

THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF GEORGE ORWELL

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THIS year marks the centenary of the birth of Eric Arthur Blair, better known as George Orwell. Although dead for over a half century, Orwell remains one of the most read and most quoted authors of the twentieth century. His two best-known books, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, remain in print and have sold over 30 million copies. They contributed such phrases to the language as 'Big Brother', 'Newspeak', 'All animals are equal but some are more equal than others'. In 1996 a poll of its customers by the English bookstore, Waterstone's, ranked *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as the second and third most influential books of the twentieth century, trailing only J. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

Biographies and special studies about Orwell still appear with regularity: a life by the biographer Jeffrey Meyers was published in 2000, several biographies and studies have appeared in this centenary year, including one by the controversial journalist Christopher Hitchens who stresses Orwell's continuing importance today. Only last month two prominent Democratic politicians in America, Senator Lieberman and former Vice-President Gore used some of Orwell's words to attack President Bush.

Why does this writer continue to fascinate critics and ordinary readers today? Why Orwell's enduring relevance?

Orwell, quite simply, continues to fascinate as a writer and a person. His literary output includes a brace of still readable novels, two works of pure genius (the aforementioned *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) along with some of the best essays to appear in the first half of the twentieth century.

Orwell's political writings especially his exposure of Communism, Fascism and Imperialism may seem dated now when these isms – at least in the form Orwell knew them – are dead. But a closer look reveals the sophistication of Orwell's insights. He was concerned not only about the disastrous effect of totalitarianism but also about the way it corrupted the language and thus made seeking the truth more difficult. He feared the growing power of the centralized state, seeing in it a threat to individual liberty. For these reasons Orwell's appeal crosses the political spectrum. The right has tried to co-opt him: 'body snatching', Hitchens calls it, claiming Orwell as the first Cold Warrior. In fact, there is some evidence that he coined the term 'Cold War' as early as October 1945. For his fellow leftists, he is the champion of egalitarianism and foe of privilege, a prime example of Socialism with a human face.

Orwell's early years were typical of the respectable middle classes (he was always precise about his status, labelling himself lower upper middle class) in Edwardian England. He attended St. Cyprians, a decent preparatory school, and then won a scholarship to one of the leading public schools, Eton. He failed to distinguish himself; and, instead of taking the traditional route to Oxford or

Cambridge, Orwell followed in his father's path into the Indian Imperial Police, serving in Burma. He spent an unusual five-year apprenticeship there absorbing a hatred of British imperialism, a distrust of authority and a growing desire to rid himself of an attitude of superiority to the native populations. Unlike many anti-imperialists, however, Orwell never romanticized the Indians or the Burmese he came in contact with. In an otherwise sympathetic portrait of the natives in his novel *Burmese Days* (1933) Orwell created a slimy Burmese villain in U PO Kyin, who for sheer Oriental mendacity is a match for a character such as Fu Manchu.

Orwell returned to England in 1927 and, determined to become a writer, eventually resigned his commission. It would take almost a decade and half before he would earn an income from writing that matched that of his last year as a policeman.

Despite holding a variety of jobs as teacher, storekeeper, and bookstore manager, Orwell wrote incessantly although often without great popular or financial success. Beginning in 1933 he published a book a year for seven years: four novels, one book of semi-autobiography (*Down and Out in Paris and London* [1933]), one piece of brilliant investigative journalism (*The Road to Wigan Pier* [1936]) and the best single book on the Spanish Civil War (*Homage to Catalonia* [1938]), all produced while Orwell worked full time at other jobs. He also wrote book reviews for a number of English journals and began to hone the mastery of the essay that was to make him the greatest practitioner of this deceptively difficult literary form in the first half of the twentieth century. Two of his essays written during these years, 'A Hanging' (1931) and 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936), define the modern essay form. They are direct, powerful, brief studies that stay with the reader for years.

In 'A Hanging', for example, Orwell captures the fragility of human life with almost Shakespearean intensity. A Hindu about to be hanged is being led from his cell to the gallows. 'I watched the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of me', Orwell wrote. 'At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel. And once, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle in the path. It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short'. No opponent of capital punishment ever said it better.

'Shooting an Elephant', anthologized for years as an example of vivid prose, is also a brilliant indictment of the two-edged nature of imperialism. Supposedly based on an incident while Orwell was in the Burmese Police, the essay demonstrates how the actions of the imperialist often were dictated by the people over whom he rules. The policeman in the essay, probably Orwell, is forced to shoot an elephant that has run amok and killed a peasant, even though it is no longer a threat to anyone.

'And it was at this moment that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of

the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I standing in front of the unarmed native crowd seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys'. 'Shooting an Elephant' remains one of the best indictments of Imperialism ever written. And yet it is neither a diatribe nor a Marxist rant but a sad, highly personal piece that humanizes the dilemma inherent in one race ruling another.

Although most of Orwell's early books were reviewed positively, only *The Road to Wigan Pier* was a financial success. It was commissioned by the successful publisher Victor Gollancz and later adopted by the Left Book Club controlled by him. It sold around 47,000 copies in various editions, a large figure for its day. *The Road to Wigan Pier* also revealed a side of Orwell that was to make him controversial. Gollancz wanted and got a brilliant depiction of the evils of capitalism in Orwell's portrait of the English coal mining industry in the midst of the depression, but he also received a shock. The second half of the book contained a sustained attack on the failures of socialism and socialists. In order to make the case for socialism, Orwell found it necessary to start by attacking its flaws. As with Christianity, he shrewdly noted, 'the worst advertisement for Socialism is its adherents'.

Orwell ridiculed the pretensions and idiosyncrasies of English socialism in an oft-quoted passage in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. 'One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words 'Socialism' and 'Communism' draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, 'Nature Cure' quack, pacifist and feminist in England'. Harsh, even unfair, but containing just enough truth to hit home.

Orwell knew that Socialism was an overwhelmingly middle class movement. Fascinated with working class values and life styles, he tried to immerse himself into the ranks of the working class after his return from Burma. But he knew that he had failed. This blending of middle and lower classes was a theme that obsessed him for years. He believed overcoming class barriers in England was almost impossible and that Socialism would succeed only when Socialists truly lost their sense of class superiority and became one with the working class. At the end of *Road to Wigan Pier*, he wrote, half in jest, after all 'we have nothing to lose but our aitches'. Although Orwell's book was resented by some in Wigan, now it has become the focus of the city's tourist appeal. The city has just spent £4 million rebuilding Wigan Pier and tired tourists can visit the Orwell pub.

Orwell followed *The Road to Wigan Pier* with his expose of the betrayal of the idea of revolution in the Spanish Civil War. For this apostasy, he was a marked man in certain left-wing circles even though Orwell, unlike many of his critics, had actually fought in Spain. In *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Orwell argued that Stalin and his allies in Spain were not really interested in a victory for the Republic but rather in prolonging the Civil War as a way of weakening the western democracies. For stating this view that is now accepted by most scholars, Orwell

was ostracized by many on the left. Gollancz, for example, refused to publish *Homage to Catalonia*. At the same time Kingsley Martin, editor of the *New Statesman*, the leading left-wing political journal in Britain, had asked Orwell to review a new book on the Spanish Civil War. When Orwell's review contradicted the Popular Front line of 'no enemies on the left', Martin rejected it. Orwell never forgave Martin and accused him of having the 'mentality of a whore'. Years later Malcolm Muggeridge was having lunch with Orwell when the latter asked him to change seats. Why, Muggeridge asked? Orwell said that Martin was sitting nearby, and he could not abide looking at his corrupt face.

Despite his problems with his socialist friends, Wigan Pier and Spain completed Orwell's conversion to Socialism and he remained a committed, if slightly eccentric, one for the rest of his life. His writing after Spain – save for one last and quite good novel, *Coming Up for Air* (1939) about an England on the eve of war – was overwhelmingly political in nature. In his essay, 'Why I Write', Orwell argued that from 1936 on (i.e., from the time of *Road to Wigan Pier* and the Spanish Civil War), 'I wanted to make political writing into an art'. In this he largely succeeded.

World War II energized him. During the dangerous summer of 1940 when Britain's fate hung in the balance, Orwell rediscovered his latent patriotism. He even tried to join the military but was rejected for health reasons, i.e., he suffered from a serious weakness of the lungs that eventually developed into the tuberculosis that killed him at age 46.

In a sense Orwell enjoyed the war, its dangers, and its privations. He argued that the war had created a unique opportunity for revolutionary socialism to triumph: both the middle and lower classes were patriots at heart, he thought, and both groups saw the importance of saving England. He argued the case in a long, brilliant essay, 'The Lion and the Unicorn'. Patriotism, Orwell wrote, is the glue that binds the different classes of the English people. England, he argued in a famous analogy, is not Shakespeare's jewelled isle. 'It resembles a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family. It has rich relations who have to be kow-towed to and poor relations who are horribly sat upon. It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts. Still, it is a family. It has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy it closes its ranks'.

By 1942 Orwell recognized that his hope for a great revolution in the midst of the war was a forlorn hope. The last years of his life revolved around two all-consuming fears. First he feared that the future would be controlled by all-powerful totalitarian states in a perpetual state of war. This terror was the genesis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a novel that projected the ghastly post-war age of austerity into the near future.

At least as important as this concern was Orwell's second belief that the very concept of truth was disappearing under the strain of war and propaganda. His experience in Spain when he saw how ideology could corrupt historical events profoundly worried him. He was haunted by memories of how the war news from

Spain had been distorted. 'I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts. I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed. I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various 'party lines'. *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, both partially about how the idea of revolution is betrayed, also deal with the corruption of language and the fading of historical truth. In recent months there has been renewed criticism of Orwell from some left-wing circles in Britain because he had provided a list of pro-Soviet intellectuals to the British security services. Orwell did this because of his fear that a Soviet victory in the Cold War could lead to a totalitarian dictatorship. In our present debates about Iraq, the name of Orwell is heard from all sides. As one Wisconsin newspaper put it: 'Our time is still George Orwell's time! The year may be 2003, but never in history has the clock ticked more Orwellian than it ticks at this moment'. (*The Capital Times*, 21 August, 2003.)

Although Orwell died at the height of the Cold War and in the early stages of the break-up of European imperialism, his insights still have validity today. His warnings about trends in totalitarianism are still with us, and his concerns for the vitality of the language are more valid today with the onslaughts of politics and advertising more dangerous than ever before. Orwell remains for the twenty-first century both a man of his time and a man for our time.

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