

George Bernard Shaw: Joyriding on the Front

By Ed Mulhall

It was a request from the General. The Commander in Chief, Sir Douglas Haig, was inviting George Bernard Shaw to visit the Front Line and to write about it. Shaw was at this time, 6 January 1917, considered a major critic of the war. His pamphlet *Common Sense About the War* had resulted in a storm of protest and his plays were no longer being regularly produced in England as a result.¹ He had failed to get a follow-up pamphlet, *More Common Sense About the War*, published by *The New Statesman* but he was still engaged in active debate on issues relating to the conflict, in letters, articles and speeches. The suggestion to invite Shaw to the Front had come from Philip Gibbs, the war correspondent for *The Daily Chronicle*, who was in France and had been asked by the Chief of Intelligence for the British Forces to suggest some famous writers who 'would come and write a series of articles likely to be of value from a propaganda point of view.'² The Generals were in need of some good propaganda at that point: there seemed to be stalemate across the front; the Battle of the Somme had resulted in large-scale casualties with little territorial gain and there was great dispute among the staff and between the allies as to the next move. Most significantly, a new administration under Lloyd George had taken office with a determination to take control of the war effort and not a very high opinion of the current army leadership.³

When he got the invitation, Shaw was at first wary, but his wife was clear what he should do. He wrote in his new diary (begun with the intention of charting his movements throughout the year but lasting only two weeks): "Charlotte says I must go, as I ought to see this terrible thing for myself. I grumbled that I should see nothing except a conventional round on which all the journalists are sent... but my interest increased as the day went on."⁴ He had some other concerns as he wrote to H. G. Wells, who had visited both the Italian and French fronts in the previous months and whose accounts had yet to be fully published:

"I have received an invitation from the Commander in Chief to go to the Front. Naturally the temptation to accept is very strong, as pure mischief is always fascinating. But I notice that your articles in *The Daily News* have been delayed and - especially in one instance where you were giving your opinions of our general staff work as compared to that of the French - you have given such short measure as to suggest that somebody, like the man in *Pickwick*, had been dipping his beak into the jug. What I want you to tell me is whether they demand any pledges from you as to what you shall or not say, and whether the fact of having been at the Front marks you out for special censorship even in respect of books. If that is the case, I won't go. If you can give me any tips even as to boots and overcoats and baksheesh and the like. I should be glad to have them."⁵

Wells replied:

"The swine do impose the right to censor (severely) your articles on the Front but not the rest of your literary career. My work on the Front is held up now by GHQ on the score of that criticism of the staff work. (But in the later part of the book which deals with the war generally & not the front, I get it all in

¹ For more on Shaw and the War, See Ed Mulhall, *Common Sense and the War: George Bernard Shaw in 1914*, Century Ireland, <http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/common-sense-and-the-war-george-bernard-shaw-in-1914> and Ed Mulhall, *The Lady and the VC*, Century Ireland, <http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/the-lady-and-the-v.c.-lady-gregory-yeats-shaw-and-the-recruitment-play-that>.

² Philip Gibbs, *The Pageant of the Years* (London, 1946) p. 195

³ See Ed Mulhall, *A Very British Coup*, Century Ireland, <http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/a-very-british-coup-carson-the-press-and-the-fall-of-asquith>

⁴ Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, London, 1998, p 461

⁵ GBS to HG Wells, 11/1/1917 in Dan H. Laurence, *George Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters, 1911-1925* (London, 1985) p. 449

uncensored.) But if you go & see them they get timid and make concessions. Thick boots and waders. The mud is terrible. Macintosh and furlined coat.”⁶

Thus reassured, Shaw believed he was ‘not free to refuse’ and bringing trench boots and a khaki tunic and breeches, as recommended by the proprietor of *The Nation* (a news periodical) Hugh Massingham who had just returned, he crossed over to France on 28 January 1917.⁷

Shaw was met at Boulogne by a staff captain and brought to the Château de la Tour close to General Headquarters at St Omer, sixty miles from the Front Line.⁸ The war correspondent Philip Gibbs was assigned to accompany him throughout his visit and, as an accredited correspondent, had officer status. On his first day at GHQ Shaw expressed the wish to see Ypres, scene of the great battle and to where visits were usually discouraged due to the continued shelling. But Shaw believed that he would be wasting his time if he could not get close to the action: “we had come to the theatre to see the play not to enjoy the interval.”⁹ As they arrived at Ypres, with some shells flying overhead, Shaw saw a decapitated body on the road. In the town, in charge, there was Major from Ireland, an ‘immense’ man who after an initial reluctance promised: “if you want to see it all, I’ll show you though I expect I will be stopped by my own police - but we’ll get round.”¹⁰ He was true to his word, as Charlotte Shaw relayed GBS’s account to her sister: “when they were getting near the square - bang! A shell exploded in front of the car. It frightened the chauffeur and he stopped. The town major yelled: “Go on man, go right on. A shell never comes in the same place twice.”¹¹

South of Ypres, Shaw surveyed the battlefields of Vimy Ridge, saw but one German shell at Neuville St Vaast but witnessed intermittent British shelling (with little obvious purpose). He admired the technology, later getting to sit in the new weapon of war that had just been introduced - the tank. Philip Gibbs noticed his easy manner with those he met: “it was surprising what a lot of knowledge he had about the technical side of war, especially about aviation. To whatever subject he turned his fine brain, he became its master, or at least seized upon the essential facts in a penetrating way.”¹² On the Vimy Ridge too he had this revelation from Shaw: “Gibbs, he said, one’s thoughts on the war run on parallel lines which can never meet. The first is that all this is a degradation of humanity, a great insanity, and a crime against civilisation. It ought never to have happened. It’s a dirty business for which we all ought to be ashamed. That’s the first line of thought and the second is that we’ve got to beat the Boche.”¹³

Another trip was to Arras, further south along the battle line, where there was more shelling and an officer remarked on Shaw’s wit under fire: “the old boy’s got nerve. I was on at the front with him at Arras and there was some pretty lively shelling going on around us. I told him to put on his tin hat, but he wouldn’t do it. I said, ‘those German shell-splinters may get you’ and he laughed and said: ‘if they do me in, then there is no gratitude in this world.’”¹⁴ Shaw felt the bombardment of Arras hadn’t

⁶ Wells to Shaw, January 1917, Percy Smith ed., *Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells (Selected Correspondence)* (Toronto) p. 94

⁷ Holroyd, 1998, p. 461

⁸ For detailed account see Stanley Weintraud, *Bernard Shaw 1914-1918, Journey to Heartbreak* (London, 1973). See also Gibbs, 1946, Oliver Eaton, *C.E. Montague, a Memoir* (London, 1929) and extracts in A.M Gibbs, *Shaw, Interviews and Recollections* (London, 1990)

⁹ Eaton, 1929, p. 163

¹⁰ Janet Dunbar, *Mrs. G.B.S. a biographical portrait of Charlotte Shaw* (London, 1963) p. 254

¹¹ Charlotte Shaw to Sissey Cholmondely 16/2/1917, in Dunbar, *Mrs. GBS*, 1963, p. 254

¹² Gibbs, 1946, p. 196

¹³ Gibbs, 1946, p. 197

¹⁴ A.M Gibbs, *Shaw, Interviews and Recollections* (London, 1990) p. 250

been particularly effective: “the British bombardment of Dublin beat it hollow, I resisted the temptation to say it then.”¹⁵

At Arras they met another war correspondent, the novelist H. M. Tomlinson, frustrated at his ability to report on the historic developments in the war but happy now with something he was allowed to write about: “I was not at Mons but I was present when Shaw looked first on Armageddon.” Shaw told Tomlinson that the war could last a long time: “You see, war creates its own resources. The resources grow less on both sides and each combatant improvises with what he can get. If these are pretty well-balanced, you can foresee the result - if you have the courage to look at it. Each side must continue to strive for victory to prevent another side getting it.”¹⁶ Sitting with the young officers that evening, in a comment also noted by Gibbs, Shaw was asked what he thought about the prospects for peace, he replied: “What the nations of the Europe really want is an early and dishonorable peace.” Tomlinson continued: “once they understood his intent, Youth with its military crosses leaned back in its chairs and its laughter tolled down the ruined corridors of the deserted town.”¹⁷

On 1 February 1917 General Sir Douglas Haig noted in his diary: “Mr. Bernard Shaw (the Author & Playwright) came to lunch. An interesting man of original views. A great talker! On sitting down to lunch, I at once discovered he was a vegetarian. As if by magic, on my ordering it, two poached eggs appeared, also some spinach and macaroni, so he did not fare badly.”¹⁸ The lunch was at the GHQ building and one of a number Haig had with journalists that week (two French journalists earlier that day, one from the US on the day after). Shaw would later give his impression of Haig:

“He seemed to me a first-rate specimen of the British gentleman and conscientiously studious soldier, trained socially and professionally to behave and work in a groove from which nothing could move him. Always steadied by a closed mind and an unquestioned code. Subject to these limitations he was, I should say, a man of chivalrous and scrupulous character. He made me feel that the war would last thirty years, and that he would carry it on irreproachably until he was superannuated.”¹⁹

Evidently engaged by their conversation Haig changed his plans and brought Shaw in his car to a demonstration of new weaponry which included new incendiary shells. On the drive they had, according to Charlotte, “quite a heart to heart and seemed to have discussed everything.”²⁰ There, Shaw rode in a tank and witnessed the flame thrower which didn’t always work successfully. Neither man was convinced by what they saw, with Shaw thinking Haig “disconnected and distressed by the military novelties and skeptical of their military value.”²¹

Shaw stayed overnight at the military headquarters at Amiens as Haig wanted him to see General Sir Henry Rawlinson who was the commander of the Somme Front. They met the following day before touring the Somme. Charlotte Shaw said that he wasn’t as impressed with Rawlinson as he had been with Haig.²² Shaw later wrote that the two generals couldn’t be more different, Rawlinson was “frank, his manners were his own: and he had no academic illusions about the situation, which was not a very rosy one, for the recent Somme offensive had come to nothing but a very superfluous demonstration

¹⁵ George Bernard Shaw, *What I Wrote about the War* (London, 1930) p. 249

¹⁶ Weintraub, 1973, p. 220; Gibbs, 1946, p. 196

¹⁷ Weintraub, 1973, p. 220

¹⁸ Diary entry for 1 February 1917 in Robert Blake ed., *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig 1914-1919* (London, 1952) p. 194

¹⁹ Weintraub, 1973, p. 220

²⁰ Dunbar, 1963, p. 255

²¹ Weintraub, 1973, p. 221

²² Dunbar, 1963, p. 255

of the homicidal uselessness of sending waves of infantry to attack barbed wire defended by machine guns, even after the costliest bombardment and minings.”²³

He toured the devastation of the Somme battlefield, witnessed some shell fire and noted that the Germans fired very infrequently compared to the British, keeping much in reserve.

Shaw’s next journey was one filled with personal significance. He went to visit the Air squadron base at Trezennes where his friend, the actor, Robert Loraine was a squadron leader and Lady Gregory’s son Robert Gregory one of the airmen. In an indication of how close they were, the Shaws had been named as Loraine’s next of kin when he left for the war and had visited him in hospital when he had been wounded in action over France in December 1914.²⁴ Loraine was now primarily desk bound, commanding the squadron and writing to the relatives of airmen killed or wounded. The conditions at the base were very tough too with severe frost and Shaw got to meet the airmen as they returned from action. The squadron was fully engaged in intercepting enemy aircraft and as Shaw observed [each man was a] pure duelist: “their machines carry only one man (only): and he with one hand on the tiller and the other on his machine gun, throws himself on any German he can find in the air, and intimates, like the Shakespearean warrior that ‘for one or both of us the hour has come.’ ”²⁵ Loraine was also using his theatrical experience to provide entertainment for his men in the evenings, including short plays. They performed Shaw’s two one act plays for him while he was there: *The Inca of Perusalem*, acted by the airmen and *Flaherty V.C.* by the officers. It was Shaw’s first chance to see the play properly done in rehearsal format and he was observed laughing at his own lines, though when an officer remarked to him that he was enjoying their poor efforts Shaw gave the riposte: “if the [I?] thought the stuff could be as poor as this, I’d never have written it.”²⁶ The company, with Loraine and Gregory taking parts, gave the first formal production of the play *Flaherty V.C.* later that month.

For his last visit of the tour, Shaw went to another old friend, Sir Almroth Wright, who had been the inspiration for the central character Sir Colenso Ridgeon in *The Doctor’s Dilemma*.²⁷ Shaw witnessed wounded men being operated on in all sorts of corners in a Casino that had been converted into a makeshift hospital. He talked to many of the wounded about their experience as well as to Wright and his surgeons, who were having to innovate in their treatments. According to Charlotte, although he seemed to have “escaped horrors, & only saw one dead man the whole time. But he saw a regiment of men coming back from the trenches - they had been there for 16 days and were coming back for a rest - & he was greatly struck by their exhaustion. He said practically every one of them had their mouths wide open & gave the impression they were too exhausted to keep them closed.”²⁸

Shaw returned to England on February 5th. He now faced the challenge of writing about the visit in a way which would “tell the enemy nothing that he did not know already better than I, and that would help the general reader, by this time badly discouraged by the duration of the war and the absence of any prospect of its ending, to stick with it.” Shaw had told Philip Gibbs that “while the war lasts one must put one’s own soul under censorship” so he was pleased that he had no great difficulty in getting his pieces past the military censor (making only two minor adjustments).²⁹ The three articles were

²³ Weintraub, 1973, p. 222

²⁴ For more on Loraine and Shaw, see Holroyd, 1998, and Winifred Loraine, *Robert Loraine* (London 1938)

²⁵ Weintraub, 1973, p. 224

²⁶ Loraine, 1938, p. 237. See also Mulhall, *The Lady and the VC*, Century Ireland. (<http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/the-lady-and-the-v.c.-lady-gregory-yeats-shaw-and-the-recruitment-play-that>)

²⁷ Dunbar, 1963, p. 256

²⁸ Dunbar, 1963,, p. 256

²⁹ Gibbs, 1946, p. 195 and Shaw, 1930, p. 255

published under the sardonic title: “Joy Riding at the Front”, in *The Daily Chronicle* on the 5th, 7th and 8th of March.³⁰

Shaw began his first article by recalling pre-war visits to Domremy and Rheims for the sake of a play on Joan of Arc that he had conceived but which “I have never written down and perhaps never will.” While at Rheims he decided to visit Ypres and the towns which surrounded it. He writes that he had just returned there:

“I have seen Ypres again. This time, though still a superannuated civilian, I was in khaki like everybody else, by way of camouflage...Everything was different. The weather was again bright, but intensely cold. The language of the country was English in all its dialects. The farmhouses and villas had no roofs, no floors, large holes in the walls and no inhabitants. The trees were chipped and scarred, and here and there broken off short. A man lying by the roadside was not a tramp taking a siesta, but a gentleman who had lost his head. There was no Belgian carillon, but plenty of German music: an imposing orchestration in which all the instruments of percussion.... Boom whizzzzzz!!! Boom whizzzzzz...all fortissimo diminuendo: then crescendo molto subito. Whizzzzzz-bang-clatter! In such a bang and clatter had the man by the roadside lost his head. Well, in time of peace he might have lost it more painfully and mischievously. There are worst ways of ending one’s walk in life.”³¹

In a similar ironic style, Shaw navigated through his visit. He visited Ypres and its square, Arras, the Vimy Ridge and the Somme front. He confessed to realising that he has been viewing the shelling like a ‘sportsman’ even while those being shelled in the air might easily have been one of his own personal friends. He remarks that the shelling may have improved the look of some of the villages and buildings that had not impressed him before. He used the description of the physical surroundings to capture the desolation of war, avoiding direct discussion of casualties but seeing them reflected in the shattered landscape:

“The Somme front in the snow and brilliant sunshine was magnificent. The irony of the signposts was immense. ‘To Maurepas’; and there was no Maurepas. ‘To Contalmaison’; and there was no Contalmaison. ‘To Pozieres’; and there was no Pozieres. I went to the windmill at Pozieres, and saw a little mound on which the windmill may be stood. Trones wood was a coconut shy with no coconuts on the sticks: our guns had scooped what the enemy guns left. On the road to Ypres the trees had stood, an unbroken Old Guard lining the road, with hardly a gap in their ranks. But here! With every limb shot to bits, beheaded, halved, cut off at the shins or torn out of the earth and flung prostrate, these woods seemed to scud with bare poles or broken jury-masks before the wind as our car passed, all their rigging blown and shot away. Of houses, except in one strangely-spared space, not a trace. And I knew from what I had seen at Ypres that this meant that almost every square yard of brick had received a separate smashing hit. As to the ground you cannot find enough flat earth in a square mile to play marbles on. here the British hurricane has swept away and delved up what the German typhoon had left. The land caught ‘between the pass and fell incensed points of mighty opposites’ has flung everything their hands burdened it with into their teeth in fragments; taken patiently the print of their elephantine footsteps; and swallowed and made dust of their bravest by the right of their common mother, the earth.”³²

His second article centred on “The Techniques of War”. In this piece, he challenged the strategists and their claims for the armaments they were using: “...if the big guns had the precision they pretend, or even anything approaching it, the war would be over in two days.” But they did not. They were not precise. He contrasted it with the battle in the air of the ‘duelists’: “you do not have to send a thousand airmen to do the work of one. You do have to send a thousand bombs to do the work of one and after all they are much less likely to do it.”³³ He added that the new weapons such as he witnessed with Haig were no more effective. Thus, it followed that the economics of the war and the claims that more money for armaments would hasten its end were false. To win more and more must be supplied.

³⁰ Published in full in Shaw, 1930, and Bernard Shaw, *What Shaw Wrote about the War*, edited by J.L. Wisenthal and Daniel O’Leary (Florida, 2006)

³¹ Shaw, 2006, p. 196

³² Shaw, 2006, p. 199

³³ Shaw, 2006, p. 200

The British taxpayer must be “taught that war is not precise and economical. It is almost inconceivably wasteful and extravagant. It burns the house to roast the pig, and even then seldom roasts him effectively.”³⁴ There was nothing cheap on the battlefield “except the lives of men” and taxpayers must resign themselves to the fact that “we may fight bravely, fight hard, fight long, fight cunningly, fight recklessly, fight in a hundred and fifty ways but we cannot fight cheaply. That means we must organise to increase our production.”³⁵ Shaw added one other moral note, increasing the precision and number of the weapons which kill wholesale may be the decisive factor and one sure way of improving precision is to ensure that it is done with a clear and calm head, free of anger and hatred.³⁶

His concluding piece on ‘Consolations and Responsibilities’ aimed to draw some conclusions from his visit and to reconcile his claim to have ‘enjoyed’ his visit to the Front with the avowed principles which saw him in opposition to the war when it began. There was, he wrote, no room for pacifism on the front:

“all the tangle and tedium of the controversy between the pacifist and the militarist disappear on the battlefield; for whether you fight for victory or fight to make victory possible, the result is the same: you fight like the devil anyhow... the more they desire the end of the war, the harder they must fight to reach it... One does not trouble about the danger of damp sheets when the house is on fire; and granted as much as you like that both we and the Germans ought to have managed better than to go to war, now that we have done it we must put our backs into it, not sparing our souls at home any more than the soldiers spare their bodies abroad.”³⁷

Shaw argued that “war is not concerned with the justice of its quarrel. That is one of the main objections to war as an institution and one that will eventually uproot it from human morality. But it is too late to consider it when the sword is drawn.”³⁸ He noted too that “pugnacity is still a part of human nature” and that soldiers engaged “in the most perilous service” still say without affectation that they have never been so happy. “They seek terrors and hardships more determinably than warm clothes, comfortable firesides and security. The “never again” of the civilian papers finds no echo at the front. The soldier may pity those who have been driven from their wrecked homes to wander on the face of the earth in helpless vagabondage, and are victims of war without having any part in it. He does not pity himself.”

This is not just a contrast with the dullness of ordinary life that does not satisfy their heroic instincts but also the reasonable and intelligible benefits of service with others. So, at the Front: “they will not make peace unless the enemy forces them to, though they have reason to desire it of which no civilian can form any adequate compensation.”³⁹ Shaw concluded that “the power to make peace, and the responsibility for war and its enormous mischiefs, do not rest with the Army but with the politicians at home who wield this monstrous engine of death and devastation... but if even one shot too many be fired the guilt will lie on them and not on the soldier. For at this rate of destruction the prayer of the peoples must be, not “Give us peace in our time” but “Give us peace in all time.” As to the heroes who do not desire peace, there will be for them the “mental fight” of William Blake, who, long after Waterloo, did not let his sword sleep in his hand. His Jerusalem is still to be built; and it will not be built with howitzers. They are too easy to fire.”⁴⁰

³⁴ Shaw, 2006, p. 200

³⁵ Shaw, 2006, p. 203

³⁶ Shaw, 2006, p. 204

³⁷ Shaw, 2006, p. 205

³⁸ Shaw, 2006, p. 206

³⁹ Shaw, 2006 p. 209

⁴⁰ Shaw, 2006, p. 211

Shaw's articles proved to be controversial. The sardonic and ironic tone was not appreciated. Questions were asked in Parliament as to why he had been facilitated by the army. (Shaw quoted with approval the official reply which said: "nothing is known against this officer" and the statement in the Commons by Ian Macpherson, the under secretary for War (and later Chief Secretary for Ireland): "I have always found that when any gentleman visits the front in France he comes back with an added desire to help the British Army and is proud of it. (Cheers))"⁴¹ Philip Gibbs said that the articles were "totally useless as propaganda and written with a flippancy which was not in the best taste in the middle of a war which was taking a frightful toll of youth."⁴² But Shaw wanted again to shock people out of the slush and sentiment which had taken possession of many minds who evaded the grim realities. He shocked them all right.⁴³ To Lady Gregory, Shaw confided "my articles on the Front were shocking: it was a most demoralising experience."⁴⁴

He later reflected on what he had left out so that his message of "stick with it" would succeed:

"The appalling, slaughterous British offensives that just stopped short of getting there; the bombarded coast towns about which our authorities lied so heroically; the holocausts of British youth sacrificed in holding the ground for French offensives that never came off; the air raided cities and torpedoed ships; the Red Cross vans with their loads of mutilated men; the combing out of civilians as the need for more cannon fodder made the medical examinations for fitness less and less fastidious and the tribunals more and more inflexible: above all, the reaction of unreasoning patriotic enthusiasm into equally unreasonable disillusion: all this could easily have been exploited to rub in Pacifist or anti-Imperial morals, or conversely to harden the public temper in the opposite direction. Neither of these opportunities appealed to me."⁴⁵

By the time his articles appeared in the first week of March the course of the war was changing once more. The Generals he had met, Haig and Rawlinson, were embroiled in a battle for control with the Lloyd George Government that was attempting to put them under new single French leadership. (Haig even writing to the King in protest). Meanwhile on the battlefield they were completely outmaneuvered by the Germans, who withdrew to the Hindenburg line - thereby frustrating Allied plans to advance and losing whatever small advantage had been gained from the dreadful carnage of the Somme. And then Russia collapsed into disarray with the abdication of the Tsar following a mutiny in the army. ⁴⁶ (In writing to the novelist Maxim Gorki in support of 'revolution' Shaw urged that revolutionary Russia should throw her entire fighting weight behind the war effort, which was now at least two-third republican against the side that was wholly monarchical. While this might seem like the urging of an English patriot resolved to "fight against the last drop of Russian blood" he reminded Gorki that he was an Irishman and patriotism there takes the form of implacable hostility to English rule: "I take the part of England in this war exactly as a Russian might: that is, as an ally believing that the defeat of the central empires is essential to the success of the common cause of democracy and Socialism.")

In April as another battle of Arras began along the Remy Ridge and with America about to enter the war, Shaw again asked to visit the Front Line. He was subsequently to decline the invitation but the fact that it was made showed his earlier visit hadn't made him unacceptable to the military. The invitation, that came from General Dalme-Radcliffe, was to visit the Italian front. In declining Shaw said that he could only go if he were of some use:

⁴¹ Shaw, 1930, p. 279

⁴² Gibbs, 1946, p. 197

⁴³ Gibbs, 1946, p. 197

⁴⁴ GBS to Lady Gregory, 4th/5/1917 in Dan H. Laurence and Nicholas Grene, Shaw, Lady Gregory and the Abbey, Buckinghamshire, 1993, p. 133

⁴⁵ Shaw, 1930, p. 255

⁴⁶ See Blake, 1952 for Haig's account of the events of March and Major General Sir Frederick Maurice editor, The Life of General Lord Rawlinson of Trent from his journals and letters, London 1928, for Rawlinson's. For overview see A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War* (London, 1963) pp. 166-169. GBS to Maxim Gorky, 24/5/1917, Laurence, London, 1985

“when I visited the British front I was able to do two things that were on the whole worth doing. I took the opportunity to present the war to many people whose consciences were very sore about it - people to whom the ordinary patriotic utterances were worse than useless - in a way that comforted them considerably. And I could amuse the messes, weary of the inevitable daily war shop, by talking to them. That was all.”⁴⁷

Bernard Shaw was however to return once more to Domremy and Rheims in fulfilment of his pre-war ambitions. In 1923, Shaw finally began the play he conceived in the pre-war calm and thought he would never write the story of the ‘virgin queen,’ the newly canonised Saint Joan. Now, informed by war and its aftermath, its weapons and cruelties, having witnessed the destruction of France and Flanders (and Ireland), the realities of treason trials (Roger Casement and Edith Cavill) with sentences and executions and the lengths society was prepared to go to protect itself at times of strain like war or rebellion, he was able to imagine the world of the French heroine.⁴⁸ Her standard had been carried by French troops into battle during the war and her story was fresh again as France and Europe tried to rebuild itself, physically, politically and morally.

In the play's final moments, Joan is left with just one supporter, an English foot soldier, freed from hell for a day a year due to his fashioning a cross for her at the funeral pyre:

“Joan: And you my one faithful? What comfort have you for Saint Joan?
The Soldier: Well, what do they all amount to, these kings and captains and bishops and lawyers and such like? They just leave you in the ditch to bleed to death; and the next thing is, you meet them down there, for all the airs they give themselves. What I say is, you have as good a right to your notions as they have to theirs, and perhaps better. (*Settling himself for a lecture on the subject*) You see it's like this. If - (*The first stroke of midnight is heard softly from a distant bell*) Excuse me: a pressing appointment - (*he goes on tiptoe*)

(*The last remaining rays of light gather into a white radiance on Joan. The hour continues to strike*).

Joan: O God thou madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints?
How long, O Lord, how long?”⁴⁹

The achievement of Saint Joan resulted in the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1925 to George Bernard Shaw. Like the 2016 recipient, Bob Dylan, he did not attend the award ceremony in Stockholm.⁵⁰ The only letter of congratulation he kept was one from James Joyce: pleased that the award had gone again to a “distinguished fellow townsman.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ GBS to Charles Deme-Radcliff 13/4/17, Laurence, 1985, p. 466

⁴⁸ See Preface to Saint Joan in George Bernard Shaw, *Complete Prefaces*, (London, 1965) p 604

⁴⁹ See Saint Joan in George Bernard Shaw, *Complete Plays* (London 1937) p. 1009

⁵⁰ Holroyd, 1998, p. 314

⁵¹ James Joyce to GBS 26th /11/1926 in Richard Elman ed., *James Joyce Letters, Volume 2* (New York, 1966) p. 146, and A. M. Gibbs, *A Bernard Shaw Chronology* (New York, 2001) p. 263

Further Reading:

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. Janet Dunbar, *Mrs G.B.S. A biographical portrait of Charlotte Shaw* (London, 1963)
7. John O'Donovan, *G. B. Shaw* (Dublin, 1983)
8. Dan H. Laurence and Nicholas Grene, *Shaw, Lady Gregory and the Abbey* (Buckinghamshire, 1993)
9. George Bernard Shaw, *Complete Plays* (London 1937)
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