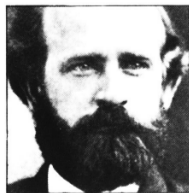


# FROM GEORGE TO S



• George

## The so-strange evolution of George Bernard Shaw



• Shaw

ROY DOUGLAS  
a chapter in  
great man

AT THE TIME of his death in 1950, George Bernard Shaw was one of those gurus whose works were still being avidly read by most people with any sort of intellectual pretensions. He was, beyond argument, one of the great literary figures of the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th.

His plays have a delight all of their own. Their characters are, for the most part, wholly unconvincing as human beings; but the points which they make bring home arguments with exceptional clarity.

Yet somehow Shaw the man eludes us. How could the young convert to Henry George pass through a rake's progress via Fabian socialism to the eager defence of Stalin during the period of that monster's greatest crimes against humanity? There must be something truly odd about a man who is capable of such an evolution.

Michael Holroyd's book\* tells us how it all started, and will presumably be followed by one or more companion volumes, which will bring the story down to the death of the 94-year old sage, long after all the great figures with whom he had been

\* Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw Vol. 1: The Search for Love, 1856-1898*. Chatto & Windus, London, 1988, 486pp.

associated in the period of his glory had left the scene.

Shaw was born into a family of erratic morals, sexual and otherwise; but he appears to have been the lawful progeny of a very drunken, shabby-genteel Irishman, George Carr Shaw, by a wife who held him in little regard.

Later, a curious *menage à trois* developed, in which his parents were joined by a music teacher named Lee, who may have played some part in encouraging Shaw's considerable musical interests.

But the whole relationship seems to have been a loveless one; and perhaps in this fact we have an important clue to Shaw's development. He read avidly, and appears to have been influenced considerably in his intellectual development - and lifelong vegetarianism - by the writings of Shelley.

In 1876, aged twenty, Shaw moved to London. He contrived to keep himself alive, first with office work and later as the

author of some serious career a

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## ELECTRIFYING

GEORGE Bernard Shaw heard Henry George speak at a London meeting in 1882. He was electrified by the insights which the American was able to offer on the major social problems that dogged society.

George explained the persistence of poverty amid plenty, and he did so with little more than the rigorous application of the principal tenets of classical economics.

In later years, asked by his biographer, Hesketh Pearson, for an explanation as to the cause of poverty, Shaw replied:

"The Ricardian law of rent which nobody understands." On another occasion, Shaw elaborated:

The malignant demon is not Shakespeare's angry ape dressed in a little brief authority, but the impersonal Ricardian law of rent, which remains the pons asinorum of political science. If only it could be knocked into people's heads as effectively as the Apostle's Creed, they would react to it as Henry George did, or Karl Marx, or

## ENLIGHTENMENT

Sidney Webb, or myself.

Shaw had gone on to discover Karl Marx.

Marx was a revelation. His abstract economics, I discovered later, were wrong, but he rent the veil.

The theories may have been wrong, but Marx's perspectives, which emphasised the primacy of the labour and capital markets, held sway. The land market was buried in a welter of Hegelian metaphysics.

Shaw's heart was in the right place. He preached the brother-

hood of mankind based on the fellowship of communism. But the means which he advocated were misguided, Stalin was his hero; he would banish the landlord in favour of the collectivisation of agriculture, and capital would be socialised.

Stalin's collectivised farm has not withstood the gaze of glasnost: the practice has been found to be as faulty as the theory. Meanwhile, a century of opportunities for the advancement of mankind has been lost in the pursuit of a foolhardy experiment.