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Shaw's Black Girl: Layers of Ideas

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Letters of Shaw and the Webbs Survive Editing

Alan Andrews

Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw. Bernard Shaw and the Webbs. Edited by Alex C. Michalos and Deborah C. Poff. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. xxxii + 312pp. Index. C\$65.00

The idea of including a volume devoted to the letters between Shaw and Sidney and Beatrice Webb in the Shaw Correspondence series must have been self-recommending, so it is not surprising to discover that one was commissioned some time ago by the original editor of the series, the late Percy Smith. No political friendship was more important to Shaw than that with Sidney Webb. It is the equivalent in significance of his friendships with William Archer or Granville Barker. And, as the volume that has now emerged shows, this is a correspondence that lasted longer than any other in Shaw's long life, spanning more than sixty years. It begins with a letter from Sidney Webb three years after they met and ends with a 1946 letter also from Sidney just over a year before he died and four before Shaw's death.

Shaw and Webb first met in 1880. Webb and Sydney Olivier (Laurence Olivier's uncle), together with Graham Wallas, were, Shaw later said, "the Three Musketeers of Fabianism, with myself as D'Artagnan." The Fabian Society emerged from the left-wing sectarianism of the 1880s as a strong political force." The four musketeers were indispensable to the stature the Fabian Society established in its early years, particularly with the publication [End Page 242] of *Fabian Essays* in 1889. The editor was Shaw and five of the eight essays were written by the four. Shaw also wrote the brief Preface, which ended with the words: "There are at present no authoritative teachers of Socialism. The essayists make no claim to be more than communicative learners." The *Essays* were reprinted in 1908 (new Preface by Shaw), 1920 (Introduction by Webb), 1931 (Preface by Shaw), and in a Jubilee edition in 1948, with a new Postscript by Shaw, entitled "Sixty Years of Fabianism." In addition to the five essays, between 1884 and 1892, more than seventy-five percent of the first forty-three Fabian Tracts, as they were called, were the work of the musketeers: Webb wrote twenty-four, Shaw seven, and Olivier and Wallas one each.

Both Webb and Olivier were civil servants, which somewhat inhibited their ability to participate in politics publicly, and may have encouraged the notion of educating and influencing whatever political party would listen to their ideas; hence the emphasis on pamphlets and tracts, which the Fabian Society published in abundance. When he married, Sidney Webb was persuaded by his wife to resign his civil-service position and devote himself to writing and politics. Olivier became a colonial governor—shades of Hector Hushabye and *Misalliance's* Summerhays—and thus put himself at a greater distance from the local political fray. Webb and Shaw, on the other hand, both entered municipal politics in the 1890s and were elected in different London boroughs, Shaw to the St. Pancras Vestry and Borough Council, until he lost his run for re-election in 1902, Webb to the London County Council for Deptford until, in 1910, he decided not to re-offer. Wallas was also briefly a member of the L.C.C.

Beatrice Potter, whom Webb married in 1892, was one of a family of brilliant sisters. I once tried to ask Kitty Muggerridge, Beatrice's niece, about the Webbs. Speaking of Sidney, she said emphatically: "He was the devil, that man—the Devil." But what then, I pursued, attracted Beatrice to him. "Oh," she said, "it was power, sheer power." Alex Michalos and Deborah Poff¹ provide a more detailed, careful, and altogether more persuasive account of Beatrice's eventual agreement to marry Webb. No doubt, though, she was attracted by his powerful intellect. When one of the Webbs' secretaries retired, he was presented with a set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; Shaw quipped that...

The third and final allegorical layer Hugo uncovers is that of the black girl as a political/racial icon. Shaw's own voice is cleverly muted and emerges as the voice of the black girl. Her forceful voice carries the message that the "inhumanity of white exploitation spares no soul." Shaw recognized the danger of a political policy of apartheid and through the black girl he voiced his concern about South Africa's future. The marriage between the black girl and the Irishman is a model for the survival of the whites and blacks of South Africa, the solution, if you will, to resolve racial strife.

Hugo's work is a clarion call that Bernard Shaw is still worth reading, that he speaks to all generations. It is a shame that both articulate voices—Hugo's and Shaw's—have been silenced, but their work will remain a constant reminder of the vital issues that confront all humanity throughout the ages, past, present, and future.

Gale K. Larson

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