

(February 4, 1929)

## The Real Bernard Shaw

BY MR. MAURICE COLBORNE

PRESIDENT DALY:—There is, I imagine no other living man of letters whose work gives the stimulus and pleasure that Mr. Bernard Shaw has produced through the brilliance of his writing, the keenness of his wit and the thought-provoking conceptions of society and politics which fill the pages of his plays and their prefaces. There is no one with whom we would more welcome a personal acquaintance, both to assist us to a proper understanding of his works and also to satisfy a legitimate curiosity to know somewhat more intimately the real character of this great genius. During the last few months the public of the United States and Canada have been delighted by the fine dramatic and artistic work of Mr. Maurice Colborne and his English players in their presentation of Mr. Shaw's plays, and it is of particular value to receive a personal impression of Mr. Shaw from one who knows him intimately and whose interpretations of his plays have been of such outstanding excellence. I have very much pleasure in introducing Mr. Colborne who, at very short notice, kindly accepted this invitation to address the club.

Mr. Colborne:—It is an ill wind that pleases nobody, and I speak strictly from my own point of view because, you, I feel, are justified in being disappointed today but believe me your disappointment has brought me the great pleasure of being able to speak to you, instead of Mr. Lemieux. My excellent lunch has been considerably perturbed by the remarks of my friend on my left who has pointed out that Mr. Lemieux is perhaps the greatest and most splendid orator and speaker in Canada today. However, that isn't my fault and has strictly nothing to do with the matter.

Now gentlemen, I find it very interesting and difficult to register the kind of remarks which I have been accustomed to make in some other places away from here which I shall not mention, because I feel that you here know probably just as much about Bernard Shaw as I shall be able to tell you. In some other places they have not known quite so much as either you or I know. For instance in one place—I think we can risk mentioning the State of Montana—one or two people were very surprised that Bernard Shaw, since they had seen his photographs, was not with us. "Where is your leading comedian?" they said. And a lady, full of intelligent interest in our undertaking, said, "And what plays of Bernard Shaw are you going to do, Mr. Colborne?" So I said, "You never can tell." And she said, "No, no, of course not." And when I finally got the fact imprinted on this charming young lady that "You never can tell," was the name of the play and went on to mention the name of the second play, "Candida," one of those charming old ladies, slightly deaf, said, "Oh! You never can tell in Canada?" But it has been interesting to realize that I suppose Bernard Shaw's comedies have been played in one nighters through Montana and places like that where fifty years ago the white man would not go. So we have had a delightful tour and some comical experiences as well. Now we must get on with the old gentleman, Bernard Shaw.

I suppose we all know about his earlier days, how he was the son of a genteel but impoverished Irish landowner, who sent Shaw to school, where he confesses he was the laziest boy in school. That is a great point I make when addressing colleges or normal schools: I say there is a chance for all of us. He ran away to England where he confesses he made the sum of six pounds in nine years from his own efforts, and five pounds of this were reputed to be amassed by his writing the caption and layout for a patent medicine advertisement. I imagine that his gifted musical mother must have looked after him. He has never revealed how he spent the six years except that he did spend them in the British Museum, accumulating facts; day by day, facts, facts, facts; and, as we know, it is his vast accumulation of facts that helps make him the

most brilliant debater in the world. That is why he really always wins because he has always got one more fact up his sleeve than his adversary. To divert his leisure in those six years, I suppose, he wrote the inevitable first novel. Well, that was fine. The writing was splendid. But the bad part was, nobody bought it. The mice finally got at it, as Bernard Shaw says, even they could not finish it.

Still, gentlemen, I suppose genius will out and he soon found himself one of the most valued members of the staff of one of the foremost London weekly papers. He was musical critic. Well, he took some years to say all he had to say about music, and he finally went to the editor. He had said all he had to say about music and if he were to continue as musical critic he could only say it all over again. So rather than lose him they made him dramatic critic. And so he started to go to the theatres and see the series of plays which we may say in the vernacular, "bored him stiff." He got so fed up that he had a serious conference with himself and he decided the only way in which his job would be made tolerable would be if he wrote plays himself and went to review them and told what magnificent plays they were. That is how he became a playwright, although I never doubted he would have been one anyway. I suppose he used to inveigh against a small salary which in those days they paid dramatic critics, and one way of protesting was to refuse to continue to go to the evening show. Well, before the war he sat in the orchestra in London in his everyday clothes which was quite a piece of *lèse majesté*. But Shaw took the ground he was there on business and he went in his business clothes, which were rather a peculiar sort of loosely spun tweed of a color bright enough to match what was in those days a virulent red beard. In one theatre he was starting down the aisle and the usher, seeing this remarkable figure, ran down and said, "Excuse me, you can't sit in that seat in that coat." So he got up and said, "Oh, very well, I'll take my coat off." I have forgotten his marriage. He was a very poor man and he confessed he not only had the good sense to fall in love with his wife but he had also the good sense to fall in love with somebody very comfortably off with this

world's goods. They are today an extremely happy couple, a kind of Darby and Joan. I think it is a most miraculous thing in these days, when so many celebrities all over the world gain great notoriety through their marital relations or lack of marital relations, that Bernard Shaw should have achieved his seventy-fourth year without one tiny breath of scandal ever being mentioned even by his bitterest enemies. That quality goes right through his work. We need hoist on our banner no other words except George Bernard Shaw (we could do the whole thing and put "wholesome, clean laughter" and all that kind of thing), but George Bernard Shaw's name is quite sufficient; so we have found it.

So we really finish Shaw's sketch and we leave him writing plays, happily married and very comfortably off. Of course he is a rich man. He would be a rich man, gentlemen, with the stuff I have sent across the water to him in the last six months. We shall have to make some other arrangement with him next year. This little poem came to my notice when we were in Edmonton:

Said Gene Tunney to George Bernard Shaw,  
 "The Pen is Mightier than the jaw,"  
 Said George Bernard Shaw to Gene Tunney,  
 "But both, I see, can make big money."

Shaw is a good business man, a wealthy man, and a great lover of boxing. I suppose he loves boxing because we all of us love some of the things we cannot do ourselves, and Shaw certainly does not box. But he is very fond of boxing and I believe he was one of the first callers upon Gene Tunney. In the conversation it is reported that Shaw talked about boxing and Tunney talked about Shakespere. I wish they had had a reporter or a microphone in that room.

Shaw is very business like. When I asked him whether he would prefer me to send him his fees direct or through the organization which already existed by means of the Theatre Guild in New York, he said without a moment's hesitation, "Direct; you will save American exchange."

Well, besides boxing, Shaw, as you know, is very fond of swimming. I don't know how often the press all over

the world when wanting to fill up some space has sent to get pictures of Shaw swimming, the breast stroke, floating, standing on a raft, drying, half dry, dry. When I got back from Canada last June I got up early next morning and went down into the swimming pool. The dark green pool was very still and I felt I was the first person to break its surface that morning. In my sleepy condition I looked around and I saw what I thought I had left behind five or six weeks before in the Straits of Belle Isle, a small ice-berg. Well, not trusting my sight at such an early hour, I rubbed my eyes, looked again and found it was George Bernard Shaw floating with his white beard sticking out of the water. What is it that makes a man in his seventy-fourth year able to take his daily morning dip, walk half a mile and half a mile back? It is something exceptional. I think it is mental serenity of outlook. I suppose nobody has fought more battles in his life than George Bernard Shaw but I have never heard George Bernard Shaw lose his temper. He may often have pretended. In fact what he makes Caesar say in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, "What have I to do with resentment," is typical. And I feel Shaw is the most serene young old man living in the world today. You know he doesn't wear any lining to his coat because he thinks it nice that the winds of Heaven should come in direct contact with George Bernard Shaw. I think it is this mental outlook that really gives him his health and it is that mental outlook and his lack of resentment which enable him to always find the proper answer to every kind of question. Take the time when "Arms and the Man" was first produced years ago and Shaw was not the Shaw we know today and although the reception was a very brilliant reception, yet there was one man up in the gallery who said what he thought about it, which was most inimical. Now most people would have gone off blushing or gone off in anger; not Shaw. He looked up and said, "Sir, I quite agree with you, but after all, what are we two among so many?" There was one exception when he was very keen, as he always is, to cast his plays correctly and he wrote to an actress who had played "Candida" a few years ago and asked her to play it again. She wrote back again and said

she was very sorry, she had had a child since she played before who was now about two years old and she could not possibly leave the little boy. Most managers would take the view that there were just as many good fish in the sea and just as many actresses could play as well as she, but not Shaw. He wrote saying: "Madam, you have ruined my play, damn you, and I hope your child grows up to be an actor."

But, gentlemen, he could do other things than pay compliments so beautifully. He could administer criticism or he could administer snubs. A hostess in London had once engaged a violinist at vast expense to play for her at her very luxurious soirée and Shaw was one of her guests. She ran up to Shaw and said, "What do you think of Mr. So and So?" Shaw said, "Well, he reminds me of Paderewski." And there was a little pause. The hostess didn't know how to take it but finally she said, "Paderewski is not a violinist," and Shaw said, "Just so, just so."

But, gentlemen, he could do worse than that. He can really say what he wants to say. You remember Isadore Duncan, international dancer. It is true that she once had the audacity to write to Mr. Shaw in the following terms: "Dear Mr. Shaw, you have the most magnificent brain in the world today. I, as you know, am reputed to have the most magnificent physique"—and then she went on to propose for the sake of posterity what we might call a eugenic alliance. And Bernard Shaw wrote back promptly: "Dear Madam, I am afraid I cannot accept your very kind offer. As you know, heredity is not yet completely within human control, and think what a terrible thing it would be for posterity if our children had your brain and my body!" Gentlemen, I feel we are getting very light-headed and I did not realize I was speaking over the radio. We must now become serious and discuss some academic questions like: "Is Shaw conceited?" That is a good one, except that it always is such an argumentive topic of conversation and it is only a matter of opinion, but I would say, "No." Shaw is one of the least conceited men in the sense of being vain, by which I mean objectionable. I don't know whether you have

seen him on the movietone. If so you will at once see the delightful twinkle in his eyes, which always accompanies his most brilliant utterances.

He never, like Oscar Wilde, would pose his sentences and frame his sentences knowing they were likely to be handed down to posterity. He just makes you feel at home and talks in a most delightful way. And he shows more unselfishness in asking about the doings and affairs of the person to whom he is speaking. For instance he asked me if I would be a ruined man if this Canadian Transcontinental subsidiary failed and he said, "well you had better bring me your copy of the Intelligent Woman and I will write in it and then you will at any rate have thirty pounds." So I was around there the very next morning with the book. Not that I had any claim on him but I felt one might as well lay in a copy which would be marketable in any market at any time and keep appreciating as the years went on. A recent visitor in town removed the photograph of Bernard Shaw from one of our front of house frames. I wrote a letter to the paper because I didn't know who else to write to, and suggested if the perpetrator had been brave enough to do that, why wasn't he also brave enough to take the frame. I explained he had taken the trouble to unscrew the four bolts to get the picture unsigned, whereas by writing to Mr. Shaw he would likely get the picture back or maybe a letter, which could always sell in any market for about \$100. Early in life Shaw came to the conclusion that he had got to sell a commodity to the public and the commodity, so-called George Bernard Shaw, he has sold. Genius in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred never receives its reward during the possessor's lifetime and when its possessor asks for bread he is usually given a stone. "The remedy for this," said Mr. Shaw, "is steady self-advertisement. Accordingly I have advertised myself so successfully that even now in middle age I am already as legendary as the Flying Dutchman." It is your fault and mine that we will not let Shaw alone. When he goes for a holiday to the South of France, I don't believe he takes the trouble to solemnly ring up and make appointments with the photographers to come and see him

floating. Shaw has been so successful as a publicity man that we won't let him alone and his least word is put down in black and white. I suppose he is expected to say something rather outrageous, rather conceited, and being a very obliging man, he does what the people want him to do. But if there is one thing that Shaw does like it is being called respectable. If you say he has changed he says he is the same as he always was and holds exactly the same views. If anybody has changed, he says, it is ourselves who have had the good sense to come to his way of thinking. He objects because he says it affects his popularity. Somebody asked him whether the sale of his printed plays was not colossal and he said "Oh no, it is terrible. I am already treated as a classic and nobody reads me and I am treated like an Archbishop." So I think the way to put it in a nutshell is this, that whereas before Shaw's beard was red-hot with rage, now it is white-hot with fury.

What I am doing, or trying to do here, is to bring Shaw to all people. Bernard Shaw exhibits two of the qualities which I suppose all members of the British Empire feel are peculiarly their own. I refer to the qualities of a sense of fair play and a sense of humor, and therefore I feel that Bernard Shaw would fit in very well with a Canadian tour. The sense of fair play comes out in all his plays; it is clearest in "John Bull's other Island." It is a political play. It is a bit of everything, but the great point in the history of that play is that the English liked it because it had a hit at the Irish and the Irish liked it even better because it had such a hit at the English; the Protestants liked it because it had a hit at the Catholics and the Catholics loved it because it hit at the Protestants; the Liberals loved it because it hit at the Conservatives and the Conservatives loved it because it laid the Liberals low. It is absolutely a fifty-fifty piece. I suppose Shaw has some personal feelings of his own, but it is very hard to find where they are he is so scrupulously fair, and he has said that in writing his plays he is the character; he is sitting for the portion of that speech to the best of that character's ability. Shaw makes a point of giving every character full measure from that character's point of view. And that is what I call Bernard Shaw's sense of fair play.

That reminds me of a topic which I found in a book, in a chapter called "Bernard Shaw and the war," I, like you, was a bit wearied hearing about George Bernard Shaw in the war. The author's point was this: after having digs at the English for thirty years, the Germans thought Shaw would be an excellent mouthpiece or earpiece for their point of view and so they said things into Shaw's ear. Well, Bernard Shaw kept his ear open, but, according to this book, what he heard went to the British. Then for months, if not years, he was an extremely unofficial but extremely valuable secret service agent, close in touch with the British Foreign Office. Now that is the sort of case in which Shaw would say, "Now what have I to do with resentment, thou foolish Egyptian?" because from the point of view of people who know and the odor of what Shaw was supposed to do during the war, he hasn't even taken the trouble to dispute in the least the hostile criticism of his supposed attitude. I was very glad indeed to find this out for myself and I pass it on to you.

There is one thing I must say and that is why we are so glad to be in Toronto. Of course there are thousands of reasons but this is one: We are glad because so far our record week and our record night lies outside Canadian soil. This is a purely Canadian feature; the scenery is built with Canadian wood; and the posters are made of good Canadian pulp; I am keen to bring the week's record from Seattle and the night's record from Spokane back to Canadian soil and I know it is already assured. I believe that Toronto is going to wipe Seattle right off the map.