

BERNARD SHAW AND HIS BIRTHDAYS

MARJORY BANWELL

SHAW reached his eighty-ninth birthday last July. On that occasion he seems to have said very little. "Work as usual" were the only words I saw quoted. The reporter had to fall back upon utterances of the previous year. The gist of these was, "Leave me alone," which, in anyone else, would be called rude.

The late Lord Tweedsmuir once remarked, "Bernard Shaw has been very much over-praised," meaning perhaps that we talk altogether too much about him. Nevertheless, we shall continue to talk about him. He is a unique character, as well as a genius. Therefore, he interests us—still interests us, even at eighty-nine years of age.

This unusual man had, it seems, unusual parents. George Carr Shar, his father, was, Shaw tells us, a confirmed drunkard. Late in life he reformed. Permanent reformation of this kind occurs rarely, and Mr. Carr Shaw must have had a strength of character for which nobody seems to give him credit. Mrs. Carr Shaw, Shaw's mother, appears to have been a woman of great ability and depth of character. Disillusioned she was, but not for her mere dull acquiescence in disillusionment. She was not an average nineteenth century female. She set out to mend the family fortunes, and succeeded. Shaw says, "I wrote my five hundred words a day, and made a man of myself (at my mother's expense) instead of a slave." Certainly this admirable lady, by her fortitude and her achievements, earned—although she does not seem to have won in any great degree—the admiration and gratitude of her son. Hesketh Pearson says of her in his book "G.B.S." that it is doubtful if she ever loved anyone,—a pretty sweeping statement, which he might find it hard to justify. Pearson did not meet Shaw until the year 1913, the year of Mrs. Carr Shaw's death. How much, then, can he know about her?

Shaw himself speaks of "a devil of a childhood." A healthy childhood, spent in a region as beautiful as any in the world, having servants provided to attend to his physical needs and governess to teach him—"Not bad!" we would say (most of us)—"not bad at all!" If Shaw's complaint is that he saw little

of his parents, neither did other boys of the Carr Shaw class, in the Ireland of those days or in the England of those days either. Sometimes that may be a good thing. It is possible for parents and children to be together too much.

It can be gathered that Shaw grew up to be a kindly, genial, charming man. He endured years and years of poverty, but his abundant vitality carried him triumphantly through them—that and much patience and perseverance. His own experience of poverty no doubt bred in him his consistent friendliness to obscure struggling writers. The charming preface to *Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* by the poet W. H. Davies proves Shaw's warmth of heart. His diligence as a St. Pancras vestryman and his attitude on various matters with which he had to deal in that capacity show his sympathy with the hard lot of the inarticulate masses.

This is the real Shaw, we like to think, and not the inconoclast, so recklessly censorious with his tongue and pen.

His recklessness is perhaps natural, for Shaw is an Irishman, and shares that amiable weakness of his fellow-countrymen—the love of astonishing people; only, with Shaw, to astonish is not enough. He must shock. Imagine him, on dozens, scores of occasions saying gleefully to himself, as he penned some outrageous assertion, "Now this will shock somebody!"

This leads to the question, Does Shaw ever pose? Does his mighty intellect ever permit his stooping to pose? It is certainly difficult to believe him invariably sincere in his attitude—for instance, his attitude towards Oscar Wilde, and towards the "intolerance" of British matrons on the subject of Sylvia Pankhurst. Again, can he have meant exactly what he said of W. E. Henley;—that Henley had "nothing important to express"? Nothing important to express! The man who wrote *Innuitus*!

Shaw has never retracted this remark, so, presumably, he did mean it. Nor did he ever retract his notorious assertion concerning Shakespeare, ". . . no eminent writer . . . whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespeare when I measure my mind against his." Well, why should he measure his mind against Shakespeare's? Why should he wish to? Comparisons are odious. If this comparison had to be made, Shaw would have done better to leave the making of it to someone else.

There were several contemporary writers of genius whose feelings became and remained cool to Shaw—Rudyard Kipling, Henry Arthun Jones and Arnold Bennett; and Shaw does not seem altogether comfortable in his mind on the matter. When

such coolness has a rational foundation, even Shaw cannot change it back to warmth by a mere slap on the back and a "there, there."

His sympathetic advice to young people somehow smacks more of a desire to hinder parents in their efforts to guide their offspring aright than to help the young people themselves. It is a pity that he never became a father. He ought to have had a whole houseful of children, including three or four daughters, or better still, half a dozen daughters, who would, on occasion, sit on his knee and pinch his ear or pull his beard, laughing irreverently, and not even pretending to listen, when he declaims. He might then have been restrained from some of his excesses in impishness, might even have been impelled occasionally to say "I was wrong" or "I was mistaken." How refreshing it would be if there were on record one instance of such an admission!

In three months Shaw will be ninety. It will be delightful if, on that birthday, he lets the reporters crowd round and interview him—delightful if he decides at last to be the gentle, genial old man. Old people, as a rule, love to have young people round them; and if Shaw, on that occasion, will sit back and be natural and let the eager young reporters do the talking, he can have as happy a birthday as any of the many he has had; and, what is more, succeed once again in astonishing us all very thoroughly.