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Robertson and Shaw: An "Unreasonable Friendship"

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THE MANUSCRIPT DEPARTMENT of the British Library houses a small collection of letters which throws an interesting light on the relationship between two extraordinary literary figures of the late-nineteenth-early twentieth century: John Mackinnon Robertson and George Bernard Shaw. While their present reputations could not be further apart—the one virtually unknown and the other the centre of a vast literary industry—for several years their careers ran parallel, and even when they later went quite separate ways, they maintained a friendship that finally lasted over forty years. It was, admittedly, a relationship that was often far from harmonious, and Robertson himself, a rationalist to the core, described it somewhat uneasily as "unreasonable." On political, literary, and personal grounds the two men had much to disagree about, but it seems that they both found, as we shall see, that disagreement could be as stimulating as it was often exasperating. This principle sustained their friendship over quite a few more years than an outsider might find plausible.

The Robertson-Shaw relationship has not been one that Shaw's biographers have particularly bothered about. Hesketh Pearson does not mention Robertson at all, while St. John Ervine devotes about half a paragraph to him. With its ten lines on Robertson, Michael Holroyd's monumental modern biography does little better, even though Holroyd did have access to the Robertson-Shaw correspondence, which was acquired by the British Library in 1980.

On the one hand, this lack of interest is not altogether surprising, since Robertson is hardly a household name in the present-day scholarly world. After his death in 1933, it did not take long for Robertson and his
work to sink into oblivion. There is no full-length biography, nor did Robertson himself choose to write an autobiography, unlike so many of his contemporaries. As far as his personal life was concerned, Robertson was an extremely reticent man, and the many thousands of pages he wrote contain very few autobiographical references. For the most part, Robertson's life will have to be pieced together from a few appreciations by friends, his surviving correspondence, passing references in the works of contemporaries, and accounts of his various exploits in the many periodicals for which he wrote.  

On the other hand, even though Robertson does not provide potential biographers with ample material, his life and career are not lacking in distinction. An immensely prolific and erudite writer and controversialist, there seem to have been few subjects on which Robertson did not touch. As a literary critic, he made an impressive attempt to create a scientific system of literary criticism, and as an accepted authority on Elizabethan drama, he did much work to establish, as he saw it, the real authorship of Shakespeare's plays. As an historian, he wrote a massive four-volume history of Freethought through the ages, as well as several other large-scale historical-sociological works, such as *The Evolution of States* and *A Short History of Morals*. He was an expert on the history of Christianity, and wrote several books in which he tried to prove that the existence of Jesus was as mythical as that of the Greek and Roman gods. In the thousands of articles he wrote for the periodical press he commented on all major contemporary issues, whether in the field of politics, where he spoke out against Imperialism and the Boer War, or economics, where he was one of the last to wholeheartedly defend free trade. Nor did Robertson limit himself to writing; he was a particularly active MP for the Liberal Party from 1906 to 1918. In 1911, Asquith appointed him secretary to the Board of Trade, while in 1915, he was made a Privy Councillor. In the Commons, he was feared and respected as a debater who could crush any opponent with the immense knowledge he had at his fingertips.

Throughout his life and work, Robertson never wavered from the stern rationalist philosophy he had adopted early in life. His chosen enemy was religion, against which he crusaded for over fifty years with all his powers of controversy, never displaying any doubt whatsoever as to the rightness of his cause. His whole work is permeated with the desire to rid the people of that which he saw as restraining them most in their progress to a better world: the yoke of organized religion. Even
in more specifically philosophical works such as *Rationalism* (1912) and *Letters on Reasoning* (second, revised edition, 1905) in which he sketches the outlines of his rationalist system of thought, religion is his main target, and he attacks it with the heavy artillery of evolutionary science. He was, in other words, wholeheartedly devoted to the English nineteenth-century tradition of positivist thought, which we can trace back to Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill, and ultimately to Bacon.

Robertson's early history can explain to us how he came to occupy this ideological position. John Mackinnon Robertson was born in the same year as Bernard Shaw, 1856, at Brodick on the Scottish Isle of Arran. At an early age he moved with his parents to Stirling, where he went to school until he was thirteen years old; he had to start working then because his parents could not afford to give him any further education. For eight years he held various clerking jobs which cannot have given his precocious mind much intellectual satisfaction. A voracious reader, he had set his mind on a career in literature, and he educated himself to that purpose, so that he acquired a degree of erudition which must have amazed his fellow clerks. To widen his knowledge of European literature in the broadest sense, he studied assiduously on languages, learning six or seven. When he was fifteen, he drew up the following plan for himself: "The thing for me to do is to master Spanish, get into the copper trade, make a reasonable fortune in twenty years or so, and then withdraw and devote myself to my books." Not surprisingly, the plan was never executed, but a literary future was ahead.

In 1877, when Robertson was twenty-one years old and living in Edinburgh, he met William Archer, who became his (and later also Shaw's) close friend. From 1875, Archer had been a leader writer for the *Edinburgh Evening News*, an advanced Radical newspaper whose editor was a disciple of Herbert Spencer. Archer was greatly impressed with Robertson's powers of mind, and when he decided to move to London in 1878, he recommended Robertson as his successor at the *Evening News*. Thus launched in journalism, Robertson remained leader writer until 1884, when he in his turn decided to seek his luck in London.

By that time, he had long ceased to hold any kind of religious belief. In September 1878, he had attended a lecture by that formidable figurehead of Secularism, Charles Bradlaugh, by which he was very much impressed and which removed any remnants of belief he had not already read himself out of. This was Robertson's first contact with the Secularist movement, in which he was later to play such an important
role himself. At the Evening News, Robertson fell in with a group of followers of Bradlaugh, and he joined the Edinburgh Secular Society, where he was soon noted for his wide-ranging knowledge and debating prowess. The president of the E.S.S., John Lees, was a close friend of Bradlaugh, and it was at Lees's house at Portobello that Robertson met Alice and Hypatia Bradlaugh, Bradlaugh's daughters and co-workers in the Secularist cause. It is not quite clear whether he also met Bradlaugh himself, but there is little doubt that he soon attracted the great man's attention. Robertson was now starting to make regular contributions to the National Reformer, the official organ of the National Secularist Society and Bradlaugh's main mouthpiece, as well as to two other Freethought ventures: Progress, edited by the leading Freethinker G. W. Foote, and Our Corner, edited and owned by Mrs. Annie Besant. About this time he described his ideological position as that of a “Socialist and Pessimist,” but although Bradlaugh had a great aversion to socialism, he soon perceived that Robertson's brand of socialism was extremely close to his own Radical Liberalism, and that in this young man, he had found a valuable, powerful ally.

It was Bradlaugh's closest co-worker, the inimitable Mrs. Annie Besant, who finally arranged Robertson's removal from his beloved Scotland to London in 1884. For some time, she had been looking for a replacement of the dedicated but unreliable Edward Aveling on the staff of the National Reformer, of which she was co-editor. In the autumn of 1884, Mrs. Besant travelled up to Edinburgh, and succeeded in persuading Robertson to come with her to London and become assistant-editor of the National Reformer, which he was to remain until Bradlaugh's death in 1891. Upon arrival at St. Pancras station, Robertson was taken straight to Mrs. Besant's vast house at 19 Avenue Road, where, for the next thee years, he was to be a lodger. Robertson was now well on his way to becoming one of the pillars of the Secularist movement, and a loyal, though never uncritical, disciple of Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant.

The early 1880s were the Secularists' finest hour, when Bradlaugh, as president of the National Secularist Society, achieved unprecedented notoriety:

The Secularists were a relatively small group of men and women from the working classes whose mission was a radical restructuring of society by peaceful means. Their fundamental belief was that the evils of contemporary society were attributable to the baneful effects of religion, and their aim was to discredit Christianity and those social institutions which depended upon
It is not surprising, then, that the Secularists were regarded with horror by the majority of the respectable members of the middle and upper classes, especially considering that besides the atheism and republicanism there was the open advocacy of birth control. Bradlaugh, in reality an ardent constitutionalist and patriot, was considered an exceptionally dangerous man by the establishment, and there was a general outcry when in 1880, after four unsuccessful attempts, he was elected into parliament for Northampton. What ensued now became known as Bradlaugh's "parliamentary struggle." Bradlaugh, as an atheist, refused to take the Oath of Allegiance and he was not allowed to take his rightful seat in Parliament. It was not until six years later that he finally won his battle, and could embark on a parliamentary career. By that time, the Bradlaugh case had become a "cause célèbre," and had made him a popular hero. On the wings of this furor, the National Secularist Society reached its peak in 1883 and 1884, after which a gradual decline set in which proved unstoppable. Secularism, firmly rooted in the Liberal-Radical tradition, had to give way to a movement of which George Bernard Shaw was to become a prominent exponent: socialism.

Robertson not only replaced Edward Aveling on the staff of the National Reformer, he also replaced him in the triumvirate Aveling had formed with Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant. Robertson made numerous contributions to the National Reformer, thereby allowing Bradlaugh to concentrate on his parliamentary career. He also became Mrs. Besant's right hand man on Our Corner, of which she was the sole proprietor. Initially, Our Corner tried to carry out its Secularist mission from a popular, family-oriented angle. There were separate corners for a great variety of subjects: Politics, Young Folks, Art, etc. After 1885, when Mrs. Besant joined the Fabian Society, its slant became more serious and political, and around 1887 it turned into a socialist magazine, while retaining an interest in literature. This was entirely in keeping with the changing views of its proprietress, who was moving more and more away from Secularism towards socialism.

Partly but significantly, this was due to the influence of George Bernard Shaw, who now enters the scene, a struggling young author whom Robertson had met through Mrs. Besant. It seems likely that Robertson first met Shaw in his capacity as editorial assistant of Our
Corner. Mrs. Besant had come to the conclusion that Shaw was not the “loafer” he had proclaimed himself to be in a lecture at the South Place Institute in the beginning of May 1884, but was in fact “very hard-working” and quite poor, and therefore a worthy object of patronage. She decided to offer him space in Our Corner to publish the novels he had been peddling unsuccessfully with publishers of more conventional repute. It seems likely that Robertson too had a say in this decision. In an overview of the literature of 1884 in the National Reformer of December 1884, Robertson offered unusually high praise of Shaw’s fifth novel, An Unsocial Socialist:

On the whole, the most noteworthy piece of fiction I have lately seen has been the story entitled “An Unsocial Socialist,” by Mr George Bernard Shaw, which has just been concluded in the magazine To-day. There is capital work in that novel—insight, brilliance of style and pith of dialogue; and the conclusion struck me as the most stringent and striking application of the cynical method I had seen. It finally demonstrated, I think, that the cynical method is after all not good enough for a novelist of really wide range of sympathy, such as Mr Shaw shows himself; but it is only just to bear testimony to the freshness and strength of his work. It is really abreast of the thinking of the day—perhaps on that account too advanced for many readers.

This is obviously the kind of review that may well spark off a friendship, and Shaw was grateful for Robertson’s glowing words. When Macmillan rejected An Unsocial Socialist for publication, inviting him to write something “of a more substantial kind,” Shaw referred to Robertson in his reply as the one reviewer “who really took the book in.” Generally, the comments Shaw received on his work in the letters of rejection from the publishing houses he had tried were of a rather deadly kind. Kegan Paul, Trench & Co. had, for instance, noted that “it appears to us written in good style and language, but it suffers, in our opinion, from the fatal effect on a novel, of not being interesting.” Only John Morley, in his reader’s report for Macmillan, had gilded his rejection with some apt praise to the effect that “the author knows how to write; he is pointed, rapid, forcible, sometimes witty, often powerful and occasionally eloquent.” Both Robertson and Morley, who were to become political friends at a later stage in their careers, spotted in Shaw the qualities, the “brilliance of style and pith of dialogue,” which Shaw was only to develop to their full effect as a playwright. At the same time, Robertson was obviously still attracted to Shaw’s socialist message, and he undoubtedly felt he had met a kindred spirit.

The question to be solved now was which of Shaw’s remaining novels
Our Corner was to publish? Early in January 1885, Mrs. Besant wrote to Shaw to let him know that “Mr Robertson fancies that the Irrational Knot is the least likely of your novels to suit us.” Robertson, in fact, preferred Love Among The Artists, a preference with which Shaw was not greatly pleased:

Now I write to say that you have not read the Irrational Knot, that you ought to know better at your age than to dogmatise about novels that you haven’t read, and that, by the Lord! you shan’t have the other one that you want. What do the readers of Our Corner care about the life of a musician? they don’t know Wagner’s Tristan from “Pop goes the weasel.” The Irrational Knot is very long, and highly moral, and deeply interesting. A child can understand it, and a stern man can weep over it (if he likes).

Notwithstanding Robertson's objections, it was Mrs. Besant's favourite, The Irrational Knot, which was finally serialized in Our Corner from April 1885 to February 1887. Love Among The Artists was eventually published in Our Corner from November 1887 to December 1888.

The playfully indignant tone of the above letter indicates that the two men had become well-acquainted, and they were to see and hear much of each other in the months that lay ahead. Shaw’s diaries record frequent meetings with Robertson. They had a mutual friend in William Archer, and they both spent long days studying in the Reading Room of the British Museum. After Shaw’s first dramatic encounter with Annie Besant at the Dialectical Society on 21 January 1885, at which she unexpectedly defended Shaw’s advocacy of socialism, Shaw could often be found in the evenings at her house in St. John's Wood, where Robertson was a lodger. The two young men were exceedingly well-matched, and they honed their debating-skills by “sparring.” Undoubtedly, socialist politics and policies figured as an important theme in their discussions. Under Robertson’s influence, Mrs. Besant had begun to adopt a more favourable attitude towards socialism. In her usual, orotund style she testified in her Autobiography that “The inclusion of John Robertson in the staff of the Reformer brought a highly intellectual Socialist into closer touch with us, and slowly I found that the case for socialism was intellectually complete and ethically beautiful.” Robertson himself appears to have hovered on the fringe of the Fabian Society, and it seems likely that not even he, let alone Mrs. Besant, was entirely immune to the magnetic power of Shaw’s rhetoric.

In their correspondence, Shaw and Robertson discussed The Irrational Knot. In a letter dated 9 February 1885, Robertson urged Shaw,
none too seriously, to rethink the title of his novel: “Knowing you won’t take my advice, I suggest a change of title. ‘Irrational Knot’ is irrational: it is knot in the knature of knots to be rational or irrational. Why ‘Knot’ (Don’t retort with Why not?) ‘Mr Conolly’s Experiments’—would that do?” Further criticism was kindly offered: “But the one point on which I feel really strongly is the injustice you do to your kind in making them say ‘Humph’! I grant human beings are a bad lot, but they do not say ‘Humph!,’ and having read many hundreds of “Humphs” in the ‘Knot’ I am filled with an enthusiasm of humanity by way of reaction.”

Such witticisms show that Robertson could match Shaw’s level of banter if he wanted to, even though he may not have been entirely comfortable with it. This tone remained prevalent in Robertson’s further letters, but on a more serious level they did their best to boost each other’s literary careers. Robertson suggested, for instance, that Shaw should try publishers with socialist leanings like Vizetelly, publisher of Zola, and Sonnenschein, who had published the first translation of Das Kapital, rather than more established firms like Macmillan’s. He asked Shaw to send a number of his articles for evaluation to Thomas Carlaw Martin, a Secularist friend of Robertson’s Edinburgh days who was trying to run The Magazine of Music. Interestingly, Robertson asked Shaw to evaluate a play he had written (which unfortunately has not survived). Shaw’s response was apparently none too favourable, as Robertson’s rather awkward reply indicates:

As regards the play, the damned thing wasn’t worth discussion. You haven’t mentioned half its faults. Of course Lady Ida is special pleading. Do you suppose I didn’t know? But I make one stand—I stand up for my Earl. You clearly haven’t studied Earls. If you had you would have known that two moods is an extremely liberal allowance for an Earl.

In that same letter, Robertson then makes a startling suggestion: “Suppose we do a play together? But the trouble is that neither of us is a plottist. Only I would keep your plot within the bounds of common-sense—my own Quixotism was perfectly conscious.” He must have been aware of Shaw’s earlier attempt to write a play with William Archer, their mutual friend. In that attempted collaboration, Shaw’s supposed inability to come up with a good plot had also played a role. In the summer of 1884, Archer had outlined to Shaw the following masterplan: Archer was to provide the plot, which he borrowed from a “twaddling cup-and-saucer comedy” entitled Ceinture Dorée by Emile Augier, while Shaw could take care of the dialogue and make it sparkle. Shaw started
work on August 18, and by November he had completed the first two acts, but found it impossible to carry on. Now, only a few months later, we find Robertson trying to induce Shaw to embark on a similar venture. What Shaw thought of this plan has not been recorded, but one can imagine that after one misguided attempt in the recent past he was not so eager to run the risk of another failure. Even if he had been considering a successor to Archer, his distinct lack of praise for Robertson’s own efforts indicates that he would hardly have thought of Robertson as his first choice.

Given the fact that Robertson had written so highly of An Unsocial Socialist, Shaw may well have been unpleasantly surprised by Robertson’s review of his fourth novel, Cashel Byron’s Profession, in Our Corner of 1 May 1886. The main defect Robertson saw in the novel was Shaw’s inability to combine his satirical purpose with a sufficient degree of realism. Shaw’s heroine, a young lady of the highest nobility who finally marries the implausibly genteel prizefighting hero of the people, could not find favour with Robertson: “This egregious young woman, with her universal knowledge, her philosophic calm, and her supernatural perfection in general, is not composed of the tissues which constitute either women or men.” Robertson did not deny that besides realistic fiction, there should be room for the romance as a genre. However, he felt that Cashel Byron effectively belonged to neither the former nor the latter, and he compared Shaw unfavourably with Robert Louis Stevenson in that respect:

... it seems to me, that Mr Stevenson, if the lesser thinker, is, when at his best, the greater artist; that he achieves roundness, balance, and proportion in a successful art form, while Mr Shaw’s many-sided satire is not artistically homogeneous; the satiric purpose being cramped by the fiction-form, and the fictional effects being thwarted and deflected by the satiric purpose.

Shaw’s diaries indicate that, after reading this review, Shaw sat down to write a long, possibly indignant letter to Mrs. Besant. The note which Stanley Weintraub, the editor of Shaw’s diaries, has appended to this entry, is, however, curiously beside the point:

J. M. Robertson professed friendship and admiration for Shaw but saw him as a rival for Annie Besant’s favors and insinuated unfavorable criticism into everything he wrote and said about Shaw and his work. In OC [Our Corner] for May 1886 he faint-praised Cashel Byron’s Profession, pronouncing it a “dazzling” failure.

We shall later return to Weintraub’s first point, but as far as Robertson’s
implied malevolence is concerned, Weintraub may have missed such a paragraph as the following:

No one can read the running comment in his story without seeing that in something of the Dickens faculty of humorous imagination he adds a much wider intellectual grasp than that of Dickens; that his satire is abreast of the times; and that he has looked at life from an adequate level of culture. His dialogue, too, is generally vivid and vigorous, and never feeble, though at times it curiously lapses into old-fashioned conventionality. And his style is that of a born writer, sound, elastic, various, unaffected.40

This is hardly "faint praise," and moreover, Robertson's criticism seems quite to the point, especially with regard to the all too idealistic portrayal of Shaw's genteel heroine and her intrepid acceptance of a prizefight for a husband. Later in life, Shaw would not hesitate to endorse this view (though without reference to Robertson):

I actually thought that educated people conscientiously learnt their manner and studied their opinions—were really educated, in short—instead of merely picking up the habits and prejudices of their set, and confidently presenting the resultant absurd equipment of class solecisms to the world as a perfect gentility. Consequently the only characters which were natural in my novels were the comic characters...41

Shaw's diary for 1886 indicates that the two men were still frequent to be found in each other's company, however much Shaw may have resented Robertson's criticism. Politically too, there were still few signs of the chasm between Secularism and socialism which was to divide them in years to come. Robertson, for instance, was present at the first Fabian conference, which was organized on 9–11 June 1886, at the South Place Institute. Its aim was "to discuss the present commercial system and the better utilisation of national wealth for the benefit of the community." On the first day, Robertson argued against Sidney Webb view "as to the non-cultivation of poor soils," while on the third day, he read a well-received paper entitled "A Scheme of Taxation."42 Shaw later wrote that in this paper, Robertson "anticipated much of what was subsequently adopted as the Fabian program,"43 thus confirming Robertson's influence on Shaw's political thought is by no means to be neglected, and perhaps deserves further investigation than this overview can provide.

On a more personal note, the journalist from G. W. Foote's Progress who reported on the Conference provides some interesting insight in the essential difference in character between the two men, by describing...
Robertson's delivery as "cool, dignified, and gentlemanly," in contrast with "the dry Irish witticism of Mr Bernard Shaw, whose pleasant, half-ironical smile makes us forgive nature for having endowed him with a deathly pale face, like that of the average vegetarian."44

Although at this time Robertson still sympathised with the socialist ideal, and although he may even have contributed to the Fabian programme, he was never a socialist in the sense that he believed in state monopoly or revolution. To Robertson, only gradual and painstaking reform could bring the founding of the socialist state any nearer, and he did not feel that his evolutionary approach was sufficiently shared by socialists in general, nor by the (hardly revolution-minded) Fabians. His immediate concern was with the social betterment of the here and now, and he had little time for the founding of a Utopia at some remote point in the future. Mrs. Besant, however, preferred political ideas that soared up into the cloudy sky to those which remained firmly rooted in humble soil, and it was not long before she was convinced by Shaw to take those final steps towards socialism which Robertson was not prepared to take. This finally resulted in a painful breach between her and Charles Bradlaugh, who rightly perceived socialism as a dangerous threat to his Secularist movement. In October 1887, Mrs. Besant resigned as co-editor of the National Reformer, leaving Robertson with much of the editorial burden on his hands, now that Bradlaugh was preoccupied with his parliamentary duties.45

By that time, the relationship between Shaw and Mrs. Besant had developed in such a way that it, as Shaw wrote, "very nearly became an intrigue." Annie Besant had offered Shaw a written agreement to live at Avenue Road and join in her work, which Shaw, disconcerted by the serious turn their relationship was suddenly taking, refused "with a consciousness of having behaved inconsiderately." In December 1887, Mrs. Besant returned all Shaw's letters to him and apparently reproached Shaw very bitterly for his treatment of her.46 About this time, Robertson was away to Germany, where he stayed for several months. Was it Annie Besant's infatuation with Shaw that drove Robertson abroad, as Shaw seems to imply vaguely in his diaries: "She having left herself almost alone during her acquaintance with me, she had for example allowed J. M. Robertson, who had boarded in her house, and was deeply attached to her, to go abroad."47 It does not seem very likely. There is no evidence to suggest that Robertson ever wished to "adventure with a landlady and employer nine years his senior and already
married,” as Bradlaugh’s biographer David Tribe puts it. Weintraub’s suggestion that Robertson and Shaw were in competition for Mrs. Besant’s favours, and that this created not a little rancour between them, remains unconvincing.

It is true that in Shaw’s diaries, Robertson appears to be always at Mrs. Besant’s side, almost as if they were a married couple. If he is not correcting proofs with her, he is escorting her around town on one of her numerous engagements. In an autobiographical fragment, Shaw wrote: “There was a different leading man every time: Bradlaugh, Robertson, Aveling, Shaw, and Herbert Burrows. That did not matter.” At some point between 1884 and 1886, Robertson had clearly become her new “leading man,” one whom she could rely on for support and intellectual stimulus. It seems unlikely, however, that their relationship was ever anything other than strictly platonic. Mrs. Besant may well have referred to Robertson too when she observed complacently to a later “leading man,” W. T. Stead: “Let us be honest, I have not worked with any man in close intimacy who has not fallen in love with me, but I have managed to steer through and . . . keep my friend.” But what she needed was a reliable and supportive co-worker, not a lover, and this role Robertson fitted to perfection. After Mrs. Besant left Secularism for the misty heights of Theosophy, Robertson retained his loyalty to her, in spite of their ideological differences. Mrs. Besant was duly grateful and praised Robertson highly in her autobiography for being “a man of rare ability and culture, somewhat too scholarly for popular propagandism of the most generally effective order, but a man who is a strength to any movement, always on the side of noble living and high thinking, loyal-natured as the true Scot should be, incapable of meanness or treachery, and the most genial and generous of friends.”

It was, then, most likely not sexual rivalry which caused the friendship between Robertson and Shaw to cool down considerably. Rather, ideological forces were at play which drove asunder the two men who had once started out together on the same path to socialism and literary renown. While Shaw and the Fabian society were guiding socialism in new directions, Robertson finally remained faithful to Bradlaugh’s “old-fashioned” brand of individualist Liberalism, preaching “evolution” rather than “revolution.” In spite of the political chasm widening between the two men, Shaw’s diaries for 1888–1890 as yet do not show any signs of rupture, Shaw several times searching out Robertson’s company when Shaw felt “quite done up.” However, in 1891 we see the first signs
of a serious conflict arising. Shaw’s diary of February 22 records a lecture
Shaw held at the Hall of Science, the Secularist centre, on “Freethinking
New and Old,” in which he dealt, as he later recalled, “with the whole
mass which [Secularists] called free thought: I went into their Darwin­
ism and Haeckelism, and physical science, and the rest of it, and showed
that it did not account even for bare consciousness. I warned them that
if any of them fell into the hands of a moderately intelligent Jesuit—not
that I ever met one—he would turn them inside out.”

It is not surprising that Robertson took offence. As a loyal Bradlavian
Secularist, the tenets of Darwinism and science were sacred to him, and
he would not so easily let any Jesuit and certainly not Shaw himself
“turn them inside out.” After the lecture, Shaw was unpleasantly sur­
prised by the “extraordinarily bitter attack” Robertson made on him.
Perhaps significantly, Shaw records no further meetings between them
that year. However, their conflict flourished in print. On 1 March 1891,
Robertson placed his reaction to Shaw’s lecture in the National Re­
former, and he let loose on his friend in no uncertain manner. In his
lecture, Shaw had pleaded with sardonic wit that the middle-class
individualism of the Secularists should be replaced by the working-class
collectivism of Fabian Socialism. The logic-chopping, Bible-smashing
Secularists had it all wrong; the road to reform ran squarely through
the Fabian form of Freethinking. It was, in fact, the socialists who were
the real Freethinkers, not the individualist Secularists.

This line of reasoning ran counter to Robertson’s deepest convictions
and allegiances. He plotted his revenge by presenting an imaginary
socialist in whose mouth he put the following creed:

“We Socialists are mostly impressionable people, strongly alive to the evils
of society; but it must be confessed we have very little of the spirit of science
in us. Only a few of us have a knowledge of economics; and a good many of
us have only a smattering of common-sense. We appeal on the one hand to
the more excitable workers, whom we never worry with any suggestion while
knowing how hard it is to find work at good wages; and on the other hand to
sentimental middle-class and upper-class people, who feel flattered at being
singled out from the vulgar bourgeoisie, whom we invite them to abuse in
season and out of season.”

And so on for several paragraphs. Robertson did admit to still being, to
a limited extent, a socialist himself:

Well, I in my way am a “Socialist”; that is to say, I have long regarded human
society as an indefinitely evolving order, which in the main is gradually
coming nearer and nearer to corporate consciousness and mutual helpfulness; this evolution being in one sense a continuous process of Socialism, from the lowest stages of human life, in another sense a progress towards Socialism, taking that to mean a complete co-operation, which will only be possible in a stage of intellectual equilibrium.57

But it is clear this would not go far enough by half for the Fabians. It was precisely this refusal on the part of the Secularists to see eye to eye with the need for more radical working-class reform that was the cause of the decline of Secularism, which had set in in the late 1880s.58 The fact that his friend Shaw played an active role in that decline provoked him to a level of aggressiveness in his counter-attack that must have put considerable strain on their relationship.

That the principle of “an eye for an eye” now characterized their relations is evident from the sharp edge Robertson’s jesting can be seen to acquire:

I know my friend would not be very angry with me for calling his lecture absurd, even if he had not repudiated the idea of being reasonable. I know he would not have felt quite happy if he had not made a number of the ladies in his audience say “How delightfully funny Mr Shaw always is”; and that my derision, which he freely returns, will never ruffle our unreasonable friendship.69

Shaw does seem to have taken Robertson’s sallies in good form. In a letter to E. C. Chapman of 29 July 1891 he declared: “But I happen to know that Robertson is an honest man”,60 and on 10 November 1891 he wrote to Archer:

You know two journalists who may fairly be called uncompromisingly honest in their utterances. One is Robertson: the other is [G. W.] Foote. Both of them are a good deal honester than I am, because, although they do not publish more extreme opinions, yet they have to serve them up without Shaw sauce and it was a strong sense of this that provoked Robertson to say, in the National Reformer, that I never said anything that was not palatable to my audiences.61

Three days later he wrote to Archer: “In spite of what I said about Shaw sauce I should laugh at Robertson if he claimed to be a braver man than I because my style of swordplay, which he cannot manage, is a safer one than his. We all go as far as our styles will carry us.”62

One feels that Shaw had the measure of Robertson. He respected his friend and adversary for his scrupulous honesty, but he also saw clearly that Robertson was no match for him when he tried to impinge on hi
own special style of rhetoric, his blend of Rationalism and whimsy. It is perhaps here, even more than in all kinds of ideological divergences, that the true cause for the widening gap between the two men lies. Their approaches could not be more different. Robertson was always the hard-headed rationalist, rigorous in his logic and unwavering in his beliefs and allegiances. Shavian flippancy was not only something he abhorred, but it was also a mode that was quite outside his own range, however much he sometimes tried to copy Shaw’s tone. Shaw was well aware of this, but it did not weaken his respect for Robertson, as his letters show.

Robertson, however, could not hide an element of contempt in the criticism of his friend. In the National Reformer of 6 December 1891, Robertson published a review of Shaw’s Quintessence of Ibsenism. In that book, Shaw continued in the same vein as in his earlier lecture on “Freethought, New and Old,” undermining the very foundation Robertson built his work on:

The fact remains that when Darwin, Haeckel, Helmholtz, Young, and the rest, popularized here among the middle class by Tyndall and Huxley, and among the proletariat by the lectures of the National Secular Society, have taught you all they know, you are still as utterly at a loss to explain the fact of consciousness as you would have been in the days when you were satisfied with Chambers’ Vestiges of Creation. Materialism, in short, only isolated the great mystery of consciousness by clearing away several petty mysteries with which we had confused it; just as rationalism isolated the great mystery of the will to live. The isolation made both more conspicuous than before. We thought we had escaped for ever from the cloudy region of metaphysics; and we were only carried further into the heart of them.

In his review, Robertson writes off Shaw as a light-weight thinker, incapable of deep philosophical analysis and always ready to let his latest whim take control of his mind:

But it is a pity, after all, to subject Mr Shaw’s “Quintessence” to analysis, or, at least, to do nothing else with it. He must needs work in his own way, and say just what he feels for the time being. He can never see more than part of a philosophic problem at a time, and he seldom goes far beyond the threshold of a truth; but his faculty of walking where others fear to tread, is at times of the greatest service to his public. I think he frustrates himself a good deal by his foible for paradoxing, by telling people to discard the idea of Duty when he really wants to teach them new duties, by exhorting them to reject reason when he is actually trying to make them reason more closely and more thoroughly.
One cannot escape the feeling that what really annoys Robertson in Shaw is the latter's headstrong refusal to be more like Robertson himself: a fearless reasoner and logician, to whom consistency in thought is the greatest measure of truth. That consistency is precisely the quality he felt Shaw lacked.

When a year and a half later Robertson reviewed Shaw's first play, *Widowers Houses*, his opinion about Shaw the thinker had not changed. However, his general opinion was remarkably positive: "...in his fitful and wayward way he probes life and stimulates thought; and in his replies to his critics, and his vindication of his play, though there is the usual partly sincere assumption of personal importance, and the usual failure to strike the note of dignity, he is entertaining as always, and, as always, felicitous in style." Robertson ends with the exhortation to the reader that we "must be content to appreciate him for what he is, not vainly urging him to what he can never be." This was sound advice, although there is a strong hint that Robertson found it much easier to take with regard to Shaw the playwright than Shaw the propagandist for Fabian socialism.

We have very few records of Robertson's and Shaw's involvement beyond 1893. Their careers went their different ways: Robertson eventually embarked on a career in politics (though he kept writing at a tremendous pace), while Shaw's career as a playwright was soon well under way. All that has survived of their correspondence in later life are two letters on trivial business, one of 16 May 1918, the other of 28 October 1927, which does indicate that they kept in touch.

One year before the last letter, in 1926, Robertson had launched a final critical missile at Shaw, by writing an acerbic little book on Shaw's *Saint Joan: Mr Shaw and "The Maid."* We immediately recognize the tone of Robertson's and Shaw's polemics of the 1880s and 1890s. Robertson chides Shaw at length for the inconsistencies in his historical representation of "the Maid":

And who... can now fail to see that when the noble figure of the tranced visionary, with her sheer burning mediaeval faith in God and the Saints, inspiring disheartened soldiers and populace to a kindred faith in her Mission, is transmuted to that of a kind of early Feminist Reformer—a Super woman with a genius for artillery and tactics, reforming a demoralized army—we have lost a real historic figure and gained a mere whimsical contraption.

Robertson's book was reviewed by T. S. Eliot in the *New Criterion* of
April 1926. Fully corroborating Robertson’s line of thought, Eliot re­­marked that “what issues most clearly from a reading of Mr Robertson’s book is Mr Shaw’s utter inability to devote himself wholeheartedly to any cause.” Eliot’s verdict is precisely that of Robertson: “… Mr Shaw’s ‘St. Joan’ is one of the most superstitious of the effigies which have been erected to that remarkable woman.” With Eliot on his side, it seems that Robertson was left with the last word in the ongoing debate between himself and Shaw. Robertson died in 1933; there are no indications of any further contact between the two men after 1927.

The relationship between Robertson and Shaw as described in this article survived for over forty years, and on that account alone does not deserve to be neglected. Although it may not be possible to measure the exact extent of their influence on each other, there is no doubt that the interaction between these extraordinary minds had its effects, particularly considering that it was at its closest when both men went through the formative stages of their lives. Shaw found in Robertson one of the few critics who could outdo him in erudition and reasoning power, while Robertson may have been stimulated more by Shaw’s rhetorical brilliance than he was willing to admit. Their personalities may often have clashed resoundingly, but from the point of view of intellectual stimulus there was finally nothing “unreasonable” about this friendship.

Notes


1. British Library, Add. MS 50548, ff. 115–133. I am grateful to the British Library for giving permission to quote from these manuscripts.


11. The main source for Robertson's early life and career is the short account of his life by J. P. Gilmour which is prefixed, together with appreciations by Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, Ernest Newman, and John A. Hobson to the 1936 edition of Robertson's History of Freethought...to the Period of the French Revolution. Unless otherwise stated, the biographical information presented here is taken from this source.


16. Robertson's contributions to Progress as well as to Our Corner start with Volume I, 1883.

17. J. M. Robertson, "Correspondence," National Reformer, 15 and 29 June 1884.


24. Quoted from Holroyd, 118.

25. Ibid.

26. GBS to JMR, 19 January 1885. Quoted from Laurence, 113.

27. Ibid.


32. JMR to GBS, 10 February 1885. BL Add. MS 50548, f. 118.
33. JMR to GBS, 14 May 1885. BL Add. MS 50548, f.124.
34. JMR to GBS, 9 March 1885. BL Add. MS 50548, f. 120.
35. JMR to GBS, 11 March 1885. BL Add. MS 50548, ff. 122–123.
39. Ibid.
45. Tylor, 188; Nethercot, 249.
47. Ibid.
50. Quoted from Tylor, 186.
51. Besant, 286.
52. See the entries for 19 July and 22 November 1889, 5 June 1890.
54. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 133.
57. Ibid.
58. See Roylo, 36–45.
60. Quoted from Laurence, 301.
61. Ibid., 326.
62. Ibid., 328.
67. Ibid., 35.
68. JMR to GBS, 16 May 1918. BL Add. MS 50548, f. 131.
69. JMR to GBS, 28 October 1927. BL Add. MS 50548, ff. 132–133.
70. J. M. Robertson, *Mr. Shaw and ‘The Maid’* (London: Richard Cobden-Sanderson, 1926), 38.