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Landlord–Tenant (Non)Relations in the Work of Bernard Shaw

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ABSTRACT: As a child, Shaw was horrified by the appalling poverty of the Dublin slums, and, while working in a Dublin estate office as a teenager, he actually had to collect slum rents. On a more personal level, both sides of Shaw's family were tied to the Protestant Ascendancy, possessing land throughout Leinster and Munster. Although Shaw himself was raised in "shabby genteel poverty," he was taught to take pride in his family's exalted social connections. He gradually came to realize, however, that his revered relations were complicit in the unjust land distribution prevalent in Ireland prior to the Land War. The unjust relations between landlords and tenants that Shaw witnessed in Ireland cast a shadow over not only his politics (leading him to embrace socialism as a young man) but also his drama. As this article demonstrates, Shaw deals with Irish landlord-tenant relations directly in his three plays set in Ireland: *John Bull's Other Island*, *O'Flaherty, V.C.*, and *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*. In addition, his exposure to Dublin slums as a child and teenager informs *Widowers' Houses*, and his numerous visits to Irish (and not simply English) Big Houses were a clear influence on *Heartbreak House*.

The troubled relations between landlords and tenants during Bernard Shaw's formative years in Ireland strongly influenced his sociopolitical perspective as an adult. In particular, his horror over the appalling poverty that he witnessed in Dublin as a child (the city's slums were widely regarded as the worst in Europe) led him to eventually conclude that poverty is "the greatest of our evils and the worst of our crimes."¹ And, during his four and a half

years working in an estate office in Dublin in his teen years, he witnessed the unjust way in which rural tenant farmers and the urban working classes were treated by their idle and often absentee—or at least geographically distant—landlords. Added to these experiences, both sides of Shaw's family (the Shaws and the Gurlys) were tied to the Protestant Ascendancy, possessing land throughout Leinster and Munster. Although Shaw himself was raised in "shabby genteel poverty," he was taught as a child to take pride in his family's exalted social and political position.² He eventually came to realize, however, that the esteemed Shaws and Gurlys were utterly complicit in the unfair land distribution prevalent in Ireland prior to the Land War (a campaign for the redistribution of Irish land that broke out within three years of Shaw's departure for London). Shaw's embracing of socialism as a young man and the anger that he harbored throughout his life over the exploitation of the poor by the upper classes should always be read in light of these formative experiences—especially since Shaw was converted to socialism in 1882 by Henry George, an American political economist who was an active supporter of the Irish Land League and the author of *Progress and Poverty* (1879) and *The Irish Land Question* (1882). According to Shaw, George's work revealed the "significance" of what he had witnessed during his early years in Ireland.³

Not surprisingly, the disgust that Shaw felt from his youth over the unjust relations between Irish landlords and tenants did not just inform his adult politics; it also cast a significant shadow over his drama. As this essay demonstrates, Shaw deals with Irish landlord-tenant relations directly in his three plays set in Ireland: *John Bull's Other Island* (1904), *O'Flaherty, V.C.* (1917), and *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman* (1921).⁴ In addition, his exposure to Dublin slums as a child and as a real estate clerk informs *Widowers' Houses* (1892), and his numerous visits to Irish—and not simply English—Big Houses were a clear influence on *Heartbreak House* (1919). In all five of these plays, the imbalance of power implicit in the capitalist letting of private property prevents sincere and meaningful relationships from developing between landlords and their tenants. Indeed, the landlords in these works often prefer to completely avoid interacting with their tenants; in one extreme case, *Heartbreak House*, the landowners ignore the very existence of the tenants who provide them with money and social position.

Although Jonathan Swift complained regularly about Dublin's dirty and barely habitable slums during the early eighteenth century, the city's poverty got significantly worse in the wake of the Act of Union of 1800. As part of Ireland's incorporation into the United Kingdom, the country's elected officials no longer sat in the Irish parliament in College Green in Dublin

but rather in Westminster in London. These parliamentarians and their families—as well as those whose professions were tied to parliamentary business—moved to London en masse, and their once fashionable (and now abandoned) Dublin town houses were gradually turned into tenements. Each building was split into a number of small apartments and housed several impoverished families in unsanitary conditions. As Murray Fraser has shown, the city's "putrid slums" were a constant source of concern throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were regarded with horror by many observers, including Friedrich Engels and Lloyd George.⁵

As children, the sensitive, Dublin-born writers Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and J. M. Synge were disgusted and indeed frightened by these slums, which led each of them to embrace socialism in later life, despite hailing from families tied to the Irish Anglican Ascendancy. Shaw's consternation and anger over Dublin's slums stayed with him into adulthood, as can be seen from two of his famous comments regarding the 1916 Easter Rising. In the wake of the insurrection, Shaw lambasted the British government for its decision to "quite unnecessarily" reduce much of the Dublin city center to rubble, because he thought it was a ridiculous overreaction to what was actually quite a small rebellion.⁶ However, he felt that, if the British forces were intent on shelling his native city, they could at least have destroyed the city's horrible slums. In a 4 May 1916 letter sent to Sir Matthew Nathan (the undersecretary for Ireland), he wrote, with typical Shavian provocation,

[W]hy, oh why didn't the artillery knock down half Dublin while it had the chance? Think of the insanitary areas, the slums, the glorious chance of making a clean sweep of them!⁷

And in a 6 May 1916 article in the *New Statesman*, he asserted that

[the] demolition [of Dublin's General Post Office] does not matter. What does matter is that all the Liffey slums have not been demolished. Their death and disease rates have every year provided waste, destruction, crime, drink, and avoidable homicide on a scale which makes the fusillades of the Sinn Feiners and the looting of their camp-followers hardly worth turning the head to notice.⁸

Shaw first moved to London a few months shy of his twentieth birthday in 1876, and his intellectual curiosity and social conscience led him to search for a belief system that could explain the socioeconomic injustice prevalent in the Ireland he had left and in his new home of Britain.

On 4 September 1882, he read a newspaper account of Henry George's 1881 arrest as "a revolutionary Fenian" in Galway (the Royal Irish Constabulary were concerned by the American's interventions—in the form of journalism, pamphleteering, and speech making—in the Irish Land War). This article inspired Shaw to attend George's lecture at the Memorial Hall in Farringdon Street the next night. This lecture convinced Shaw of the "economic basis . . . of our civilization."⁹ In the years immediately following Shaw's political conversion, he gained a degree of fame across Britain as a socialist platform speaker, and it is noteworthy—given that his formative years were spent in Dublin, home to dire neighborhoods like the Liberties and St. Michan's parish—that he spoke frequently on the appalling conditions found in the slums of British cities. During these early years in England and, indeed, for the rest of his life, Shaw also regularly wrote pamphlets, articles, and letters to newspapers regarding the social ills related to poverty.

Shaw's passionate concern over economic injustice—again, first roused in Dublin—also inspired his involvement in practical politics. Between 1885 and 1911, he served as a member of the Executive Committee of the Fabian Society (which sought to bring gradual socialist reform to the United Kingdom), and between 1897 and 1903 as a vestryman in the London Borough of St. Pancras; in both positions, he worked hard to improve the deplorable living conditions endured by the urban poor. When Shaw began writing plays, he certainly did not segregate his drama from his socialist political concerns: his very first play, *Widowers' Houses* (started in collaboration with William Archer in 1885 but completed by Shaw alone in 1892), is concerned with the evil of slum landlordism.

Shaw's interest in slum landlordism was clearly connected to the fact that he spent his formative years in a city famous for its foul tenements. Indeed, in *Widowers' Houses*, the character of Lickcheese—who serves as rent collector for the slum landlord, Sartorius—could be alluding to parts of inner-city Dublin when he describes the properties that bring Sartorius so much profit: "Tenement houses, let from week to week by the room or half room: aye, or quarter room. It pays when you know how to work it, sir. Nothing like it."¹⁰ Similarly, when Lickcheese describes the nature of his work, he sounds suspiciously like the land agents and "middlemen" in colonial Ireland, who extorted as much money as they could for landlords—and for themselves—with little or no regard for the health and safety of tenants. Some Irish middlemen, known as "gombeen men," also frequently acted as money lenders, charging extortionate interest on loans made to already impoverished tenants.¹¹ Lickcheese boasts, "I've screwed more and spent less on his properties than anyone would

believe,"¹² and his mercenary ruthlessness becomes abundantly clear when he admits

I've took money . . . when no other collector alive would have wrung it out. . . . Look at that bag of money on the table. Hardly a penny of that but there was a hungry child crying for the bread it would have bought. But I got it for him [Sartorius]—screwed and worried and bullied it out of them.¹³

Lickcheese was, of course, acting under orders from Sartorius—someone who can be compared to colonial Ireland's cruel landlords (including absentees) in that he never thinks of setting foot in the foul properties that provide him with his fortune. As Lickcheese puts it, "Catch him [Sartorius] going down to collect his own rents! Not likely!"¹⁴

Given the play's concern with slum landlordism and tenements, Shaw was always aware that *Widowers' Houses* had special relevance to Dublin. In an 1892 letter to his former collaborator Archer defending the play's realism, Shaw emphasized that his knowledge of the play's subject matter came from his time as a clerk in an estate office in Dublin. Shaw explained that he, like others working in the office, had to collect rents from impoverished slum dwellers on behalf of supposedly respectable "middle class landowner[s]."¹⁵ While Shaw's clerical job mainly involved general office duties and accounts, he did have "to take the tram every Tuesday to Terenure and collect the weekly rents, ranging from a shilling to half a crown, from a dozen cabins called Dodd's Row on the Whitton estate."¹⁶ As Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel has noted, Shaw's firm belief that *Widowers' Houses* had much to say about Dublin led him to recommend the play to W. B. Yeats when the poet and dramatist was putting together the program for the Irish Literary Theatre's 1903 season.¹⁷ Since Yeats chose not to produce *Widowers' Houses* in 1903, it seems that he may not have fully appreciated the play's Irish resonances.¹⁸ By contrast, the Irish journalist turned playwright Frederick Ryan certainly understood how the play related to Dublin's housing situation; as Ritschel has shown, Ryan's first play, *The Laying of the Foundations* (1902)—which is concerned with slum landlordism in Dublin—is heavily indebted to *Widowers' Houses*.¹⁹

Shaw's memories of the Dublin tenements and of his time in the land agency are not the only traces from his Irish formative years that can be found in *Widowers' Houses*. The play's male lead, Dr. Trench, wants to marry Sartorius's daughter, but does not want to accept any money from his future father-in-law, because it derives from an unclean source: tenement rents.

Trench later learns, however, that a significant part of his own income is derived from interest on a mortgage attached to Sartorius's tenements. As David Edgar has put it, "Shaw's message . . . [is] that capitalism has made everyone complicit in its evils whether they like it or not; and that the alternative is not to attempt to live an individually moral life, but to change society."²⁰ Shaw recognized that the "respectable" people who benefited from the exploitation of the Irish tenantry included not just the property owners he collected and counted rents for as part of his job in the estate office but also people much closer to home: both sides of his own family and even, by extension, himself. Shaw's extended family owned much property in Counties Dublin, Cork, Tipperary, Offaly, Carlow, and Wexford, and Shaw could not ignore the fact that, even if his relations did not collect the rent themselves and therefore did not see the deplorable state that their tenants lived in, they owed their income and their highly prized social position to economic injustice. He also recognized that he personally benefited—against his will, of course—from the unjust distribution of land in Ireland, through the reflected glory of his socially exalted family members and his connection to the privileged if declining Protestant Ascendancy. Shaw used the character of Dr. Trench to dramatize his own realization that many middle-class and upper-class people—including himself and his extended family—were complicit in slum landlordism and/or the harrying of the rural poor, whether they believed they were or not. Interestingly, in later life, Shaw inherited "seventeen parcels of land in and around Carlow" and "a shop in Wexford" from the Gurlys.²¹ In keeping with his socialist principles, in 1945, he convinced the Irish Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera, to promote and pass a law that would allow him to turn these properties over to the Irish Free State for municipal use.²² Today, the main theater in Carlow is named for Shaw, in recognition of his generosity to the town.

Shaw's own Irish properties, being small holdings in Irish towns, were typical of those owned by many middle-class Irish Anglicans prior to independence (for example, the families of J. M. Synge and W. B. Yeats owned such properties). By contrast, the stately home and huge tracts of rural land owned by Shaw's richer relations—including the Shaws of Bushy Park in County Dublin and the Shaws of Monkstown Castle in County Cork—marked them out as Big House Protestants.²³ Big House landlords and their families have appeared frequently in seminal works of Irish literature. Some Irish writers, such as Elizabeth Bowen, have written about the Big House with nostalgia and fondness, even when admitting the character weaknesses of those who lived in such splendid isolation and when recognizing "the inherent wrong" that gave birth to their "ignobly gained"

positions.²⁴ Others, such as Molly Keane, have depicted the occupants of Big Houses as mad, cruel, and selfish, with their souls corrupted by the original sin that provided them with their land and their sense of superiority. Still others, such as Brian Friel in plays like *The Freedom of the City* (1973) and *Translations* (1980), have erased Big House Protestants from the Irish scene, depicting Irish history as a dualistic conflict between English authorities and put-upon Irish Catholics. (Of course, Friel did include subtly drawn Big House Protestant characters in plays such as *Faith Healer* [1979], with the character of Grace, and in *The Home Place* [2005], with Christopher Gore.) Shaw is noteworthy, because, in his three plays set in Ireland, he reveals that he has deeply ambivalent feelings about the residents of Irish Big Houses. He is more critical of them than someone like Bowen, but much more sympathetic toward them than a writer like Keane. And Shaw differs from Friel in that he is firmly convinced that Big House Protestants are Irish. (Even in a work like *The Home Place*, Friel repeatedly equates the Irish Protestant Ascendancy with English “planters” in Kenya and India, and, in *Faith Healer*, Frank Hardy repeatedly casts doubt on Grace’s Irish identity.)²⁵

Shaw, as a socialist, strongly opposed the ownership of huge swathes of land by a small, select portion of the population. Therefore, he happily anticipated the end of the old landlord system, both in Ireland and across the world. Shaw expresses his glee over this future state of affairs—with startlingly comic heartlessness regarding Irish Big House landlords—in an exchange between the English Elderly Gentleman and the Gort, County Galway resident Fusima in the 1921 play *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman* (part 4 of the *Back to Methuselah* cycle), which is set on the west coast of Ireland in AD 3000.²⁶ Toward the start of the play, the Elderly Gentleman asks Fusima if she is the “landlord” of the part of the Burren where he is sightseeing; since her socialistic society does not have the concept of “private property,” she is puzzled by the word “landlord,”²⁷ stating, “There is a tradition in this part of the country of an animal with a name like that. It used to be hunted and shot in the barbarous ages. It is quite extinct now.”²⁸

While this is a negative comment regarding *all* landlords, it also has specifically Irish resonances, in that it references the shooting of cruel Irish landlords by disgruntled tenants throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Perhaps the most high-profile examples of such assassinations include the shootings of Major Denis Mahon in 1847 and of Lord Leitrim in 1878; Shaw, in fact, mentions the shooting of Lord Lietrim in his 1944 treatise *Everybody’s Political What’s What*.)²⁹ In contrast to Shaw’s relatively brief—and disparaging—comment on Irish landlords here, he criticizes them in a more sustained fashion in his World War I play,

O'Flaherty, V.C. (completed in 1915 and first published and performed in 1917), which features the character of Sir Pearce Madigan, a British Army general and the owner of an Irish country estate. While Shaw does not suggest in this work that Protestant landlords like Madigan should be "hunted and shot," he does suggest that such aristocratic grandees are overly disconnected from their Catholic tenants. Much of the play's humor stems from the fact that Private Dennis O'Flaherty (awarded the Victoria Cross) has been emboldened by his exposure to the wider world, which leads him to treat his landlord, Madigan, as an equal. O'Flaherty no longer feels obligated to be overly deferential toward his landlord and no longer lies about his real sociopolitical views. Sir Pearce is shocked and scandalized when he discovers how people like O'Flaherty and his mother actually view the world.

In *O'Flaherty, V.C.*, Shaw gives a further indication of Madigan's cultural distance from his tenants through his talismanic devotion to the Victoria Cross. At one point, the general gets angry with O'Flaherty because he feels that the private's forthright views have crossed a line and are impertinent. However, when O'Flaherty subsequently mentions the Cross in passing, Madigan quickly reverts to his former respect for the private; this is because the general's culturally British upbringing has taught him that winning the Victoria Cross is a supremely high honor—indeed, the highest honor that can be bestowed upon a soldier.³⁰ By contrast, O'Flaherty says that the Cross means little to him, other than the pension that comes with it;³¹ this is clearly the only interest that it holds for his materialistic girlfriend, Tessie, as well.

From Shaw's point of view, Sir Pearce's cultural and social distance from his tenants is indefensible. However, in *John Bull's Other Island*, Shaw contends that if there is to be a landlord-tenant system in Ireland, it would be better if the land was in the hands of aloof "West Brits" such as Madigan rather than the hands of greedy small farmers and the new, unscrupulous, upstart, would-be land barons. This is a view that Shaw repeats in his journalism about Ireland.³² *John Bull's Other Island* deals centrally with the redistribution of Irish land in the wake of the Land Acts, which were passed between 1885 and 1903 in response to the Land War. These acts allowed and encouraged small farmers to purchase their freeholds from their (mainly) Protestant landlords. In *John Bull's Other Island*, the Shavian mouthpiece Larry Doyle fears that the new landowners, including small farmers like Matthew Haffigan, will be even more oppressive to those who cannot afford to buy land, such as the farm laborer Patsy Farrell, than Big House landlords like Nick Lestrangle ever were. Doyle says to Haffigan,

Do you think, because you're poor and ignorant and half-crazy with toiling and moiling morning noon and night, that you'll be any less greedy and oppressive to them that have no land at all than old Nick Lestrangle, who was an educated travelled gentleman that would not have been tempted as hard by a hundred pounds as you'd be by five shillings? Nick was too high above Patsy Farrell to be jealous of him; but you, that are only one little step above him, would die sooner than let him come up that step; and well you know it.³³

In this speech, Shaw draws attention to what he regards as Lestrangle's excessive distance from his tenants. He does this not only by alluding to the landlord's high social position and expensive education, but also by giving him the Norman name "Lestrangle"—which suggests that this gentleman is on some level a "stranger" or "foreigner" to Ireland. It should be stressed, as argued earlier, that Shaw is not implying that such Big House landlords are non-Irish foreigners. Indeed, Shaw was always at pains to emphasize that the old "Protestant country gentlemen . . . were as Irish as Irish could be."³⁴ He is merely suggesting that, while Protestant landlords and their families have certainly become Irish over their centuries of residence in Ireland, many—such as Lestrangle—have preserved too much social and cultural distance from the general populace. While Shaw, as a socialist, felt that such snobbery was reprehensible, he also felt a perhaps unexpected sympathy and appreciation for Big House figures like Lestrangle. His openness to the residents of Big Houses is evident in *John Bull's Other Island* at two points in the script. One is the quote cited above, in which Shaw uses Doyle to voice his opinion that a Big House landlord is often "an educated travelled gentleman" who will be kinder to landless laborers than the new, rising, Catholic middle classes will. Another occurs earlier in the play, when Shaw uses Doyle to articulate his sneaking regard for roguish Irish squires and his hope that the occupants of Big Houses will not be treated too harshly in the financial reckoning to come. As Doyle says to his English business partner, Broadbent, "Your foreclosing this Rosscullen mortgage and turning poor Nick Lestrangle out of house and home has rather taken me aback; for I liked the old rascal when I was a boy and had the run of his park to play in."³⁵

Shaw's regard for Big House Protestants is evident not just from these quotations from *John Bull's Other Island*. We also know that he had a soft spot for members of the Irish Ascendancy from the fact that he married the daughter of a Cork Big House: Charlotte Payne-Townshend. Shaw frequently visited the estates of Charlotte's relations and friends throughout Ireland and England. As a socialist and as someone raised in a thoroughly

middle-class Dublin household, Shaw was not always at ease in these country Big Houses. While one might assume that he had practice moving in such circles as a child, his father's alcoholism and business difficulties meant that he visited the Shaw family seat at Bushy Park only once during his childhood. A good indication of Shaw's outsider status in this aristocratic milieu is a story told by C. S. Lewis, which was doing the rounds in the extended Church of Ireland social circles of which both his family and Shaw's were a part. Lewis wrote to a friend,

Do you know the story of how this same G.B.S. once got more than he bargained for? He had been asked to stay with Lady Londonderry, a great society hostess in the old days, and sent her a letter warning her that it was not his habit to eat the bodies of dead and often putrefying animals and birds and so on, in typical Shaw style; he got his answer by telegram—"Know nothing of your habits: trust they are better than your manners."³⁶

Contrary to what this story might suggest, Shaw actually got on quite well with important Big House *châtelaines*.³⁷ In addition to his strong friendship with Abbey Theatre founder and fellow playwright Lady Gregory of Coole Park, he also had a close relationship with his wife's sister, Lady Mary Cholmondeley. It is to Lady Cholmondeley that he addresses his work of popular economics, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928, revised as *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism* in 1937).³⁸ It is important to note that, in this work, Shaw—in keeping with the Fabian value on a reasonable pace of sociopolitical change—calls for the *gradual* liquidation of the assets of those who own estates or have shares in banks, with the owners getting "full market price" for their property.³⁹ He is once again emphasizing, as he had through Doyle in *John Bull's Other Island*, that he does not want to see such gentry figures rudely and abruptly "turned out of house and home."

That said, Shaw definitely wanted such landowners to give up their assets (as he would later do with his properties in Carlow and Wexford), not only as part of a socialist program to produce a more equal society but also for the good of their souls. In Shaw's *Heartbreak House* (completed 1917, published 1919)—a work inspired by Chekhov's Big House dramas—he demonstrates his firm belief that the leisured classes of Europe are being driven to madness and/or congenital ennui simply because they are leading unproductive, decadent lives. Although Shaw sets the play's action in

north Sussex, the household depicted is clearly informed by his extensive exposure to Irish—and not simply English—Big House life.

Because of this, *Heartbreak House* can be seen as, at least on some level, an Irish Big House play. I am not the first to suggest this: Audrey McNamara has previously and extensively discussed many of the play's Irish elements. In particular, she has noted that the house at the heart of the play recalls Irish Protestant Big Houses in that the owner, as well as his relations and social equals, all possess surnames that seem English in origin (Shotover, Utterwood, Hushabye), while the servants and the visitors from lower-class backgrounds possess what are—or at least could be—Irish Catholic surnames (Guinness, Mangan, Dunn). Further to this, she has suggested that “Boss” Mangan, being a middleman between big financiers and small businesses, could be seen as a “gombeen man” (one of the usurious Irish middlemen mentioned earlier). McNamara has also pointed out the numerous parallels between *Heartbreak House* and Shaw's major Irish play, *John Bull's Other Island* (including the poetic and mystical strain that runs through both works and the damning reflections on international capitalism). Finally, she has noted the Yeatsian echoes in the play—and Yeats is, of course, a constant presence whenever one is discussing the Irish Big House.⁴⁰

Building on McNamara's analysis, I would contend that there is another crucial way in which *Heartbreak House* can be linked to the Irish Big House, and it relates to the play's reflections on horses. In the play's preface, Shaw claims that there were two types of country houses in Europe prior to the outbreak of the Great War: those he calls Heartbreak House, whose residents were fixated on culture, science, and sex, and those he calls Horseback Hall, whose residents were consumed with breeding and riding horses—as well as with “charity, churchgoing (as a substitute for religion), and conservative electioneering (as a substitute for politics).”⁴¹ Shaw contends in the preface that the residents of both types of houses have no aptitude for practical living and that their estates cannot survive much longer. In the case of Heartbreak House, Shaw suggests through the play that the denizens of such cultured Big Houses are asleep to their fate, hence all the play's references to sleep—including, most obviously, the name Hushabye and Mangan's hypnotic “sleep.” In this state of torpor, such houses—no matter how cultured—will not be able to stand up to the intrusions of new-money robber barons such as Mangan or the intrusions of practical politics (in this case, bombs falling from the sky during a world war). However, toward the end of the play, Lady Utterwood suggests that there may be a future for Heartbreak House if they can subdue their “neurotic” cultural, scientific, and sexual interests and embrace the outdoor rigors associated

with breeding and riding horses and going on hunts.⁴² Lady Utterwood's father, the Big House owner Captain Shotover, believes that she may be on to something. This is interesting, because such a combining of the positive attributes of Heartbreak House with those of Horseback Hall is exactly what was aspired to by the residents of many Irish Big Houses between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, including two estates visited by Shaw and his wife: Lady Gregory's Coole Park in Gort, County Galway and Edith Somerville's Drishane in Castletownshend, County Cork.

For much of the eighteenth century, the residents of Irish Big Houses had a reputation for being dissolute and much more interested in horses and pleasure than they were in learning. As the Longford-born, middle-class son of a clergyman, Oliver Goldsmith, put it, the men of the Irish gentry "spen[t] their whole lives in running after a hare, drinking to be drunk, and getting every girl with child that will let them" and "spent more money on breeding horses in one season than they had in two centuries on learning."⁴³ Toward the end of the century, Big House-dwelling antiquarians such as Charlotte Brooke published scholarly works that attempted "to clear the reputation of her . . . class as an ascendancy of muscular dullards."⁴⁴ Yeats and Synge were presumably thinking of such scholars—as well as, perhaps, the Edgeworth family's social circle or isolated individuals from earlier in the century, such as Lord Charlemont, George Berkeley, and Henry Brooke (Charlotte's father)—when they idealized eighteenth-century Big Houses as bastions of learning possessed of fine libraries.⁴⁵

Late eighteenth-century Big House scholars like Brooke inspired many Ascendancy families to balance an interest in hunting and horses with intellectual pursuits. As a result, when Shaw visited Coole Park and Drishane in the early twentieth century, he was greeted by hostesses who combined an interest in scholarship with an interest in equestrian pastimes. Lady Gregory not only was a great writer, but also bred horses, attended horse races (though not as often as her late gambling-addict husband did), and went to the Horse Show at the Royal Dublin Society Showgrounds on various occasions. Her interest in horses made its way into her work: the breeding and racing of horses are central to two plays, *Galway Races* (1913) and *Shanwalla* (1915), and horses feature prominently in her retellings of Irish mythology. Edith Somerville—one half of the writing team Somerville and Ross—was a Master of Fox Hounds, leading local hunts in West Cork, and her cousin and writing partner, Martin Ross (née Violet Martin), never really recovered from injuries sustained in a horse-related hunting accident. Horses and hunts feature prominently in many of Somerville and Ross's most famous works, including *The Silver Fox* (1897) and the *Irish R.M.* stories (1898–1915).

Given Shaw's friendships with Gregory and Somerville, it seems likely that he is suggesting, through Lady Utterwood, that the Irish attempt to combine Heartbreak House and Horseback Hall is preferable to the segregation of these two types of houses, as was the norm in England. (In the play's preface, Shaw notes that, in the English Big Houses that he visited at weekends, "sometimes one came upon horsebreakers and heartbreakers who could make the best of both worlds. As a rule, however, the two were apart and knew little of each other.")⁴⁶ Shaw—being a proud Irishman and someone interested in hiking, cycling, and calisthenics—may have preferred the balance between culture and outdoor pursuits found in many Irish Big Houses, but he ultimately believed that Heartbreak House, Horseback Hall, and any combination of the two were doomed. As a socialist, he believed that exploitative capitalism would eventually give way to a more equal society in which all citizens would lead—or would be forced to lead—productive lives. As he demonstrates in *Heartbreak House*, he did not regard the idle rich as simply lazy. The cultured residents of the house in his play have spent much time in cultivating their intellects (reading books, learning musical instruments, etc.). Likewise, the athletic residents of Horseback Hall were also not, to Shaw's mind, wantonly idle people. After all, as Shaw points out in *The Intelligent Woman's Guide*, they regularly engaged in "dangerous and exhausting sports."⁴⁷ For Shaw and other socialists, "economic idleness" did not mean "inactivity but consuming without producing."⁴⁸ As active as the residents of Heartbreak House and Horseback Hall were, their labor was not productive; what's more, their lives of indulgence were made possible only by the productive labor of others. Shaw rightly recognized that such profound economic inequality could not last much longer (workers would no longer contenance it) and that such estates would soon perish.

This is, of course, exactly what happened. In Ireland, the world of the Big House came to an abrupt end thanks to the War of Independence and the Civil War. As Terence Brown has noted, "between 6 December 1921 and 22 March 1923 192 [Irish] Big Houses were burned by incendiaries" right across the island.⁴⁹ This cataclysmic end often obscures the fact that these large estates were dying anyway—and not just in Ireland but also in Britain. Financial difficulties resulted in 221 country houses being "destroyed in England, Scotland, and Wales" between the world wars, and, by 1975, over 1,200 British Big Houses had been "destroyed or abandoned . . . [while] many others were transferred to the National Trust, became reliant on paying visitors, or became schools or other institutions."⁵⁰ Although many did not see this monumental societal change coming, Shaw, writing *Heartbreak House* between 1913 and 1917, certainly did.

In an essay on landlords and tenants, it is important to note that there are no tenant characters in *Heartbreak House*, and, in fact, the Shotover tenants are not even mentioned in the play. This is a deliberate omission on Shaw's part. Shaw is once again highlighting something that he had observed in his previous plays informed by Irish landlord-tenant relations: the fact that landlords and their families often preserve too much distance from their tenants. Just as Sartorius does not collect his own rents in *Widower's Houses*, just as the landlord in *John Bull's Other Island* is deliberately named Lestrangle, and just as General Madigan is stunned by the views of his tenants in *O'Flaherty, V.C.*, the residents of Heartbreak House do not pay much attention to the tenants who are providing them with their income.⁵¹ When they remember their servant, Nurse Guinness, it is usually to criticize her. Such artificially contrived social and cultural distance was highly distasteful to the socialist Shaw.

Toward the end of Shaw's long life, he repeatedly insisted that his formative years in Ireland had left a much greater imprint on him than his much longer residence in England.⁵² As we have seen, his perspective on landlord-tenant relations, first formed in Ireland, made a significant impact not only on his politics but also on his work for the stage. Five of his plays are informed by his early exposure to tenement slums and to property owners who owed their exalted social position and their incomes to the exploitation of their lower-class tenants—people who they could not be bothered to connect with in a meaningful way. Such selfish greed and disregard for those of inferior economic standing can still be detected among landlords and unscrupulous mortgage lenders today. There is currently a severe housing crisis in Shaw's native Dublin. Rents are spiraling out of control and homes are being repossessed in record numbers, resulting in what has been called a "tsunami of homelessness."⁵³ Given his views on property, Shaw would certainly be disappointed to see that Western capitalism, including in his home country of Ireland, still forces the economically vulnerable to live at the mercy of market forces and that better progress has not been made in providing safe and secure housing for all.

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NOTES

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1. Bernard Shaw, *Major Barbara* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 15.
2. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1911–1925*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 364.
3. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1898–1910*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Dodd, 1972), 501.
4. In this article, the dates used for each play refer to either the first publication or the first production, whichever came first.
5. Murray Fraser, *John Bull's Other Homes: State Housing and British Policy in Ireland, 1883–1922* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 64–65.
6. Bernard Shaw, *O'Flaherty, V.C.*, in *Selected Short Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 255.
7. Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1911–1925*, 400.
8. Bernard Shaw, “Neglected Morals of the Irish Rising (1916),” in *The Matter with Ireland*, 2nd ed., ed. Dan H. Laurence and David H. Greene (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 121.
9. Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw. Volume 1, 1856–1898: The Search for Love* (London: Penguin, 1988), 128, 127.
10. Bernard Shaw, *Widowers' Houses*, in *Plays Unpleasant* (London: Penguin, 2000), 60.
11. For more on land agents, “middlemen,” and “gombeen men,” see Ciarán Ó Murchadha, *The Great Famine: Ireland's Agony 1845–1852* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 188–89.
12. Shaw, *Widowers' Houses*, 60.
13. *Ibid.*, 59.
14. *Ibid.*, 61.
15. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1874–1897*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London: Reinhardt, 1965), 373.
16. Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1956), 55.
17. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, Vol. III (1901–1904)*, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 302. Yeats had written to Shaw, looking for permission to produce *The Man of Destiny* (1899), but Shaw suggested three alternate plays: *Widowers' Houses*, *Arms and the Man* (1894), and *The Devil's Disciple* (1897). For more on this, see Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel, *Shaw, Synge, Connolly, and Socialist Provocation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 17, 226.
18. Indeed, Yeats would not produce *Widowers' Houses* until it had its Abbey Theatre premiere in 1916.
19. Ritschel, *Shaw, Synge, Connolly, and Socialist Provocation*, 10–16.
20. David Edgar, “Introduction,” in Shaw, *Plays Unpleasant*, xvi.
21. Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1926–1950*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 743.

22. For Shaw's communications with De Valera and Maurice Moynihan (De Valera's private secretary) over what eventually became the Local Authorities (Acceptance of Gifts) Act of 1946, see Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1926-1950*, 748, 743.

23. Aristocratic Big House families and even middle-class families from Church of Ireland backgrounds are often called the "Anglo-Irish." This term was despised by Shaw, and is therefore not used in this essay. Shaw echoed the views of many of his fellow Irish Anglicans when he said that calling Irish people of British descent from Church of Ireland backgrounds "Anglo-Irish" has been a convenient way for English commentators—and bigoted "Irish-Irelanders"—to imply that these people are not really Irish. See Bernard Shaw, "Ireland Eternal and External (1948)," in *The Matter with Ireland*, 340.

24. Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court* (New York: Ecco, 1979), 20; Elizabeth Bowen, "The Big House," in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Hermione Lee (London: Virago, 1986), 27.

25. Brian Friel, *The Home Place* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 21, 35, 36, 65, 71, 75; Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, in *Plays One* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 332, 335, 339, 345.

26. It should be noted that the people who reside in Ireland in this futuristic play—and who live for hundreds of years—are not ethnically and culturally Irish. (The Irish became effectively extinct after leaving Ireland to stir up anticolonial revolutions throughout the world.) However, as Peter Gahan has noted, these futuristic residents of Ireland are "more Irish than the Irish themselves and exemplify the positive qualities that Shaw found gave Irishmen a type of wisdom, an objectivity in dealing with subjects other than Ireland." Peter Gahan, "John Bull's Other War: Bernard Shaw and the Anglo-Irish War, 1918-1921," *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 28 (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2008), 219. Elsewhere, I have shown that Shaw uses these "long-liver" characters as crypto-Irish foils to the English Elderly Gentleman and his family. See chap. 3 of David Clare, *Bernard Shaw's Irish Outlook* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

27. Bernard Shaw, *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*, in *Back to Methuselah* (London: Penguin, 1990), 195, 194, 195.

28. *Ibid.*, 195.

29. Bernard Shaw, *Everybody's Political What's What*, 2nd ed. (London: Constable, 1950), 17.

30. Shaw, *O'Flaherty, V.C.*, 263.

31. *Ibid.*, 263.

32. See, for example, Bernard Shaw, "Socialism and Ireland (1919)," in *The Matter with Ireland*, 241.

33. Bernard Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island* (London: Penguin, 1984), 119.

34. Shaw, "Ireland Eternal and External," 339.

35. Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island*, 78-79.

36. C. S. Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume 3: Narnia, Cambridge and Joy, 1950-1963*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), 286-87. Lewis, despite his high-profile criticisms of Shaw's belief in Creative Evolution, describes himself in private letters as "an admirer of Bernard Shaw's work" and as having "an enthusiasm for Shaw." Indeed, he shows his familiarity with Shaw's oeuvre in

this letter through the line “got more than he bargained for.” This is an allusion to the preface to *John Bull’s Other Island*, in which Shaw claimed that Yeats—in requesting a play for the Abbey from Shaw—“got rather more than he bargained for.” Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume 3*, 65; Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume 2: Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931–1949*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 28; Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume 3*, 286; Shaw, *John Bull’s Other Island*, 7.

37. Shaw also became friendly with some of the male owners of the Irish Big Houses that he visited, most notably Sir Horace Plunkett.

38. Margaret Walters, “Introduction,” in Bernard Shaw, *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), vi.

39. Shaw, *Intelligent Woman’s Guide*, 287–92.

40. For McNamara’s analysis of the Irish elements in *Heartbreak House*, see her unpublished conference papers, “Bernard Shaw’s *Heartbreak House*: From Bull to Heartbreak” (UCD Drama Studies Research Seminar Series, University College Dublin, 24 March 2014), and “*Heartbreak House*: A Plague on Both Your Houses!” (ACIS 2013 Conference, DePaul University, 10 April 2013); see also her Programme Note for the 2013 Abbey Theatre Production of *Heartbreak House*, “*Heartbreak House* and the Decline of an Empire.” Elsewhere, I weigh up the case for seeing Mangan, Guinness, and the Dunns as portraits of Irish or Irish Diasporic people. See chaps. 1 and 2 of *Bernard Shaw’s Irish Outlook*.

41. Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 9.

42. *Ibid.*, 141.

43. Oliver Goldsmith, *Collected Letters*, ed. Katharine Calderston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 10; Declan Kiberd, “The Perils of Nostalgia: A Critique of the Revival,” in *Literature and the Changing Ireland*, ed. Peter Connolly (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), 17. Kiberd is paraphrasing the passage from Goldsmith’s undated letter to “Daniel Hodson Esqr. at Lishoy near Ballymahon, Ireland” (probably written in the summer of 1758), in which he wrote, “There has been more money spent in the encouragement of the Padareen mare there [in Ireland] in one season, than given in rewards to learned men since the times of [Archbishop James] Usher” (Goldsmith, *Collected Letters*, 29). The extravagant amount spent on the Padareen mare seems to have particularly appalled Goldsmith, since he also references it in his epistolary novel *The Citizen of the World* (1760–61). See Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World, or, Letters from a Chinese Philosopher, Residing in London, to His Friends in the East*, vol. 1 (Bungay: Child, 1820), 30.

44. Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2000), 304.

45. W. B. Yeats, *Purgatory*, in *Eleven Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 201; J. M. Synge, “A Landlord’s Garden in County Wicklow,” in *Collected Works II: Prose*, ed. Alan Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 231. It should be noted that, regardless of Yeats’s mythologizing of the eighteenth-century Big House, the vast majority of Irish Protestant artists and intellectuals publishing prior to Charlotte Brooke—with the obvious exceptions of James Ussher, Robert Boyle, George Berkeley, and Charlotte’s father, Henry—were

from thoroughly middle-class backgrounds. I am referring, of course, to people like William Molyneux, Jonathan Swift, William Congreve, George Farquhar, Sir Richard Steele, John Toland, Thomas Parnell, Mary Barber, Laetitia Pilkington, Laurence Sterne, Edmund Burke, Charles Macklin, the Sheridans (Thomas, Sr., Thomas, Jr., Frances, Richard Brinsley, Alicia, and Elizabeth), and Oliver Goldsmith. Dissenter and Catholic scholars and artists from this period—including Francis Hutchinson, Sylvester O’Halloran, John Curry, Charles O’Conor, and the Ulster Weaver poets—were also from distinctly nonaristocratic backgrounds.

46. Shaw, *Heartbreak House*, 9.

47. Shaw, *Intelligent Woman’s Guide*, 13.

48. *Ibid.*, 13.

49. Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 86.

50. David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 119; Jeremy Black, *A History of the British Isles*, 3rd ed. (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 263.

51. Of course Captain Shotover also supports the household with the money made from his inventions.

52. See, for example, Bernard Shaw, “Shaw Speaks to His Native City (1946),” in *The Matter with Ireland*, 334–38; Shaw, “Ireland Eternal and External,” 339.

53. Miriam Donohoe, “Alan Kelly ‘Should Cut Holiday Short’ to Deal with ‘Tsunami of Homelessness,’” *Irish Independent*, 12 August 2015. See also Carl O’Brien, “McVerry Warns of ‘Tsunami of Homelessness,’” *Irish Times*, 18 May 2014.