

## A NOTE ON BERNARD SHAW AND H. E. BATES

*Hector Bolitho*

**D**URING THE SECOND WORLD WAR I WAS AN INTELLIGENCE OFFICER WITH the Royal Air Force. My tasks varied, but for most of the time I was editor of the Royal Air Force journal which was a more or less secret publication. In July 1942, we had a problem: it was simply that aircrews would not eat enough green vegetables. They preferred the food that fills to the food that sustains. As they sat cooped up for hours, especially in Coastal Command aircraft, making their thirteen hour vigils over the ocean, it was important that their physical plumbing should work as well as possible.

Early in July, I realized that the archvegetarian, George Bernard Shaw, might write something that would seduce the aircrews from the doughy puddings and slices of Swiss roll, and make them enjoy their cabbages and Brussels sprouts. I wrote to him and, with the following note attached, he sent me his article:

With Bernard Shaw's compliments

*This is the best I can do. If you think it worth printing let me have two proofs, as I presume you may not let me have the journal in which it appears*

*(Ayot St. Lawrence, Welwyn, Herts.)*

*Blivedon. Taffelw. Bucks until the 14<sup>th</sup> August*

*HB  
1.20/7/1942*

The article was published in the journal with the title "To Tokyo on Butter-milk."

I am not a sky pilot; and at my present age (86) am not likely to qualify for that accomplishment. But as the R.A.F. carefully <sup>teaches its novices</sup> ~~teaches~~ everything except how to feed <sup>themselves, and</sup> ~~themselves~~, <sup>for</sup> most ~~people~~ <sup>aces</sup> devoutly believe that a heavy job needs a heavy meal, it may surprise them to learn that it is <sup>more than</sup> ~~is~~ sixty years since I <sup>last</sup> ~~eat~~ ate flesh fish or fowl. ~~I~~ I have given up eating eggs, though I eat butter and drink buttermilk <sup>sometimes</sup> when I can get them. I am a six footer, and am told that my weight should be at least twelve stone ten. As a matter of unromantic fact it is nine stone, and stood at ten stone eight during the most active <sup>part</sup> ~~time~~ of my life. <sup>Not</sup> ~~Why~~ I find myself working as hard as ever, a bit deafish <sup>and</sup> ~~and~~ dotty, as becomes my second childhood, but still in fairly good form as author, playwright, biologist, philosopher and political pilot, not to mention journalism as a side line.

You will say, perhaps, that if ever a man needed a plentiful and stimulating diet I am that man. But on such <sup>gluttony</sup> ~~excess~~ I should have gone stale or died years ago. Dickens, who ate and drank generously, <sup>died</sup> ~~died~~ before he was sixty. So did Shakespear. I have lived longer <sup>than they did</sup> by about thirty years, and written my most famous books and plays during those thirty years.

Or perhaps you will say ~~that~~ that inkslinging is not work, and that a raid on Danzig and back would shew me up. Well, I grant you I am no athlete; and I am certainly, like most literary geniuses, a born coward; but it is a hard fact that an emergency rush of literary work can tear <sup>a man's</sup> ~~one's~~ nerves to rags, and that my remedy for this was to get on a motor bicycle <sup>and</sup> ~~and~~ and blind round the crooked lanes of Hertfordshire for an hour or so, at the end of which I was <sup>again</sup> ~~as~~ as steady as a rock. ~~And~~

(2)  
for thirty years I spent my holidays driving my car all over the islands and <sup>beyond them</sup> as far as western Europe and north Africa, when flying was easier and in peace ~~at~~ time less dangerous. In the last century, when the push bike was a new invention, I had plenty of opportunities of ~~my~~ learning how to feed myself on a <sup>long</sup> day's ride.

Consequently it may interest you to know that if I were sent off to bomb, say Tokyo, I should take with me a packet of thin slices of brown bread -- not dirty bread ~~made~~ but made of shopsweepings real stoneground bread -- with a layer of red currant jam between <sup>each</sup> pair of slices. I should eat one of these sandwiches every <sup>two or</sup> hours. For drink I should take a flask of buttermilk. I should <sup>know</sup> that though flak is dangerous, a square meal would be certain death <sup>for</sup> within <sup>fifteen</sup> minutes after it I should fall asleep over my ~~controls~~ controls and nose dive to destruction..

That is what will happen to you if you eat a between-rib beefsteak and drink a bottle of Guinness on a serious job.

I should have mentioned that <sup>I</sup> have never smoked, never drunk intoxicants, and never shaved. <sup>That</sup> is a better record than even that of the famous centenarian who was asked to what he attributed his longevity. He replied " I attribute it to the fact that I <sup>never</sup> never drank, never smoked, <sup>not even</sup> ~~never~~ had any relations with women until I was fourteen years of age".

G. Bernard Shaw

H. E. Bates, the novelist, was working as an officer in the Air Ministry. I had known him for thirteen years and he is a proved friend. He wrote a reply to Shaw, "Back to Methuselah on a Beefsteak," and sent it to me for the journal. I thought it polite to show it to Shaw before printing it. Shaw sent it back with this note:

With Bernard Shaw's compliments

*I have no objection on earth to this letter, which is quite good copy; but the story about Mr. P.B. is not what really happened. I have ventured to correct it.*

Ayot St. Lawrence, Welwyn, Herts.

*5/9/1942*

*Back to Methuselah on a Beefsteak, by H. E. Bates*

Like Mr Shaw I am no pilot, though I belong to the R.A.F. Like Mr Shaw again, I am a writer. But unlike Mr Shaw I am not a vegetarian and at my present age, 37, I am not likely to qualify for that accomplishment, though you never can tell. The fact is I don't want to be either a pilot or a vegetarian. I don't even want to be Mr Shaw. I want to be a writer.

Now Time will decide, eventually, what places in literature Mr Shaw and I will occupy: not whether Mr Shaw will go forward to Tokyo, by which of course he means immortality, on buttermilk, or whether I shall go back to Methuselah, by which of course I mean posterity, on a beefsteak, but whether or not we were, in fact, good writers. To achieve our ends both of us need, as Mr Shaw so well points out, a plentiful and stimulating diet, and Mr. Shaw's idea of a plentiful and stimulating diet, it seems, is red currant jam. It isn't a pilot's idea and it isn't mine. But then, of course, Mr Shaw is extremely crafty. He doesn't really care two hoots about red currant jam. What he really wants, as he has wanted it for the past 86 years, is a revolution. And what better chance of that, you English dumb-clucks, than if you were to put R.A.F. pilots on red currant jam tomorrow? The red currents, you see, in the scheme of things.

We meat-eating writers, in Mr Shaw's view, do not seem to live for a very long time. Dickens, it is true, died at sixty; but he managed to write *Pickwick Papers* before he was twenty-five, at which age Mr Shaw was, in a literary way, in short pants. Keats died before he was thirty; but managed to write *Donais* before he died. Tchekov was just over forty when he died; but he succeeded in writing half a dozen plays which Mr Shaw, on his own confession, would have given his beard to write. Chaucer died young; but wrote the

*Canterbury Tales*. Shakespeare too died young, but before doing so—but then, everybody by this time knows that Mr Shaw himself wrote Shakespeare.

It is in fact not when you die, or what you eat and drink before you die, but what you do before you die, that matters. Some men eat beef and write *Hamlet*; some eat sturgeon and write *The Cherry Orchard*. Some eat red-currant jam and write, if it doesn't surprise you, *The Doctor's Dilemma*.

Mr Shaw, in fact, wants jam on it. He not only wants to be an Irishman and the author of *Saint Joan*, which ought to be enough for any man, but he wants to teach pilots the best stomach on which to fly Stirlings. To Tokyo, he says, on red-currants; or to Germany, if you prefer it, on gooseberries. I should know, he says, that flak is dangerous. And so, he should know, is belly-ache at altitudes.

Now I am a beef-steak writer myself and I am fond of the gravy and onions of life, and almost the only thing I regret about that life and about myself as a writer is the fact that I have never met Mr Shaw. I should in fact very much like to meet Mr Shaw. And what I would like to do if I did meet him is to take him to see pilots eating. We would go to a south-coast station, and Mr Shaw could have lunch in the Mess there. We would lunch with pilots who fought at Dieppe and who might, indeed, be fighting over France again that same afternoon. Mr Shaw could choose his lunch from four or five salads, stewed fruits, melba toast, cheese and, if he really liked, red currant jam.

And while we were eating I should tell a story. It would be one of the many stories about Mrs Patrick Campbell and Mr Shaw. For it seems that Mr Shaw was once rehearsing a play of his, with Mrs Patrick Campbell in the play. Mr Shaw, sitting in the stalls, directing the rehearsal, had been all morning very exacting and very tiresome. At last Mrs Campbell could bear it no longer. She walked over to the footlights and in a firm voice said to Mr Shaw:

"Mr Shaw, one day you will eat a beef-steak. And then God help the women of England."

Which only shows how careful Mr Shaw has to be with his diet.

Back to Matsushita u. c. Beefsteak

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H. F. Roals.

Like his show I am no pilot,  
 though I long to be R.A.F. like his show  
 you. I am a writer. <sup>But</sup> I think his show  
 I am not a vegetarian or a very present  
 37, I am not likely to qualify for that  
 accomplishment, though you never can tell.  
 The fact is: I don't want to be either  
 a pilot, or a vegetarian. I want to be  
 a writer. ~~and to~~

Now Time will decide, ~~at least~~ eventually,  
 whether <sup>in literature</sup> his show or I will occupy: not  
 whether his show will go forward to Tokyo.

{ which of course he means in work clip, in  
intermittent, or rather I shall go back to  
intermittent, (which of course I mean ~~positive~~  
or not  
positive, as a breakfast, but whether, in  
work, in fact, I don't write. To achieve  
our ends here of us need, as he show

so well  
1 joint out, a plentiful & stridently diet,  
his show's idea of a plentiful &  
stridently diet, <sup>it seems</sup> is not current jargon. It  
isn't a pilot idea & it isn't mine.

Burton, of course he show is extremely  
crafty. He doesn't <sup>villily</sup> care too hot about  
red current jargon. What he really wants,

as he has wanted it for the past 86  
years, is <sup>the</sup> a revolution. And what <sup>with</sup> <sup>him</sup>

chance of that, <sup>you stop</sup> <sup>English</sup> <sup>dumb-ducks,</sup> <sup>than</sup> if you were to  
put the R.A.F. on red current jargon  
tomorrow? The red current, <sup>you see,</sup> ~~is~~ ~~the~~ ~~way~~





die, but what you do before you die  
Some men eat beef & write Hamlet;  
some eat sturgeon & write The Cherry Orchard;  
some eat red-currant jam & write, if  
it doesn't surprise you, The Doctor's Dilemma

but I don't, in fact, want jam  
on it. He <sup>is not</sup> <sup>at all</sup> <sup>want</sup> <sup>to</sup> <sup>be</sup> <sup>an</sup> <sup>Irish</sup>  
<sup>man</sup>, <sup>but</sup> <sup>what</sup> <sup>is</sup> <sup>it</sup> <sup>to</sup> <sup>be</sup> <sup>an</sup> <sup>Irish</sup>  
man? I don't know, but I don't want to  
be an Irishman, a  
teacher of the best stomach, a child to  
my <sup>studies</sup> <sup>spit</sup> <sup>to</sup> <sup>Tokyo</sup>, he says, in red-  
currant jam to Germany, if you prefer it, in  
poison berries. I should know, he says, but  
I don't. <sup>And so</sup> <sup>it</sup> <sup>is</sup> <sup>dangerous</sup>. <sup>And</sup> <sup>so</sup> <sup>it</sup> <sup>is</sup> <sup>dangerous</sup>.  
I should know, but I don't. I should know,  
in belly-ache at altitudes.

Now I am a beef-steak writer  
by <sup>an</sup> <sup>order</sup> <sup>of</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>law</sup>  
& <sup>take</sup> <sup>to</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>joy</sup> <sup>of</sup> <sup>living</sup> <sup>a</sup> <sup>man</sup> <sup>of</sup> <sup>life</sup>, a child  
the way they <sup>ought</sup> <sup>to</sup> <sup>be</sup> <sup>written</sup> <sup>about</sup> <sup>that</sup> <sup>life</sup>  
myself as a writer in the fact that I

have never met her Shaw. I should like  
 just my mind like to meet her Shaw.  
 from what I could like to do if I did  
 meet him is to take him to see pilot  
 camp. he would go to south coast  
 station, or her Shaw could have lunch ~~there~~  
 there. he would lunch with pilot who fought  
 at Dieppe or who might, indeed, be fighting  
 from) Oct. some afternoon. her Shaw will  
 choose <sup>his lunch</sup> for him a few salads, stewed  
 fruit, butter toast, cheese and if he will  
 bread and unsweet jam.

And while he was eating I  
 should tell a story. It would be one of  
 the many stories about her Patrick Campbell  
 or her Shaw. For it seems that her Shaw  
 was once rehearsing a play of his, <sup>with</sup>  
 her Patrick Campbell ~~was~~ in the play. her

Shaw, sitting in the stalls, directly the  
 wheel, had been <sup>all morning</sup> by exactly in my business.  
 For last Mrs Campbell could have it no  
 longer. She walked me to the post office  
 or in fine voice said to her Shaw:  
 " Mrs Shaw, as long as you will  
 call a beef-steak. And then good help  
 the women of England."  
 Shaw has to <sup>think of</sup> <sup>how</sup> <sup>careful</sup> <sup>the</sup>  
~~to~~ be with ~~his~~ <sup>his</sup> <sup>diet</sup> <sup>food</sup>.

the best stomach on which to fly Stirlings. To Tokyo, he says, on red-currant; or to Germany, if you prefer it, on gooseberries. I should know, he says, that flak is dangerous. And so, he should know, is belly-ache at altitudes.

Now I am a beefsteak writer myself and am proud of the gravy and onions of life, and almost the only thing I regret about that life and about myself as a writer is the fact that I have never met Mr. Shaw. I should in fact very much like to meet Mr. Shaw. And what I would like to do if I did meet him is to take him to see pilots eating. We would go to a south-coast station, and Mr. Shaw could have lunch in the Mess there. We would lunch with pilots who fought at Dieppe and who might, indeed, be fighting over France again that same afternoon. Mr. Shaw could choose his lunch from four or five salads, stewed fruits, melba toast, cheese and, if he really liked, red currant jam.

And while we were eating I should tell a story. It could be one of the many stories about Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Mr. Shaw. For it seems that Mr. Shaw was once rehearsing a play of his, with Mrs Patrick Campbell in the cast. <sup>and Sir Herbert Tree</sup> said Tree to Mrs Campbell, <sup>relaying to Shaw</sup> "Let's take him to lunch and ~~take him to lunch and~~ ~~take him to lunch and~~ ~~take him to lunch and~~ ~~take him to lunch and~~ ~~take him to lunch and~~ give him a beefsteak."

~~rehearsal, had been all morning very exacting and very tiresome. At last Mrs Campbell could bear it no longer. She walked over to the footlights and in a firm voice said to Mr. Shaw:~~

~~"Mr. Shaw, one day you will eat a beef-steak; And then God help the women of England."~~

~~Which only shows how careful Mr. Shaw has to be with his diet.~~

Said Mrs Campbell to Tree, "No, for Heaven's sake! He is bad enough as it is; but give him a beefsteak and no woman in England will be safe."

*W. G. W.*