

# Sound-writing

George Bernard Shaw and a modern alphabet





# Sound-writing

Neither words nor alphabets have always been used in records. Cave men recorded hunting exploits pictorially. The earliest crude symbols to be written were unrelated to words; they

1 were 'pictographs', simple standardised drawings, hundreds of which were needed to convey imprecisely a very limited range of ideas. With more precision, Chinese writing employed thousands of 'ideographs', which only experts could read and write.

Then, 3 000 or more years ago, came the highly economical, easily applied, exactly 2 meaningful, writing with 'alphabets'. Given readers who spoke the writer's language, a few graphic symbols (now called 'letters') could serve to represent the few basic sounds with which a whole language was spoken. Words became visible as well as audible. The Phoenician, Greek, Etruscan and Latin languages were adequately represented by as few as 22 to 25 letters.

Roman civilisation and the Roman Church made Latin the international language of writers in Britain and throughout Europe for roughly 1500 years. Although by 1400 AD 3 Chaucer and Wyclif were using a form of English, it was not the English we now speak. To the Latin alphabet a letter W had been added. Later, U and J became letters with sounds distinguished from those of V or I. But as the Latin C, Q and X have sounds otherwise represented (by S or K or KS or GZ), only 23 of our 26 letters could serve us for sound-matching, even if used consistently in our spelling. As there are at least 40 significantly differing speech sounds employed in speaking English, we lack 17 single letters for single sounds. To write these 17 sounds by means of couplets, triplets or quads of letters (such as sh, th, ch, wh, tch, owe, awe, eigh, ough) is ambiguous, unmethodical and wasteful. While we continue to use the Latin alphabet with only three added letters, spelling largely depends on memory, not on method. An alphabet of some 40-or more-simpler characters would eliminate the waste of labour and materials caused by our traditional spelling

irregularities. Writing and printing would occupy far less space. It is this resulting *economy*, still not fully appreciated, that Bernard Shaw grasped and fostered. His aim was not conceived as educational but as utilitarian.

The story told in this exhibition begins with an unusual kind of alphabet concerned with economies in writing, published in 1892 by

5 Henry Sweet of Oxford, a great authority on phonetics, the science which analyses speech into its few significantly different sorts of sound. Sweet's analysis of spoken English into some 40 sorts of sound was not original. Isaac

6 Pitman among others had used 40 sound-sorts

7 matched by as many characters, both for an abbreviated shorthand and for longhand (roman) sound-writing.

The most distinctive feature of Sweet's

8 *Current Shorthand* was that his characters always kept their appointed place on the horizontal 'writing line'; whereas Pitman's and other fast shorthands, by joining ends to beginnings in any sequence of characters, make words wander variously from a ruled or imagined writing line -a wandering much exaggerated where long words are fully spelled. For typewriting and type-set printing the aligned sequence of lettering is essential.

Sweet's lettering, then, conforms to the traditional three main kinds of characters: *Shorts*, which stand on the imagined writing line with their tops also aligned on an 'upper parallel' (like orthodox letters a e m n o u); *Talls*, which (like b d f h k l) stand on the writing line but ascend well above the height of Shorts; and *Deeps*, which (like g p q y) are top-aligned with the Shorts on the upper parallel but descend well below the writing line. This is a neat and familiar manner of writing: Talls and Shorts keep an imaginary writing line well defined, while Deeps and Shorts equally preserve an imaginary upper parallel.

Less happily, Sweet employed two more categories of lettering: one so enlarged as to be both Tall and Deep (like a script letter f), the other of less height than the Short letters:

— cat. ul —

u b u, ' beth uB  
 "ul 2 7. b uB!"  
 l c an 2 n e cB,  
 - of / u b c uB.

u b uB, - u b cB,  
 2 u b uB, c;  
 7 1, 3, e y uB  
 l b e l b, u.

ul 2 uB! ul 2 uB!  
 - c 2 2 uB uB;  
 "u b u, 1 uB uB,"  
 b u b l b, c uB

u b u, - ul 2 l b u,  
 - u b u, c uB - 2 2,  
 u, u b l b uB, 1 u b  
 l b u l b, c 2 2.

8 Current Shorthand by Henry Sweet

1. u b uB, - u b cB,  
 2. u b uB, c;  
 3. u b uB, e y uB  
 4. l b e l b, u.  
 5. ul 2 uB! ul 2 uB!  
 6. - c 2 2 uB uB;  
 7. "u b u, 1 uB uB,"  
 8. b u b l b, c uB  
 9. u b u, - ul 2 l b u,  
 10. - u b u, c uB - 2 2,  
 11. u, u b l b uB, 1 u b  
 12. l b u l b, c 2 2.

10 Pitman shorthand as written by Shaw

neither the too large nor the too little letters serving to preserve either parallel's level at all. Furthermore, Sweet's own writing distorted the small letters in order to link them fore and aft with larger letters. He held the too common belief that for fast writing the writer may only lift the pen between words.

In using Short, Tall and Deep lettering, Sweet conformed to tradition. Quite apart from any use of abbreviated spelling, he gained speed by enlarging his alphabet to spell all single sounds with single letters. That is, he used no 'digraphic' sound-spellings such as *th, sh, ie, ay*. Moreover, Sweet's characters are among the simplest graphic shapes known to geometry: they are mostly single penstrokes, without dottings, crossings, or 'diacritical' markings such as dictionaries use to define a letter's pronunciation. Such markings would involve penlifting and hand movements additional to any required in advancing from one letter to the next. Sweet's alphabet served to spell, to write, (and could have served just possibly to type) with simpler, as well as fewer, letters than are used in orthodox English. It was in this respect that it provided a crude model worth refining as

9 recommended by Shaw: not to serve still as shorthand, but as an all-purpose modern alphabet.

Dr Abraham Tauber's book, *George Bernard Shaw on Language* (London, Peter Owen, 1965, p 30) states that Shaw first met Sweet as early as 1879. It is well known that Sweet became in some measure a prototype for Henry Higgins, society speech trainer, in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, written in 1912, the year of Sweet's death.

Shaw habitually drafted his own writings almost fully spelled in the 40-letter alphabet of Pitman shorthand. He may well have found this unsatisfactory for re-reading and revision. It could spell sounds unambiguously, having an adequate number of letters. But as its script was unaligned, it certainly could not serve also for typing and type-set print. Moreover, Shaw was very knowledgeable and interested in fine typography. At the age of 85, he appealed to `type

designers or artist-calligraphers, or whatever they call themselves, to design an alphabet capable of representing the sounds of the following string of nonsense quite unequivocally without using two letters to represent one sound or making the same letter represent different sounds by diacritical marks.' The nonsense test-piece was intended to cover all English sound-sorts and to discover designers who truly recognised them. He then went on to recommend Sweet's alphabet as a suitable point of departure for his designer, (see pp 26 -27 of Shaw's preface to *The Miraculous Birth of*

11 *Language*, by Professor Richard Albert Wilson, London, Dent, 1941).

This Preface, dated February 1941 but not published till the autumn, gives Shaw's most precise instructions, though his public campaign opened with a long and important letter to

12 *The Times* of 15 April 1941. Only years later was the letter to *The Times* made known to me, but while I was myself experimenting with a sound-spelling alphabet, my attention was drawn to Shaw's appeal in the Preface.

How many others responded seriously to his appeal I was never able to discover, though I tried. Shaw dissuaded me from contact with or influence by others. But from acknowledge-  
 13 ment postcards he had printed, it would seem that there was no lack of misdirected proposals and gratuitous advice; for there he stated concisely what he sought and what he repudiated. Especially notable is his dismissal of all `schemes spelling English phonetically with the old A B C'. He sought a wholly new alphabet to be used and taught concurrently with the old alphabet until one or the other proves the fitter to survive'. He would not consider tampering with orthodox English spelling or its traditional alphabet: these were to be left undisturbed -and unimproved.

What-beyond courage-qualified Shaw to demand a new English alphabet? Though an Irishman to the last, he certainly possessed authority on the pronunciation of English. From 1926 to 1939 he served on the BBC's

cat	hot	ray	long
get	china upper	toy	die
city	pat	pay	bay
see	too	key	gay
are father	or saw	say	zoo
air care	earn bird	she	rouge measure
day	go molest	thin	then
fly	how	foe	vow
yea	way	extend locks	exert logs
nay	lay	itch church	judge
may	hay	oil	use
	whip		

32 Part of Read's competition entry: the proposed alphabet as used for handwriting

באשן ראכזלחוט קט ג אכפ.	'Total is every economical writing'
באשן ראכזלחוט קט ג אכפ.	Basic
באשן ראכזלחוט קט ג אכפ.	Expanded
באשן ראכזלחוט קט ג אכפ.	Condensed
באשן ראכזלחוט קט ג אכפ.	Italic
באשן ראכזלחוט קט ג אכפ.	Angular

32 Part of Read's competition entry: modified styles for letterpress printing

Their reception is related fully by Pitman in his introduction to Tauber's *Shaw on Language*. Their Society's commitment to using none but our accustomed 26 letters of the alphabet-and consequently to digraphic spelling of sounds was anathema to Shaw: he was adamant against it.

The Will, finally signed on 12 June 1950, 29 does not specifically exclude the use of familiar letters of the alphabet, but it was evident to the Trustee from Shaw's published writings that he had intended the use of a *wholly new* set of between 40 and 50 characters. If further evidence were needed, it exists in Shaw's private correspondence quoting my grasp of his intentions as a guide.

The Will was wilfully made in language more Shavian than legal in so far as its Clauses 35 -38 dealt with the alphabet. Beginning with Subsection 35 (1), it calls in effect for some estimate of the world's man-hours wasted in writing and printing English with an alphabet of 26 instead of 40 or more letters; and a valuation in money of those wasted hours. This impossible task was entrusted to Mr P A D MacCarthy who, having investigated, could only report that no reliable data exists for any meaningful estimate. Sub-section 35 (2), also in Mr MacCarthy's care, deals with transliteration of *Androcles*, which presented a few problems mentioned in his Appendix to *Androcles*.

Although Shaw's letter to *The Times*, his Preface to Wilson's book, and his private correspondence refer explicitly to an alphabet for printing from type as well as for script, the Will makes no definite provision either for or against using printers' type in *Androcles*. Clause 35 (2) provided funds 'to employ an artist-calligrapher to fair-copy the transliteration for reproduction by lithography, photography or any other method that may serve in the absence of printers' type'. In brief, the Will permits, *if necessary*, a departure from normal letterpress printing. It was agreed that no such departure was necessary.

Shaw died on 2 November 1950. It was not

until royalties from *My Fair Lady* swelled the estate that his executor, the Public Trustee, could put into effect the Will's Clause 35 concerned with an alphabet. By then this Clause had been challenged and its validity had to be tested in the High Court. After a costly hearing it was pronounced legally invalid.

An Appeal being denied at first, Mr Pitman sought my help to implement Shaw's intentions without resort to his estate. One result worth mention was a leaflet showing the economy of letters and space made by my then proposed alphabet, compared with an orthodox type 30 setting. By taking the Lord's prayer as an example, the phonetic values of my lettering were evident without a key. Here I already used the alphabet which was destined to become a competition entry. However, largely by Pitman's exertions, the dispute was settled by allotting no more than £8 300 to execute Clause 35 relating to the alphabet.

Thereupon, the Trustee announced a world-wide competition to secure ideal designs for a Shaw Alphabet. Though this clearly reduced my own chance of formulating it, my previous work was not unknown to the Trustee who in January 1958 persuaded me to illustrate and discuss competition requirements on BBC's programme, *Panorama*.

Clause 6 of the Trustee's 'Advertisement M. 4405.V' stated that 'it is implicit in the Will and in Mr Shaw's writings' that the main object is 'saving of labour ...a means of writing and printing in the English language which will be more economical of the writer's time, of the paper and ink of the printer, and of transport and storage, yet convenience and ease in reading are of importance ...Practical problems of typography will be taken into account'. Clause 7 adds that 'designs of shorthand codes for verbatim reporting and designs for reforming the existing alphabet by addition of analogous letters will be disqualified'.

Competitors had a year in which to prepare their alphabetic entries. I saw no reason to amend my Lord's prayer alphabet, nor to

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

- 33 *The Lord's Prayer rendered in the four recorded entries for the Competition:*  
*Dr S L Pugmire's alphabet*  
*Mrs Pauline M Barrett's alphabet*  
*Kingsley Read's alphabet*  
*J F Magrath's alphabet*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

submit alternative entries: The Advertisement offered inconclusive counsels on sound-sorts to be represented. I hardly believed it possible to arrive at a perfect alphabet without finally pooling the wisdom of competitor(s) and judges.

In view of Shaw's stipulated speech model, 'that recorded of His Majesty our late King George V', I went to Broadcasting House to have a number of the King's recordings played over to me. His pronunciations varied according to context as with all other speakers. I also went to type-founders-the Monotype Corporation and consulted printers, becoming convinced that *Androcles* ought to be type-set, not reproduced from a calligrapher's fair-copy as the Will permitted 'in the absence of printers' type'. I wrote to

- 31 Mr Pitman on 18 November 1958 that fair-copying 'is superfluous. Worse, the very absence of type provides a gratuitous argument for opponents ...The Will provides for propaganda costs. The *fait accompli* is our best, most widely intelligible propaganda'. His reply agreed: he too had taken stock of the possibilities.

- My competition alphabet was accompanied 32 by examples, type designs, and detailed reasons for the sounds and characters chosen. It proved to be one of 467 entries, many of them from abroad. None met exactly the ideals of the judges. However, I found myself among four competitors sharing the honour and the prize. Our four entries are best compared as scripts, though hardly as typography, in renderings of the Lord's Prayer reproduced in a trade journal,

- 33 *Print in Britain.*

Mr. P A D MacCarthy, from Leeds University's Department of Phonetics, was undertaking a transcription of *Androcles* in the new alphabet as soon as one could be adapted and approved. He was therefore asked by the Trustee 'to collaborate with one or all of the four designers mentioned ...(see the Foreword to *Androcles*) to produce the best possible alphabet...' Various revisions were considered till finally each designer's latest attempt was re-written by a disinterested calligrapher for comparison. The selectors chose mine as closest to their require-

ments discussed with me a few possible alternatives, and nominated me for appointment as designer responsible to the Trustee and his 34 adviser. My letter of appointment is dated 19 July 1960.

A month later, on 18 August, I brought to London the finished Shaw Alphabet. It was fully discussed with Mr Pitman and with Mr J T Harrison (of Stephen Austin and Sons, Hertford, who produced type and printed *Androcles*) and it was adopted by the Trustee. I then proceeded 36 to make die-cutting drawings-30 times print size-in three distinct styles required for stage directions, the names of speakers, and the dialogue.

- Mr MacCarthy was by this time transliterating the play while on secondment to Lahore University, Pakistan, and a good deal of printers' proof revision fell to me. New and old versions of the play were printed on facing pages, matching exactly *line for line*, without either overrunning the other. The task of securing tolerable typographic spacing was not easy. An edition of 40 000 paperback copies was issued commercially by Penguin Books Ltd. Their refinements of typography in the orthodox version inspired me to emulate it in the new alphabet. Our joint result was chosen as one of the National Book League's 'best printed books of 1962'.

Apart from this Penguin commercial edition, the Trustee distributed gratis to all Head Public Libraries of Britain, the Commonwealth, North and South America, and to all National Libraries of the world, a total of some 13 000 hard-back copies which should still be available.

The Shaw Alphabet itself, and both editions of *Androcles*, were published on 20 November 1962, with a press conference and publicity on television.

No-one needs to know the new alphabet to see immediately that *Androcles* demonstrated a marked economy; for the lines of its orthodox text are exactly 50% wider than matching lines in the Shaw Alphabet. Normally, line-widths would not be shortened; but books in the new alphabet would occupy one-third fewer pages,



# List of exhibits

- 1 Pictographic writing: Egyptian hieroglyphs
- 2 Examples of alphabets: cuneiform, Phoenician, Classical Greek, Etruscan, Roman, Old English Runic
- 3 Specimen of Chaucerian English from *The Cook's Tale*
- 4 Specimen of Wyclif's English from *Of Fyned Contemplatif Lif*
- 5 Portrait of Henry Sweet
- 6 Portrait of Sir Isaac Pitman
- 7 Forty-letter alphabets devised between 1843 and 1962 from *Alphabets and reading* by Sir James Pitman and John St John (Pitman and Sons, 1969)
- 8 Current shorthand by Henry Sweet
- 9 Portrait of George Bernard Shaw
- 10 Copy of a specimen of Shaw's habitual writing in the alphabet of Pitman shorthand
- 11 Extract from *The Miraculous Birth of Language* by Richard Albert Wilson (London, Dent, 1941)
- 12 Letter by George Bernard Shaw to *The Times*, 15 April 1941
- 13 Printed postcard from George Bernard Shaw on a forty-letter British Alphabet
- 14 Membership of the BBC's Spoken English Advisory Committee formed July 1926
- 15 Portrait of Robert Bridges
- 16 Portrait of Kingsley Read
- 17 Kingsley Read's first letter to Bernard Shaw, 20 January 1942
- 18 Kingsley Read's tentative alphabet of forty-seven letters; his transcription of George Bernard Shaw's test-piece; a sheet of variously styled lettering to show how the alphabet might be used in writing, printing and display
- 19 Printed acknowledgement card from George Bernard Shaw to Kingsley Read, 27 January 1942
- 23 Letter from George Bernard Shaw to Ogden, 18 January 1943
- 21 Letter from George Bernard Shaw to Kingsley Read giving encouragement and advice, 28 January 1943
- 22 Postcard from George Bernard Shaw to Kingsley Read suggesting the preparation of a Manual, 18 January 1943
- 23 *Sound- Writing: A method and an economy in spelling*, by Kingsley Read, 1943, with a letter from Kingsley Read to George Bernard Shaw, 27 July 1943
- 24 Illustrations for *Sound-Writing*
- 25 Letter from George Bernard Shaw to Kingsley Read, 3 August 1943, suggesting consultation f with Mr I J Pitman and commenting on *Sound-Writing*
- 26 Letter from George Bernard Shaw to I J Pitman, 25 September 1943, commending Read's script alphabet
- 27 George Bernard Shaw's announcement of his intention to make a Will promoting a new alphabet, (The Author, Autumn 1944)
- 28 Letter from George Bernard Shaw to I J Pitman, 19 July 1944
- 29 Extract from the Will of George Bernard Shaw, 12 June 1950
- 30 A specimen of a new British Alphabet, using The Lord's Prayer as a model
- 31 Letter from Kingsley Read to I J Pitman on type-setting Androcles and the Lion
- 32 Competition entry submitted by Kingsley Read
- 33 The Lord's Prayer rendered in the four recorded entries for the Competition (Print in Britain)
- 34 Letter from the Public Trustee to Kingsley Read appointing him the designer of the proposed British Alphabet, 19 July 1960
- 35 Part of the transliteration by P A D MacCarthy of Androcles and the Lion into the new Shaw Alphabet
- 36 Enlarged working drawings of characters for die-cutting for the Shaw Alphabet's type
- 37 Material produced by Stephen Austin and Sons Limited for Androcles and the Lion (1962). Lent by Ludlow Industries (UK) Limited
- 38 Shaw Alphabet editions of Androcles and the Lion (Penguin Books, 1962)
- 39 The Shaw Alphabet for Writers (1962)
- 40 Part of the Gettysburg Address transcribed in the Shaw Alphabet
- 41 Jabberwocky by Lewis Carroll, transcribed in the Shaw Alphabet
- 42 Article on the typography of the Shaw Alphabet (Indian Print and Paper, vol 28, 4)
- 43 Shaw's letter to The Times; transliterated in the Shaw Alphabet
- 44 Publicity sheet for the Shaw Alphabet prepared in Rhodesia by Peter Oliver
- 45 Type-cutting drawings for the keyboard of the Shaw Alphabet Typewriter
- 46 Article on 'The World's first Shavian Typewriter' with a photograph showing the keyboard
- 47 Shaw-script: a quarterly in the Shavian Alphabet, no. 1, Autumn 1963
- 48 Letter from I J (Sir James) Pitman to Kingsley Read, 18 December 1962, asking him to organise correspondence in the Shaw Alphabet
- 49 Circular letter from Sir James Pitman relating to Quicksript, June 1967
- 50 Quicksript: its Alphabet and Manual, by Kingsley Read (1966)
- 51 The Gettysburg Address, a letter from a correspondent in Quicksript (Moirá O'Brien)
- 52 Examples of Quicksript from circulated correspondence
- 53 Letter from Russell Graves to Kingsley Read, 28 June 1971, on the use of the Shaw Alphabet and Quicksript