the Imperial War Museum. Among them was the Royal Flying Corps diary of Ewart Garland, which as it turned out we had no need to copy. Garland’s son, Patrick, a stage and TV producer, had directed the revival of *My Fair Lady,* with Rex Harrison again as Henry Higgins. Patrick also ran the Chichester Festival Playhouse. Because of the Shavian connection we had corresponded previously, and when he learned that I was working on the Armistice, he told me that his father had flown in the RFC and now lived in a small house in Chichester. Ewart Garland had been a captain, based at the Azelot aerodrome near Nancy in France. Rodelle and I visited and chatted with him, and he gave me a copy of his RFC diary. Although obviously failing, he was a warm, articulate ninety. I dedicated *A Stillness Heard Round the World. The End of the Great War* (1985) to him: “In memory of Ewart Garland, who flew over Flanders on the final day…” (My publisher had scrapped my working title, as publishers typically do.)

For nearly a decade we rented, part of each summer, Patrick’s London flat at 46 Cadogan Square, just below Harrods, while he was di-
recting at Chichester. The Harrods food court became our grocery. We even held a July 4 picnic for friends in Cadogan Square, a park accessible to residents by key. Inevitably, Rodelle took calls from theater people for Patrick, which may have resulted in a gossip column in a London scandal sheet referring to him as “the only heterosexual director in London.” (He was married to actress Alexandra Bastedo, but the caller/writer may have thought that Rodelle was Alexandra.) One persistent caller was Rex Harrison, who had been impressed by Patrick’s poignant 80th birthday TV celebration of Laurence Olivier, and was urging a Rex equivalent. Putting him off, Patrick told us that Harrison was now nearly sightless, had to memorize his lines and his positions before the camera—and had an ugly temper. There would be no TV birthday for “Henry Higgins.”

Each chapter of the World War I book was prefaced by a song recapturing the time. For the chapter “Armistice Eve” I quoted a Doughboy song wryly skeptical that the end was near:

Darling, I am coming back,
Silver threads among the black.
Now that peace in Europe nears,
I’ll be home in seven years.
I’ll drop in on you some night,
With my whiskers long and white,
Home again with you once more,
Say in Nineteen fifty-four!

The Germans, aware that two million Americans arriving in France meant inevitable defeat, would surrender before a single Allied soldier crossed their frontier, making a reality of the national hymn of the 1850s, Die Wacht am Rhein:

Dear Fatherland, may peace be thine,
Firm stands, and sure, the watch,
The watch on the Rhine!

To dramatize the civilian revelry in Britain following the Armistice, I quoted the music hall favorite “Knees up, Mother Brown!”:

Knees up, knees up,
Don’t let the breeze up,
Knees up, Mother Brown!
Having written inquiries to one-time schoolchildren later known in print, and delved into memoirs and diaries, I was able to quote Evelyn Waugh, Malcolm Muggeridge, C. P. Snow, James Barrie, Christopher Fry, Kenneth Clark, and Leonard Woolf. At the stupendous news of the end of the war, the students at the fictional Bamfylde School in Devon, in the novel by R. F. Delderfield based upon the West Buckland School he attended in his youth, celebrate enthusiastically, although nearly a hundred Old Boys of Bamfylde were among their wartime dead. When Delderfield’s *To Serve Them All Our Days* (1972) was adapted for television in 1981, Emrys-Roberts composed an anthem, in period, for “Bamfylde College.” He was subsequently overwhelmed by requests from public schools to authorize its adoption.

I learned a little more about the Armistice when again at Sissinghurst Castle. Through the research institute at Penn State, which I had run since 1970, I was, among other projects, financing Joanne Trautmann’s work on Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, the mother of Nigel Nicolson, who had inherited Sissinghurst. Joanne became Nigel’s co-editor of the multi-volume *Woolf Letters* (1975–1980), and thus I found myself connected with Sissinghurst and Nigel, who was “resident donor” after the National Trust acquired the castle, renowned for its gardens, in 1967. We visited when in England, on occasion staying at Sissinghurst, and Nigel visited us both at Penn State and in London. Once, when we were staying at Shakespeare Tower at the Barbican, Nigel, arriving for lunch, mistakenly climbed to the 12th floor. Unable to figure out how to summon the lifts, he resorted to the indoor stairs. We were on the ground floor at number 12. After a search we found Nigel, revived him with chilled wine, and had our belated lunch.

Unpretentious, he would often pace through “his” gardens at Sissinghurst in a seedy tweed coat to overhear visitors’ comments, and if they observed what appeared to be an oversight, he would notify the groundskeepers. On a distant corner, at the edge of a moat, he had a writing shed, which surprised visitors when they discovered it occupied.

On our first visit Nigel took us up the staircase in the tower to see his mother’s study, still strewn with papers left as they were since her death in 1962. He was negotiating to sell the collection, including her correspondence with Virginia Woolf, once he and Joanne had completed
their work. (In 1983 the papers would be acquired, for a hefty sum, by the Lilly Library at Indiana University.) Nigel pawed through the unsorted debris and drew out a Christmas card from T. S. Eliot. “Have a souvenir!” he offered. It is now at Penn State.

Nigel knew we were in Kent to search out the places where Henry James and Stephen and Cora Crane had lived for a book on Americans in late-Victorian London, which would become *The London Yankees* (1979) and precede the Armistice book. He offered to take us about. We squeezed into his wheezing Austin, with the dangling lining of Nigel’s ancient tweed coat caught, at first, in the door. Henry James’s eighteenth-century Lamb House in Rye, now a National Trust property, was easy to find, but Brede Place, where Crane spent his last years, wasn’t. When Juliet, Nigel’s daughter, prepared Sunday brunch for us and learned where we were going, she warned us about the alleged Brede ghost. A school friend who had lived there in the 1960s believed that as a child she once saw the impression of someone moving about restlessly on a bed although the room appeared empty. Terrified, she fled.

We traveled on the route which Juliet had recommended. When Nigel saw an elderly lady walking along the narrow road, leaning on a cane, he stopped to enquire about Brede Place. It was no longer, we knew, the drafty shell of Crane’s day, with vestiges of its fourteenth-century origins and lit by flickering candles. In battered hat and a coat to match, Nigel emerged from his Austin and approached the lady, not identifying himself as the resident lord of Sissinghurst Castle and a former MP, but explaining that he had two American professors with him who wanted to see Brede Place. Tremblingly she pointed toward a left-hand turn and said that she lived nearby and didn’t recommend going inside Brede.

Nigel offered to drive her home en route. She climbed in, reluctantly, but when we reached her road she asked to be let out to walk. Apparently she did not want the unkempt stranger to learn where she lived. Nigel braked, held the door for her, the shredded lining of his coat flapping in the breeze. When she was out of hearing he observed to us: “These English eccentrics are everywhere.”

However eerie by reputation and once a weathered gray hulk visited by bats, Brede Place was lavishly restored and surrounded by a velvety
lawn. Yet its wandering ghosts and strange noises seemingly remained. Owls roosted and hooted in the thick ivy, and the wind caused the rafters to creak and groan. We did not venture in, as Brede was privately owned. Once we looked about, Nigel drove on to the unrelated, broadly moated Bodiam Castle, dating from the days of Richard II, then on to James’s Lamb House.

On one sunny weekend at Sissinghurst, a lavish breakfast for guests—including Virginia Woolf’s nephew (and biographer) Quentin Bell, and his lovely daughter, Virginia—was laid outdoors in the garden before public visitors came. A serving maid could be heard telling another in shock as the table was being set that one bed she had turned the night before had not been slept in. Bedrooms had doors within to adjacent smaller rooms, and apparently a gay couple new to decorous Victorian arrangements failed to make the unused bed appear slept in. Such pairings were hardly new to Nigel, whose father, Sir Harold Nicolson, had male lovers and whose mother was openly lesbian and bedded, among others, Virginia Woolf.

Nigel must have known the verses about him penned by John Colville, a private secretary to Winston Churchill:

With your mother disclosed as a Lesbian
And your father admitted a queer,
The question we feel we must ask you
Is how you contrive to be here?

Nigel wrote about his origins, without requiring prompting from Colville, in his memoir *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973), which became a best-seller.

One writing project often emanates from an earlier one. Although a supporting player, the expatriate Henry Harland had appeared in *Beardsley*, but I had not written extensively about a London Yankee until *Whistler*. For decades before Whistler, London had the magic and the practicality, for Americans, of place. When there was little cultural sophistication in the new republic across the Atlantic, or markets for the arts and letters, London, like Florence and Paris, had a creative allure. London’s intellectual ambience was even accessible in one’s own language, and Americans had advantages in England in being both within and without its society.
Evoking the mystique of place, I titled each chapter with a location identified with an expatriate Yankee. Tedworth Square conjured up Mark Twain, who spent seven productive years in London and owed his *Connecticut Yanke in King Author’s Court* and *The Prince and the Pauper* to London. At Lancaster Gate, the below-stairs gossip in 1895 was shifting from the elderly but debonair American who wrote fiction and lived at number 109 with a lady not his wife to the young American lady who also wrote fiction and lived at number 56 without her husband, whom she was in the process of divorcing. Bret Harte was the gentleman. Pearl Craigie, who wrote as “John Oliver Hobbes,” was the literary lady in 56 who lived on the earnings of her father, the entrepreneur who had made Carter’s Little Liver Pills a household word in England.

I associated Cromwell Road with Henry Harland, the defiant American who with Aubrey Beardsley had edited *The Yellow Book*. “Croydon Police Court” summoned up the trial for murder of Kate Lyon, the Chicago lady not Harold Frederic’s wife yet calling herself so, who treated his stroke unsuccessfully with Christian Science therapy. Frederic, correspondent for *The New York Times*, had also written the novel sensation of 1896, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*. Brede Place summoned up Stephen Crane, and Lamb House, in Rye, Henry James, while Tite Street in Chelsea was home to painters Jimmy Whistler, John Singer Sargent and the underrated Edwin Abbey, who rejected a knighthood to retain his American citizenship. “I am that terrible thing, / the product of American culture,” wrote the curmudgeonly Ezra Pound of Church Walk in Kensington, who wrote to the editor of *Poetry* magazine in Chicago, according to Robert Frost, “denouncing a country that neglects fellows like me.” Frost had abandoned farming in New Hampshire, relocating to Beaconsfield, which gave me “North of London” as a chapter heading recalling his poetry collection *North of Boston*. I closed with Bedford Place, and Conrad Aiken and T. S. Eliot—and in effect the beginning of the Great War in 1914, with Frost electing to chance the U-Boats and return home, and Eliot choosing the alternative risk of trying to succeed in England. Somehow World War I had resurfaced in my writing, and would yet again.

*The London Yankees* was a media winner with fine reviews on both sides of the pond, but not a success in the bookshops. On the basis
of its wide press reception I expected more, but it was never reprinted.

Each time we visited Sissinghurst, Nigel Nicolson would ask how my work was going, and could he help. When I mentioned that I was beginning to work on the week of the Armistice, he said: “I have the diary of Uncle Fred. He was in Belgium at the end.” Nigel rushed up to the castle tower and returned with a diary open to November 11, 1918. In my book I would write:

At Ath, Major Frederick Nicolson, eldest brother of a young Foreign Office expert on the peace treaty process, Harold Nicolson, took time to scrawl a few lines in his diary. “Entered Ath, extraordinary scenes. Hun prisoners nearly lynched in the square. The people hysterical, [we] formed up in a field at Maffle, & were told hostilities ceased at 11. We had outbursts but 10th Hussars continued firing for some time. Huns [were] hit back. Billeted at Maffle, very comfortable. Thank God.”

Significant American collections, albeit remote from each other, were at the Hoover Institution on the Stanford campus and the Army’s Military History Institute in my home state. The Hoover had a hoard of German wartime papers and publications, much of it too fascinating to turn away from, even if not directly relevant. When back in Pennsylvania I drove the ninety miles to Carlisle and checked in at the AMHI, I discovered it strangely quiet and almost empty. The date was March 28, 1979. Close downriver on the Susquehanna was the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor complex. It had just suffered a meltdown, the worst nuclear accident ever to happen in the United States. Residents nearby had fled, as had all but caretaker staff at the Army War College.

I saw no reason to waste the week I had put aside for research there unless nuclear fallout would make the area hazardous. There seemed no evidence of risk. With no waiting for requests from others to be filled, I accomplished in three days what I expected would take five and drove home. I would be back—for later projects. The faulty reactor remains capped but the rest of the facility is operational.
Inevitably for the writer, something turns up too late, or too off-topic, however tempting. My “Aftermath” chapter dealt with the front lines once the shooting had stopped, and “Having a Knees-Up” evoked the home front in Britain. There was no way I could exploit a Christmas season episode in London that came just beyond my time frame and would not fit the books about wartime Christmases which I would write decades later. Eric Blair, who wrote later as “George Orwell,” was a public-school student when he saw Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* during the holidays. He remembered the theater full of soldiers fresh from the front in France. They saw the point ... because their experiences had taught them the same thing. There is a passage early in the play where Bluntschli is telling Raina what a cavalry charge is really like. “It is,” he says, “like slinging a handful of peas against a window pane: first one comes, then two or three close behind him, and then all the rest in a lump.” Raina, thinking of Sergius, her lover, charging at the head of the regiment, clasps her hands ecstatically and says, “Yes, first comes One! The bravest of the brave!”

“Oh,” says Bluntschli, “but you should see the poor devil pulling at his horse!” At this line the audience of simple soldiers burst into a laugh which almost lifted the roof off!

No more rewarding in royalties than *Bernard Shaw, The Diaries 1885–1897* would be was my edition of Shaw’s collected and mostly anonymous (or GBS-signed) art criticism, *Bernard Shaw on the London Art Scene, 1885–1950*, published in 1989. His writings on art, largely reviews of exhibitions, were part of his seeking income through journalism, but as he paced the hard floors of galleries he became a quick learner. He also acquired expertise that would prove useful in enriching scenes in his plays—and even ideas for them. For example, Shaw included the *Madonna* element in onstage art in *Candida*, which he called his “modern Pre-Raphaelite play,” and he based scenes in *Caesar and Cleopatra* and in *Androcles and the Lion* on the art he viewed by Jean-Léon Gérôme.

Shaw would always see the various professions as self-protective entities, a failing he excoriated regularly about physicians and medicine since his earliest days as a writer. In his novel *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883) he carped that a physician, rather than implicate a colleague for incompetence, would let him “decimate half of London.” And in *The Doctor’s Dilemma* (1906) the more fashionable a physician is, the more latitude he has for malpractice. Art was no exception. As early as
a review in 1885, I found Shaw writing: “During the past month Art has suffered an unusually severe blow at the hands of the Royal Academy by the opening of the annual exhibition at Burlington House.” The next year he would scoff, “If you want a picture that will keep, buy water-colors. An American cheap clock is guaranteed to last two years. An average Academy picture is even more fleeting than an American clock.” The remark would find its way into a wry line given to General John Burgoyne, about the timing of an execution, in the last scene of *The Devil’s Disciple* (1896): “I should never dream of hanging any gentleman by an American clock.”

I found Shaw as art critic fully as satiric and amusing as in the dialogue in his later plays. Writing about second-rate attempts to replicate Whistler’s technique, he abhorred “a ghastly lilac-coloured fog,” and maintained of a nude that “a painter who sees nothing in a woman but an idiotic doll, sees too little, whatever his [artistic] school may be.” He was not opposed to “nakedness … either of statues, men and women, or horses and dogs,” but to pretentious nonsense.

Some exhibitions included pictures he admired—he was one of the first to appreciate Claude Monet’s “vividly faithful” canvases—but he thought that “the first step towards making our picture-galleries endurable is to get rid of the pictures.” He meant “the pigheaded academic pictures, signboards all of them of the wasted talent and perverted ambition of men who might have been passably useful as architects, engineers, potters, cabinet-makers, smiths, or bookbinders.” He found the relatively new and popular Grosvenor Gallery “like nothing so much as Mr. Jobling’s Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty.” Reading Dickens seemed essential to reading Shaw, who happily employed Dickensian metaphor in whatever he wrote. Tony Jobling, a friend of Mr. Guppy in *Bleak House*, had decorated the walls of his room with inexpensive engravings of current “Fashionable Ladies.” The Grosvenor, at a showing of pastels, Shaw wrote, overdid the fashion: “The display of young females in chalky millinery at the Grosvenor is excessive.” The Royal Academy annual to Shaw was always “the very worst on record” but for the previous one. Each picture “has been compounded, like a chemist’s prescription, according to a formula of proved popularity,” which inevitably included “cheap sentiment.”
At the close of each day’s work in the Victoria and Albert Museum I was pleased with the outcome, but Rodelle deplored my laboring on the project as unprofitable drudgery, a parallel to the diaries. I found the research, while commercially costly in lost income, challenging and useful. Writing something else for a “trade” market would have enhanced our bottom line, but I enjoyed working at the Victoria and Albert Museum on Cromwell Road and further enriching my background about Victorian England. And the largely unknown Shaw was an engaging read. He was never to be satisfied, as a literary critic, art critic, music critic or theater critic, with the work of an artist who was performing at less than his potential. As he put it in a music column in 1890: “A criticism written without personal feeling is not worth reading. It is the capacity for making good or bad art a personal matter that makes a man a critic.”

When under the press of other writing priorities Shaw ceased regular art reviewing, he relinquished the columns to the beautiful Lady Colin Campbell, whose journalism he admired and who, now divorced in scandal, needed the income. She would be one of the subjects of an essay series I created, published as Shaw’s People, Victoria to Churchill (1996). It would be followed by another collection, Who’s Afraid of Bernard Shaw? (2011)—obviously concluding with Virginia Woolf.

Shaw was also unintimidated by the politics of picture placement and other deceptions meant to mask inadequacy of performance. In scorning a prudery-tinged, illustrated Rabelais exhibition (Jules Garnier depicting Gargantua and Pantagruel³) he rejected “a sort of special claim on the score of indecency . . . for some dozen out of the hundred and sixty pictures by putting them into a separate room, admission to which can only be obtained by persons giving ‘names and addresses.’ The absurdity of such a qualification is of a piece with the bad taste shown in making an indelicate mystery about a few pictures which are no whit more Rabelaisian than those in the outer galleries.”

In an article that would appear in a much later book about Shaw—about his “embryo playwright” years before his first produced play in 1892—I closed with his farewell to regular art reviewing in October 1889. It was also my personal adieu to Sherlock Holmes, one of the first pleasures of my early reading. GBS had confided, as the pseudonymous “Corno di Bassetto” (basset horn) in his October 23 vale-
dictory in *The Star*: “I cannot guarantee my favorable impression of the Hanover Gallery, as I only saw it by gaslight. This was the fault of [Pablo de] Sarasate, who played the Ancient Mariner with me. He fixed me with his violin on my way to Bond Street, and though, like the wedding-guest, I tried my best, I could not but choose to hear.” Shaw’s diary for October 19, 1889 had noted: “Private View. Hanover Gallery. Sarasate concert at St. James’s Hall, 15[00].” Multi-tasking had its limits, and “Bassetto” had failed to pen a review of that performance although he attended it. He would often review performances of Sarasate with wry compliments, writing: “He never interprets anything: he plays it beautifully, and that is all.”

Another admirer of the nimble Sarasate was the violin aficionado Sherlock Holmes. Arthur Conan Doyle’s Dr. John Watson writes about the notorious “Red-Headed League” that Holmes, mulling over the unresolved bank robbery in October 1890 as a “three-pipe problem,” suddenly sprang out of his chair and put his pipe down on the mantelpiece. “Sarasate plays at the St. James’s Hall this afternoon,” Holmes remembered. “What do you think, Watson? Could your patients spare you for a few hours?” Since the concert was on a Saturday afternoon, and Watson seemed to have few patients anyway, he was, as usual, amenable.

“Then put on your hat and come. I am going through the City first, and we can have some lunch on the way. I observe that there is a good deal of German music on the programme, which is rather more to my taste than Italian or French. It is introspective, and I want to introspect.” The pair traveled by Underground on the Metropolitan and District Line to Aldersgate, according to Watson, “and a short walk took us to Saxe-Coburg Square, the scene of the singular story which became ‘The Red-Headed League’.” Once Holmes’s scrutiny of the business premises nearby was concluded, he said: “And now, Doctor, we’ve done our work, so it’s time we had some play. A sandwich and a cup of coffee, and then off to violin-land.” At St. James’s Hall in Piccadilly, they “sat in the stalls, [Holmes] wrapped in the most perfect happiness, gently waving his long, thin fingers in time to the music.”

Later that evening Holmes would declare that the crime was solved, and one of the thieves to be seized would be found to have red hair. But for the moment the mystery lay in abeyance. As he listened, en-
tranced, to Señor Sarasate, the most famous consulting detective in fiction had not noticed, on a nearby aisle, another red-headed figure, complete to ruddy beard, paying close attention to the performance. It was Corno di Bassetto, who would write (in *The World*, October 29, 1890), “Sarasate … left all criticism behind him at his first concert on Saturday [last] week. He also left Mr. Cusins [the conductor] behind by half a bar or so all through the two concertos, the unpremeditated effects of syncopation resulting therefrom being more curious than delectable.” Yet thanks to Pablo de Sarasate, nearly a legend himself, the paths of two of the iconic figures in the Victorian literary imagination had coincided.

My piece was a part of a pseudo-biography of Shaw’s invented musical critic, “The Autobiography of Corno di Bassetto,” culled from his reviews signed as the aristocratic Italian pseudo-critic. I delivered it, to much laughter, at a conference at “Shaw’s Corner” in Ayot St. Lawrence. Then I offered it to the *Times Literary Supplement*, which published my “Corno di Bassetto” article shortly after in July 2013. Yet for reasons unknown, the TLS editors deleted the Holmes episode. I restored it for book publication in *Bernard Shaw Before His First Play: The Embryo Playwright* (2015). It reminded me of the editorial scissors wielded, long before, upon Beardsley and Whistler.

Like the diaries, my later books on Shaw, however uncommercial, would become sources for generations of future scholars. I felt rewarded enough that way. With my other hand I was always researching and writing other books engaging other interests and other challenges. Several of my Shavian collections included updated texts of earlier articles, essays and introductions which fit well under umbrella titles like *Shaw’s People*, but those which did not lend themselves to that formula, or now seem dated, remain in limbo, perhaps accessible via computer searches. Many of my hundreds of reviews since the mid-1950s can be located in archival pages of the old *Saturday Review*, *New York Times Book Review*, and *Times Literary Supplement*. The TLS now identifies previously anonymous reviews, as they were when I first reviewed for it, but my many dozens of pre-reviews in *Publishers Weekly* remain unsigned and perhaps unsearchable, although I have a file of them.

There is a strange power given to the anonymous reviewer’s pen—the ability to be utterly honest without weathering diatribes, or to sub-
ject authors to withering payback for alleged insults to one’s own work.
A review in the right—or wrong—place can make or break a book,
sometimes by misusing the opportunity for other ends. Michael Be-
schloss, for example, had access to a full page in *The New York Times
Book Review*, ostensibly to examine my triple biography of Marshall,
MacArthur and Eisenhower, *15 Stars* (2007). Much of his space edi-
torialized about George W. Bush’s disastrous invasion of Iraq. Nothing
remotely close to Iraq in time or place appears in the book. It did not
affect Beschloss’s continued reviewing, but it made my book appear to
be unworthy of his assignment.

One’s own reviewing, however, can leave one looking lame in the
passage of time or change in climate. I wrote about Christopher Isher-
wood’s closeted novel *A Single Man* for *The Saturday Review* in 1964,
considering it pathetic, but when his autobiographical *Christopher and
His Kind* appeared in 1976, the coming-out of gay men was on its way
and the earlier work had become viewed as gritty realism.

I helped propel Frank McCourt’s gritty memoir of an Irish boyhood,
*Angela’s Ashes* (1997), to best-sellerdom and a Pulitzer Prize through
my anonymous rave pre-review in *Publishers Weekly*, although I noted—
no critic thereafter did—that the “Mrs. Robinson” ending was obvi-
ously fictionalized from a popular film. A year earlier I went negative
and created a press firestorm that cancelled the American release of
the neo-Nazi David Irving’s dishonest *Goebbels: Mastermind of the Third
Reich* (1996). My pre-review described it as “a repellent book” with
“language of camouflaged admiration.” I quoted Irving as writing, as if
fact: “Neither the broad German public nor their Führer shared [Goeb-
bbels’s] satanic anti-Semitism.” *The New York Times* picked up the pre-
review and Frank Rich was given my telephone number, writing an op-
ed column, “Hitler’s Spin Artist,” which necessarily kept my anonymity
and concluded: “Call it a bloodless crime: the willing execution of the
truth.” When it was evident that all other media would follow, Thomas
Dunne, the book’s editor, issued a publicity release claiming that “I
would not publish a work I thought to be pro-Nazi.” But he had—al-
most. And he added, after a lifetime in publishing, that he did not know
of Irving’s long neo-Nazi slant until he was “told” that Irving was “at
the center of much controversy.”
I previewed books for *Publishers Weekly* for a decade, but gave it up when *PW* reduced its fees to peonage scale. The *PW* editors apparently retaliated by ignoring many of my later books. Such is the world of trade publishing.

Previewing was rewarding in other ways. I read a lot and learned a lot, often about areas new to me. But I read the proofs, some of them accompanied by dust-jacket copy, all the way through. Most proofs, uncorrected, now arrive bound, and with jackets or catalog copy. The previewing process is the bane of writers yet necessary for press exposure or promotion appearances on or about release date. For the small fees, if any, in most review media, some reviewers furnish only their money’s worth. At least one of my books was previewed, favorably by a critic who from obvious internal evidence, read only chapter one. Others have been previewed, again obviously, from jacket copy alone—a good incentive for creating compelling jacket prose. Two successful writers I knew asked to review books of mine so that they would not have to pay for them, intending to exploit them in their research. Did they read the books through? I don’t know—but they must have been disappointed, as proof copies have no index.

### Endnotes

1. Joanne Trautmann Banks, a founder of the field of Medical Humanities, died at sixty-five in 2007. She had taught at Penn State’s Hershey College of Medicine. Bank’s project was published in 1973 as *The Jessamy brides: the friendship of Virginia Woolf and V. Sackville-West*.

2. Shaw’s stage directions for *Candida* include: “on the wall above a large auto-type of the chief figure in “Titian’s Assumption of the Virgin.”

3. In the sixteenth century, François Rabelais wrote a series of novels about two giants, Gargantua and his son Pantagruel. In the nineteenth century, French artist Jules-Arsène Garnier painted 160 pictures to illustrate the Gargantua and Pantagruel stories.

4. Electricity would begin to light London in the early 1880s but the transition from gas would be expensive and slow.
5. Decades later Aldersgate Station was renamed Barbican. Although Saxe-Coburg Square is fictional, it fits the location of Charterhouse Square, below Goswell Road at Moorgate.