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C O U R I E R



OUT OF THE FOLD.

"Oh, dreadful! They dwell in peace and harmony, and have no church scandals.
They must be wiped out."

VOLUME XXVIII, NUMBER 2, FALL 1993

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES
COURIER

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From the Collections

HOPE EMILY ALLEN–GEORGE BERNARD SHAW CORRESPONDENCE

This exchange of letters between Hope Emily Allen and George Bernard Shaw of November 1924 is published here for the first time. The letters reveal Shaw's interest in the Oneida Community and the descendants' apprehensions about public exposure of their historical documents, forty-four years after the breakup of the Community.

The archives were guarded by George Wallingford Noyes, nephew of John Humphrey Noyes and Community historian, until his death in 1941. Thereafter some descendants who were part of Oneida Community Ltd. destroyed most of the original manuscripts, a tragedy mitigated only by the fact that G. W. Noyes had placed, in a bank vault, carbon copies of typed transcripts of selected manuscripts.

George Bernard Shaw was part of a long line of English writers and reformers, including Wilkie Collins, H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and Julian Huxley, who were interested in the Oneida Community. Shaw wrote about it in his essay "The Perfectionist Experiment at Oneida Creek", which appeared in "The Revolutionist Handbook" appended to *Man and Superman* (1903). In 1910 Shaw and H. G. Wells entertained Pierrepont Noyes during the latter's visit to Britain. A son of John Humphrey Noyes, Pierrepont was then president and general manager of the Oneida factories.

Having learned of Shaw's interest in the Oneida Community, Stella Smith (1878–1963) traveled to London to tell him more about it. Smith was a daughter of Community members James Vaill and Harriet Worden and a half-sister of Pierrepont Noyes. She married another descendant, Deming Smith.

Hope Emily Allen (1883–1960) was also a child of two Community members, Portia Underhill and Henry G. Allen. She studied at

Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, and Cambridge, and was perhaps the most accomplished scholar to emerge from the Oneida Community.*

The letters have been transcribed exactly, except that a few apparently unintentional misspellings have been corrected.

From Hope Emily Allen to George Bernard Shaw
(Typed transcript, Bodleian Library, Oxford)

Nov. 7 1924

Dear Sir,

You will be surprised to receive two communications on the subject of the Oneida community in so short a time. Mrs. Smith told me that she had seen you, and I was distressed, for I know her exceptional point of view, and what is said to a public man becomes in a sense official. The Oneida community, of which my parents and grandparents were members, seems to me the most intense and comprehensive experiment in human behavior ever made, and since it touched many persons very personally, selective estimates could be given that would offer striking contrasts. It so happens that Mrs. Smith, as perhaps she told you, is the only descendent of the old community who follows a manner of life related to that of the socialistic experiment of our ancestors. To the rest of us, the social novelties of the system seem to be an integral part of the theology, and to perish with that. Viewed as a mere experiment in human society without theological sanctions, I believe that the institution only served to illustrate the complications involved in any form of social organization. It bred as many problems and injustices as it solved or rectified. In any case, it could never be repeated without the condition of strong leadership, and a resultant strong organization of the theological conviction and isolation from the world which gave

*See John C. Hirsch, *Hope Emily Allen: Medieval Scholarship and Feminism* (Norman, Ok.: Pilgrim Books, 1988).

it its peculiar stability. Anyone who borrowed its license without its discipline would be violating the essential spirit of the institution.

It seems to most of us that Mrs. Smith does so violate the essential spirit of the Community, and I am sorry to hear that she thinks of printing her life history (which I believe she discussed with you). I tried to urge her to put the book aside for many years, for I believe that our forefathers' act in throwing into the community their families and goods to be held in common brings on us now the obligations to hold the community history in common, at least during the lifetime of the old members. In time the materials will all be available for the symposium which is the only just method of treating so profound and various an institution. However, if in the meantime the community history is used for present-day propaganda by Mrs. Smith, I feel that (one who disagrees with her is almost obliged to point out) the special character of our common inheritance. From childhood I have questioned the old members on the community life as far as possible without preconceived ideas, and I have therefore some evidence on community history.

I believe that the documents, persons, and incidents that have most influenced Mrs. Smith in her understanding of the community belong to the very last years before the break-up. She was born under special circumstances that reflected decay in the last year of communistic marriage—actually I believe that only two children came later than she. She is therefore the child of the dissolution of the community rather than of the community itself.

Let me say in conclusion that in spite of occasional (proportionately few) lapses from grace, the community seems to me a wonderful undertaking of pure religion, and I am very glad that my people for thirty years made part of so courageous an attack on the general human problem. I am grateful that you in your Man and Superman have recognized both the high purpose and the difficulties in the enterprise.

Of course I do not expect you to acknowledge this letter.

Yours truly,

Hope Emily Allen

From George Bernard Shaw to Hope Emily Allen
(Typed letter, Syracuse University Library)

10 Adelphi Terrace
London W.C.2.
19th November 1924

Dear Madam

I am much obliged to you for your very interesting letter.

I agree with you that only a symposium could do justice to the Oneida Creek Community's history; but the difficulty seems to be that the witnesses wont sympose. This being so, there is nothing for it but to let Mrs. Smith tell her history and provoke retorts, so that we shall get the symposium in different covers instead of in one book.

The situation, as far as I can gather, is that those members of the community who are in strong reaction against the experiment, and who have succeeded so well in capitalistic commerce and in conventional society that they desire nothing but the completest possible oblivion for their extremely unconventional origin, are opposed to any discussion or even mention of it. They put all the pressure they can on Mrs Smith to keep quiet; but Mrs Smith, who says she has a prodigious mass of records and diaries by Mrs Noyes, and who thinks that Perfectionism should not be let die, but should be revived in a more modern form, is not to be suppressed, and may catch on to that side of the Birth Control movement that is mystic rather than materialistic.

I should guess that your mind is firmer and more critical than hers; and it is possible that her nerves may not be quite

strong enough to carry her through what she conceives to be her appointed task with perfect selfpossession; but I think somebody has to take up the subject, and secure renewed attention for the peculiar sexual psychology of Noyes, and to the moral of his unique and important experiment. The old books will hardly do, because when they were written the limits of printable discussion were far narrower than at present, and the Birth Control movement less powerful.

As to keeping silence during the lifetime of the old members, I cannot see that there is any obligation on her to do that, even if they could offer her an undertaking to die within a reasonable time. If she is proud of her father (though she only guesses who he was), and her brother is ashamed of him, it seems impossible to ask her to refrain from celebrating him in deference to her brother's shame, which she cannot believe to be the more respectable feeling. That the surviving members should regard the official history of the community as their common property is natural enough; but clearly this does not mean that they have a right to suppress it. What it does mean is that they should all contribute to it and share in the expenses of its publication and its profits, if any. It may also give them the moral right to choose the historian. But if they refuse to exercise these rights and to fulfill the duty implied by them, they put Mrs Smith in the position of being the only one faithful to the old message and tradition, and almost force her to speak if her conscience drives her that way.

I do not see any way out of this. It may be hard on the old people's feelings to have their past dug up in a country which has got no further on the road to Perfection than to give an overwhelming vote for the Ku Klax Klan; but I do not believe that it will do them any material harm: quite the contrary. If I had to buy silver ware, and saw some of it marked Oneida Creek Perfectionist Silver, I should be strongly biassed in its favor. And if, when asked who my father was, I had to reply "I do not know; but he may have

been John Humphrey Noyes; and he was certainly an Oneida Perfectionist” I should be a much more interesting person than most of my neighbors, and should not like to exchange that status for one clouded in scandalous whispers. The real grievance would be to have the community misrepresented by its historian. But the remedy is not to make a vain attempt to suppress the inadequate history, but to produce an adequate one.

Is there any chance of your taking a step in this direction? Your letter shews plenty of faculty for the task.

Faithfully,

G. Bernard Shaw

From Hope Emily Allen to George Bernard Shaw
(Retained draft, Syracuse University Library)

116 Cheyne Walk.
S.W.

Nov. 22. 24

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your very kind letter about the Oneida Community. I was uncertain whether I did right in writing you, but your reply makes me feel that I did, for I think that you have been given some wrong impressions, which you would prefer to have cleared up.

The present “O.C.L.” (as we characterise it, to distinguish from the old community, which is the “O.C.”) is very far from wanting to suppress the history of the ancestor institution, and neither Pierrepont Noyes, the President (and creator of the new organisation, which is not so merely commercial as you may think) nor any other responsible person now associated with the place (so far as I know) is “ashamed” of Mr. Noyes the founder, and his achievement. It is natural that he made mistakes, and also that the descendants of his institution do not wish those

mistakes to be put foremost, at least before the more characteristic features are before the public. But a very serious and sincere history of the whole institution has been under way—you may almost say ever since it ended. The first volume was brought out by Macmillan last spring, as “The Religious History of John Humphrey Noyes”, by his nephew, George W. Noyes. I have a copy in London. George Noyes was a community child, about ten at the break-up, and sixteen at the death of his uncle, with whom he had lived during the last years. I have heard Pierrepont Noyes say that George at fourteen learned short-hand to take down his uncle’s words, and that his father “would have swopped all his own sons for half of George”. I believe that interesting talks were taken down giving Mr. Noyes’s own account and feeling about the break-up. These documents were added to the enormous archives already in possession of the Noyes family. These included not only the official community records of all sorts, but all sorts of private matter, diaries, letters, confessions, etc. from believers in distress of mind. These papers were all left to Dr. Noyes, the oldest and only legitimate son, who was a remarkably philosophical and historically-minded man. He added to them about thirty years ago when many of the very earliest followers were still living. He had interviews with them, when he filled in missing links. All these archives were inherited about twenty-five years ago by George Noyes, who built a fire-proof vault in his house to receive them, and has devoted most of his time since to getting them ready to found on them a history. He has always been one of the Directors of the company, is now one of the Vice-Presidents, and was for many years Treasurer, but since he began the actual writing, the company has let him off with very little business, so as to free him for his research. The mere finding out what he had was a tremendous matter, and he took years arranging everything, and making a very complete catalogue, in which he has typed many salient quotations on cards. He is now in the early fifties, and he feels that if he

can't get to the end of the actual writing, at least everything is ready for his successor to go on with. About ten years ago he circulated among about twenty of us copies of documents he had chosen to use for his first volume, and, when he first wrote that, we met at his house weekly during one winter while he read what he had written and asked for suggestions. This first volume only carries Mr. Noyes to 1847, just short of the first social innovations, so perhaps it may not interest you as much as the next will, on which he is now working. The first volume is however very important in building up the characters of the founders—which in this case is an exceedingly important matter. It also describes the theology, which historically speaking is all-important, however dull it may appear to us now. Most O.C. members were devoted adherents of the theology 15 years before there were any social innovations (hence the type of followers that were acquired). To George Noyes, strangely enough, the theology seems all-important still. He is the only descendant who has any interest in this, and he once told me that for that reason it was desirable that he should be sure to get written that portion himself.

I think you can understand that with a dedicated person (equipped with all the materials) working at the history in this way, it may seem undesirable for the rest of us to rush into print on the subject. If, however, the full history does come out, then the doors will be open for every sort of individual estimate to be offered. (I'm not sorry S. Smith has written hers though I don't want her to print it now.) In any case I fancy that in a few years (when we get a little more leisure) several of us may register our impressions, to be used or not sometime. I should like to, and I have heard Pierrepont Noyes say that he means to. One old member has already written her autobiography for private circulation. But I think everyone feels that the authoritative work, done with the advantage of all the materials, ought to be out first. George's method has put off the controversial part till perhaps it won't be ready till all those who might be hurt

by indiscreet revelations are gone. Perhaps he won't print at once even after he has written. In any case he is writing, and I don't believe he will emasculate the whole thing.

In all this matter it really isn't possible, I think, to act less discreetly than George Noyes has acted. Too many persons (some of them those you would expect to be more public-spirited) are indignant that he has the private papers of their relatives, or of themselves, and may even like to force the whole archives to be destroyed. Not much is said, therefore, about them. He lets no one use them except himself, which I think the only right course. As it is, I do all I can when at home to preserve whatever I can get of interest for illustrating community history. We have a little Museum for material relics, for which I have picked out many things from the rubbish heap. We have the old "short dresses" of the women, memorials of the children's house, photographs of the place and all the people at all stages, etc. etc. When I am at home, about once a year we have a public exhibition of all these things (which is specially popular with the children). I think the last time Pierrepont Noyes gave a very amusing talk on "the life of a child in the children's house". I believe that it was on the same occasion that I persuaded an old gentleman to bring a book (kept by him in the community) which gives the only humorous reaction on it ever made (as I think). It was a very trying event because I had to promise to bring to him only "insiders". You see the point of view—that intimate community history is intimate family history, not for public exhibition in the lifetime of the person concerned. I think it very important for us who are interested in the history of the community to act so that the owner of that book and his wife and persons like them aren't scared by the expectation of immediate revelations into burning the book (their daughter promises to give it and they don't mind that for a final disposition). In the meantime I am trying to arrange for a community person to photograph the whole thing and deposit the photographs in the vault. So far I don't suc-

ceed because the only community photographer that I have been able to find is married to an “outsider”, who might take an unholy interest in the book!) The owners of this book were brought to the community as children, and grew up in a state of society that had absolutely no meaning for their temperaments. To such persons the communistic system could be the subtlest and profoundest tyranny ever fashioned. As George Noyes says, “the community was a battle-field, and there were wounded, who have to be tended”. In any case we don’t want some interesting documents still in private possession to be burned, nor do we want to dry up the flow of reminiscence. If anything very esoteric comes to the historical committee I hastily give it to George Noyes to put safely in the vault, in order to relieve apprehension. Perhaps this seems to you a disgusting state of discretion, but if it accomplishes the purpose I don’t care. If there is anything significant for human experience in the Oneida Community, it can wait for its disclosure a few years more. Really we are only paying the price of the qualities which gave the institution its unique staying power for nearly thirty years. A combination of accidents made a most revolutionary community out of most unrevolutionary, rather typically Anglo-Saxon persons. Hence the stability, and hence the discretion afterwards. If the members had been like Stella Smith, it wouldn’t have lasted two years.

About her “prodigious mass of records and diaries”, I am sure they are only letters and papers of her mother’s last years (which she refuses to share with her brother). My mother (who was one of the most devoted adherents of the community) years ago had much intimate conversation with Mrs. Smith, and told me then of these documents. She thought that they had been the undoing of Stella. My mother said that the earlier, more characteristic papers of the mother of Stella had all been burnt, that these belonged to the time of the break-up of the institution, when the latter was under the influence of the person who led the op-

position to Mr. Noyes, rather than of Mr. Noyes himself. She declared that they were most uncharacteristic of the institution, and that it was very sad that Stella (only twelve at her mother's death, and after then without any parental care) had brooded so much on these documents. Moreover, she talked on the community principally with an old couple (who joined late) who were of all the members the most unbalanced. Her own nature from an early age revealed itself as the essential ultimate cause of her theories. On one subject she has always concentrated. In London she seemed more poised than I have ever seen her. She was fairly ecstatic on these subjects when I last saw her—in her youth she was liable to outbreaks of hysteria. To me she is always a sad case of a mixed nature. Essentially she seems so dishonest with herself as to her motives, yet in other ways she is one of the most honest, generous and lovable persons born. She is truly musical. I say all this so that you can see that the fact that the Oneida of to-day rejects her doesn't mean that they reject the community. The community used to reject persons like her. As a matter of fact the Oneida of to-day have founded themselves on the community—selecting from the manifold experiments of that institution what seems suited to their situation. Being no longer a theocracy, they have given up the social experiment (except birth control in marriage), but they have founded their society on an unusual closeness of fraternity, which even allows of mutual criticism. The society is not essentially materialistic, even though material success happens to be its goal. Self Fulfillment in this case happens to take the form of money-making, but actually for the leaders it doesn't. They could get far more money elsewhere. They pool the profits for the benefits of the less talented, the stock-holders, and (of late, the employees). They are trying to build up a society of mutual responsibility and fairly equal fortune, in which everyone would take his work as a sport—and therefore put his best into it. The “essential reward” is fraternity, and only the “accidental reward” is

riches—and the more money that comes in, the more ways have been found to make the distribution more general. Surely materialism involves a way of using money, and not necessarily the mere getting it. I fancy Mrs. Smith told you how materialist modern Oneida is—she told me that. It is not strange that she is bitter against it, since she is not allowed to live there. I believe that the clan (as you could now call it) includes an unusual number of talented and (at least underneath, whatever their protestations) really idealistic persons, both men and women. It will be interesting to see what comes out of their association.

I hope that I have not written at inordinate length. It seemed to take a lot of details, if I was to be fair. Moreover, as my mother used to tell me “When you start talking about the community, there is no end to what there is to say.”

Thanking you for your interest,

Yours truly,

Hope Emily Allen

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