

# An Irishman and His Irish Folks

David Clare, *Bernard Shaw's Irish Outlook*  
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Despite the constant critical interest in his dramatic oeuvre, it still seems to be a relatively widespread misconception that George Bernard Shaw was a British playwright. This may be due to the belief that in order to have such a thorough insight and detailed opinion about the social, political, economic, religious, and literary system of Great Britain, he must have been born an Englishman. In fact, Shaw proved to be an outstanding counter-example of this view, remaining a deceptively British Irishman throughout his long career. As a result of this duality, critical literature discusses Shaw as an Irish-born dramatist, but rarely as one belonging to the Irish literary canon. However, even though audiences and critics pay more attention to his English characters, the Irish figures and themes appearing in his plays can testify that Shaw's sense of belonging to his native land and its people is more significant than the majority of the readers and spectators of his works might think. Highlighting Shaw's outsider status, as well as his main sources and influences from this perspective, David Clare's monograph, *Bernard Shaw's Irish Outlook* provides a valuable analysis of how the dramatist succeeded in portraying the British nation critically, while depicting Irish people in a much more realistic way than many previous English writers had.

*Bernard Shaw's Irish Outlook* is divided into four major chapters, which offer a balanced analysis of British and Irish characters. Shaw's profound knowledge of both Irish and English people helped him construct his characters with meticulous care. To identify the primary source of Shavian dramatic figures, Chapter 1 uses "reverse snobbery" as the key-term. Defining the phrase as an expression most suitable

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to describe Shaw's fundamental practice of character-creation, Clare highlights the ways in which Shaw managed to turn conventional theatrical depictions of both the English and the Irish upside down, mercilessly pointing out the most severe faults of the former and doing some justice to the latter. The argumentation here makes it clear that Shaw was deeply concerned about Irish people's treatment on the English stage. Clare proceeds to enumerate chiefly England-based Shavian plays that feature at least one Irish character, briefly summing up their significance within the dramatist's work. Besides the characters of specifically Irish-themed plays like Larry Doyle and Father Keegan of *John Bull's Other Island* (1904), as well as the protagonist and his mother of *O'Flaherty, V.C.* (1915), somewhat lesser known examples are also analysed by Clare: "the surly Kerryman" (Clare 10), Hector Malone (*Man and Superman*, 1903), Sir Patrick Cullen (*The Doctor's Dilemma*, 1906), Mrs. Farrell (*Press Cuttings*, 1909), and Count O'Dowda (*Fanny's First Play*, 1911). Clare highlights that Shaw always provides a detailed social overview related to his Irish characters. This method is similar to the technique that the playwright applies when portraying representatives of the English working class, like Walter Boon, the waiter from *You Never Can Tell* (1898), Henry Straker, the chauffeur from *Man and Superman*, or Alfred Doolittle, the dustman from *Pygmalion* (1913). The last pages of the first chapter broaden the chronological frames in both directions. On the one hand, Clare briefly compares the ways in which eighteenth- and earlier nineteenth-century Irish writers depicted English-Irish hostility to how Shaw handled these issues. On the other hand, the playwright's influence on later Irish authors and scholars focusing on the colonial/post-colonial condition like Frantz Fanon, Brian Friel, and Declan Kiberd is also examined. The chapter ends on the note of Clare praising Shaw's impact on how the Irish and the lower social classes in England appeared in later literary and cultural commentaries (19–20).

Starting with the analysis of the Irish origins of *Pygmalion's* Professor Henry Higgins and his mother, Chapter 2 suggests a re-evaluation of some Shavian characters as members of the Irish diaspora in certain plays. Clare elaborates on Shaw's ambivalent opinions about this group of people, noting that the dramatist "had a problematic relationship with the idea of Diasporic Irishness. As various critics have noted, Shaw often spoke negatively about the children of the Diaspora" (29). Continuing the line of thought started in the previous chapter, Clare again highlights the dramatic figures through which English and Irish stereotypes are ridiculed, this time taking representatives of the Irish diaspora as examples. Mostly

early instances are given extra credit in this section, with the American Captain Kearney (*Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, 1900), as well as English characters like Cashel Byron (*The Admirable Bashville*, 1901), Bronterre O'Brien "Snobby" Price (*Major Barbara*, 1905), and Alfred "Boss" Mangan (*Heartbreak House*, 1919) being central to the argument. All of them, as Clare shows, stand out from the rest of the roles because of their "Irish stock" (31), defying the expectations audiences, accustomed to the clear-cut distinction between British characters and the Stage Irish stereotype, were likely to have. At the same time, Shavian figures of Irish descent prove themselves considerably more capable in several aspects than the majority of the full-blooded English countrymen they are surrounded by. In addition, focusing on the surnames the young Shaw must have encountered while still living in Ireland, Clare opines that the dramatist used more members of the Irish diaspora in his plays than one would assume. Besides the above-mentioned Higgins and Cashel Byron, characters like Eliza Doolittle (*Pygmalion*), Louis Dudebat (*The Doctor's Dilemma*), and Fergus Crampton (*You Never Can Tell*) are given some cultural background. Although admitting that Shaw's treatment of the Irish diaspora is not thorough enough, Clare concludes the chapter by implying that the playwright's construction and handling of his—surprisingly many—English and American characters with Irish origins can indeed compensate us for the relative lack of contextualisation.

Providing a detailed overview of Irish influences on Shaw, as well as their different dramatic materialisations, Chapter 3 sheds light on some of the best-known Irish cultural and literary traditions on the emerald island from the Anglican perspective. Clare surveys various communities including Gaelic Catholicism, Irish Anglicans, Scottish Presbyterians, the Big House legacy, the Irish middle classes, and farmers or other sorts of working-class people. Furthermore, he adds the names of well-known individuals as examples of each religious and social group mentioned here. With Elizabeth Bowen and Jonathan Swift being cited as sharp-eyed commentators on Irish issues, the general anti-Englishness of Irish literature is emphasised through the political, cultural, and religious conflicts hinted at in the first paragraphs of the chapter as well. Shaw's dramatic work is placed into this line of argument with "three plays which contain no Irish characters at all" (Clare 42). *The Man of Destiny* (1897), *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman* (1921), and *Saint Joan* (1923) reflect Shaw's strongly Irish standpoints concerning themes like British colonisation and religious impatience. With the concept of the Surrogate Irish character—applied in the three mentioned plays to the young Bonaparte Napoleon, the "long-livers"

of the future, and Joan of Arc—Clare scrupulously examines both textual references and performance histories in search of both overt and covert expressions of Shaw’s unique national consciousness. While the three mentioned plays are the centre of attention here, the chapter builds rich contexts out of historical data, earlier works, potential sources, and contemporary, i.e. late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, pieces of literature. The topic of misalliance, exemplified by Shaw’s short story collection titled *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search of God* (1932), and the importance of Ireland as the setting are also analysed from an Irish perspective. To illustrate the function of the Emerald Isle as the background for different plots, Clare turns to the Northern Irish C. S. Lewis, who “based the topography of Narnia in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956) on his native Ulster and the Narnian landscape on the area around Carlingford Lough in Co. Louth” (64). Using this feature of the popular fantasy book series as an analogue for *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*, Clare argues for Shaw’s obvious interest in his country of birth, which critics tend to overlook. Drawing attention to the complexity of Shavian dramas, Clare concludes the chapter by noting that, even though Shaw’s conventional image and reputation as a satirist of English manners might be altered by the inclusion of Irish elements, his “pan-European” (66) or cosmopolitan point of view underwrites his treatment of both nations, i.e. of both the British and the Irish.

Arguably the most complex and thought-provoking section in Clare’s work is Chapter 4, “Shaw and the Stage Englishman in Irish Literature,” which is also the longest of the four parts. Divided into three sub-chapters, it starts with a hypothesis about what the other side of the literary coin may look like: providing a concise historical definition of the Stage Irish figure, Clare asks what kind of Stage English characters Irish literature has to offer. He notes that embodiments of the Stage English in general are not “deeply offensive ciphers” or “crude caricatures like the Stage Irishman,” yet they should not be considered “completely objective portraits of English people” either (67). Clare uses “Elizabeth Butler Cullingford’s groundbreaking and seminal study *Ireland’s Others* (2001)” (68), and especially its chapter “The Stage Englishman of the Irish Drama: Boucicault and the Politics of Empathy” as a fundamental historical source for his own research and argumentation. Nonetheless, Clare defines his methodology as one differing from that of Cullingford in two significant respects. On the one hand, he takes into consideration exactly how and for what purposes English characters are applied in Irish literature. On the other hand, in spite of the terminology of the Stage Englishman,

his analysis does include female Stage English figures, too. Based on these principles, Part I of this chapter broadens the scope and covers a wide range of pre-Shavian, as well as Shaw-inspired representatives of the Stage Englishman not only in drama but also in novels and short stories. Calling them “curious creatures” but, at the same time, “very realistic characters,” who “are also meant to serve as satirical portraits of the English” (69), Clare presents a detailed definition of Stage English figures in Irish literature, and also underlines their complex nature before applying the concept to any Shavian dramatis persona. Clare reflects upon authors, playwrights, literary pieces, and characters inspired by Shaw’s depictions of the Stage English figure, while also comparing relevant, twentieth- and twenty-first-century interpretations of his works. Part I ends with Clare emphasising the importance of *John Bull’s Other Island*—and especially that of its main character, Tom Broadbent, as the ultimate Stage Englishman in Shaw’s dramatic work.

Part II of Chapter 4 functions as a kind of axis, dealing with “The Stage English figure in Shaw’s Irish plays.” Retaining the format exemplified in the previous chapter, it focuses on three of Shaw’s works, which—instead of having occasional Irish characters, like the ones mentioned in Chapter 1—have Ireland as their main setting, while the majority of the characters are also native (actual or surrogate) to the Emerald Isle. Clare suggests that *John Bull’s Other Island*, *O’Flaherty, V.C.*, and *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman* are prominent instances of using English characters (with no known Irish origins) placed into Irish scenarios—where they “become completely and unequivocally Stage English” (77). The primary example is Tom Broadbent; Clare’s analysis emphasises both his merits and his shortcomings, as well as his relationship with the Irish. Broadbent’s significance as a Stage Englishman is discussed at some length, detailing his clumsy behaviour as a tourist, his misconceptions about Irish people in general, his often hypocritical or even downright racist comments, and, eventually, his efficiency as a coloniser of Rosscullen. Citing some of Shaw’s letters and evaluating what other literary scholars have written about Broadbent, Clare provides a detailed analysis of how Shaw’s unique character-construction made this particular figure the classic example of the Stage Englishman in Irish drama. However, it may be somewhat surprising that while Tom Broadbent’s character is examined with such thoroughness and is eventually declared to be Shaw’s best Stage Englishman, the importance of the Cockney Hodson in the same play is mentioned only once in the entire book. Clare admits in an endnote that “the play’s working-class English character—the valet Hodson—is depicted

in a relatively sympathetic and non-satirical manner” (165, n36). Granted, he is a secondary character, but surely he is deserving of an analysis in the same framework of thought that Broadbent is looked at.

The Stage English figure in *O’Flaherty, V.C.*, Lady Madigan, is given due credit, in spite of the fact that she never actually appears on stage but is only talked about by her husband, Sir Pearce, and the protagonist, Dennis. The lady is compared to Philippa, the central character in the *Irish RM* stories written by the Anglo-Irish duo, Edith Somerville and Violet Florence Martin. (Since the latter wrote under the pen name Martin Ross, the team is usually referred to as Somerville & Ross.) Clare continues his argument with an analysis of the two female characters, Lady Madigan and Philippa, while also citing the preface of *O’Flaherty, V.C.* as evidence for Shaw’s realistic ideas concerning war-time Britain and Ireland. The transition between *O’Flaherty, V.C.* and *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman* is explored via the brief commentary on the former’s production history and the enumeration of some of the events during the years in between, i.e. the late 1910s. There are no actual Irish characters in *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman* (although the “long-livers” appear to function as surrogate Irish), the central figure is an elderly Briton, and this makes his role peculiar. Concentrating on the apparent absurdity of placing an Englishman into an Irish setting with no natives of the land around, Clare draws a parallel between the elderly gentleman and Broadbent, underlining racism, hypocrisy, sexism, and classism as basic attributes of both (104–105). Pinpointed through the elderly Briton’s relationship with the rest of the characters, the Broadbentian heritage is highlighted. Although declaring “that it is not a great play” (109), Clare writes about *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman* with deserved appreciation, concluding that despite certain shortcomings, it undoubtedly helps readers and spectators understand “Shaw’s Irish reverse snobbery and his perspective on the English national character” (109).

Part III of Chapter 4, appropriately titled “After Broadbent,” deals with the immense influence Shaw’s Stage English character has had on later Irish literature. Mentioning the best-known and most successful Irish writers like Elizabeth Bowen, James Joyce, Seán O’Casey, and Brendan Behan, Clare sums up what later—as well as possibly even upcoming—generations of Irish authors and playwrights owe to the Shavian mode of characterisation. Clare concludes that “Shaw was a pivotal figure in the history of the Irish use of the Stage Englishman” (120), again using Tom Broadbent to ground his claim. Praising the chiselled

character-construction the playwright achieved, Clare closes his argumentation by emphasising that, despite the occasional criticism aimed at his fellow Irish people, Shaw proved himself to be a proud Irish dramatist, who was never afraid to show the British—and the world—the various ways in which the Stage Irish figure could be defied.

Clare takes into consideration relevant instances of different character-types from the extended corpus of the Shavian oeuvre. Although the three most obviously Irish works receive special attention, the plays with less conspicuous connections to his country of birth are also considered. Thus, the tendency of overlooking Shaw's life-long concern with the Irish seems to be successfully broken by Clare. In a way, he finishes the job started by Declan Kiberd with *Inventing Ireland* (1995) and *Irish Classics* (2000), and later continued by Anthony Roche in *The Irish Dramatic Revival 1899–1939* (2015). As Clare writes in the Conclusion, his own argument reconfirms the idea that “Shaw certainly belongs to the Irish Anglican literary tradition. However, given the time period in which he wrote, his pro-Irish reverse snobbery, the subject matter handled in his plays, his literary influences, and his personal and professional connections, he should also be considered part of the Irish Literary Revival” (123). This remark, supported by the examples preceding it, can persuade readers that not only did Shaw identify himself as Irish, but he also kept up this mentality in his dramatic legacy. Thus, the grandiose collection of works he managed to produce during more than six decades belongs to the literature of Ireland.

Writing in a fluent and reader-friendly critical style, Clare conducts a thorough and well-constructed study of the Shavian works, drawing attention to some of the lesser known pieces as well. The book is an exemplary source of motivation for exploring plays not discussed here through Shaw's inimitable Irish outlook. With this monograph David Clare undeniably contributes to the re-canonisation of George Bernard Shaw—not only as an Irish-born but also as a genuinely Irish dramatist.

#### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Since 2018, Bence Gábor Kvéder has been a PhD student of the Doctoral School of Literary Studies at the University of Pécs, where he also teaches BA courses at the Institute of English Studies. The main field of his doctoral research, conducted under the supervision of Mária Kurdi, is late nineteenth- and twentieth-century