

FABIANS MAKE HISTORY

FABIAN ESSAYS: JUBILEE EDITION.
With New Essay by Bernard Shaw. Allen
and Unwin Ltd.

(Reviewed by F. L. Combs)

A FIRST reading of *Sixty Years of Fabianism* leaves one with the feeling that Mr. Shaw at 92 is still jaunty and self-sufficient, and quite sure that he knows all the answers; but one resents too the malevolent precision with which he treads on pet corns. But half-way through one begins to feel a wholesome awe of him. If ever there was a dialectician capable of knocking the doughtiest opponent into a cocked hat it is he. One recalls in this connection the pasting, urbane but ruthless, which he gave H. G. Wells many years ago.

And on a second reading of this, the most recent "preface" by the writer of hundreds, one's respect increases. Can he be a man of 92, this writer so agile in argument, so athletic in style, so far ahead of current opinion? Can it be vegetarianism that so sustains this extraordinary *élan vital*, and, if so, was not Frank Harris entirely in the wrong in bemoaning the refusal of his friend to eat a beef steak?

There is modesty in him too. Though he says his say, with immense self-confidence, he does not blow his own trumpet or laud to the skies his companions in a great historic achievement.

Historic it was, for Fabianism was one of those grains of mustard seed which, sedulously watered, grew to be one of the biggest trees. It began, as Shaw points out, with the enrolment of "less than 40 inexperienced youths without a bank account." It went on to influence liberal and conservative governments in a manner that puzzled as much as it intrigued them. It has ended by providing a Labour-Socialist government with a major portion of its personnel and policy. Sir William Vernon Harcourt said over half-a-century ago: "We are all Socialists now." Mr. Attlee could say to-day for himself and supporters: "We are all Fabian Socialists now." (Mr. Shaw adds plausibly that, from the commencement date of N.E.P., the Soviets also became Fabian.)

What factors contributed to the great constructive feat of the Fabian movement? Mr. Shaw emphasises the policy of Permeation. He says: "It (the Fabian Society) asked no one to join it or to boycott other associations. On the contrary it pressed its members to join every other association to which its members could gain admission, and infect it with constitutional socialism." Backing up this effective guerrilla tactic was a strategy calling for an able general staff. It was obtained because "membership of the Fabian Society was presented as a rare and difficult privilege of superior persons."

It is to these superior persons who made the difficult grade that one turns to discover the central secret of Fabianism's wonderful growth. A dozen of its members became celebrated in their day and three of them gained a fame that

will be historic. This small nucleus was to socio-political thinking what "starters" used to be in a mighty churning of butter. It set going the whole process of ripening opinion.

MR. SHAW himself was a catalyst. A breezy thrust of his wit, a sudden twist of his argumentative ability, and the outlook on some current problem changed. Its components entered into new combinations and nothing remained as it had been before. He began in the opinion of the Victorian Age by standing on his head; he ended by standing millions of others on their heads and making them accept his assertion

strength is as the strength of thousands. Wells, who fell out with the Webbs (he could not endure their editorial "we"—"we think," "have considered," "are of the opinion") does justice to their unique capacity for team-work. "The two supplemented each other to an extraordinary extent. . . . She was aggressive, imaginative, and had a great capacity for ideas, while he was almost destitute of initiative and could do nothing with ideas except remember and discuss them." But they "planned their work as no one had hitherto dreamed of doing it." Their collaboration went

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SIDNEY AND BEATRICE WEBB
"A small nucleus set going the whole process of ripening opinion"

that their doing so was due not to paradox but to his astringent common sense.

But one must not overlook the slow years it took to do this. Mr. Shaw, though voluminous and voluble, was nearly 50 before he gained notoriety as a publicist. To-day he is something of a national idol, but he had for a generation to endure being regarded as a cross between the howling dervish of a cult and an untimely buffoon. He explains what happened when he and his fellow Fabians underwent a setback at the hands of conservatism and lost their hold on the London County Council.

The capitalists woke up and plastered the walls with a picture of a very ugly stage villain glaring at the ratepayers, and growling, "It's your money we want." The Fabians had no money to combat this expensive weapon; and the Progressive Party was defeated.

One man of genius with an energetic brain battling away for over 60 years could and did accomplish marvels. But he was by no means the whole marvel of the Fabian movement. Mr. and Mrs. Webb, equally consistent and pertinacious, were his full partners.

It is only now and again in centuries that two able people, complementary to each other, get together and collaborate in a single-minded life-long endeavour, but when they do their

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