

George Bernard Shaw: Irish to the core

‘I have lived for 20 years in Ireland and for 72 in England; but the 20 came first, and in Britain I am still a foreigner and shall die one’

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At the age of 75, Bernard Shaw told an interviewer that the happiest moment of his life was when as a child his mother informed him that his family was moving from Synge Street in Dublin city centre to a cottage on Dalkey Hill in south Co Dublin. The young Shaw was so excited, because he already knew (and treasured) the magnificent view that is available from Dalkey Hill: the Wicklow Mountains and Killiney Bay to the south, the Hill of Howth to the north, and Dalkey Island and the Irish Sea directly below. Throughout Shaw’s career, he always insisted that it was it was “the beauty of Ireland” that gave Irish people their distinctive perspective, and, in his own case, he believed that it was the beauty of this particular view that helped to shape him into the visionary iconoclast that he was.

Indeed, upon receiving the Honorary Freedom of Dublin at the age of 89, Shaw told journalist James Whelan: “I am a product of Dalkey’s outlook.” As Shaw approached the end of his life, he was eager to emphasise the importance of his Irish formative years to his work. In an article published three years later (and two years before his death), he declared: “Eternal is the fact that the human creature born in Ireland and brought up in its air is Irish ... I have lived for 20 years in Ireland and for 72 in England; but the 20 came first, and in Britain I am still a foreigner and shall die one.”

Those who know Shaw by reputation as a writer of English society plays may be surprised to learn that he regarded himself as so thoroughly Irish, even after living in London and Hertfordshire for decades. While one might expect to see evidence of Shaw’s Irishness in his three plays set in Ireland – John Bull’s Other Island, O’Flaherty, V.C., and Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman – my book, Bernard Shaw’s Irish Outlook (published by Palgrave Macmillan and now available in paperback), demonstrates that Shaw’s Irishness is also manifest in his plays set outside of his native country. In this study, I analyse Shaw’s use of Irish and Irish Diasporic characters, as well as what I call “Surrogate Irish” and “Stage English” characters, to prove the veracity of critic RF Dietrich’s recent contention that Shaw “wrote always as an Irishman”.

Chapter 1 of my book examines all of Shaw’s plays that feature Irish characters (including the Irish-set plays, but also the “English” plays Man and Superman, The Doctor’s Dilemma, Press Cuttings, and Fanny’s First Play). In each of these works, Shaw uses Irish characters to express his Irish reverse snobbery. He makes the childhood poverty and struggle against prejudice endured by his Irish characters seem like an advantage in life compared to the material comfort and public school educations enjoyed by many of his English characters, thereby creating a new kind of underdog hero: the member of an oppressed populace having to deal with spoiled, politically unrealistic, dangerously sentimental imperial overlords or social superiors. Unlike the characters from the English novels and plays of the preceding centuries, Shaw’s Irish characters do not attempt to suppress any hint that they come from marginalised backgrounds. Indeed, Shaw’s Irish characters are very proud of their Irish origins.

Although the reverse snobbery expressed in these works was regarded as “typical Shavian perversity” when these plays were first produced, Shaw’s enduring popularity with audiences has ensured that this idea has gained purchase in the Anglophone world. Today, it is often suggested that people from less-advantaged backgrounds are cannier and have more joie-de-vivre than those from higher class backgrounds, and, in recent decades, we have regularly seen middle- and upper-class people pretending to be from less prosperous backgrounds than they actually are. Shaw’s Irish outlook – including the Irish chip on his shoulder – is at least partially responsible for this remarkable societal change.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that Shaw – like most Irish people – had conflicted feelings regarding the Irish Diaspora. On the one hand, he could be quite scathing about those born outside of Ireland who claimed to be Irish (he once called them “sham Irish”). However, he was also adamant that his friends of Irish descent, including the boxer Gene Tunney, the actor Lillah McCarthy, and the freedom fighter TE Lawrence (aka “Lawrence of Arabia”) should be regarded as Irish. Indeed, he nominated Lawrence and the New York-born playwright Eugene O’Neill for the Irish Academy of Letters.

This ambivalence regarding the Diaspora is reflected in Shaw’s plays. While some characters of Irish descent in his work are treated as not Irish at all, he suggests that others owe their strengths and weaknesses to their Irish cultural backgrounds. The most notable example of such a character is Henry Higgins from *Pygmalion* (the play which, of course, formed the basis for the classic musical *My Fair Lady*). Shaw – as he himself pointed out – was very knowledgeable regarding Irish names, thanks to his time working in an estate office in Dublin. He not only chose to give his rude but winning phonetics professor a surname he knew to be Irish (Higgins is an Anglicisation of Ó hUigín, meaning “son of the Viking”), he also imbued the character with many of the traits associated with Irishness in his other plays.

Like the Irish-born characters in *Man and Superman*, *John Bull’s Other Island*, *The Doctor’s Dilemma*, *Press Cuttings*, *Fanny’s First Play*, and *O’Flaherty V.C.*, Higgins is a cynical fact-facer who is used by Shaw to puncture what he regarded as English “sentimentality” and “intellectual laziness”, and to expose the fact that the British class system is a ludicrous invention based on a set of arbitrary, learned manners.

Other Irish Diasporic characters from Shaw’s oeuvre analysed in this chapter include Fergus Crampton (based on the real-life Irish diplomat Sir John Crampton) from *You Never Can Tell*; Captain Kearney from *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion*; Cashel Byron (named after the Young Irelander, Cashel Hoey, who was married to Shaw’s cousin, the novelist Frances Johnston) from *Cashel Byron’s Profession* and *The Admirable Bashville*; “Snobby” O’Brien Price from *Major Barbara*; and Alfred “Boss” Mangan (based on the Dublin-born newspaper mogul, Alfred Harnsworth, later Lord Northcliffe) from *Heartbreak House*.

Chapter 3 examines the plays in which Shaw uses “Surrogate Irish” characters to comment on Irish politics and history and to explore issues that were important to his Irish Anglican subculture. The title character from *Saint Joan*, Napoleon from *The Man of Destiny*, and the long-livers from *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman* are all non-Irish characters who occupy an adversarial, crypto-Irish role when confronted with the English characters (or characters of English descent) included in these works. The Irish Anglican preoccupations present in these plays include – among others – marked ambivalence (and occasionally outright hostility) towards England; a deep familiarity with (if not always respect for) Roman Catholicism; a finely-tuned sense of differences in social class (arguably inherited from their British

forebears); a fixation on “cross-breeding” between people from different backgrounds; and a distrust of art and artifice (and a related fear of disappearing too far into dreams and the imagination). As fans of Irish literature will be aware, these Irish Anglican preoccupations can also be found in the work of other writers from Church of Ireland backgrounds, such as Swift, Farquhar, Edgeworth, LeFanu, Wilde, Yeats, Somerville & Ross, Bowen, Beckett, and CS Lewis.

In Chapter 4, Shaw’s use of satirical “Stage English” characters in his Irish plays is analysed. A survey of Shaw’s Stage English figures reveals that he retained a stubbornly Irish perspective regarding the people among whom he lived for most of his life; such a survey also reveals the degree to which Shaw’s Stage English characters are indebted to, and deliberately distinct from, satirical portraits of the English found in the work of other Irish writers. Most notably, there is a tendency among Irish writers to depict the English as either “racist, officious hypocrites” or “sentimental, romantic duffers”. Broadbent, from John Bull’s *Other Island*, is an ingenious combination of the two, and Shaw’s combining of these two English character types influenced important, later portraits of the English in Irish literature, including Haines from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Gerald Lesworth from Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September*, Basil Stoke and Cyril Poges from Seán O’Casey’s *Purple Dust*, and Leslie Williams and Monsewer from Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage*.

In Daniel Corkery’s notorious 1931 study, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, he claimed that Shaw was one of the Irish Protestant writers “for whom Ireland was never a patria in any sense”. My book demonstrates just how preposterous (and, indeed, sectarian) such a statement is. Shaw maintained a strongly Irish outlook throughout his life, and it inspired or significantly informed most of his best work – and, of course, Shaw’s masterpieces are among the greatest dramatic works of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.