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A NOTE ON WILLIAM ARCHER AND THE PALL MALL GAZETTE, 1888

by Joseph O. Baylen

During the decade of the 1880's, the editors of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, John Morley and his successor, William T. Stead, attracted to the journal an imposing array of talent which helped make the *P.M.G.* one of the most renowned and influential daily papers in London.¹ Among the many outstanding contributors as essayists and literary critics to the *P.M.G.* were John Ruskin, Oscar Wilde, Frederic Harrison, Arthur Conan Doyle, the young George Bernard Shaw, and the dramatic critic and Ibsen enthusiast, William Archer.² Of these, Shaw, who joined the *P.M.G.* staff of book reviewers through the efforts of Archer in 1885, and Archer were regular contributors.³ Archer's connection with the *P.M.G.* as a literary critic

¹For an account of the *Pall Mall Gazette* under the editorial direction of John Morley (1880-1883) and W. T. Stead (1883-1890), see J. W. Robertson Scott, *The Life and Death of a Newspaper, An Account of . . . John Morley, W. T. Stead, E. T. Cook, Harry Cust, J. L. Garvin and Three Other Editors of the Pall Mall Gazette* (London, 1952), pp. 13-259.

²Cf. *ibid.*, Chap. XXVI. See also George Bernard Shaw to Frederic Whyte [1922], in Frederic Whyte, *Life of W. T. Stead* (London, 1924), II, 306; Patrick G. Hogan, Jr. and Joseph O. Baylen, "G. Bernard Shaw and W. T. Stead, An Unexplored Relationship," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* [Rice University], I (Autumn, 1961), 146, hereafter cited as "Shaw and Stead." On the life and career of William Archer (1856-1924), see Lt. Colonel C. Archer, *William Archer: Life, Work and Friendships* (New Haven, 1931); St. John Ervine, *Bernard Shaw, His Life, Work and Friends* (London, 1956), pp. 173-175, 179, 275; Archibald Henderson, *Bernard Shaw, Playboy and Prophet* (New York, 1932), pp. 257ff, 338ff, hereafter cited as *Shaw, Playboy and Prophet*.

³On Archer's role in securing work for Shaw on the *P.M.G.* and Shaw's connection with the paper, see Dan H. Laurence, "G.B.S. and the *Gazette*: A Bibliographical Study," *The Shaw Review*, III (September, 1960), 14-19; Dan H. Laurence, "Bernard Shaw and the *Pall Mall Gazette*: An Identification of His Unsigned Contributions," *The Shaw Bulletin*, No. 5 (May, 1954), 1-7; Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* (New York, 1956), pp. 164-165ff.

began in 1884 and lasted through "the stormy closing years" of Stead's editorship and "the more tranquil reign of [Stead's heir] E. T. Cook" until the paper changed hands in 1892.⁴

As Archer's filial biographer records, although "Archer's work on the *P.M.G.* was well paid, and did much to bring him into notice as a literary critic; . . . it was by no means an unmixed blessing" since much of his work was done under "harmfully high pressure."⁵ Yet Archer's unsigned reviews were not unrewarding because of the attention which his felicitous style of criticism commanded from the rather sophisticated audience of the *P.M.G.*⁶ He also won the respect of the authors of the works he reviewed by his ability to criticize without attempting to censor or censure.⁷

Archer's relationship with his editor, Stead, was cordial but never intimate.⁸ Indeed, they were sharp opposites in personality, background, and interests. A tall, dignified, and somber visaged Scot, Archer was a sophisticate who delighted in the theatre "as a palace of light and sound."⁹ Stead, on the other hand, was unprepossessing in appearance and a devout Nonconformist and North Country Radical who shunned the theatre as the handiwork of the powers of darkness.¹⁰ Still, there were marked similarities between the two men. Both possessed an innate obstinacy and incorruptibility which made it difficult for them to compromise on absolutes.¹¹ Like Stead's "New Journalism," Archer's dramatic and literary criticism was marked by spontaneity, enthusiasm for what he

⁴Archer, *William Archer*, pp. 123-124.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁷See Robert Louis Stevenson's remarks as cited by Col. Archer, *ibid.*; also Ervine, *Bernard Shaw*, p. 174.

⁸In this direction, see Archer's comments on one of Stead's many schemes to save the souls of men, in William Archer, "A New Profession: Soul-Doctoring," *The Daily Graphic*, January 22, 1890.

⁹Ervine, *Bernard Shaw*, p. 173.

¹⁰On the life of W. T. Stead (1849-1912) and aspects of his personality and career, see Whyte, *Life of Stead*, 2 vols.; Estelle W. Stead, *My Father, Personal and Spiritual Reminiscences* (London, 1913); Robertson Scott, *Life and Death of a Newspaper*, pp. 72-246. Concerning Stead's early prejudice against the theatre, see Hogan and Baylen, "Shaw and Stead," p. 128; W. T. Stead, "First Impressions of the Theatre.—I. From the Outside," *Review of Reviews*, XXX (July, 1904), 29-30.

¹¹See the remarks of Archibald Henderson who knew Archer well and also saw Archer through the keen eyes of Shaw, in Henderson, *Shaw, Playboy and Prophet*, p. 257; also Archer, *William Archer*, p. 411. My remarks concerning similarities between Stead and Archer are based upon a study of Stead's personal papers and the works of Whyte, Robertson Scott, and Miss Estelle W. Stead.

admired, independence, clarity and a concentration on essentials.¹² Both were generous to a fault with their time but demonstrated "a certain impatience with speculative opinion" and an intolerance of any opportunism in human affairs.¹³ Also, as Stead's prejudice against the theatre was eroded by the mellowing of time, he came to share Archer's enthusiasm for Ibsen and deep conviction that "the drama was a mirror of life."¹⁴

While Archer had supported Stead during his "Maiden Tribute" agitation in 1885 to raise the age of consent for young maids,¹⁵ he was quick to sense that Stead's affront to Victorian sensibilities had seriously damaged the reputation of the *P.M.G.* Nevertheless, in spite of his fear that "a glowing notice [of a book] in the Gutter Gazette would set . . . other papers against it,"¹⁶ and the increased volume of his work as a dramatic critic for *The World* and four other papers, Archer refused to sever his connection with the *P.M.G.* He still hoped to convert Stead to the idea of employing a regular dramatic critic and to support his crusade against the vagaries of the Lord Chamberlain's censorship of the theatre.¹⁷ Then, too, there were the more prosaic facts that the *P.M.G.* appreciated his literary efforts and provided a steady source of income.

The following letter to Stead¹⁸ not only furnishes some additional information on Archer's work as a literary critic for the *P.M.G.*, but also illustrates something of the method which book

¹²See Colonel Archer's candid discussion of his father's qualities as a literary and dramatic critic and publicist, in Archer, *William Archer*, pp. 405-406, 410.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 411; Ervine, *Bernard Shaw*, pp. 174, 185; also Henderson, *Shaw, Playboy and Prophet*, p. 341.

¹⁴Henderson, *Shaw, Playboy and Prophet*, p. 338. On Stead's change of attitude towards the theatre, see Hogan and Baylen, "Shaw and Stead," pp. 134, 136; W. T. Stead, "First Impressions of the Theatre. I—My First Play: 'The Tempest,' at His Majesty's," *Review of Reviews*, XXX (October, 1904), 367; also W. T. Stead, "A Plea for the Democratisation of the Theatre," *Review of Reviews*, XXXI (February, 1905), 150-155.

¹⁵Cf. William Archer to Charles Archer, November 12, 1885. Archer, *William Archer*, pp. 143-144. On Stead and the "Maiden Tribute" agitation, see Charles Terrot's sensationalist account in *The Maiden Tribute* (London, 1959), pp. 135-222.

¹⁶Cf. William Archer to Charles Archer, September 8, 1887, in Archer, *William Archer*, p. 159.

¹⁷William Archer to W. T. Stead, May 31 and June 3, 1886, and January 2, 1889, in Stead Papers.

¹⁸I am deeply indebted to Miss Estelle W. Stead and Mr. W. K. Stead for permission to edit this letter for publication.

reviewers for the major daily papers in Victorian England used in practicing their "craft." In the light of Archer's candid comments on the work of fellow practitioners, it is not difficult to appreciate the extreme sensitivity which marked the reaction of many Victorian novelists to the verdict of critics who, unlike the high-minded Archer, "often reviewed 8 or 10 novels in a [single] column" of print without reading hardly a page of the books submitted for their judgment.

26, Gordon Square
W.C.

3 Aug: 88

Dear Mr. Stead

I am sorry I cannot return Stopford Brooke's poems,¹⁹ for I sold the book some months ago. Poetry and novels I almost always sell; history and general literature I keep. I have lately learnt that on some papers there is an objection to reviewers selling books, while a few even insist on the return of all review books. As this had not previously occurred to me, I think it may be well, while we are on the subject, to let you know the principle on which I have hitherto acted, and learn whether it accords with your views.

First, as to the publishers: It seems to me that they have no right to complain of the sale of a book *which has been reviewed*. The practice of selling books which have not been reviewed is certainly unfair to them—that is to say, if the book fetches anything more than its price as waste paper. In the rare cases in which a book does not seem to me worth reviewing, I am careful not to sell it.

Secondly, as the reviewer; that is, myself—the *P.M.G.*, I admit pays very liberally as such things

¹⁹Cf. the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke, *Poems* (London, 1888). Brooke's unorthodox and independent religious views, as an Anglican divine and man of letters, undoubtedly interested Stead who, at this time, was contemplating the publication of a series of articles on the spiritual life of Britain.

go, but when it comes to doing, say, three 3 volume novels in a column, I look upon the right to sell the novels as a set off against the time it takes to read them. A man on the *Daily News* told me the other day that he often reviewed 8 or 10 novels in a column and returned the books; but he confessed that the greater part of them was generally uncut. This sort of thing I can't do, and I am sure you do not wish that I should. I do not pretend to read every word of every page of a three volume novel, but I always look over the whole of it, and satisfy myself that I have done justice (so far as in me lies) to the author. And novels are not, of course, the books which demand most study. Those to which I give most time are naturally the books I am specially interested in and want to keep; the advantage to you being that you get the most careful work of which I am capable. On the other hand I am always delighted to return books (however interesting to me personally) which are of the nature of works of reference and which ought to belong to the office. When I used to do the *Dictionary of National Biography* I always returned these volumes punctually, and other books in the same category I should never think of claiming. But as a general rule, I hope you will agree with me that it is unfair to muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn; at any rate if he treadeth it out conscientiously.

Forgive me for troubling you at this length about what is after all a small matter. I calculate that the sale of books (to a bookseller who, I believe, sends them to country circulating libraries and so forth) brings me in on an average about £6 or £7 a year. The fact is, what I have heard laterly of the practice of other papers has been troubling me a little, and your note gave me an opportunity for laying before you clearly

my theory and practice, which I hope you will
not think unreasonable.

I am

Yours very truly
William Archer