

George Bernard

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Stroud Ed. 2010

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SHAMING THE DEVIL ABOUT SHELLEY

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WHEN I first saw the proposal that Shelley's native county should celebrate the centenary of his birth by founding a Shelley Library and Museum at Horsham, I laughed: not publicly, because that would have been the act of a soil-sport, but in my sleeve. The native county in question was Sussex, which had just distinguished itself at the General Election by a gloriously solid Conservative vote which had sent to Parliament a lord (son of a duke), an admiral, two baronets (one of them ex-Groom-in-Waiting to the Queen, and the other an ex-Dragoon officer), and two distinguished commoners (one of them son to a lord and the other to a Canon, once Her Majesty's chaplain): all of them high Tories. Now the difficulty of inducing so true-blue a corner of England to express any feeling towards Shelley but one of indignant abhorrence, can only be appreciated by those who are in possession of a complete and unexpurgated statement of what Shelley taught. Let me, therefore, draw up such a statement, as compendiously as may be.

In politics Shelley was a Republican, a Leveller, a Radical of the most extreme type. He was even an Anarchist of the old-fashioned Godwinian school, up to the point at which he per-

ceived Anarchism to be impracticable. He publicly ranged himself with demagogues and gaol-birds like Cobbett and Henry Hunt (the original "Man in the White Hat"), and not only advocated the Plan of Radical Reform which was afterwards embodied in the proposals of the Chartists, but denounced the rent-roll of the landed aristocracy as the true pension list, thereby classing himself as what we now call a Land Nationalizer. He echoed Cobbett's attacks on the National Debt and the Funding System in such a manner as to leave no reasonable doubt that if he had been born half a century later he would have been advocating Social-Democracy with a view to its development into the most democratic form of Communism practically attainable and maintainable. At the late election he would certainly have vehemently urged the agricultural laborers of Sussex to procure a candidate of the type of John Burns and to vote for him against the admiral, the lord, the two baronets, and against Messrs Gathorne Hardy and Brookfield.

In religion, Shelley was an Atheist. There is nothing uncommon in that; but he actually called himself one, and urged others to follow his example. He never trifled with the word God: he knew that it meant a personal First Cause, Almighty Creator, and Supreme Judge and Ruler of the Universe, and that it did not mean anything else, never had meant anything else, and never whilst the English language lasted would mean anything else. Knowing perfectly well that there was no such person, he did not pretend that the question was an open one, or imply, by calling himself an Agnostic, that there might be such a person for all he knew to the contrary. He did know to the contrary; and he said so. Further, though there never was a man with so abiding and full a consciousness of the omnipresence of a living force, manifesting itself here in the germination and growth of a tree, there in the organization of a poet's brain, and elsewhere in the putrefaction of a dead dog, he never condescended to beg off being an Atheist by calling this omnipresent energy God, or even Pan. He lived and died professedly, almost boastfully, godless. In his time, however, as at present, God was little more than

a word to the English people. What they really worshipped was the Bible; and our modern Church movement to get away from Bible fetishism and back to some presentable sort of Christianity (*vide* Mr Horton's speech at Grindelwald the other day, for example) had not then come to the surface. The preliminary pick-axing work of Bible smashing had yet to be done; and Shelley, who found the moral atmosphere of the Old Testament murderous and abominable, and the asceticism of the New suicidal and pessimistic, smashed away at the Bible with all his might and main.

But all this, horrifying as it is from the Sussex point of view, was mere eccentricity compared to Shelley's teaching on the subject of the family. He would not draw any distinction between the privilege of the king or priest and that of the father. He pushed to its extremest consequences his denial that blood relationship altered by one jot or tittle the relations which should exist between human beings. One of his most popular performances at Eton and Oxford was an elaborate curse on his own father, who had thwarted and oppressed him: and the entirely serious intention of Shelley's curses may be seen in his solemn imprecation against Lord Eldon, ending with the words:

"I curse thee, though I hate thee not."

His determination to impress on us that our fathers should be no more and no less to us than other men, is evident in every allusion of his to the subject, from the school curse to *The Cenci*, which to this day is refused a licence for performance on the stage.

But Shelley was not the man to claim freedom of enmity, and say nothing about freedom of love. If father and son are to be as free in their relation to one another as hundredth cousins are, so must sister and brother. The freedom to curse a tyrannical father is not more scared than the freedom to love an amiable sister. In a word, if filial duty is no duty, then incest is no crime. This sounds startling even now, disillusioned as we are by Herbert Spencer, Elie Reclus, and other writers as to there being anything "natural" in our code of prohibited degrees; but

in Shelley's time it seemed the summit of impious vice, just as it would to the Sussexers to-day, if they only knew. Nevertheless, he did not shrink from it in the least: the hero and heroine of *Laon and Cythna* are brother and sister; and the notion that the bowdlerization of this great poem as *The Revolt of Islam* represents any repentance or withdrawal on Shelley's part, cannot be sustained for a moment in the face of the facts. No person who is well acquainted with Shelley's work can suppose that he would have thought any the worse of Byron if he had known and believed everything that Mrs Beecher Stowe alleged concerning him. And no one who has ever reasoned out the consequences of such views can doubt for a moment that Shelley regarded the family, in its legal aspect, as a doomed institution.

So much for the opinions which Shelley held and sedulously propagated. Could Sussex be reconciled to them on the ground that they were mere "views" which did not affect his conduct? Not a bit of it. Although Shelley was the son of a prosperous country gentleman, his life was consistently disreputable except at one fatal moment of his boyhood, when he chivalrously married a girl who had run away from school and thrown herself on his protection. At this time he had been expelled from Oxford for writing and circulating a tract called *The Necessity of Atheism*. His marriage, as might have been expected, was a hopeless failure; and when this fact was fully established the two parted; and Shelley was fallen in love with by the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and Godwin. Shelley took young Mary Godwin abroad, and started housekeeping with her without the least scruple; and he suggested that his wife should come and make one of the household, a notion which did not recommend itself to either of the ladies. The courts then deprived him of the custody of his children, on the ground that he was unfit to have charge of them; and his wife eventually committed suicide. Shelley then married Mary Godwin, solely, as he explained, because the law forced him to do so in the interest of his son. The rest of his life was quite consistent with the beginning of it; and it is not improbable that he would have separated from his

second wife as from his first, if he had not been drowned when he was twenty-nine.

It only remains to point out that Shelley was not a hot-headed nor an unpractical person. All his writings, whether in prose or verse, have a peculiarly deliberate quality. His political pamphlets are unique in their freedom from all appeal to the destructive passions; there is neither anger, sarcasm, nor frivolity in them; and in this respect his poems exactly resemble his political pamphlets. Other poets, from Shakespear to Tennyson, have let the tiger in them loose under pretext of patriotism, righteous indignation, or what not: he never did. His horror of violence, cruelty, injustice, and bravery was proof against their infection. Hence it cannot for a moment be argued that his opinions and his conduct were merely his wild oats. His seriousness, his anxious carefulness, are just as obvious in the writings which still expose their publishers to the possibility of a prosecution for sedition or blasphemy as in his writings on Catholic Emancipation, the propriety and practical sagacity of which are not now disputed. And he did not go back upon his opinions in the least as he grew older. By the time he had begun *The Triumph of Life*, he had naturally come to think *Queen Mab* a boyish piece of work, not that what it affirmed seemed false to him or what it denied true, but because it did not affirm and deny enough. Thus there is no excuse for Shelley on the ground of his youth or rashness. If he was a sinner, he was a hardened sinner and a deliberate one.

The delicate position of the gentlemen who invited Sussex to honor Shelley on the 4th of last month will now be apparent, especially when it is added that the facts are undeniable, accessible to all inquirers, and familiar to most fanciers of fine literature. The success of the celebration evidently depended wholly on the chances of inducing the aforesaid fanciers to wink and say nothing in as many words as possible. A conspiracy to keep an open secret of so scandalous a character seems extravagant; and yet it almost succeeded. The practical question was not whether Shelley could be shewn to be infamous, but whether anyone

SHELLEY

wished to undertake that demonstration. In Shelley's case it appeared that everybody—that is, everybody whose desire weighed two straws with the public—was anxious to make Shelley a saint. Mr Cordy Jeaffreson's attempt to prove him the meanest of sinners had been taken in such uncommonly bad part that no literary man with any regard for his own popularity cared to follow up Mr Jeaffreson's line. The feeblest excuses for Shelley had been allowed to pass. Matthew Arnold had explained how poor Percy had the misfortune to live in a low set, as if he had not been more free to choose his own set than most other men in England. Others had pleaded that he was young; that he was a poet; that you would find his works full of true piety if you only read them in a proper spirit; and—most exquisite of all—that the people who persisted in raking up the story of Harriet must be low-minded gossips, to allude to so improper a story. On all sides there went up the cry, "We want our great Shelley, our darling Shelley, our best, noblest, highest of poets. We will not have it said that he was a Leveller, an Atheist, a foe to marriage, an advocate of incest. He was a little unfortunate in his first marriage; and we pity him for it. He was a little eccentric in his vegetarianism; but we are not ashamed of that; we glory in the humanity of it [with morsels of beefsteak, fresh from the slaughter house, sticking between our teeth]. We ask the public to be generous—to read his really great works, such as the Ode to a Skylark, and not to gloat over those boyish indiscretions known as Laon and Cythna, Prometheus, Rosalind and Helen, The Cenci, The Masque of Anarchy, etc., etc. Take no notice of the Church papers; for our Shelley was a true Christian at heart. Away with Jeaffreson; for our Shelley was a gentleman if ever there was one. If you doubt it, ask—"

That was just the difficulty: who were we to ask when the Centenary came round? On reflection, the Horsham Committee decided that we had better ask Mr Gosse. It was a wise choice. The job was one which required a certain gift of what is popularly called cheek; and Mr Gosse's cheek is beyond that of any man of my acquaintance. I went down to Horsham expressly to hear

PEN PORTRAITS AND REVIEWS

him; and I can certify that he surpassed himself. I confess I thought he was going to overdo it, when, extolling the poet's patriotism in selecting England for his birth-place, he applied to Shelley a brilliant paraphrase of Mr Gilbert's

"For he might have been a Rooshan," etc.,

but no: it came off perfectly. A subsequent fearless assertion that there was surprisingly little slime—he said slime—on Shelley's reputation, and that the "sordid" details of his career were really not so very numerous after all, hit off to a nicety the requirements of the occasion; and when he handsomely remarked that for his part he thought that far too much talk had already been made about Harriet, we all felt that a gentleman could say no less. It was a happy thought also to chaff Shelley as an eater of buns and raisins, the satirist being no doubt stoked up for the occasion with gobbets of cow or sheep, and perhaps a slice or two of pig. But what fairly banged everything in his address was his demonstration that Shelley was so fragile, so irresponsible, so ethereally tender, so passionate a creature that the wonder was that he was not a much greater rascal. The dodge of making allowances for a great man's differences with small men on the plea of his being a privileged weakling is one which I have of course often seen worked; but I never saw it brought to such perfection as by Mr Gosse at Horsham. It was a triumph not only of audacity but of platform manner. At the stiffest parts of the game Mr Gosse contrived to get on a sort of infatuated pomposity which is quite indescribable. Whilst it completely imposed on the innocents, there was yet lurking behind it a sly relish for the fun of the situation which disarmed those out-and-out Shelleyans who half expected to see Mr Gosse struck by lightning for his presumption. For my own part, I have seldom been worse misunderstood than by the gentleman who wrote to a daily paper alleging, in proof of my sympathy with his own outraged feelings, that I walked out of the room in disgust. I protest I only went to catch the 5.17 train to London, where I had to act as the best available substitute for Mr Gosse at the

proletarian celebration of Shelley in the easterly parish of St Luke's.

In a rougher, homelier, style, the chairman, Mr Hurst, Justice of the Peace and Deputy Lieutenant for the county, gave Mr Gosse an admirable lead. The judicious way in which he dwelt on the central fact that Shelley had been born in the neighbourhood; his remarks on the intellectual value of a free public library to the working classes, and his declaration that if Shelley were alive he would be the first to support a free library; his happy comparison of Horsham to Stratford-on-Avon (which brought the house down at once); his deprecation of the harshness of Oxford University in expelling Shelley for a "mere dialectical view" (meaning *The Necessity of Atheism*); and his genial peroration on the theme of "boys will be boys," pitched so as to half confess that he himself had held quite desperate views when he was young and foolish; all this was so ingenious that when I described it in the evening at the Hall of Science it established my reputation in St Luke's as a platform humorist of the first order. But his point about the free library was really the essential one. It was for the sake of the library that I refused to blow the gaff by speaking at Horsham when Mr Stanley Little, with characteristic intrepidity, invited me to do so. It was presumably for the sake of the library that Mr Hurst, Mr Gosse, and Mr Frederic Harrison deliberately talked bogus Shelleyism to the reporters. Miss Alma Murray and Mr Herbert Sims Reeves may have recited and sung for the sake of the real Shelley; and Professor Nicholl, as I gather, shewed an alarming disposition to let the cat out of the bag in moving a vote of thanks to the chair; but the rest were solid for the library, even if the front were to be decorated with a relief representing Shelley in a tall hat, Bible in hand, leading his children on Sunday morning to the church of his native parish.

Of the meeting in the evening at the Hall of Science I need say but little. It consisted for the most part of working men who took Shelley quite seriously, and were much more conscious of his opinions and of his spirit than of his dexterity as a versifier. It

was summoned without the intervention of any committee by Mr G. W. Foote, the President of the National Secular Society, who, by his own personal announcement and a few handbills, got a meeting which beat Horsham hollow. The task of the speakers was so easy that Mr Gosse and Mr Frederic Harrison might well have envied us. Mr Foote, a militant Atheist like Shelley himself, and one who has suffered imprisonment under the outrageous Blasphemy Laws which some people suppose to be obsolete, was able to speak with all the freedom and force of a man who not only talks Shelley but lives him. Dr Furnivall, incorrigible in the matter of speaking his mind, frankly stated how far he went with Shelley, which was far enough to explain why he was not one of the Horsham orators. As for me, my quotations from the Horsham proceedings came off so immensely that I could not but feel jealous of Mr Hurst. For the rest, I had nothing to do but give a faithful account of Shelley's real opinions, with every one of which I unreservedly agree. Finally Mr Foote recited *Men of England*, which brought the meeting to an end amid thunders of applause. What would have happened had anyone recited it at Horsham is more than I can guess. Possibly the police would have been sent for.

Mr Foote's meeting, which was as spontaneous as the absence of committee and advertisement could make it, was composed for the most part of people whose lives had been considerably influenced by Shelley. Some time ago Mr H. S. Salt, in the course of a lecture on Shelley, mentioned on the authority of Mrs Marx Aveling, who had it from her father, Karl Marx, that Shelley had inspired a good deal of that huge but badly managed popular effort called the Chartist movement. An old Chartist who was present, and who seemed at first much surprised by this statement, rose to confess that, "now he came to think of it" (apparently for the first time), it was through reading Shelley that he got the ideas that led him to join the Chartists. A little further inquiry elicited that Queen Mab was known as *The Chartists' Bible*; and Mr Buxton Forman's collection of small, cheap copies, blackened with the finger-marks of many heavy-handed trades,

SHELLEY

are the proofs that Shelley became a power—a power that is still growing. He made and is still making men and women join political societies, Secular societies, Vegetarian societies, societies for the loosening of the marriage contract, and Humanitarian societies of all sorts. There is at every election a Shelleyan vote, though there is no means of counting it. The discussion of his life, which makes our literary *dilettanti* so horribly uneasy, cannot be checked, no matter how exquisitely they protest. He is still forcing us to make up our minds whether the conventional judgment of his life as that of a scoundrel is the truth or only a *reductio ad absurdum* of the conventional morality. That is a vital question; and it is pitifully useless for the exponents of the fashionable culture to deprecate it as “chatter about Harriet,” when no sensible man can hear any chattering except that of their own teeth at the prospect of having to face Shelley’s ideas seriously.

Without any ill-conditioned desire to rub the situation into those who have offered Shelley a carnival of humbug as a centenary offering, I think no reasonable man can deny the right of those who appreciate the scope and importance of Shelley’s views to refuse to allow the present occasion to be monopolized by triflers to whom he was nothing more than a word-jeweller. Besides, the Horsham affair has been a failure: nobody has been taken in by it. Mr Foote scores heavily; and Mr Gosse and Mr Frederic Harrison are left sitting down, rather pensively, even though no newspaper except the Pall Mall Gazette and the Daily Chronicle dared to prick the bubble. I now venture to suggest that in future the bogus Shelley be buried and done with. I make all allowances for the fact that we are passing through an epidemic of cowardice on the part of literary men and politicians which will certainly make us appear to the historians of 1992 the most dastardly crew that has ever disgraced the platform and the press. It seems that as the march of liberty removes concrete terrors from our path, we become the prey of abstract fear, and are more and more persuaded that society is only held together by the closest trade unionism in senseless lying and make-believe. But it is vain to lie about Shelley: it is clear as day that if he were

PEN PORTRAITS AND REVIEWS

nothing more than what we try to make him out, his Centenary would be as little remembered as that of Southey. Why not be content to say, “I abhor Shelley’s opinions; but my abhorrence is overwhelmed by my admiration of the exquisite artistic quality of his work,” or “I am neither an Atheist nor a believer in Equality nor a Free Lover; and yet I am willing to celebrate Shelley because I feel that he was somehow a good sort,” or even “I think Shelley’s poetry slovenly and unsubstantial, and his ideas simply rot; but I will celebrate him because he said what he thought, and not what he was expected to say he thought.” Instead of this, each of us gets up and says, “I am forced for the sake of my wife and family and social position to be a piffler and a trimmer; and as all you fellows are in the same predicament, I ask you to back me up in trying to make out that Shelley was a piffler and a trimmer too.” As one of the literary brotherhood myself, I hope I am clubbable enough to stand in with any reasonable movement in my trade; but this is altogether too hollow. It will not do: the meanest Shelley reader knows better. If it were only to keep ourselves from premature putrefaction, we must tell the truth about somebody; and I submit that Shelley has pre-eminent claims to be that somebody. Hence this article.

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