Shaw, Crusading Journalist

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Bernard Shaw, W.T. Stead, and the New Journalism: Whitechapel, Parnell, Titanic, and the Great War. By Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 248 pages. £67.

Before he became a great and popular playwright, Bernard Shaw first found significant fame as an informed, perceptive, passionate, and often humorous theater, music, and art critic. However, while writing these early reviews, he was also producing journalistic works of a rather different stripe: crusading letters and articles that sought to create a more just and equal society. As *Bernard Shaw, W.T. Stead, and the New Journalism*, a new book by Nelson O'Ceallaigh Ritschel, demonstrates, these early pieces were inspired by the emergence of the New Journalism, as promoted by English newspapermen like Stead. Of course, Shaw was always a dedicated fact-facer and truth-teller, so, while he admired the social justice instincts which inspired much New Journalism, he also resisted the movement's frequent recourse to titillating sensationalism and even (in the name of boosting one's cause) deliberate deception and the distorting of facts. Indeed, as O'Ceallaigh Ritschel amply proves, the New Journalism's influence on Shaw was always twofold: confirming his belief (or hope) that journalism could change the world for the better but also warning him to avoid dishonest claims or dwelling on salacious content in the hopes of attracting readers and (temporarily) carrying a point.

As O'Ceallaigh Ritschel notes, early in Shaw's career, his name did not carry enough weight to guarantee the publication of his crusading pieces. For example, in 1889, he wrote a brilliant letter to the editors of the *Star* in which he took English society to task for consistently declaring that homosexuality is "unnatural" and acting with mock horror over it when all were perfectly aware that gay sex went on regularly in English public schools and the Navy (among many other places) and was practiced by revered Greek philosophers. The *Star* rejected the letter, as did the editors of *Truth*, when Shaw subsequently sent it to them.

Of course, as Shaw's fame—first as a critic and then as a playwright—grew, he had less and less trouble getting his views into print. For example, during the early decades of the twentieth century, he wrote powerful pieces for the *Irish Times* and other Irish periodicals about the excessive use of corporal punishment in Irish homes and schools and the dangers of narrowly defined notions of Irish identity. These perceptive and prophetic pieces make chilling reading for those familiar with the widespread abuse that took place in Irish industrial schools and Magdalene laundries after Irish

independence or the role that rigid definitions of national identity played in perpetuating and exacerbating the Troubles in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s through the late 1990s.

Shaw, of course, also wrote on lighter public matters. A noteworthy example is his explanation of the work he did for a committee in 1934 in determining which pronunciations of words should be preferred by BBC announcers. The committee had been convened to ensure that the discussion of a topic would not be obscured because a key word was being pronounced in a way only familiar to people in one small part of the United Kingdom. In Shaw's published comments on the committee's controversial work, he interestingly disagrees with the BBC's preference that all announcers use the haughty-sounding "Oxford accent"—mainly familiar to us today from World War II–era newsreels and films. Shaw believed that announcers should simply use their own regional accents, while making sure to employ the most widely understood pronunciation of contentious words. In defending this point, Shaw comically argues, "In choosing an announcer regard must be paid to the psychological effect of his accent. An Oxford accent is considered by many graduates of that University to be the perfection of correct English; but unfortunately over large and densely populated districts of Great Britain it irritates some listeners to the point of switching off, and infuriates others so much that they smash their wireless sets because they cannot smash the Oxonian."[1]

Given the broad range of subjects that Shaw tackled over his long journalistic career, O'Ceallaigh Ritschel obviously had to decide which particular topics to cover in this study. He chose very wisely: as the book's subtitle suggests, O'Ceallaigh Ritschel looks primarily at Shaw's insightful—if not always popular—commentary on the 1888 Jack the Ripper killings, the 1890–91 "fall" of Irish Parliamentary Party leader Charles Stewart Parnell, the 1912 sinking of the *Titanic*, and the Great War. The critic also more briefly examines the peace crusades that arose alongside growing European militarism in the decades leading up to the Great War and the United Kingdom's relationship with czarist Russia (both topics of great importance to Stead, in which Shaw also took an interest).

These topics are, of course, fascinating in their own right, but we get new insights into them, thanks to O'Ceallaigh Ritschel's bold and persuasive arguments, which are backed up by careful, detailed research and powerful (often highly entertaining) quotes from Shaw. And, as those familiar with O'Ceallaigh Ritschel's previous publications can attest, his works make for enjoyable reading thanks to the fact that he is such a good storyteller: he is

a master at bringing readers back to the time period being discussed and placing them in the middle of the action. For example, in this book, we feel the terror on the streets of London while the Whitechapel murders are taking place and can relate to the anger resulting from the discovery of the appalling living conditions that people like the impoverished East End victims are enduring on a daily basis. (This anger found a contemporary parallel in the reactions to the recent Grenfell Tower tragedy.) Similarly, we witness and scorn the hypocritical, moralistic grandstanding of politicians and newspapermen when discussing Parnell's supposedly unsavory involvement in the O'Shea divorce case; the ludicrous romanticizing of the sinking of the *Titanic* (obscuring the role of corrupt capitalism and professional incompetence in the demise of so many innocent souls); and the blinkered, hot-tempered patriotism of British citizens and leader-writers who had no time for Shaw's more reasoned, cool-tempered approach during the early days of the Great War.

While O'Ceallaigh Ritschel's book is always stimulating, he really shines during the chapters on the *Titanic* and the Great War. He incisively analyzes Shaw's revulsion at the fact that journalists were treating the sinking of the Belfast-built liner as "a heroic melodrama" (119), and that, two years later, they viewed the Great War "in melodramatic terms" as a struggle between the "hero" Britain and its "diabolical opponent" Germany (178). Drawing on and developing the work of earlier commentators such as J. L. Wiesenthal and Daniel O'Leary, O'Ceallaigh Ritschel helps the reader to see that Shaw's commentary on these matters is of the same order as his anger over the lack of realism in English theater when working as a critic in the 1880s and 1890s.

For those more interested in Shaw's drama than his journalism, it is worthy of note that O'Ceallaigh Ritschel is also strong when it comes to showing how Shaw's involvement in these controversies and his ongoing fascination with Stead's career influenced his plays. For example, the critic shows that the naming of key characters in *Mrs Warren's Profession* and *Pygmalion*, the depiction of significant characters in *Major Barbara* and *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, and even memorable lines of dialogue from *Arms and the Man*, *The Philanderer*, and the Great War plays are all directly linked to Shaw's journalistic investigations of these crises or Shaw's abundant familiarity with Stead's career.

As someone interested in the "Irish Shaw," I was also pleased to see that, as in his previous book—the groundbreaking and highly important *Shaw, Synge, Connolly, and Socialist Provocation* (2011)—O'Ceallaigh Ritschel

highlights important connections between Shaw and his native Ireland that are often ignored even by Irish commentators. Although the critic does this throughout the book, I will cite one prominent instance. By demonstrating how the Parnell controversy permanently altered Shaw's perspective on Anglo-Irish politics, O'Ceallaigh Ritschel places Shaw in the line of famous Irish writers who were deeply affected by the "fall" of "The Chief". At last, Shaw is included in the usual list of Oscar Wilde, J. M. Synge, W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, St. John Irvine, and, of course, James Joyce (author of the Parnell-related "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" and Christmas dinner scene in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*).

Ideally, I would like to have seen an extended discussion of the degree to which Shaw's use of journalism as a means of self-promotion might have been influenced by the New Journalism. Stead's use of his pet causes to promote himself is handled extremely well, and O'Ceallaigh Ritschel is ever aware of Shaw's tendency to boast of his "Irish" powers of perception and his prodigious skills as a playwright. However, it would have been interesting to see if Shaw's use of, for example, self-interviews to promote his work might owe anything to Stead's often ham-fisted efforts to aggrandize himself. This, however, is a very minor quibble. Overall, this is an extremely important, meticulously researched, and truly entertaining book on an underexplored topic, and it is an absolute must-read for those interested in Shaw's journalism, his Irishness, or the intersection between his political crusading and his drama.

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NOTE

1. Bernard Shaw, *The Letters of Bernard Shaw to* The Times, ed. Ronald Ford (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 208.