IRONY AND CONFLICT
LESSONS FROM GEORGE BERNARD SHAW’S WARTIME JOURNEY

Michael Hanchett Hanson

World War I was both tragic and transforming for George Bernard Shaw. Like Europe as a whole, Shaw confronted the limits of his own views and strategies during the Great War. The distinctive Shavian voice that had changed the face of socialism in Britain in the 1880s; the voice that helped build the prestige of the Fabian Society, and, thereby, laid the foundation for the British Labor Party; the voice that had conveyed Shaw’s political perspectives through theater, journalism, debates and lectures; the voice that had made him famous worldwide—the Shavian irreverent and ironic confrontation of his audience seemed to fail when Shaw confronted Europe at war.

The problem was not the quality of insight. Many of Shaw’s views on the war were uncannily prescient. In the Fall of 1914 he foresaw a long, bloody war. He predicted a second war if the peace terms were vindictive. He predicted a longer-term conflict between Russia and the West. He emphasized the essential role of the United States for ultimate victory, and he prescribed a Western European mutual defense pact that included Germany as the key to enduring European peace. In his 1914 essay, Common Sense about the War (1914/1931, hereafter, Common Sense), Shaw laid out these insights as a coherent set of warnings about the present and vision for the future. Not all of his ideas were entirely new. Some, like the European mutual defense pact, he had advocated before the war (Shaw,
1913/1931). Laying out such a vision at that particular moment in history, however, was extraordinary—and that was part of the problem.

The world was not receptive to such extraordinary ideas. Even though *Common Sense* was read by a wide and influential audience, including U.S. President Wilson (Weintraub, 1971), Shaw had little direct influence on his government’s policies during the conflict. Many Britons were outraged by Shaw’s positions. Even some of his oldest and closest friends would distance themselves from him over the war.

In the end, Shaw’s wartime journey would be extraordinary for both its breadth of ideas and depth of moral conviction. *Common Sense*, and Shaw’s subsequent writing during the war, reflected years of thinking about the impact of international relations on the goals of social justice to which Shaw devoted his life. Staying true to those convictions in the face of overwhelming public opposition was courageous. Maintaining his good humor in the face of public and personal attacks demonstrated a commitment to ending the war that went far beyond Shaw’s concern for his own reputation.

In this chapter, I examine how ironic thinking contributed to Shaw’s initial point of view and to changes in his perspective on the war. This is a story of moral passion from beginning to end. It is also a story of growth. Finally and inescapably, it is an examination of what Shaw’s irony may mean to us, at the beginning of the 21st century.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL JOURNEY

In August, 1914, Bernard Shaw was 58 years old. He was at the height of his career as a playwright and Fabian activist. In the 38 years since he arrived in London from Dublin, Shaw had transformed himself from an impoverished, shy, awkward, uneducated young man into one of the most famous and outspoken men in the world.

From “Corno di Bassetto” to Quintus Fabius Maximus

When Shaw first came to London, he spent much of his time at the British Museum Library, educating himself on topics ranging from philosophy to economics to opera to social etiquette. His initial success as an author was in journalism, writing art, music and theater criticism. In his music reviews Shaw literally made a name for himself as “Corno di Bassetto” and as “GBS.” And, from the beginning, his writing was full of irony and confrontation. For example, in a column on a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*, Shaw “defended” the natural English voice against the criticism of musical slowness by noting that “the natural fault of the English