

George Bernard Shaw by Emil Otto Hoppe

[Bill Jay: *I met E.O.Hoppe on several occasions a few months before he died. He was 94 years old and living in a nursing home in the English countryside. He did not receive any visitors who knew of his immense contributions to photography - not surprisingly in that the textbook of British photohistory had stated that Hoppe had died several years earlier. He often told me that I was his only touch with his past life as a photographer, and delighted in telling me stories of his encounters with the famous people in the arts, letters and politics with whom he was acquainted. In addition, he prepared for me many written reminiscences. This is one of them: his memories of the idiosyncratic dramatist and essayist - and photographer/critic - George Bernard Shaw*]

Everything that can be said of George Bernard Shaw has probably been said at one time or another and what I write are the impressions I have formed and the experiences I have had with the grand old Irishman, spanning a period of almost half a century. They are taken from my diaries, recorded by me as they occurred, and using, wherever this was possible, his own words as near as I remembered them.

It was inevitable that I should photograph George Bernard Shaw sooner or later. The typically Shavian way it came about was this: A one-man Show, consisting of portraits I had made of prominent men had opened at the Goupil Gallery in London, when I received a post-card which read, "Your show is incomplete - G.B.S.," to which I replied, also on a post-card, "Apologies for the omission - when will you come for a sitting?" What else could I have done without appearing ungracious?

Shaw came to Millais House shortly afterwards and I have no difficulty in remembering our first meeting. Contrary to widely held opinions that his axioms should not be taken too seriously, I was fascinated by his shrewdness and the commonsense views which he expressed and the infectious good humour with which he entered into the spirit of the sitting, showing keen interest in what I did and cooperating admirably with my suggestions.

I was aware of the interest Shaw took in photography - he was an unusually able amateur - and it was natural that our conversation should have become

monopolised by references to the various aspects of camera craft.

Stimulated by our common interest, this first meeting was the beginning of a cordial relationship which has endured for four decades.

I have always found it a stimulating experience to photograph George Bernard Shaw and I have done so many times. It was a challenge to interpret the man who was so many men in one - dramatist, socialist, critic, moralist. There were so many fronts to this nature that I found it difficult to unravel the complexity of his character.

My earliest visits were to his house at No. 19 Adelphi Terrace - a delightful bit of London long since demolished. At No. 5, Dr. Johnson often visited his friend Garrick, No. 7 was the headquarters of my own Club, the Savage, and James Barrie lived a few doors to the west. I have one of the photographs I took then before me now - Shaw standing astride against the mantelpiece, both hands in his trouser pockets, partly hiding an inscription on it - "What do they say? Let them say."

Shaw often came to Millais House for a sitting or to discuss photographic problems, or I photographed him at his Hertfordshire cottage in Ayot St. Lawrence. Once, I remember, he was in a particularly jovial mood and suggested to Dr. Archibald Henderson, his American biographer, who happened to be present that day, that he should take some pictures of himself talking to me. This is the caption which he wrote on the resulting print: "This is my celebrated performance as a genial and charming old man, blessings on his kindly voice and silver hair - and Hoppe pretending to be taken in."

Most men are, or pretend to be, camera-shy. Shaw was an exception. He admitted freely that he enjoyed being photographed. He was not only an ideal sitter but a capable performer with the camera himself. He became never tired of talking about his hobby to people who were equally enthusiastic and I believe that he probably knew more about the technique of the craft than most amateurs did. I recall the following incident to illustrate this.

One day I showed Shaw a collection of cloud photographs which I had made and he told me that atmospheric facts had a great attraction for him. Shortly afterwards we went to Putney Common to photograph some cloud formations. There we had an animated discussion whether to use light yellow or an orange-tinted filter to obtain correct tone-rendering in the photographs. I still have one of

these which Shaw gave me.

Once when we were looking at some portraits I had recently made I mentioned as a matter of academic interest, that one of the most frequent requests made by my sitters was to be photographed from what they called their "best side." Curiously, though, the demand was more frequently made by men than by women. As a matter of fact, the two sides of the face, dexter and sinister, do reveal different characteristics. We took a full-face portrait from the portfolio and covering first the one and then the other side of the face, found that sides differed in expression and even in form.

Photographic exhibitions following the first and preceding the second Great War presented on the whole a melancholy record of mediocrity and conventional sentimentality. There were some notable exceptions but they were few. The majority of the photographs betrayed a self-complaisant decorum of their makers and a reluctance to depart from tradition and break new ground. Foremost in the small group of outstanding British photographers was Frederick H. Evans, of whose work Shaw wrote, "He (Evans) relies on pure photography, not as a doctrinaire but as an artist."

These words led to the often debated question whether photography can be considered an art. We came to the conclusion that photography, though primarily an ideal recording medium, can become a vehicle for the expression of emotional and artistic values, provided the tools of the craft are used with due regard to the limitations imposed by the medium.

During all the years that I knew Shaw, I found him gentle-hearted by nature. The practical side of his disposition became singularly well apparent in the sympathy he showed towards young artists who struggled for recognition. He had not forgotten the lean years he had gone through himself. I remember an incident of which I was an eye-witness and which I believe has not been told before.

I knew a young portrait painter whose efforts to make his work known had failed him and who was forced to earn a bare living as a pavement artist, with a pitch in the Embankment. Shaw lived at the time at No. 9 Whitehall Court, which is just around the corner. I told him of my young friend and suggested that he should look at the pastel drawings and allow me to photograph him doing so. Shaw readily agreed and the resulting publicity helped a great deal to establish the artist's reputation.

I remember another example of Shaw's fundamental kindheartedness and tolerance. I asked him one day to give me his opinion of Frank Harris - who had not spared him in acid criticism. "You know him well, of course," I said, "He puzzles me. What is one to make of him?" Shaw's reply was guarded as he remarked with a good-humoured gravity, "Our ebullient friend is a brilliant master of pen-craft," adding as an afterthought, "he does not suffer from a surfeit of brotherly love, though."

I found it a severe task to capture in a photograph the essence of the man who was so many men in one. I know only one of the many portraits that were made of him which discloses more than one side of his character. It was made by Alvin Langdon Coburn who succeeded to interpret the Shaw of Fabian policy and of "Getting Married." One had to reveal the imagination of the social prophet, penetrate the mask of the satirist, suggest flashes of sparkling wit - where could one find the key to such a complex fabric?

I remember Shaw as a tall, loose-limbed man in his early sixties with roguish grey eyes under bristling eyebrows, defiant yet kindly jocular. His forehead was noble and humour hovered around a generous mouth in a pink-cheeked face. His voice was soft and coaxing and had the merest suggestion of an Irish brogue. When putting forward an argument he used to raise and wag the index finger of the right hand to emphasize his point.

Shaw had the rare gift to laugh at himself. When he inspected Jacob Epstein's bust of himself his comment was, "Shaw without a sense of humour is not quite Shaw."

His humour was sensitive and suave rather than sarcastic and his harangues were often spiced with Johnsonian humour. Shaw has been called an acid humourist. To some extent this description may be apt, but then, the bitter pills which he administered whether denouncing the follies and hypocrisies from the stage, the platform or in print, were coated with honey. Being a hard-headed realist he was under no illusion that his outspokenness made him unpopular but instead of taking his critics seriously he was inclined to laugh at them. No, I look upon Shaw as the gentle cynic rather than the flippant poseur, as which he has sometimes been described.

I can only speak of my own experiences. On the many occasions and under varied circumstances we have met, I found George Bernard Shaw unfailingly

good humoured and kindhearted.

Here is a little story worth retelling. The incident occurred on the occasion of the first night at the Court Theatre of "Heartbreak House." At the fall of the final curtain the gallery showed their disapproval of the play by hissing and catcalls which threatened to drown the modest applause of the rest of the audience. Appearing before the curtain, raising both arms and spreading the fingers, Shaw turned towards the Olympians and in a voice of mock-seriousness said, "While I may sympathise with your point of view ladies and gentlemen, courtesy towards the rest of the audience prevents me to agree with you."

I had my first book published in 1924 (In Gipsy Camp and Royal Palace) and on re-reading what I had written was disappointed by a lack of polish. I mentioned this to Shaw who commented dryly, "Do not worry but remember that what you say is more important than how you say it. After all, the skill to arrange the letters of the alphabet in sequences so that they form word pictures is only achieved by experience." I have on my library shelves a much-treasured volume. Its title is "Back to Methusela" and the fly-leaf bears this inscription - To the bald knight of the Camera, from the gentle philosopher - G.B.S.

It was shortly after his return from the Riviera, bronzed and full of vitality, that I went to see him and take a series of photographs for my friend Adcock of "The Bookmen." Lurid details of a divorce case involving a well-known politician filled the Sunday papers just then. Commenting on the case, Shaw remarked that he considered the present marriage law unreasonable. "Marriage," he said to me "is a state of freehold as far as the man is concerned, but there the husband gains and enters upon possession for ever; it should justly be made to conform with the laws governing a leasehold, renewable at certain periods laid down by legislation."

In his view many marriages would be happier if the husband would beg his wife to grant him renewal, say every seven years.