

## 'Bloody likely', The War and Common Sense. Bernard Shaw in 1914.

By Ed Mulhall

By the winter of 1913 George Bernard Shaw was at the height of his creative powers as a dramatist and already a major figure in political debate and activism in London and internationally. During 1913 he had appeared on platforms supporting suffrage, Irish Home Rule (with Roger Casement) and the Dublin Lockout workers (with James Connolly); he had founded the political magazine *The New Statesman* with Sydney and Beatrice Webb and had begun to focus in his journalism on the dangers of international conflict - without, as he admitted, much impact. He had warned against the likely prospect of a bloody war with two major pieces for daily papers: "Armaments and Conscription A Triple Alliance against War" for *The Daily Chronicle* in March 1913 and "The Peace of Europe and How to Attain it" for *The Daily News* on 1st January 1914.<sup>1</sup>

While his personal life may have been in turmoil during the year, with the death of his mother in February and an infatuation with the actress Mrs Patrick Campbell, he was full of dramatic inspiration. In September, for the first time, he discussed writing a play about Joan of Arc and a couple of weeks later he heard the story that would form the basis of Captain Shotover in "Heartbreak House". His play "The Philanderer" opened in New York and London saw premieres of "Androcles and the Lion" and "Great Catherine" and a revival of "The Doctor's Dilemma". But the most significant first night was in Vienna on October 16<sup>th</sup> with "Pygmalion" which was to become Shaw's most successful play and which, later, was adapted as the musical "My Fair Lady".<sup>2</sup>

Shaw's aim for 1914 was to produce the play under his supervision in England with Mrs Patrick Campbell as Eliza Doolittle and thereby achieve, what had eluded him so far - a West End hit. But what he did not then know was that by the year's end, his play would have been a West End sensation but with a much truncated run and he himself would have become a major figure of political controversy. At the heart of these events was the outbreak of the First World War and it is particularly relevant to note that in the audience for that first acclaimed performance of "Pygmalion" in the Hofburg Theatre in Vienna in October 1913 was Archduke Francis Ferdinand.<sup>3</sup>

Following its production in Vienna, "Pygmalion" also ran in Berlin before Shaw began rehearsing the play in February 1914 at Herbert Tree's His Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket, one of the major West End theatres. Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who was himself to play Henry Higgins, was one of the last of the great Victorian actor managers and used to being the central focus of all his productions. Playing the role of Eliza Doolittle was Mrs Patrick Campbell - herself a notable personality on the British stage of that era, who often produced plays with her own company. Shaw had originally read the play to her when he finished it in June 1912 and

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<sup>1</sup> Reproduced in Bernard Shaw, *What I Really Wrote About the War*, London, 1930, pp1-22.

<sup>2</sup> Dates from A.M. Gibbs, *A Bernard Shaw Chronology*, New York, 2001, see biographies for further details with biography detail mainly from Holroyd, 1988 and Weintraub, 1973 unless otherwise stated.

<sup>3</sup> The Times 17th October 1913

during the reading 'fell head over heels in love with her'.<sup>4</sup> There followed a year of flirtatious visits and passionate correspondence (including lovelorn sonnets<sup>5</sup>) which culminated in Campbell fleeing from a Shaw intent on consummation of the relationship in Kent in August of 1913.

Shaw wrote to her having discovered she had left ahead of a proposed rendezvous "infamous, vile, heartless, frivolous, wicked woman! Liar! lying lips, lying eyes, lying hands, promise breaker, cheat, confidence-trickster!"<sup>6</sup> Her reply was more restrained: "you are trying to break my heart with your letters. What other thing was there for me to do? I had to behave like a man - and a gentleman - hadn't I?" <sup>7</sup>The balloon now burst, their relationship remained friendly but without the same intensity - to the relief of Shaw's wife Charlotte, who, though accustomed to his romantic enthusiasms, had been concerned about this one. Campbell was to marry George Cornwallis-West, whom she began seeing at this time, once he got his divorce from Jennie Churchill, mother of Winston.

Stella, Mrs Patrick Campbell, was an unlikely Eliza Doolittle, the 18 year old flower-girl. She was 49, a grandmother and used to playing the more serious classical English theatre roles. Age was a problem, Shaw advised her "Good god you are forty years too old, sit still and it is not so noticeable."<sup>8</sup> But she had also great difficulty with the cockney accent despite the playwright's persistent coaching. Henry Tree at 62 was used to having his own way. He wanted a sumptuous ball scene to add to the spectacle and also begged Shaw to allow his character to take snuff, adopt a limp or vault onto the piano but more particularly to be more a lovable presence. Shaw resisted all particularly the latter. "I say Tree", he is reported as saying, "must you be so damned 'Tree-acly?" The rehearsals were stormy affairs with Shaw regularly abandoning them in exasperation. As one observer, his business manager, remarked to Tree: "You know Guv'nor, if you put a cat, a dog and a monkey in a sack together, what can you expect but ructions...?"<sup>9</sup>

The tension ran all the way to opening night not helped by Stella's disappearance in the final week of rehearsals to marry Cornwallis-West. Shaw wrote 'Final Orders' to her on the day of the performance, April 11th. He was sending one to Tree as well: "which will pull him together if it doesn't kill him." To Stella, he detailed a number of dramatic points: "I give up in despair that note of terror in the first scene which collects the crowds and suddenly shows the audience that there is a play there and a human soul there, and a social problem there, and a formidable capacity for feeling in the trivial giggler of the comic passages. But until you get it I shall never admit that you can play Eliza, or play Shaw."<sup>10</sup> But he ended with some hope,

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw, Volume 2, The Pursuit of Power 1898- 1918*, London, 1988 p 297

<sup>5</sup> "oh dearest Danger, I must love thee less Or plunge into a devil of a mess" Shaw to Stella Campbell 22n April 1914 in in Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell: Their Correspondence*, edited by Alan Dent, London, 1952 p110

<sup>6</sup> Shaw to Stella Campbell, 12th August 1914, Dent, London, 1952, p 141

<sup>7</sup> Stella Campbell to Shaw, 13th August 1913, Dent, 1952 p 142

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Weintraud, *Bernard Shaw 1914-1918, Journey to Heartbreak*, London, p4

<sup>9</sup> Weintraud,, London, 1973 p 4.

<sup>10</sup> Shaw to Stella Campbell, 11th November 1914, Dent, 1952, p 161

likening themselves to generals setting out for battle, he with strategy, she with courage: "I say God save me for having to fall back on that resource, though if it must come to that it must. I don't like fighting. I like conquering. You think you like fighting; and now you must succeed, sword in hand. You have left yourself poorly provided with ideas and expedients; and you must make up for them by dash and brilliance and resolution. And so Avanti!"<sup>11</sup> He need not have worried for within the play was an audacious moment that was to seal its notoriety. There was a build-up in the press in advance about the use of a word not common on the stage and pressure on Shaw to change it. As the morning *Daily Sketch* anticipated in a headline: "Tonight's Pygmalion in which Mrs Patrick Campbell is expected to cause the biggest theatrical sensation for many years." She - the story told - was to use a forbidden word "certainly not used in decent society."<sup>12</sup>

Shaw wrote to his wife Charlotte who headed for America to avoid Mrs Patrick Campbell debut in her husband's play:

"The House was of course crammed; and the people behaved very well. My protests had been read and though there was plenty of laughing it was kept in hand and the play listened to practically without serious interruption until the ends of the acts, when the applause was serious and sustained. But in the third act the effort to keep quiet was less successful; and when 'Not bloody likely' came, the performance was nearly wrecked. They laughed themselves into utter abandonment and disorder that it was really doubtful for some time whether they could recover themselves and let the play go on. I had told Tree after the first act, which went smoothly & well that the play was safe until the end of the third act. He was frightfully pleased and excited. In the second act Miss Oliffe played very well & Doolittle was a colossal success. In the third act Mrs Campbell played superbly and ravished the house almost to delirium. Tree's farcical acting was very funny here; and my idea of making him stumble over the fire irons had a success worthy of it.

For the last two acts I writhed in hell. The raving absurdity of Tree's acting was beyond description. He was like nothing human; and he wallowed ecstatically in his own impossibility, convinced he was having the success of his life. He made every conceivable and practical mistake. He did the exact opposite of everything I had warned him to do, not intentionally, but by sheer force of an irresistible genius for bad acting & erroneousness. Mrs Campbell, on the other hand, did (equally by genius for the opposite qualities) practically everything I told her to do. She was magnificent in the fourth act, and carried it over Tree's head, which by the way she nearly knocked off with her second slipper shot. She could not carry off the fifth act in the same way; but she let him rave and fired broadside after broadside with such effect that the scene did not hang fire, though the contrast between her acting and the frantic proceedings of her colleague was staggering. I had particularly coached him at the last rehearsal in the concluding lines, making him occupy himself affectionately with his mother, & throw Eliza the commission to buy the ham & c over his shoulder. The last thing I saw as I left the house was Higgins shoving his mother rudely out of the way and wooing Eliza with appeals to buy a ham for his lonely home like a bereaved Romeo. I went straight home to bed and read Shakespeare for an hour before going to sleep to settle myself down. I refused supper & dressing room visits & congratulations (including the privilege of kissing the leading lady): but to make up for this moroseness I took the newly wedded pair down here to Ayot & gave them lunch and tea today."<sup>13</sup>

That last point was Charlotte's first indication that her once perceived rival was now married again.

"Pygmalion" played to packed houses and the controversy over that word raged in the press. Shaw stayed away as, according to reports, Tree continued to improve his play. He did go in May with Charlotte when she returned from America and the play ran until the end of July.

The summer of 1914 saw international tension increase and move to crisis following the assassination of Franz Ferdinand on 28th June. In the days after the assassination, Shaw with W.B. Yeats, G.K. Chesterton, Rupert Brook and a host of other notable guests attended a lavish 'cinema supper' at the Savoy, organised and

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<sup>11</sup> Dent, 1952, p 162

<sup>12</sup> A M Gibbs, *Bernard Shaw A Life*, London, 2004, p 331, see Telegraph review with photo here: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/10757120/Pygmalion-His-Majestys-Theatre-1914-review.html>

<sup>13</sup> Shaw to Charlotte Shaw 19th April 1914 in Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters Vol. 3 1911-1923*, edited by Dan H Laurence, New York, 1985, p 228.

filmed for J M Barrie. Amongst the guests - even in those tense times - was the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. (Shaw and Chesterton were to return to play as Cowboys for Barrie's camera the following day of which a bizarre photograph remains<sup>14</sup>)

Shaw, who had foreseen the inevitable and deliberate move to conflict, had even discussed his proposals for avoiding it with the German Ambassador Prince Lichnowsky to be told to leave such proposals to the able professional diplomats like Sir Edward Grey, who "was the best friend Germany had in the world and he would not be party to any action that implied the slightest mistrust of him." At the same lunch at the ambassador's residence Charlotte had "done her best to shake the belief of her hostess that the danger of revolt in Ireland made it impossible for England to go to war."<sup>15</sup>

The Shaws were in a hotel in Devonshire when they first heard of the declaration of war on August. 4th. He immediately wired his German friend and translator Siegfried Trebitsch who had been responsible for the premieres of "Pygmalion" in Austria and Germany: "what a hideous situation civilisation tearing itself to pieces instead of standing solid against the common enemy in the east you and I at war can absurdity go further my friendliest wishes go with you under all circumstances."<sup>16</sup> Trebitsch wouldn't receive the wire until January.

The Shaws continued on to Torquay where they would stay for the next three months. Shaw was now totally consumed with writing about the war. He was sent all the newspapers from London and sought all the background material that could be mustered including the diplomatic papers of the major powers released to justify their position; the white books of Germany and England; the yellow book of France; the red of Austria-Hungary; the orange of Russia etc. Working every morning in the roof garden of the Hydro Hotel, Shaw set about writing a major analytic piece on the war but also writing other shorter articles and letters in response to events and requests. "I do not hold my tongue easily" he said and it is estimated that he wrote over fifty thousand words on the War in those months.<sup>17</sup>

His first statement on the war, drafted on August 6th and published in *The New Statesman* of the 8<sup>th</sup>, set out his position: "We shall have to die and pay and suffer with the grim knowledge that we are sacrificing ourselves in an insane cause, and that only by putting up a particularly good fight can we bring ourselves out of it with credit...for the present time there is only one thing to be done besides fighting...to set to work immediately to draft the inevitable Treaty of Peace which we must all sign when we have had our bellyful of murder and destruction." <sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://thebioscope.net/2008/05/30/pen-and-pictures-no-3-jm-barrie/> and also :<http://www.tcd.ie/irishfilm/showfilm.php?fid=36890>

<sup>15</sup> Weintraub,1973, p 12.

<sup>16</sup> Shaw to Siegfried Trebitsch 4th August 1914, Letters, V3 p 243

<sup>17</sup> Holroyd,1988 p 347.

<sup>18</sup> Holroyd,1988, p 347

He wrote a number of pieces in those early weeks suggesting in *The New Statesman* that churches all over Europe should close their door until the end of the war. In *The Daily News* he laid responsibility for the war evenly between the British “commercial adventurers” and the German “overweening militarists” and in *The Sunday Review* challenged the view that the violation of Belgian neutrality was the cause of war, seeing it instead as the inevitable consequence of the diplomatic power games on both sides. He took up the case of soldiers’ pay and the allowances for the families left behind. As the fighting began in earnest he met in Torquay many Belgian refugees from the fighting which fuelled his scepticism about the newspaper reports of German atrocities while also bringing the reality of the war into closer focus. His perceived anti-war position began to make it difficult to get pieces published. C. P. Scott, in *The Manchester Guardian*, refused a piece as it was against the atmosphere of the time while in September, Shaw remained in Torquay when a selection of the great literary men of the day were gathered by the Government at a conference in Wellington House to discuss how they might help the propaganda effort. (Amongst those assembled were HG Wells, J M Barrie, Thomas Hardy, Arthur Conan Doyle, GK Chesterton, John Galsworthy, Ford Maddox Ford and Rupert Kipling.) As he prepared his major piece to be published by *The New Statesman* Shaw was struggling with its owners, the Webbs, and the editor, Clifford Sharp, to retain editorial control.

The stage had been set for his major piece by his newspaper articles and in late September Shaw gave an interview to an Irish American journalist Mary Boyle O'Reilly previewing some of his analysis. (Lloyd George had recommended she talk to him as "the cleverest man in England is an Irishman".<sup>19</sup>) In the interview he explained that he viewed both sides as being responsible for the conflict; he equated the English diplomatic and officer caste with Prussian Junkerdom (the German aristocratic and military officer class) and suggested ... "In both armies, the soldiers should shoot their officers and go home, the agriculturalist to his land and the townsman to his painting and glazing...we always learn from war that we never learn from war." It would be a number of weeks before the interview made news in the US under the headline ' "Shoot your Officers and Go Home!" says Shaw'.<sup>20</sup> Shaw had also written a letter for Belgium relief to the Belgian scholar and fund raiser Charles Sarolea in late September, intended for publication in November. It concluded: "Please do anything you can to make your countrymen understand that our obligation to Belgium is fully realised by many English people who have no means of making their feelings in the matter known, and that the delay in coming to her aid was not the fault of the people, but the diplomatists and party politicians who wished to conceal their intention of going to war until the actual outbreak of hostilities made retreat impossible. This is why we always go to war without being prepared for war. Had the matter been in the hands of the British people, our expeditionary force would have reached Liege before the Germans."<sup>21</sup> In October with his large piece on the war on the way to the printers he assured *The New Statesman* editor Clifford Sharp , who had been alarmed by its anti-war positioning and may have been demurring about publication; "I have written a fierce piece of rhetoric about Belgium for *The Daily Telegraph's* 'King Albert's book', but as the moral of it is that if we leave an inch of Belgian soil in German soil we are beaten or else blackly dishonoured, it will not be unpopular, and if it gets out first, which I hope it will, will prevent

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<sup>19</sup> Weintraub, 1973 p 43

<sup>20</sup> San Francisco Chronicle 2nd November 1914.

<sup>21</sup> Shaw to Charles Sarolea 23rd September 1914, Letters v3 p 250

people from beginning the Supplement under the hostile impression that I am a Back Down & stop the War person." <sup>22</sup>

The piece and Shaw's growing anti-war reputation were too hot for *The Telegraph* which rejected the article. But Shaw, at the urging of his Belgian contacts, adapted the argument in it to a much more significant purpose: an 'Open Letter to the President of the United States of America'. This was published in *The Nation* on November 7<sup>th</sup> and in *The New York Times* the following week. His request to Wilson was straightforward: "I petition you to invite the Neutral Powers to confer with the United States of America for the purpose of requesting Britain, France and Germany to withdraw from the soil of Belgium and fight out their quarrel on their own territories." He was not asking the United States to take sides: "But I may plead for a perfectly innocent neutral state, the state of Belgium, which is being ravaged in a horrible manner by the belligerents. Her surviving population is flying into all the neighbouring countries to escape from the incessant hail of shrapnel and howitzer shell from British cannon, French cannon and most tragic of all, Belgian cannon. The Belgian army is being forced to devastate its own country in its own defence." As for Britain, "the technical correctness of our diplomatic position, as to Belgium, may be unimpeachable; but as the effect of our shells on Belgium is precisely the same as that of the German shells, and as by fighting on Belgian soil we are doing her exactly the same injury we should have done her if the violation of her neutrality had been initiated by us instead of by Germany, we could not decently refuse to fall in with a general evacuation." He argued: "Whatever else the war, and its horrors may have done or not done, you will agree with me that it has made an end of the dreams of military and naval steam-rolling in which the whole wretched business began. At a cost which the conquest of a whole continent would hardly justify, these terrible armaments and the heroic hosts which wield them push one another a few miles back and forward in a month and take and retake some miserable village three times over in less than a week." His appeal ended by displaying why America matters: "Here, in England and in France, men are going to the front every day; their women and children are all within earshot and no man is hard-hearted enough to let them hear the worst of what is going on in Belgium now...I am thinking of the honest Belgians, whom I have seen nursing their wounds and whom) I recognise at a glance as plain men, innocent of all warlike intentions, trusting to the wisdom and honesty of the rulers and diplomatists who have betrayed them, taken from their farms and businesses to destroy and be destroyed for no good purpose that might have not have been achieved better and sooner by neighbourly means. I am thinking of the authentic news that no papers dare publish, not of the lies they all publish to divert your attention from the truth. In America these things can be said without driving American mothers and wives mad: here we have to set our teeth and go forward. We cannot be just: we cannot see beyond the range of our guns. The roar of the shrapnel deafens us; the black smoke of the howitzer blinds us; and what these do to our bodily senses our passions do to our imaginations. For justice, we must do as the medieval cities did; call in a stranger. You are not altogether that to us; but you can look at us all impartially. And you are the spokesman of Western Democracy. That is why I appeal to you."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Shaw to Clifford Sharp, 21st October 1914, Letters, v3 p 257

<sup>23</sup> Open Letter to the President of the United States of American Nation 7th November 1914, reprinted in Shaw, 1930 pp127-133

The week this piece was published in America and as the British 1st and 7th divisions were suffering massive casualties near Ypres, *The New Statesman* (14 November 1914) contained an 80-page supplement by George Bernard Shaw "Common Sense about the War". Modelled on the work of Thomas Paine, who was the author of a major pamphlet called *Commonsense* as well as the *Rights of Man*<sup>24</sup>, the piece is a very detailed analysis of the causes of the war and its potential impact. He came he said to speak common sense confessing his bias:

"I do not hold my tongue easily; and my inborn dramatic faculty and professional habit as a playwright prevent me from taking a one-sided view when the most probable result of taking a many sided one is prompt lynching. Besides, until Home Rule emerges from its present suspended animation, I shall retain my Irish capacity for criticizing England with something of the detachment of a foreigner, and perhaps with a certain slightly malicious taste for taking the conceit out of her. Lord Kitchener made a mistake the other day in rebuking the Irish volunteers for not rallying faster to the defence of "their country." They do not regard it as their country yet. He should have asked them to come forward as usual and help poor England in a stiff fight. Then it would have been all right."

He sees the war not as one which has welded Governments and peoples into complete and sympathetic solidarity against a common enemy and sees the aristocratic military elite in Prussia mirrored at home:

"I see the people of England united in a fierce detestation and defiance of the views and acts of Prussian Junkerism. And I see the German people stirred to the depths by a similar antipathy to English Junkerism, and angered by the apparent treachery and duplicity of the attack made on them by us in their extremist peril from France and Russia. I see both nations duped, but alas! not quite unwillingly, by their Junkers and Militarists into wreaking one another the wrath they have spend in destroying Junkerism and Militarism in their own country. And I see the Junkers and Militarists of England and Germany jumping at the chance they have longed for in vain for many years of smashing one another and establishing their own oligarchy as the dominant military power in the world. No doubt the heroic remedy for this tragic misunderstanding is that both armies should shoot their officers and go home to gather in their harvest and make a revolution in the towns; and though this is not at present a practicable solution, it must be frankly mentioned, because something like it is always a possibility in a defeated conscript army if its commanders push in beyond human endurance when its eyes are opening to the fact that in murdering its neighbours it is biting off its nose to vex its face, besides riveting the intolerable yoke of militarism and Junkerism more tightly on its own neck."

His analysis of the causes and character of the war is followed by his prognosis, 7 points which he summarises at the end:

1. The war should be pushed vigorously, not with a view to a final crushing of the German army between the Anglo French combination and the Russian millions, but to the establishment of a decisive military superiority by the Anglo French combination alone. A victory unattainable without Russian aid would be a defeat for western European liberalism. Germany would be beaten not by us but by a military autocracy worse than her own.
2. We cannot smash or disable Germany, however completely we defeat her, because we can do that only by killing her women; and it is trifling to pretend we are capable of any such villainy... We and France have to live with Germany after the war and the sooner we make our mind up to do it generously, the better.
3. War, as a school of character and a nurse of virtue, must be formally shut up and discharged by all the belligerents when this war is over.
4. Neither England nor Germany must claim any moral superiority in the negotiations. Both were engaged for years in a race for armaments. Both indulged and still indulge in literary and oratorical provocation. Both claimed to be an "imperial race" ruling other races by divine right. Both showed high social and political consideration to parties and individuals who openly said the war had to come. Both formed alliances to reinforce them for that war.
5. Militarism must not be treated as a disease peculiar to Prussia. It is rampant in England; and in France it has led to the assassination of her greatest statesman. If the upshot of the war is to be regarded and acted

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<sup>24</sup> Holyroyd, 1988. p354. Paine's 1776 pro-independence monograph 'Common Sense' was credited to 'An Englishman' and Shaw used a similar device here.

upon simply as a defeat of German Militarism by Anglo-French militarism, then the war will not only have wrought its own immediate evils of destruction and demoralisation, but will extinguish the last hope that we have risen above the "dragons of the prime that tare each other in their slime."

6. It has to be admitted on our side that as to the conduct of the war there is no trustworthy evidence that the Germans have committed any worse or other atrocities than those which are admitted to be inevitable in war or accepted as part of military usage by the Allies. By making examples of towns and seizing irresponsible citizens as hostages and shooting them for the acts of armed civilians over whom they could exercise no possible control, the Germans have certainly pushed these usages to the point of Terrorism which is hardly distinguishable from deliberate murder of non-combatants; but the Allies have not renounced such usages, nor ceased to employ them ruthlessly in their dealing with the hill tribes and fellaheen and Arabs with whom they themselves have to deal (to say nothing of the notorious terrorism of the Russian government), they cannot claim superior humanity.
7. To sum up, we must remember that if this war does not make an end of war in the west, our allies of today may be our enemies of tomorrow as they are of yesterday, and our enemies of today our allies of tomorrow as they are of yesterday; so that if we aim merely at a fresh balance of military power, we are as likely as not to negotiate our own destruction. We must use the war to give the *coup de grace* to medieval diplomacy, medieval autocracy, and anarchic export of capital, and make its conclusion convince the world that Democracy is invincible, and Militarism a rusty sword that breaks in the hand. We must free our soldiers, and give them homes worth fighting for. And we must, as the old phrase goes, discard the filthy rags of our righteousness, and fight like men with everything, even a good name, to win, inspiring, and encouraging ourselves with definite noble purposes (abstract nobility butters no parsnips) to face whatever may be the price of proving that war cannot conquer us, and that he who dares not appeal to our conscience has nothing to hope from our terrors." <sup>25</sup>

The publication of "Common Sense" by *The New Statesman* was followed by its serialisation in *The New York Times* and it created a storm of protest. As Holroyd summed it up: "Libraries and bookshops removed his work from their shelves, newspapers instructed readers to boycott his plays. The editor of *The Clarion*, Robert Clarion, described his article as 'the meanest act of treachery ever perpetrated by an alien enemy residing in generous and long suffering England.' At the Royal Naval Division the Prime Minister's son, Bevis Asquith, announced that he 'ought to be shot'. And former President Theodore Roosevelt called him a 'blue rumped ape' and lumped him with the 'unhung traitor Keir Hardie and a 'venomous herd of socialists and physically timid creatures'." <sup>26</sup> Writers whom Shaw admired came out to criticise him. Arnold Bennett wrote a detailed riposte in *The New York Times*, praising the courage of the writer but saying his analysis was historically inexact almost to a scandal and that it was not a time for "disingenuous, dialectical bravura." Henry James said he couldn't finish the piece because of its 'horrible flippancy... a man deliberately descending into the arena in this present crisis and playing the clown." H G Wells, a friend of Shaw's, was to write that he was "at present ...an almost unendurable nuisance" and G K Chesterton told him "I think you are a great man and I think that your first misfortune was that you were born in a small epoch. But I think it is your last and worst misfortune that now at last the epoch is growing greater and you are not." There were questions in the House of Commons as to whether the pamphlet had been passed by the official censor and within a week of that the Government issued an order in council under its wartime powers to enforce the control of any publications likely to "cause disaffection to his Majesty or to interfere with the success of his Majesty's forces by land or sea...or prejudice the recruiting, training, discipline or administration of his Majesty's forces." As *The Daily Express* put it: "Will Mr. Keir Hardie Please Note, Also Mr. Bernard Shaw."

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<sup>25</sup> Common Sense about the War, a supplement to the New Statesmen of 14th November 1914 Reproduced in Shaw, 1930 pp 23-115. Full text here: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13635/13635-h/13635-h.htm>

<sup>26</sup> Holroyd, 1988 p 452

<sup>27</sup> Writers and newspaper quotes from Holroyd and Weintraub (p 355 and p 78)



As the storm against the "Common Sense" piece was building in late November Shaw also turned to the situation in Ireland and what he perceived as a dangerous anti-British pro-German view that was being used in the anti-recruitment rhetoric. He wired to George Russell on 26th November: "I want to write a strong letter urging the claims of the French Republic to Irish support so as to stop if possible all this silly pro-German slosh which is making mischief and doing no good. Am I the best person to do it? What does Plunkett think?" Russell replied that Horace Plunkett agreed with him that Shaw was the best man to do it and the letter appeared in *The Freeman's Journal* (November 30<sup>th</sup>). In the piece Shaw derived some of his authority from the fact that he is one of the "best abused men in England because I, an Irishman, criticised pretty candidly the manner in which British diplomatists played their hand against both the German diplomatists and the British nation." He argued that there should be common cause between the Irish and the French:

"If Fontenoy is to be fought over again will the Irish Brigade betray its old comrades, the French, for the sake of Prussia? We fought in France when she was a military tyranny, as dangerous to freedom as Potsdam is now. Are we going to fight against her now that she is a Republic and shares with America (whom she helped to her freedom) the honour of being the hope of Republicans all over the world...We must get rid of the tyranny of England from our minds now that at last the Act is passed that promises us an escape from her political tyranny. In this war she has only a corner share, with little to gain or lose. It is France that is holding the West against Potsdam and all that Potsdam means to western liberty; and it is French soil, on which some many Irishmen found a refuge from British tyranny, that is being drenched with French blood."

He had a particular message for the Irish press:

"I invite the Irish papers to write sedition as between England and Ireland until they are black in the face and red in the gills, if it amuses them; but as between the Irish and the French, as between the Irish cause and the cause of Western democracy, they must come not come down on side of the Turk and the Prussian military autocracy."

He signed off:

' with all possible apologies to the anti-Irish, and to the delightful Parliamentary Man from Shropshire, who, in khaki clad, sees more peril to England in the " Irish Volunteer" than in a thousand Zeppelins, or even the commonsense of yours truly, G. Bernard Shaw."<sup>28</sup>

In his private correspondence he was even more blunt. He wrote to his former secretary Mabel Fitzgerald on 13<sup>th</sup> December. Mabel was the mother of future Taoiseach Garret, and with her husband Desmond would be in the GPO as Volunteers in Easter Week 1916 .Shaw wrote to Mabel then living in Dingle, County Kerry:

"This won't do at all: it belongs to a bygone slavery and will plunge us back into it. All the hope of the Unionists has been revived by the pro-German folly in Ireland. They have never given up the hope that they can, by military mutiny if necessary prevent the Act being carried out. Their hopes fell badly when the Bill was passed. They fell lower when Redmond offered the Nationalists of Ireland for service against Germany. Then this folly of pro-Germanism, this recrudescence of the Clan na Gael suddenly showed them a way out. They saw that if the Irish could once be tempted to turn against England in the war, Home Rule would be repealed before it had ever been put into action. And they are quite right. Only throw Ireland on the side of Prussia in this war, and the weary labour of nearly fifty years will be wiped out at a stroke. All the democracies of the world will spew us out of their mouths as an incorrigible people, fighting for negro slavery in the American Civil War, and fighting for the devastators of Belgium and the destroyers of human happiness and liberty by the very system of military despotism that has crushed ourselves."

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<sup>28</sup> Bernard Shaw, *The Matter with Ireland*, edited by David H. Greene and Dan H. Laurence, London 1962 p 90

He also looked to the future:

"The days of small nations is past, indeed, except for nations still denied self-government, nationalism is a dead horse; and even subject nations like Ireland must never forget that the moment they gain home rule, the horse will drop down under them and reveal by a sudden and horrible decomposition, that he has been dead for many years. Only as a member of a great commonwealth is there any future for us. We are a wretched little clod, broken off a bigger clod, broken off the west end of Europe, full of extraordinary beautiful but damnably barren places, with a strange climate that degrades base people hideously and clears the souls of noble people wonderfully. We are capable of taking a very high degree of training: in fact we are rather dangerous without it. We have an enormous advantage of exceptional literary power and a language which puts us in communication with a fifth of the human race. We are not rich enough to become fatheaded and demoralised like our biggest neighbours. In short, we shall be either a very highly civilised people or nothing; and this means that we should carefully preserve our relations with the large countries....Now if Sinn Fein means that we are to decide and arrange all this ourselves instead of having it arranged for us by others, then more power to Sinn Fein's elbow. But if S.F. means that we are to turn back and shrink into a little village community with a sham language that nobody in the wild world speaks, and do nothing but wonder how much longer the turf will last in Donegal, then the proper place for Sinn Fein is the ash-pit."

He signed off to Mabel with a reference to her new life in the South of Ireland:

"I must break off now, having written far too much; but I want to rub your eyes for you and waken you up. Ireland is your plaything at present, because you are an educated woman trying to live the life of a peasant. You have put yourself out of reach of Beethoven and the orchestra; so I suppose you must have something to play with. But you will not play with ME, madam, and with that I beg to subscribe myself, your most obedient G.Bernard Shaw." <sup>29</sup>

As the year drew to a close the war came even closer to the Shaws. Though childless themselves, Shaw and his wife Charlotte had been named as next of kin by the actor Robert Loraine (who had played the lead role in his "Man and Superman") when he joined the Royal Flying Corps. The Shaws were first to be informed when Loraine was wounded in action over Fromelles on the 22nd of November when a piece of anti-aircraft shrapnel pierced his back and his lung. Loraine was first in hospital in Lilliers and then moved to a hospital in Park Lane London where the Shaws went to visit him. He was unable to meet them as he was too ill and Shaw wrote to him on the 13th December:

"The first credible news was that you were hit; the next that you had lost a lung. This alarmed me because one of my uncles lost a lung, and though he recovered all his robustness of habit, yet he died of it after lingering in this state for forty-seven years. We called yesterday. We wanted to see you for two reasons; (1) To know whether there is anything you want that we can get you or send you or anything that we can do that you want done...(2) I wanted to see for myself how you were; for I knew that medical reports and diagnoses were worth nothing in the face of your powers of acting and that it was just a toss-up whether you would be in the mood to while away your last hour by a breezy cheerful 'it's nothing, I shall be out in a week' or if you felt exceptionally full of beans, to treat them to a death bed scene that would plunge the whole hospital into convulsive weeping. The Colonel of the Horseguards reported you on the cheery tack, from which I appended the worst. I hope anyhow, that you are bad enough not be allowed out again. for really you have done enough for honour, and there are plenty of fellows who will stop shrapnel quite as effectively as you and who are not as useful to their country in other respects as you are."

He concluded:

"We were down most of the time in Torquay where I wrote my immortal Common Sense about the War, and set chairs at the Pavilion for the wounded Belgians. The band played Tipperary for these warriors, who instead of rising on their crutches and bursting into enthusiastic cheers, made it only too clear by their dazed demeanour that they were listening to this tune for the first time in their lives. " <sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Shaw to Mabel Fitzgerald, 13th, December 1914 in Letters V3 pp 275-277

<sup>30</sup> Shaw to Robert Loraine, 13th December 1914 in Letters v3 p280

In a couple of weeks Lorraine, though frail and in a wheel chair, was well enough to be visited. Shaw wrote to Mrs Patrick Campbell in New York where "Pygmalion" had run for 74 performances in three different theatres averaging £1500 a week:

"Lorraine has just been describing to me how he dropped four monster bombs on a little town, two in the market-place and one at each end of the main street. They shot him (on a subsequent occasion) in the small of his back, the bullet coming out of his collar and knocking his heart into his left elbow. The lung is still out of action; but he is fairly robust and starts for Rio de Janeiro the day after tomorrow on a recuperative voyage.

What I said in Common Sense about the War is nothing to what I will say presently if this silly business of feeding men into the machine to be killed absolutely without any other result, goes on and on. And that is all Stella. Might be a scrap of newspaper, might it not? Do you ever ask yourself what has become of my sonnets? GBS"<sup>31</sup>

When he, over a year later, would start to write a play of these times, he would go back to those earlier days, a sea captain, his daughters, a rumbling in the sky and a house of heartbreak.<sup>32</sup>

## Further Reading:

For the main articles and letters:

1. Bernard Shaw, *What I Really Wrote About the War*, London, 1930.
2. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters Vol. 3 1911-1923*, edited by Dan H Laurence, New York, 1985.
3. Bernard Shaw, *The Matter with Ireland*, edited by David H. Greene and Dan H. Laurence, London 1962.
4. Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and Mrs Patrick Campbell: Their Correspondence*, edited by Alan Dent, London, 1952.

For the plays and prefaces:

Bernard Shaw, *Collected Plays with Their Prefaces* ( 7 volumes), edited by Dan H. Laurence, London, 1971-74.

For Biographical detail:

1. Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw, Volume 2, The Pursuit of Power 1898- 1918*, London,1988.
2. Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, London, 1998.
3. Stanley Weintraud, *Bernard Shaw 1914-1918, Journey to Heartbreak*, London, 1973.
4. A.M. Gibbs, *A Bernard Shaw Chronology*, New York, 2001
5. A M Gibbs, *Bernard Shaw A Life*, London,2004
6. Mark Bostridge, *The Fateful Year : England 1914*, London,2014.
7. John O'Donovan, *G. B. Shaw*, Dublin, 1983.

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<sup>31</sup> Shaw to Mrs Patrick Campbell in Dent 1952 and Letters v3 p 282

<sup>32</sup> See Heartbreak House in Bernard Shaw, *Collected Plays with their Prefaces*, London,1971-74