# *Foreword*

THROUGHOUT most of his long life (1856–1950) George Bernard Shaw was the self-appointed teacher of an intractable class—humanity. A composite Socrates-Voltaire-Rousseau, he enlarged their arena of instruction by means of the press, platform, pamphlet, and play (his chief "battering ram"); and tried to make his fractious students understand that their obsolete theories of life, sham institutions, and traditional morals were cruelly hindering them from becoming what they could become. He trumpeted from the housetops that he had isolated the only path to economic, political, social, cultural, and spiritual welfare. Perhaps his most eloquent objurgations were reserved for what he called capitalist education, which lay the groundwork for all that was spurious to him in society. It was therefore inevitable that Shaw, fully aware that education is the primary factor in that progressive accumulation and refinement of learnings and ideals which make for social advance, should evolve his own system. Almost all of his writings, including the plays, are permeated with educational ideas.

I have neither set up Shaw as a great educator, nor held it legitimate to dismiss most of his ideas as impracticable. These appraisals were largely influenced by the demands of the

democratic ideal underlying education, which I have tried to define within limits. There are libertarian as well as totalitarian strands in Shaw's thinking—a complex that can easily be distorted in either direction by prejudices and preconceptions about society and schools. He saw in his special brand of socialism the promise of transforming and elevating society from the plane of chaos and callousness about human growth, to a more civilized one in which social activities and education would be deliberately planned in behalf of desired values. It was clearly impossible, he thought, to exact moral, intellectual, and aesthetic cultivation from people whom societal circumstances—poverty, money-grubbing, war, disease, the vulgarity of mass communications—pervert to a subhuman level. Monstrous institutions, he repeatedly charged, make monsters of quite ordinary men. If Shaw's unteachable class refused to learn his assigned lessons, it was, in one sense, a good thing. Impatient to reach his objective and thus failing to qualify sufficiently his proposed remedies, he frequently resorted to questionable methods—absolute government (with democratic whispers from benevolent, educated rulers), and extermination of the unfit (with humanitarian overtones about painlessness). This state of affairs, despite his violent hatred of cruelty, could easily dominate his schools. One of the purposes of this book is to isolate his recommendations which could be of value to educational authorities in a democratic state.

If challenged to state the main purpose of his educational system, he would have replied promptly: "To make humanity divine." Or, perhaps, he would have written an even longer preface than the one to *Misalliance* in which he had said this. Unfortunately for Shaw the aims he proposed for education have been ignored because they are buried in a mass of dis-

cursive polemics. Like all the genuine teachers and prophets of the past, he was convinced that humanity as he found it was not good enough, and that the vital force conducting so noble an experiment with man on earth demanded something better: human nature must be transcended. The chief difficulty, he argued, was that though we always affirm the need to change for the better, we do not sufficiently desire to take the collective trouble to bring it about.

*Back to Methuselah* is a dramatic parable about human growth in the far distant future; Shaw's program of education is his way of indoctrinating the young to dedicate themselves to similar dreams of perfection. As an evolutionist he was persuaded that since we live in a morally and intellectually expanding world, ideals and methods regarded as sacrosanct in child training must be repudiated. Parental, religious, and school instruction became, for him, vicious indoctrination when it sought to cram a child with man-made dogmas which proclaim that society and the universe are perfected schemes, and that we already know all there is about basic values. Shaw had much in common with the pragmatists in America, who believe that continuous growth—incompatible with closed systems which imprison creative possibilities—is the purpose of all learning. Growth, he believed, was not a haphazard development; it was rather a calculated search for perfection requiring new powers of vision, intelligence, and flexibility of mind so that we could appreciate the way in which the modern world was moving, and adjust our course accordingly. His socialism, evolution, and education constitute a three-pronged assault to clear the way for human development.

Shaw tried to tell us that we could shape the social evolutionary process to our liking. Basic to his vitalist doctrine, presented full dress in the Preface to *Back to Methuselah* and

repeated in other works to the end of his life, is his hypothesis of an "evolutionary appetite" as the fundamental progressive force in life. In *Man and Superman* he dramatized the human brain (life's "darling object") as a mechanism, wholly novel in evolution, capable of profound contemplation, of rational choice between alternatives, and of appropriate action—all of which are contingent upon the strength of man's will. Since in the later stages of organic evolution, the struggle for Natural Selection is increasingly replaced in the human area by a struggle between traditions, ideas, and values within man's consciousness, progress for Shaw meant changes in social organization, in transmitted knowledge and ideals, and in processes of learning. Thus education, emanating from a society steeped in vital will and significant purpose, becomes fundamental for the release of human possibilities that are as yet scarcely dreamed of. The rate of evolution in the human sphere, Shaw argued, could thus be speeded up considerably. Whether we find merit in his views or not, they challenge us to exorcise moribund traditions and ideas in life and in education, and to exercise intelligent, purposive choice of values and institutions which will ultimately determine the course of social and human destiny.

Shaw's educational ideas are highly controversial. From the Victorian era to the present, his chief concerns—politics, economics, science, religion—have embroiled his name in lively controversies and civilizational enigmas. In a desperate search for fundamental values Shaw agitated himself and the world with seemingly insoluble problems, which most of the educated give up early in life as hopeless. His polemical and dialectical techniques were deliberately charged to shock the lethargic masses, drugged with what he thought were inert

ideas, into joining the intellectual fray and caring intensely about solutions.

The dilemmas raised by democracy, socialism, communism, and religion, with their inevitable impact upon education, will, nevertheless, have to be solved if civilization is to advance or survive. Recognizing that in our fragmented society there was little agreement among educators as to what the goals of learning should be, Shaw attempted to provide principles that would cohere education, religion, economics, and all other problems of human living. The ultimate problem of education, for him as for a free society, was to produce persons for whom freedom and the welfare of the world—even that of future generations—are inextricably rooted in thought and action. This was quite impossible, he claimed, because of the glaring lack of unity regarding basic values; these he wanted hammered out by educated rulers, like the benevolent King Magnus in *The Apple Cart*. The cleavages and conflicts in society between theory and practice, between the arts and the sciences, between education and religion, and between public good and private good, Shaw held, make insuperable difficulties for the educative process. Demanding agreement on essentials—even to the point of embracing a universal religion—Shaw wanted us to decide what it is that we really want and how we are prepared to work for it. This keynote has been sounded frequently in recent years by democratic educators, who, like Shaw, realize that the age of uncontrolled individualism and unplanned pluralism is quite dead. I have suggested elsewhere in this book, in a different context, that a free society must find modes of agreement on basic values, but not in such a way as to produce a totalitarian state. This calls for constructive thinking, social inventiveness, creative planning, and for the

application of scientific method to the problems of the times. As an antidote to totalitarian wholeness we need a leadership that can dare to envisage and formulate a great program of democratic wholeness in education for the coming years. Shaw's program of education, despite—or rather because of—the many authoritarian emphases, confronts us with such a task.

It should be stressed that Shaw's educational views are not isolated from the rest of his thought; they form an integral part of his politics, religion, science, and art; they can, in fact, be regarded as more explicit formulations of his basic premises in these areas. Education cannot be talked about in isolation, for the things we say about it will, consciously or unconsciously, involve fundamental convictions about the nature of man, society, and the meaning and purpose of human life—in short, about the basic values of civilization and their worth. In this sense, it can be said that Shaw viewed all of human life in an educational perspective.

His originality as an educator was on a par with his originality as a critic of music and of the theater. The literature about education has frequently failed to interest thoughtful people—particularly disillusioned teachers—because of its tendency to drift into formulized vocabulary and vague moral slogans. This is not true of Shaw's way, for the Shavian touch is evident to an unusual degree. Perhaps it was difficult for a notorious wit and propagandist, armed with invigorating language spiced with epigram, paradox, invective, humorous exaggeration, and the telling aphorism, to inspire confidence as an educator; perhaps the fifteen other reputations he claimed have obscured his attempts in this role. Saturated in the fine arts, in vitalist philosophy, and in social controversy, all of which enter into his doctrine, Shaw wrote uniquely about

teachers, schools, learning, and culture. The multiplicity of his ideas includes programs of instruction for such diverse persons as political leaders, criminals, doctors, and actors. To disagree categorically with his views about secondary education, religion, sex, or child training is to discover that he is intensely interesting and compelling, always ready with strange twists and turns away from the traditional and conventional. This is especially evident in the criticisms of his own early education in Dublin and in London. There is, behind his writings on education, a great deal of memory and bitter experience to which can be attributed his deeply personal views; yet these are frequently profounder and more subtly concrete than the generalizations and abstractions of the professional educator. Shaw dared to probe where few modern educators ever venture; and what he says often sharpens awareness of our own concerns. Perhaps we need to appraise and use, in the formulation of our educational theory, the insights and intuitions of artists and writers who have communicated configurations of life in novel and revealing ways. Shaw's education is not of the text book.