Shaw Before His First Play

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Preface: Bernard Shaw
Before His First Play

Shaw was once asked when he first felt “inclined” to be a writer. “I never felt inclined to write,” he said, “any more than I ever felt inclined to breathe. I felt inclined to draw. Michael Angelo was my boyish ideal.” He also thought that he would like to be “a wicked baritone in an opera when I grew up.” Tenors were the romantic leads, but being bad was far more interesting. As a youth he wrote a long-vanished short story about a gunman on the prowl in an Irish glen and sent it unsuccessfully to a boys’ magazine, and as a teenager he wrote a letter to Public Opinion, objecting as an atheist to the traveling revivalist Dwight Moody. To the unhappiness of his more pious relatives in Dublin, it was published. Yet one letter to the editor appearing in print did not turn him into an obsessive author.

Only opportunity, and the need for some income of his own, spurred Shaw’s pen, and that came after he left his dreary bookkeeper’s job in Dublin and followed his mother and sisters to England. At twenty, in 1876, Shaw arrived in London without prospects or means. His mother’s vocal mentor, George John Vandeleur Lee, found him ghost music reviewing assignments ostensibly by Lee. Until the weekly Hornet folded in 1878, that was Bernard Shaw’s publishing career. He began a novel, cribbed an unsaleable short story from it, wrote an equally unpublishable satire, My Dear Dorothea. A Practical System of Moral Education for Females Embodied in a Letter to a Young Person of that Sex; and he began, ambitiously—even arrogantly—a blank-verse play about Jesus and Judas, and (under his pen) the less-than-holy Holy Family. Although he abandoned the effort after forty-nine pages, on one of which he wrote, “vile stuff,” it remains a striking achievement for a school dropout hardly past twenty.

Shaw also began, and finished, handwritten in dark brown ink, a long Dickensian novel about a young man much like himself which he titled, “with merciless fitness,” he confessed later, Immaturity. He spent
much of his small income for years afterward having Carter Patterson send it fruitlessly to publishers. He kept writing dozens of job-seeking letters to prospective employers seeking clerkships, as his experience in Dublin, however boring, fit that niche. All he secured was a job in 1879 with the Edison Telephone Company of London, knocking on doors to acquire permission to extend rooftop lines and poles in gardens in the East End. Yet he had frankly confided to the company manager, to whom he had been referred by a cousin: “My only reason for seeking commercial employment is a pecuniary one. I know how to wait for success in literature, but I do not know how to live on air in the interim.” When the company was absorbed by Bell Telephone a year later, he was offered a large pay increase, from £48 a year to £80. He turned it down and began his second novel, *The Irrational Knot*, an Ibsenite twist on marriage, about which he knew almost nothing.

Living at home, and off his mother’s small music-teaching income, Shaw kept writing more novels, and a few music reviews for which he was paid. Even a disabling bout of smallpox, which he claimed was a reaction to a vaccination, and left him with a lifetime hostility to professional medicine, only delayed his completion of a third novel, *Love Among the Artists*, in which he created an acerbic “British Beethoven” and sowed the seeds of his Higgins and Eliza in *Pygmalion*. For his now-compulsive writing, he had no need for the traditional author’s study. Spending his days under the gaslit dome of the British Museum Reading Room, his informal university, he had what he described later as all the benefits of socialism—a spacious desk, access to books and journals, ink and blotting paper, light and heat. Entertainment beyond books was also available in London without cost—if one wanted to attend the myriad public lectures, literary society gatherings and debates advertised. They became Shaw’s urban classrooms, his multi-venued student union, where he met like-minded young people and conquered his fear of rising to comment and question and exposing his worldly innocence.

Under the Reading Room dome as an intellectual Bohemia he also encountered Londoners destined to play crucial roles in his life. It was almost routine while strolling the arcs of the reading desk aisles, seeking information from the surrounding reference bookshelves, to glance at the books and papers that museum habitues had stacked. A young man named William Archer, two months Shaw’s junior but already a practicing critic and translator, noticed on the red-bearded Irishman’s desk the striking anomaly of a large score of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*
and a French text of Marx’s *Capital*. Once they got to know each other, ideas about collaboration followed, and Archer also passed on his surplus reviewing offers to Shaw, one of which would lead to his becoming art critic of the weekly *World* in February 1886.

Until Archer materialized, Shaw’s meager income was nearly nothing, but he dined cheaply at vegetarian restaurants in Fitzrovia (his mother cooked nothing for him and he prepared his own late-morning oatmeal). He had few other expenses beyond writing paper, penny stamps and an occasional tram ticket. When he had sold his short story “The Miraculous Revenge” for the March 1885 issue of *Time*, receiving £3.3.0, it seemed a considerable sum. When his father died (at seventy-one) in Dublin that April, Shaw was able, from his mother’s small inheritance, to purchase at Jaeger’s, for £11.1.0, a suit, a black coat and vest, a cravat, and a pair of trousers. He finally had professional attire for the galleries, concert halls, and theaters.

His diary beginning in 1885 meticulously lists his income and his expenses, even to a penny (probably thrown to a newsboy) lost under a train, and his investment in condoms when he understood from his increasingly heated social evenings with a widow much his senior that he was about to be seduced. His purchase was probably unnecessary as Jenny Patterson was childless, much bedded, menopausal, and very likely sterile. Another of his women, Annie Besant, a divorceé, wanted him to sign a cohabitation agreement. Shaw declined, penning only agreements (a sort of unsuccessful seduction) to publish, serially, several of his unsaleable novels in her socialist journal *Our Corner*, to which he was also contributing reviews, and for the equally socialist (and impecunious) *To-Day*. At the least it got his novels in print, one of them, *Cashel Byron’s Profession*, reaching book form from the plates of the serial publication. Income to live on had to come from elsewhere than low-paying bits in newspapers, book reviews, and failed fiction. His reviews of Victorian claptrap (he was never assigned the choice releases) for W.T. Stead’s *Pall Mall Gazette* were anonymous and modestly paid; they contributed to his self-education while giving him entrée to publish other forgettable bits, as did his work soon for the afternoon *Star* and the weekly *World*. Every connection helped. And some of his ephemera that remain are worth another look, as with his pre-Wellsian political fantasy “A.D. 3,000.”

Shaw’s visibility at political lectures, for which he took only expenses, if that, and his burgeoning careers as art and music critic, were more crucial at improving his lifestyle and creating his public persona. His
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musical signature, *Corno di Bassetto*, developed into a personality about whom he might have fashioned a play. What the novels did—and they were far better than their commercial fate—was to incubate ideas and situations he exploited later in his plays. He noted in his diary, at the close of 1889, having abandoned a sixth novel, that his yearly book royalties from his last completed novel, *An Unsocial Socialist*, were all of two shillings and tenpence. Even his walking the art galleries would be useful in a rich vein of scenic ideas and visual metaphor recycled into his plays. As a playwright and polemicist he wasted little from his prentice years that could be turned onto the stage or into his prefaces, which to some of his plays sometimes seemed appended excuses.

Shaw’s intimacy with Archer would lead not only to continuing work as a critic but to a first completed play. It began as a collaboration with Archer to be titled *Rheingold*, but petered out until Shaw revived the work himself and completed it in 1892 as *Widowers’ Houses*. He was then in his middle thirties, late-blooming for a fresh start, yet his earlier writings had prepared the path. The play would have only two performances, and it was excoriated—when reviewed at all—in the press. Yet Shaw knew better. It was ahead of its time, and is still striking theater. He was on his way.

These segments about Shaw’s pre-playwright beginnings have been written and edited over more than half a century, and follow here, when not completely new, in much updated and augmented form. None are as they were. I trust that the vintage chapters have aged well and were worth rejuvenation. Several sections are new for this book.