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G.B.S. ON THE "ART OF LIVING," 1908

by Joseph O. Baylen

In December, 1907, the editor of The Review of Reviews, inspired by the recent publication of a survey of the drinking habits of eminent Frenchmen in a Parisian periodical, decided to attempt a similar inquiry among prominent British men of letters, science, artists, and religious and political affairs. They were requested to offer suggestions to the British public and especially the younger generation "as to the best way in which to preserve their health, insure their happiness, and generate the maximum amount of working power" by rendering their opinion of "the best regimen as to food and drink and tobacco . . . ."\(^1\)

Among those queried were Court historian Sir Theodore Martin, savant Alfred Russel Wallace, author William M. Rossetti, scientist Sir William Crookes, soldier Lord Roberts, politician Sir John Gorst, editor of Punch Sir Francis Burnand, Non-conformist leader Dr. John Clifford, Salvation Army patriarch "General" William Booth, Positivist pundit Frederic Harrison, actor Herbert Beerbohm Tree, actress Ellen Terry, critic Edmund Gosse, humorist Jerome K. Jerome, and dramatist George Bernard Shaw. Their replies to a circular letter were published in the February and March, 1908, issues of The Review of Reviews with each statement prefaced by a short editorial commentary on "the nature and duration of the life-history" of the individual concerned.\(^2\)

Of all the statements published, the lengthy communication elicited from Bernard Shaw is the most detailed and interesting. While Shaw's letter adds to what is known of Shaw's personal

\(^1\)[W. T. Stead,] "What to Eat, Drink, and Avoid. The Experience of the Experts in the Art of Living," The Review of Reviews, XXXVII (Feb. 1908), 136.

\(^2\)Ibid., 136-46; Ibid. (Mar. 1908), 237-46.
habits and idiosyncracies, it is also significant because it has apparently been overlooked by Shaw's biographers as an addition to the ever-growing corpus of Shaviana. Moreover, there is the fact that the communication was introduced and published by W. T. Stead, who, as editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* from 1883 to 1889, had helped launch Shaw on his career in 1885 by providing employment for him on the *Gazette.*

In his preface to Shaw's letter, Stead introduced the views of "the mocking sage of Adelphi Terrace" with the wry comment

> Mr. Shaw has views upon all subjects and those which he entertains upon the subject of vegetarianism, alcohol, and tobacco are so very pronounced that the reader will probably turn to his contribution first of all. They will not be disappointed, for they will find in it the secret, or... one of the innumerable secrets of Mr. Shaw's superiority to the rest of mankind. In virtue of his incontestable superiority to all his contemporaries I include him among the elders...

Shaw's letter, written in January, 1908, was, in a sense, both a subtle critique of British life in the Edwardian era and characteristically an exposition of what he wanted his public to know of himself. Indeed, the following letter was a clever artifice designed by Shaw to enhance and color his image.

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4*The Review of Reviews*, XXXVII (Feb. 1908), 145.
[Dear Mr Stead]

(1) **Food.**—I have not eaten meat for twenty-seven years. The results are before the public.

I find modern customs in eating among the unwholesomely rich people horribly monotonous. One would imagine the more meals people eat the more care they should take to make each meal as different from the other as possible. Yet at present dinner and lunch are really two dinners; and breakfast is rapidly becoming a third dinner. The extraordinary popularity of afternoon tea is really due to the craving for a meal that is not a dinner. The old system of breakfast, dinner and tea, in which dinner is the only meal at which meat was eaten, will probably be re-established when people realise the need of variety not only in food, but in meals.

(2) **Drink.**—I never drink alcohol except when people ask me to taste wine or liqueur and tell them whether it is genuine or not. In most cases it is obviously not. An enormous quantity of fluid is sold and drunk all over Europe which nobody with a palate could possibly mistake for the fermented juice of sun-ripened fruit. The best English cider has the characteristic flavour of genuine wine in a much lighter degree than many even of the imported wines which are not wholly artificial. I conclude that one of the effects of wine-drinking is to blunt the palate to such a degree that tastes as different as those of capers and cob-nuts cannot be distinguished by the victim of the habit. The same thing is true of liqueurs. Only a week ago in a first-rate hotel I tasted a fluid which was supplied as sloe gin. I guessed it to be poisonously bad brandy.

I have a professional reason for not drinking alcohol. The work I have to do depends for its quality on a very keen self-criticism. Anything that makes me easily pleased with myself instantly reduces the quality of my work. Instead of following up and writing down about two per cent. of the ideas that occur to me on any subject, I put down ten per cent. or even more if I go to work under the comfortable and self-indulgent influence of a narcotic.
(alcohol, please observe, is a narcotic and not a true stimulant). An ordinary wine-drinking English author puts down, I should imagine, quite eighty per cent. of the ideas that occur to him. Many journalists, under the combined influence of beer, whiskey, tobacco, steak and onions, put down rather more than 100 per cent. That is the secret of the very marked difference between the literature and journalism I produce and the ordinary commercial article.

(3) **Smoking.**—To ask my experience of smoking is to insult me. Why should you accuse me of so filthy a habit without any evidence that I have ever been guilty of it?

G. Bernard Shaw

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5Ibid., 145-46.