



WILLIAM ARTHUR SHAW

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1865-1943

WILLIAM ARTHUR SHAW was born on 19 April 1865. His father James Shaw, who died in 1899, was in business at Ashton-under-Lyne, and there Shaw was privately educated at a school which, as a friend writes, 'had an unusually good head'. He went young to what was then Owens College and was a Master of Arts at twenty-one with a first class in History. He had taken prizes and scholarships in both History and Economics and had come into touch with the remarkable group of men who built the Victoria University of Manchester on the foundation of Owens College—especially with Richard Copley Christie, the French Renaissance scholar, who in the early days of Owens had taught both History, Law, and Political Economy there. History he had passed to Adolphus Ward, Law to James Bryce, Political Economy to Stanley Jevons—a splendid group of successors, as Shaw once pointed out. Christie remained a patron and maker of the growing University until his death in 1901. To him Shaw dedicated his first book—*The History of Currency 1252-1894* (1895)—'in memory of a friendship of peculiar grace and inspiration'; and of him Shaw wrote, in the Memoir introductory to Christie's *Selected Essays and Papers* (1902), that he 'strove . . . to restrain any display of harsh feeling on my part, to moderate strong impressions, to point me to a reasonable construction of motives at times when, from hurt pride, or from passionate resentment, I went wilfully astray in my judgment of contemporaries'.

These acknowledgements and confessions are put here early because, as Professor Tait writes, the friendship with Christie was 'as far as I know . . . the one close friendship of Shaw's life', and because they reveal that violence of feeling and conviction which peeped out every now and then in nearly all his work—giving occasion to the reviewer!—but was sometimes no more than suspected by those who came into light, learned touch with this somewhat withdrawn scholar. 'A charming acquaintance. Very friendly and very generous . . . full of enthusiasms of all sorts', one writes. Another says how attractive he found him, 'though I always suspected a violent nature deep down somewhere'. That was discerning. Shaw could not discuss the provenance of an early eighteenth-century broad-sheet—as he did in writing not long before he died—without treating Harley

almost as a personal enemy, so bitterly did he disapprove. A man who saw much of him, yet hardly in the way of intimate friendship, writes: 'I should say that at all times black was black to him and white was white: grey was merely a defect in the observer's eyesight.'

To Christie and Ward Shaw owed his start as a productive scholar. He was given a Berkeley Fellowship at Owens (1886-8) and began editorial work for the Chetham Society, which Christie had saved from extinction in 1882. His edition of the Minutes of the *Manchester Presbyterian Classis* began to appear in 1890 and that of the *Bury Classis* in 1896. So far as I have been able to trace, his first published contribution to learning was an article on 'Elizabethan Presbyterianism' in the *English Historical Review* for 1888; but possibly some local work appeared even earlier. Shaw had many outlets for his intense activity.

He was already at home in the Record Office when, in 1893, a letter weightily signed brought his name before Sir Henry Maxwell Lyte as a possible editor of a Calendar of Foreign State Papers. The signatories included Gardiner, Ward, R. L. Poole, Firth, and Christie. The Treasury rejected the plan; but in 1895 agreed that Shaw should take up the Treasury Calendar, suspended since the retirement of Joseph Redington in 1891. So he entered on what was to be his main, though very far indeed from his sole, life's work. He enlarged the plan, not confining himself to the files of papers as his predecessor had, but including—to the historian's very great advantage—the Treasury Minute Books. The first volume of 'his' series, that for 1729-30, appeared in 1897: after that he worked to and from his base line in 1660. He was able to write of forty-five volumes of these records issued under his editorship before he died.

'Shaw', I am reminded from the Record Office, 'opened the gateway into Treasury Records not merely for the specialists but for any intelligent person.' It is astonishing how few figures of the period whose names have survived in any public context—and in many private ones—fail to turn up somewhere in the 'Shaw' volumes. Flaws can be detected here and there in the workmanship; but no historian can neglect either the material or the Editor's introductions. The most thorough and authoritative handling that a group of these volumes ever received was from C. H. Firth in a review of 1912. Method and results were both warmly praised. Shaw's was 'one of the best of the long series of calendars'. His contention that Parliament starved

Charles II of supplies, and that his finance would have been a failure had he been never so parsimonious and virtuous, Firth regarded as 'proved . . . conclusively'. But when Shaw went on to make of Charles almost the Patriot King, Firth said with reticence that historians could hardly follow him, but would pardon 'these digressions' in gratitude for the fine work done (*Eng. Hist. Rev.* xxvii. 163).

Economists were less tolerant—not of the Treasury editing; your average economist usually avoids 'les documents'; but of the excursions into currency and banking theory. Shaw brought out his *History of Currency* in the year that he was made an editor at the Record Office—when he was only thirty. H. S. Foxwell wrote severely (*Eng. Hist. Rev.* x. 768) that 'no one really qualified for such a stupendous task . . . would ever have undertaken it'. He pointed out gaps in equipment and some actual mistakes. Is it unkind to recall that Foxwell, equipped for several stupendous tasks, never undertook one? Shaw had an undertaking and combative spirit. There certainly were odd limits to the history of currency as he conceived it: he left out debasement, prices, paper money, and a good deal else, as irrelevant to his main theme, the relations of gold to silver, and his main contention, that bimetallism in any form always had been and now would be a curse. Bimetallism was as live an issue in 1895 as Arianism was at Nicaea; and Foxwell was a leading bimetallist. So he called the book 'a . . . pamphlet masquerading in the guise of history'. A pamphlet it was, a pamphlet that no doubt suffered from Shaw's 'solitary methods of work'. But a substantial pamphlet of over 400 pages, that had a second edition, was translated into French and Japanese, and is still to be consulted by those who cannot hope to master the vast literature of which Foxwell spoke, but are prepared to look in Shaw only for what he contains, not for what he might contain.

It was characteristic of his impetuous generosity that he gave to the Record Office Library his copy of the *Groote Plakaat Boek*—his standby source for the currency history of Holland—a costly gift from a man who was very far from affluent. He was a great bookbuyer. At times he was forced to sell, and he might very properly have sold the *Plakaat Boek*.

Undeterred by criticism he published in 1896 a series of *Select Tracts and Documents Illustrative of English Monetary History*, a most useful collection that earned a reprint after thirty-nine years.

Meanwhile the line of work which he had undertaken for the Chetham Society led up to his *History of the English Church during the Civil Wars and under the Commonwealth* (2 vols., 1900). Like his *History of Currency*, it is more selective than its title suggests. 'It is not', he explains in the Preface, 'a history of religion. . . . It is not . . . concerned with the history of Dogma or with that of the Sects or of the three Denominations.' It is a parliamentary and institutional history of the Church, of the fight over its reform, and of its reconstruction or destruction—as we may care to put it. It is as full of meat as an egg but less easy to digest. It comes to a very abrupt end; and as with a good deal of Shaw's work, on closing it a German descriptive title for a certain valuable class of book springs to the mind—*Materialen zur Geschichte* of so and so.

Preliminary to it had been, very appropriately, his *Materials for an Account of the Provincial Synod of the County of Lancaster and Financial Administration of the Disendowed Church under the Commonwealth* (both privately printed, 1890 and 1893) and the *Minutes of the Commission for the Relief of Plundered Ministers . . . [in] Lancashire and Cheshire*, edited for the Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society in 1893. It was while working on these and on certain sections of his *History of Currency* that he gained the familiarity with financial records that even his severe critic Foxwell warmly praised, and that prepared him for work on the Treasury Books and Papers.

The paper on *The Beginnings of the National Debt* which he contributed to the Owens College Historical Essays of 1902 was a natural outcome of his main work at the Record Office; but after its publication his 'leisure' was occupied with other things. First, there was a *Bibliography of Creighton, Stubbs, Gardiner and Acton*, prepared for the Royal Historical Society in 1903; and in 1906 the two volumes of that most useful, and as Shaw thought imperfectly appreciated, book of reference *The Knights of England; a complete record of all the Orders of Chivalry and of Knights Bachelors of England, Scotland and Ireland*; then, in 1905, an edition from the manuscript of H. M'Culloh's *Miscellaneous Representations Relative to Our Concerns in America, 1761*. A few years later (1911) appears the first volume of the *Letters of Denization and Acts of Naturalisation for Aliens in England and Ireland*, beginning with 1603, edited for the Huguenot Society. His introduction has been described as 'one of the most complete . . . treatises on the history of naturalisation laws in this country ever written'.

The war of 1914 took Shaw to the Treasury. 'His work was mostly of a routine character and cannot have been very congenial; but he was an inspiring companion, not least when at his most heterodox, and those who had closest contact with him became his friends', is the Treasury record. The work awakened his old fighting interest in contemporary monetary and financial doctrine; and also made him almost despair of the future financial historian's task.

There is an inevitable tendency [he writes to me in 1939] to abbreviate all interdepartmental communications—to short-circuit them. To-day the Treasury and the Bank are practically two facets of one department or machine. [Truly put: J. H. C.] There is a private telephone between the Finance Department in the Treasury and the Bank. . . . I used it myself. It is . . . in use all day long . . . the Governor comes to Whitehall for a conference at any moment. All that means the taking of important decisions and the passing of important communications without any record whatever being kept of them. What is the poor historian of the future to do? I pity him—what with the filing of carbon flimsies as of record (flimsies which perish in a few months from mere handling) and unrecorded telephone decisions and communications.

Shaw had learnt his trade among wooden tallies, and records on vellum or stout rag paper.

The books which resulted from his revived interest in contemporary affairs may not have added to his scholarly reputation.¹ No doubt he was not curious that they should, any more than that *The Coming Reaction* should, a volume which he issued under the pseudonym of 'Legislator' in 1905. There was something that he wanted to say and he said it. His politics, it may be reported incidentally, have been described as 'those of the extreme right'.

About this time he took over the editing of the *Sidney Papers* in the De L'Isle and Dudley muniments at Penshurst for the Historical Manuscripts Commission. One volume had appeared and one was unfinished. Shaw revised it, though not so completely as he would have liked, and saw it published in 1934. Two more volumes came out (1936 and 1942) and one other is ready for press when printing can be resumed. 'Almost his last act before he went into hospital was to complete the Introduction' to this volume, so far as completion is possible with an unprinted text.

¹ They are: *Currency, Credit and the Exchanges during the Great War and Since*, 1927; *The Theory and Principles of Central Banking*, 1931; *The Principles of Currency, Credit and the Exchanges*, 1934.

For nearly fifty years Shaw was based on the Record Office, and—as if to underline his character as records scholar—this was the only address that he permitted in *Who's Who*. But having been twice married—his first wife died in 1919 and he leaves a widow and a daughter—he had lived in various places about London, at Golders Green, at Waltham Cross, at Finchley, and perhaps elsewhere, in houses crammed with books and pictures—books everywhere, books in the kitchen. As a visitor to one of them noted, 'the house . . . seemed the smaller because most of the books were large'.

But he was never on the staff of the Record Office : in industrial language he was a piece-worker. In Chancery Lane a friend who had not seen him for years once found him 'in a small, almost triangular room, which hardly more than held him, a table and piles of what I supposed were Treasury Books. All very dim and dusty and Shaw, grey and dusty, quite in keeping. He was quite bright and cheerful however . . .' and reproached the old-time friend for not billeting himself on the Shaws.

The pictures in the various houses call up another interest of his—sixteenth- and seventeenth-century portraiture. He had wide knowledge, and clear opinions not generally shared, of the Wilton Diptych; in 1937 he published his *Inventories of the Royal Collection of Pictures under Henry VIII and Edward VI*; and I knew a man who thought of him first as an enthusiast for such things. Then there was music. His remains contain an unpublished and probably unorthodox manuscript on medieval Music; and it is on record that in his Golders Green days (about 1907–10) 'he was much taken up with Music—especially Greek Music'. These widespread, perhaps too widespread, interests did not at any time, it would seem, include nature. Very long ago, his oldest surviving friend, with two who do not survive, took him walking in the Lakes: 'but he was like a fish out of water and showed no interest whatever in his mountain surroundings'.

There are many publications to his name besides those already quoted. They range from *The English Government and the Relief of Protestant Refugees* (1894), through *Manchester Old and New*, a very long series of articles in the *D.N.B.* and many elsewhere, to the *Bibliography of the Collection of Books and Tracts on Commerce, Currency and Poor-law (1557–1763)* formed by Joseph Massie, of 1937. A complete bibliography of Shaw would be a task for Shaw himself. He wrote because he loved curious

knowledge—and because he had to write. ‘It would be safe to say that he was never independent of his pen.’ He lived, and he died, the poor and, in a sense, the lone scholar.

J. H. CLAPHAM

The old friend, often quoted, is Professor James Tait, to whom I am deeply in debt. There are also quotations or information in the text from letters by Mr. Cyril Flower, Mr. Charles Johnson, Professor Galbraith, Professor G. N. Clark, Mr. Hilary Jenkinson, Mr. Sydney Turner of the Treasury, and Mr. Atkinson of the Historical Manuscripts Commission. All these I thank.