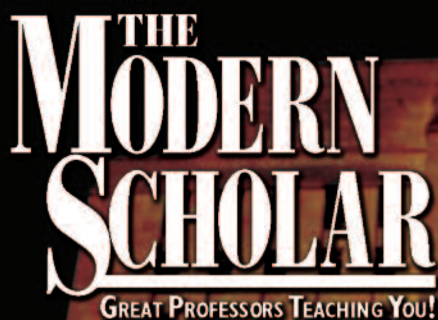

The World of George Orwell

Professor Michael Shelden
Indiana State University

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The World of George Orwell
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Photo courtesy of Michael Shelden

About Your Professor

Michael Shelden

Born in Oklahoma, Michael Shelden earned his Ph.D. in English from Indiana University in 1979. He then began teaching at nearby Indiana State University, where he was promoted to Professor of English in 1989, and where he remains a full-time member of the faculty. For ten years he was a fiction critic for the *Baltimore Sun*, and from 1995 to 2007 he was a features writer for the *Daily Telegraph* of London, where he contributed dozens of articles on notable figures in film, literature, and music, including one of the last interviews with actor Christopher Reeve. Shelden is married and the father of two daughters.

Shelden's first book, *George Orwell: Ten Animal Farm Letters to His Agent, Leonard Moore* (1984), was an edited collection drawn from letters Shelden found at the Lilly Library (Indiana University, Bloomington). In 1989, he published his literary history *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of* Horizon, which covered the decade of the 1940s, when *Horizon* was the most influential literary magazine in the United Kingdom. The book was based on a large collection of Connolly's personal papers at the University of Tulsa, and on interviews with the magazine's former editors and assistants, including Stephen Spender.

Authorized by the George Orwell estate, Shelden's biography of Orwell (*Orwell: The Authorized Biography*) was published in 1991 and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Biography. Among other things, the book included the first detailed account of Orwell's controversial list of people whom he considered politically dishonest and unreliable in British society.

Shelden's biography of Graham Greene appeared in a United Kingdom edition in 1994 under the title *Graham Greene: The Man Within*. In 1995 it was published in the United States, with revisions, as *Graham Greene: The Enemy Within*, and its "despoiling" portrait of Greene as a driven and devious artist provoked heated debate on both sides of the Atlantic.

Introduction

If you want to listen to the sound of George Orwell's laughter, or watch him stroll down a country lane in a video, you're out of luck. Though we have silent films of Mark Twain and a wax cylinder of Tolstoy reciting homilies, there are no voice recordings or moving images of the most influential British novelist of the twentieth century. We don't even have a color photograph or a portrait of him smiling. He may as well have lived and died a Victorian. Yet this old-fashioned character—whose pencil-thin mustache and tweedy outfits gave him the appearance of a retired British colonel—was so ahead of his time that we are only now catching up with him. His two most popular novels—*Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—have been translated into sixty languages and have sold more than thirty million copies. Not a month goes by without his name appearing hundreds of times in the world press as journalists use his words to comment on everything from global politics to computer crime. The concepts of Big Brother, the Thought Police, Doublethink, and Newspeak are all his inventions, and they resonate in our time with even greater force than they did in his. More than Orwell's contemporaries, we understand the dangers of the telescreen (as Orwell called it) and the constant electronic surveillance conducted by the totalitarian regime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. We have seen the face of Big Brother staring down at us from posters in several despotic regimes around the world, where the novelist's nightmares are brought to life every day. The world that he imagined is now all around us, and his name has become a convenient adjective for describing its terrors—Orwellian. Even in apparently benign democracies, various versions of his Thought Police are busy at work, tracking our electronic footprints or intimidating people who dare to entertain politically incorrect ideas. In the media, the academic world, and the social services, we find the guardians of correctness gleefully pouncing on the slightest word or phrase that might hint at a forbidden thought and promoting rigid rules and laws to punish offenders.

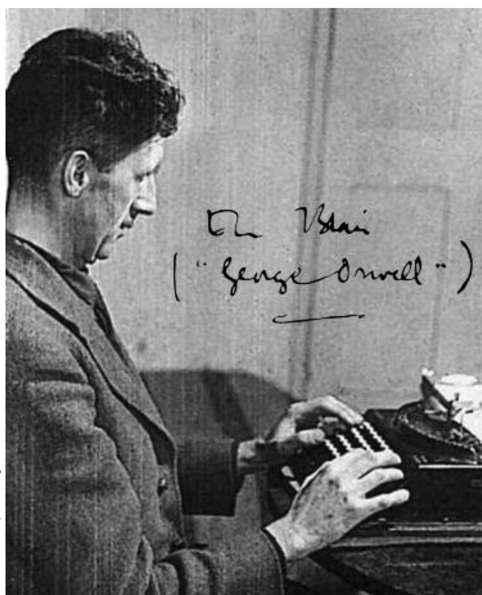
© BBC Television/The Kobal Collection

Again and again in his work, Orwell shows us that ideology is the great bane of our modern world. Millions have gone to their deaths under the garish banners of fascism, imperialism, communism, religious fundamentalism, and a host of other "isms," yet most of these ideologies have produced benefits for only a select few. All "isms" seem to require an elite group to administer and defend the articles of the faith, and this concentration of power leads inevitably to corruption. After a time, ideology merely provides excuses for the exercise of power, and ordinary people suffer in the name of an empty creed.

What many people yearn to maintain today is the same thing that Orwell's work consistently promotes: the "honour and privilege" of responsible freedom. In his original preface to *Animal Farm* (which remained unpublished until 1972), he declared: "If I had to choose a text to justify myself, I should choose the line from Milton: 'By the known rules of ancient liberty.'" This phrase, Orwell explained, referred to his strong faith in the "deep-rooted tradition" of "intellectual freedom . . . without which our characteristic Western culture could only doubtfully exist."

So how did a crusty Englishman who was born more than one hundred years ago, and who died in 1950, understand so well the challenges to freedom in our world? Was he gifted with incredible foresight? If anything, his genius was inspired by hindsight. As his old friend Cyril Connolly liked to joke, Orwell was a revolutionary in love with 1910. He was fascinated by anything obsolete or eccentric and was always eager to celebrate useless facts, trivial hobbies, and quaint pastimes.

What he dreaded about the future was that an increasingly powerful political and social authority would stamp out not only the past but the pleasures that went with it—the odd, individual joys that make freedom worth having. He wanted the right to be obsolete: to smoke bad tobacco, read forgotten novels, walk instead of drive, and measure things in yards instead of meters. These are not irrelevant freedoms. When he chose to call his newspaper column of the early 1940s "As I Please," he was making the point that the grand heroic notions of liberty begin with the right to make simple choices: defying the herd by insisting on individual preferences in even the smallest things. The Thought Police are so insidious because they work at such a basic level, banishing common ideas and phrases until they corrupt language and reason and exert control over the most elementary choices. Orwell has a reputation as a serious intellectual who wrote about complex political questions, but he was just as happy—if not more so—to indulge in long discussions about making tea, rolling his own cigarettes, reading murder mysteries, or planting trees and rose bushes. Unlike many modern intellectuals, he liked working with his hands as well as his mind. He kept a goat and chickens, built his own furniture, and knew how to kill snakes.



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At the height of the Second World War—when Britain's future was darkest—he took time to write a long essay analyzing the

appeal of seaside postcards featuring titillating pictures and comic captions. He loved their low humor and kept a small collection of them in a drawer at home, along with old copies of boys' weekly magazines. A favorite theme of his was that of the little man of ordinary tastes who lurks inside the great man of accomplishment. "There is one part of you that wishes to be a hero or saint," he wrote in 1942, "but another part of you is a little fat man who sees very clearly the advantages of staying alive with a whole skin. He is your unofficial self, the voice of the belly protesting against the soul."

Never one to follow the crowd, he always made a point of thinking for himself and avoiding the easy ways of the latest fashion. He was never in tune with the spirit of his time, seeking out unpopular causes and obscure ideas and scrupulously avoiding what he called "all the smelly little orthodoxies . . . contending for our souls."

Because he was so willing to resist popular opinion, he saw trends that many of his contemporaries were blind to. In effect, he was seeing into the future, but not because he had a special gift of prophecy or other mystical powers. Rather, it was simply the case that he looked at things from such a broad and deep perspective that he could trace the general direction of the future and describe it in almost mythological terms.

Like all great writers, he had a genius for turning the latest buzz into a timeless concept—exposing the horrors of the Soviet commissars by portraying them as greedy pigs in *Animal Farm*, or creating Big Brother as the embodiment of all dictators. Orwell's reputation keeps growing because the resonance of his work gets louder and stronger as time reveals more counterparts to his creation in the real world.

He was a dedicated contrarian, always taking the path he wasn't supposed to choose. In his view, the most sacred right is the right to one's own opinion. In the entire body of his work, nothing is more inspiring than this remark from his preface to *Animal Farm*: "If liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

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Though his life was short (he was only forty-six when he died), his independent spirit continues to exercise enormous influence in a world where mindless conformity and political tyranny are constant threats.

Lecture 1

An English Schoolboy, 1903–1922

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Peter Stansky and William Abrahams's *Unknown Orwell* and *Orwell: The Transformation*.

George Orwell began life as Eric Arthur Blair. It wasn't until he was nearly thirty that Eric Blair first used the pseudonym of George Orwell for his book *Down and Out in Paris and London*, which was published at the beginning of 1933. He took the last name from a minor stream in England—the River Orwell—and chose George partly because he admired it as a solid, typically English name of the time. But Blair never legally adopted the name Orwell and was always known as Eric to his family and old friends.

The son of a civil servant at the lower rungs of the British Empire, Eric Blair was born in the colonial province of Bengal, India, on June 25, 1903. His father, Richard, was stationed there as an official supervising the Empire's lucrative opium monopoly, which produced one-sixth of the government's total revenue for India. Despite the high-minded claims for imperialism in London, the ugly truth about Richard Blair's job was that he spent most of his career helping to maintain a steady supply of opium to millions of addicts in Asia.

Eric's mother, Ida, came from a small European enclave of Burma and was much younger than her husband. She was working as a governess in India when she met Richard. They married in 1896, and two years later she gave birth to a girl, Marjorie. Within a year of Eric's birth, Ida did what many colonial wives did in India—she left the hot climate and settled in England with her children, bringing the two up alone while she waited for her husband to serve out the remaining years of his work. As a consequence, between the ages of one and eight, Eric saw his father only for a short time during a single leave in 1907.

Eric grew up in the little town of Henley-on-Thames, where he enjoyed a close relationship with his mother and sister, but where he formed few strong friendships with the local children. He was an introspective, imaginative child who liked to read and write at an early age. He felt the calling to be a writer in this period and published his first poem in the local newspaper when he was eleven.

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Top: Eric at six months with his mother. Bottom: Eric at three.

Impressed by her son's talent for language, Ida wanted him to have the best education possible, so she decided to send him to a preparatory school shortly after he turned eight. The school was called St. Cyprian's and was located sixty miles south of London near the seaside resort of Eastbourne. Eric would spend a little more than five years there, and he would come away with a deep and enduring hatred of the place. It became his first experience of living under a system that he considered tyrannical.

As he later portrayed it in an essay called "Such, Such Were the Joys," the school seemed to him to be more like a prison than an institution of learning. He argues in the essay that underfeeding was routine, punishments severe, overcrowding common, and filth pervasive. He depicts the headmaster and his domineering wife as sadistic, greedy snobs who held a cynical view of education as nothing more than a mechanical process of cramming facts into young minds.

The dominant figure at the school was the headmaster's wife, Mrs. L.C. Vaughan Wilkes, who was much admired by the boys she favored, but who was despised by everyone else. She made life very unpleasant for those who didn't win her approval. When she was sufficiently provoked, she didn't hesitate to slap a boy's face or pull his hair. One contemporary recalled that Eric had his hair pulled so often by Mrs. Wilkes that he began greasing it so that she couldn't pull it so hard.

© St. Cyprian's School
Mrs. L.C. Vaughan Wilkes
(Cicely Ellen Philadelphia Vaughan Wilkes)
(1875–1967)

Orwell's creation of Big Brother was partly inspired by the example of Mrs. Wilkes, who made a great show of insisting that she was a friend to every boy and wanted only to be loved and respected, but whose methods were insidiously cruel. She made a habit of censoring letters the boys sent home and belittled them for being weak if they complained. "I was in a world," Orwell writes, "where it was not possible for me to be good." One former pupil succinctly described life under Mrs. Wilkes's rule: "If you were in favor, life could be bliss; if you weren't, it was hell."

> *"Not to expose your true feelings to an adult seems to be instinctive from the age of seven or eight onwards."*
>
> ~George Orwell

Yet young Eric persevered and developed a toughness that would serve him well in life. The harsh methods of the school helped to shape his character, giving him an acute sense of guilt and a suspicion of authority, but also planting in him an incredible desire to prove his worth in a hostile world. To survive five years at St. Cyprian's, he had found it necessary to acquire what he later described as "a

power of facing unpleasant facts." When he left the school at thirteen, he felt like a reprieved prisoner. "The world was open before me, just a little, like a grey sky which exhibits a narrow crack of blue."

There was an immediate reward waiting for him when he put the long nightmare of St. Cyprian's behind him. As a result of his determination to excel, he managed to win a scholarship to one of the most prestigious British schools—Eton. Located near Windsor Castle, it was the place where many of the nation's elite went to put the finishing touches on their education or to prepare for admission to a college at Oxford or Cambridge. Though the teachers could be demanding and the work difficult, Eric found Eton to be a veritable paradise after his struggles under the thumb of Mrs. Wilkes.

There were many good things about it—the beauty of the ancient buildings, the River Thames nearby, and the great romantic towers of Windsor looking down on the entire scene. Best of all, pupils at Eton enjoyed a relative degree of freedom that allowed young Blair to pursue his own interests and complete his work at a reasonable pace. He later praised the school for its "tolerant and civilised atmosphere which gives each boy a fair chance of developing his individuality."

His health, which was often bad at St. Cyprian's, improved at Eton. He grew much stronger and a lot taller, reaching his full adult height of almost six feet three inches by the time he left. He became a good swimmer, an accomplished athlete in a couple of sports, and an irreverent spirit who "enjoyed playing the lone wolf" in his free time.

He found small ways to show his independence. He smoked cigarettes when he was beyond the watchful eyes of

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Eric Blair, age 14, at the time he entered Eton.

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Blair's photograph upon graduating from Eton, 1921.

authority, and he liked to shock his few friends by making fun of visiting parents behind their backs. He worked on a school literary magazine, contributing some poems of his own, and he earned a reputation for questioning everything in a spirit of "sardonic cheerfulness."

During part of his time at St. Cyprian's and Eton, Britain was at war. He received military training at both schools, but was never in any danger of having to fight. All the same, the daily news of casualties haunted his days throughout the years of the First World War, from 1914 to 1918, and he couldn't have been unaffected by the awful death toll suffered among the former pupils of Eton. More than a thousand Old Etonians were killed in the fighting, and the school often received visits from wounded soldiers. Usually, Eric pretended not to take the war too seriously, but the fact that it ended long before he finished his studies may have influenced the unconventional decision he took in 1921, his last year at Eton. Instead of trying to enter a university, he chose to put on a uniform and serve his country. But he didn't join a military unit. He became an officer in the Indian Imperial Police, returning to his family's roots in the exotic East.

> *"Probably the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of Eton, but the opening battles of all subsequent wars have been lost there."*
>
> ~George Orwell

It was the kind of career his fellow Etonians would have considered beneath them, but he wanted to be different and do the unexpected. Perhaps also, as a policeman, he wanted to discover at last what it was like to exercise authority over others.

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Assistant Superintendent Eric Blair (the tallest, back row) with the Indian Imperial Police, 1923.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How can Orwell's creation of Big Brother be traced back to Eric Blair's experiences at St. Cyprian's?
2. Why did Blair find Eton College a welcome change from St. Cyprian's?
3. How did Blair come up with the pseudonym of "George Orwell"?

Suggested Reading

Stansky, Peter, and William Abrahams. *The Unknown Orwell* and *Orwell: The Transformation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.

Other Books of Interest

Davison, Peter. *George Orwell: A Literary Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996.

Meyers, Jeffrey. *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

Shelden, Michael. *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*. New York: HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1991.

Websites of Interest

1. St. Cyprian's School website provides details of the founders of the school, its history, and a discussion of Eric Blair's school days and later life. — http://www.st-cyprians-school.org.uk/Eric%20Blair.htm
2. The *Independent* of London provides an article from December 7, 2005, by Terry Kirby entitled "Eton's Old Boy Network." The article "looks at the school that connects the ruling classes, [and] whether they hold sway over the worlds of politics, the arts, a regiment, a boardroom or merely the odd nation." — http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/etons-old-boy-network-518455.html

Lecture 2

Servant of the Empire, 1922–1927

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Emma Larkin's *Finding George Orwell in Burma*.

At a young age Eric Blair became a powerful figure in a country the size of Texas. Appointed to the rank of assistant superintendent of police, he joined a force of some ninety officers in charge of the thirteen thousand native policemen who kept law and order among a population of thirteen million. While some of his old friends from Eton were struggling to complete their university degrees, he was overseeing life-and-death matters in districts inhabited by Burmese numbering in the tens of thousands.

During his five years in Burma he served in five places, and the most important of these was Moulmein, the third largest town in the country. Whenever a major crime was reported, he was called to the scene to supervise the investigation. Whenever a dangerous criminal was at large, he directed the effort to capture the man. He settled quarrels between village leaders, disciplined local constables, observed interrogations, and testified at important trials and inquests.

It also seems likely that Moulmein is the setting of an experience that Blair recounts in the essay "A Hanging," which was first published under his own name only four years after he left Burma. It is a riveting piece of prose whose emotional power comes from a slow but steady accumulation of detail. As he and a group of jailers escort a Hindu convict to the gallows, Blair studies the man's "bare brown back," his clumsy walk as he tries to march with his arms bound, and his footprints in the wet gravel. No detail is too insignificant because each one helps to convey a sense of what is lost when a life is taken.

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And then one detail illuminates all the others when the man takes one small step to avoid a puddle. "Till that moment," Blair writes, "I had never realised what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. . . . His brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned—reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking

together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less."

The whole point of the essay is to bring home the horrific reality of an act that is so much easier to sanction in the abstract if you never have to witness it in the flesh. Like his father before him, Eric found himself doing the dirty work of the British Empire. But unlike his father, who served faithfully until retirement and returned home with a pension, Eric soon discovered that he had made a terrible mistake in joining the Imperial Indian Police. The job paid well, the country was beautiful, his work was important, yet being in a powerful position left him feeling no better than when he was powerless.

It is easy enough to see how imperialism enslaves its subjects, but what he learned in Burma is that the system also has endless ways of enslaving its masters. He came to feel that enforcing British authority in a foreign land was not only unjust to the local people but demeaning for him. He was troubled by the faces of the many prisoners whom he had watched the system punish, and who had regarded him with sullen defiance. "Innumerable remembered faces," he called them later. More than anything else—more than any political notions or theories of moral justice—the accusing looks on those faces eventually made his work in the police unbearable. "Unfortunately," he observed, "I had not trained myself to be indifferent to the expression of the human face."

In his disgust over his position as an instrument of imperial might, he began to hate both the Empire and the native subjects with an almost equal passion, and this planted some dark, irrational thoughts in his brain. "With one part of my mind," he concluded, "I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny . . . with another part I thought the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts." The system was threatening to turn him into a brute, and his own growing awareness of this corrosive influence was his strongest reason for deciding that he couldn't continue serving in Burma.

"Shooting an Elephant," an essay Orwell published in 1936, offers a convincing self-portrait of a young imperial master who has lost respect for his job and himself. On one level, it is a rather simple tale of colonial life in the East. In the teak yards of Moulmein dozens of trained elephants were

A Burmese elephant at work in a teak yard, ca. early 1900s.

© Library of Congress

used to move the heavy logs, picking them up with their tusks. Normally, they were docile, but now and then one would stray into town, and in rare cases go on a rampage.

It was customary for the local police officer to shoot any dangerous elephant. In Orwell's essay, the killing of the large beast assumes enormous significance because the decision to shoot it has nothing to do with any threat from it. Orwell's runaway elephant is peacefully standing in a paddy field stuffing grass into its mouth when it is finally tracked down. In such situations the elephant's handler could easily be summoned and lead the animal home without incident. But a large crowd gathers and expects more dramatic action, and Orwell treats this mood of expectation as the real danger in the moment because it reflects the worst tendencies of the imperial system. As a police officer, he must shoot the elephant because he must live up to his image of authority. "A sahib has got to act like a sahib," Orwell explains; "he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things."

> *"On the whole human beings want to be good, but not too good and not quite all the time."*
>
> ~George Orwell

Under such circumstances it is impossible to act independently and to make the decision to turn the job over to the elephant's native handler. For the representative of the British Empire, that would mean a loss of face. He was "an absurd puppet," Orwell says, "pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind . . . When the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom he destroys." In the end he kills the elephant "solely to avoid looking a fool."

In 1927, after an attack of tropical fever put him on medical leave for a few weeks, Blair had the chance to think over his future in Burma. He decided that it was time for him to go. There was no point in trying to keep up the pretense that he belonged in the police service. On July 14, 1927, he sailed for home. A dozen years later he would refer to his life in Burma as "five boring years within the sound of bugles," but that was a typical understatement. The boredom was frequently punctuated by intense, unforgettable incidents that would continue to haunt him until the end of his life.

In 1940, he criticized W.H. Auden for using the phrase "necessary murder" in a political poem. He said, "I would not speak so lightly of murder. It so happens that I have seen the bodies of numbers of murdered men—I don't mean killed in battle, I mean murdered. . . . I have some conception of what murder means—the terror, the hatred, the howling relatives, the post-mortems, the blood, the smells."

He could also never forget the execution he had witnessed, saying in 1937 that even the horror of criminal murder couldn't begin to compare with the brutality of an "official" one. "I watched a man hanged once," he remarked; "it seemed to me worse than a thousand murders."

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why are descriptive details so important in "A Hanging"?
2. How does "Shooting an Elephant" serve as a criticism of imperialism?
3. Why did Orwell take exception to W.H. Auden's casual use of the phrase "necessary murder" in a political poem?

Suggested Reading

Larkin, Emma. *Finding George Orwell in Burma*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Rai, Alok. *Orwell and the Politics of Despair: A Critical Study of the Writings of George Orwell*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Websites of Interest

1. The Online Burma/Myanmar Library provides an extensive catalog of articles and links about Burma, including its history during the British Colonial Period from 1824 to 1948. — http://www.burmalibrary.org/show.php?cat=261&lo=d&sl=0
2. PBS provides an audio discussion from July 2005 of Orwell's time in Burma from a report broadcast in the *All Things Considered* news program. — http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4761169
3. The *Time Asia* website provides an article discussing Orwell's time spent in Burma. — http://www.time.com/time/asia/traveler/021017/orwell.html

Lecture 3

Among the Poor, 1927–1933

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

Richard Blair, who had been living in comfortable retirement in England since leaving India in 1911, was disappointed by his only son's failure to continue serving the Empire. Mr. Blair had devoted a career of more than thirty-five years to it, and his loyalty to the imperial cause had allowed him to give his family a solid middle-class life. Eric was rejecting not merely a job but a tradition of selfless dedication that the old man valued with all his heart.

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Richard Walmesley Blair (1857–1938) in retirement.

When he discovered that his son's only plan for the future was to become a writer, Mr. Blair scoffed that Eric had wasted his early advantages and was now merely a "dilettante." His wife, Ida, was more understanding of their son's disenchantment with Burma, whose colonial problems she knew well from her childhood experiences in the country. She tried to encourage Eric's literary ambitions. But it would take five long years for him to prove to his family that he could turn his talent for words into a promising career.

He took a series of odd jobs to supplement the money he had saved in Burma, and he sought out fresh experiences to write about, exploring the underworld of the poor in London and Paris. Feeling tainted by his police work, he wanted to shun anything that reminded him of the unjust system he had served. "I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man," he explained later. "Failure seemed to me to be the only virtue."

He also had a genuine desire to understand how the least fortunate members of society managed to live in a world that generally ignored their needs. He wanted not simply to shed light on their suffering, but to make others who were better off understand that poverty wasn't an abstraction. It was a harsh reality that affected individuals in different ways, and those ways could be described only by someone who took the trouble to observe them firsthand.

His attempt to find literary inspiration in Paris during the late 1920s resulted in one disaster after another. He was robbed, nearly died of pneumonia, endured an awful period as a dishwasher in a filthy hotel restaurant, was barely able to earn enough to feed himself, and wrote stories that, as he recalled, "nobody would print." He struggled so much with his writing that he would, in his words, "destroy a dozen pages for one that was worth keeping."

He had more luck after he abandoned France and returned to England. He found a reasonably good job as a teacher, made a few friends, and worked on a book about his life in Paris and the occasional periods when he would visit the slums of London disguised as a tramp. He took great care to make his disguise convincing, dirtying his face and wearing a shabby coat, black dungaree trousers, faded scarf, and rumpled cap.

Despite his educated accent, he usually found that when he tried going on the road and living for days at a time among real tramps, he was accepted as one of their own. "Even a bishop could be at home among tramps," he said, "if he wore the right clothes; and even if they knew he was a bishop it might not make any difference, provided that they also knew or believed that he was genuinely destitute. Once you are in that world and seemingly of it, it hardly matters what you have been in the past."

In 1932, Blair found a publisher for his first book, which was originally called "Days in London and Paris." With his approval, Victor Gollancz—his publisher—changed the title to *Down and Out in Paris and London*. It was published at the beginning of 1933 under his new pen name of George Orwell. Wanting the book to succeed, but having come to think of himself as a failure, he couldn't bear to put his own name on the cover. Using a pseudonym allowed him to avoid responsibility for the book's fate. If it failed, it wouldn't be Eric Blair's failure. If it succeeded, it wouldn't be Eric Blair's success.

To his amazement, the critics loved not only *Down and Out*, but also its author. "It is not only George Orwell's experiences that are interesting," remarked one reviewer; "George Orwell himself is of interest." In effect, the good reviews killed the literary career of Eric Blair by establishing George Orwell as a distinctive voice of artistic and intellectual promise. He decided to stick with the name, but he really didn't have

Three down-and-out men on a bench along the Thames Embankment, 1930.

© Clipart.com

much choice. As far as his work was concerned, the struggles of Blair belonged to the past, and all his hopes were now associated with the success of George Orwell.

Down and Out is not a cohesive narrative, but a series of sketches about life on the fringes of society, with Orwell serving both as guide to this underworld and as the most engaging character in the adventures that take place there. The book is justly renowned for his unsparing descriptions of the poor enduring hunger, illness, and the damp conditions in crowded slums, and also his sickening account of conditions at a hotel restaurant in Paris where the food comes from grimy cooks slaving away in a cockroach-infested kitchen.

> *"The kitchen was like nothing I had ever seen or imagined—a stifling, low-ceilinged inferno of a cellar, red-lit from the fires, and deafening with oaths and the clanging of pots and pans. It was so hot that all the metal-work except the stoves had to be covered with cloth. In the middle were the furnaces, where twelve cooks skipped to and fro, their faces dripping sweat in spite of their white caps. Round that were counters where a mob of waiters and* plongeurs *clamoured with trays. Scullions, naked to the waist, were stoking the fires and scouring huge copper saucepans with sand. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry and a rage."*
>
> ~George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, 1932

The book doesn't offer any solutions to the problem of poverty or any grand theory about its causes. What it attempts is to alter the common perceptions of the poor as an indistinct mass suffering from the same problem and needing the same remedy. Above all, Orwell wants to remove "the stink of charity," as he calls it, from any effort to improve the lives of those in need. If you give to others, do it without any strings attached, he suggests.

As an example, he tells the story of a young clergyman who regularly distributes meal tickets to tramps on the Thames Embankment in London. He is shy and moves quickly among the men without making a show of his charity, pausing only to say good evening as he gives each man a ticket. He expects nothing in return, not even a word of thanks. He respects their right to be ungrateful, which is another way of saying that he refuses to take from them the dignity of freedom.

> *"A man receiving charity always hates his benefactor—it is a fixed characteristic of human nature."*
>
> ~George Orwell

Naturally, the tramps admire him. "Well, he'll never be a f—— bishop!" one tramp shouts when the clergyman leaves. This remark, Orwell explains, was "intended as a warm compliment."

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why did Orwell want to make a virtue of failure?
2. How did the good reviews for Orwell's first book put an end to the literary career of Eric Blair?
3. Why isn't the narrative cohesive in *Down and Out in Paris and London*?

Suggested Reading

Orwell, George. *Down and Out in Paris and London*. New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1972 (1933).

Other Books of Interest

Thompson, John. *Orwell's London*. New York: Schocken Books, 1985.

Websites of Interest

1. The *New Yorker* magazine provides an article by George Packer from April 2009 entitled "Reading Orwell: George Packer." The article reviews Orwell's first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London,* with excerpts from the work. — http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/reading-orwell-george-packer.html
2. *Pop Matters* features a lengthy article by Josh Indar from June 2009 entitled "Bumming Smokes in Paris and London: George Orwell's Obsession with Tobacco." The article discusses Orwell's cigarette addiction and particularly his references to smoking in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. — http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/94064-bumming-smokes-in-paris-and-london-orwells-obsession-with-tobacco/P0

Lecture 4

Young Novelist, 1933–1935

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is George Orwell's *Burmese Days*.

With his first book behind him, Orwell wasted no time moving ahead with his second book. In early 1933, he completed the first hundred pages of *Burmese Days*, a novel he had been trying to write in one form or another since his last months in the Indian Imperial Police. His success at finding a publisher for *Down and Out* seems to have given him the extra incentive to work harder on the novel. By the end of the year he was able to finish a typescript of almost four hundred pages.

"One difficulty I have never solved," said Orwell near the end of his life, "is that one has masses of experience which one passionately wants to write about . . . and no way of using them up except by disguising them as a novel." For fear of causing offense or of attracting a libel action, he was reluctant to write openly of his relationships among the British colonials in Burma, especially one that seems to have involved a romantic attachment.

In Moulmein, he formed a close bond with Elisa-Maria Langford-Rae, an attractive young woman whose blond hair made her impossible to overlook in Burma. She was educated in Scotland and had come out to Burma as the wife of a government official. Later, she would enjoy an adventurous time in the East as a colorful adventurer with espionage connections and many lovers. In her middle age she would visit the Himalayas, become involved in local political intrigues, and emerge as the confidante, and eventually the wife, of Lhendup Dorjee, the first prime minister of Sikkim.

"I knew Eric Blair very well," she recalled in the 1950s. "We used to have long talks on every conceivable subject." Whether he became one of her lovers, she never revealed, but she did speak glowingly of her admiration for his character, especially "his passion for justice, his dislike of prejudiced remarks about anyone, however lowly, and his sense of utter fairness in his minutest dealings."

In *Burmese Days*, Orwell created a fictional cast of colonial masters and natives to dramatize the conflict he had witnessed between the demands of the Empire and the actual needs of Burma. He is scathing in his treatment of bigotry among the ruling elite, ridiculing two devoted British imperialists for their petty argument over which of them has the right "to kick the servants" at their club.

© Deorali Orchid Sanctuary, Gangtok, India

Elisa-Maria Langford-Rae with her husband, Sikkim Chief Minister Kazi Lhendup Dorjee Khangsarpa, in 1990.

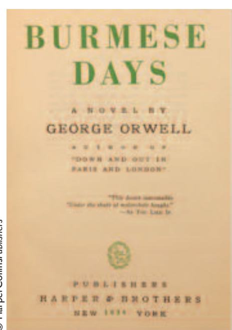
His critical view of the imperialists didn't please his former comrades in the police when copies of the novel reached Burma. Though he had cleverly concealed the real models for his characters, some officers took his criticisms personally. According to one of them, the book enraged the tall, rugged head of the police training school in Mandalay, who "went livid" after reading it "and said that if he ever met that young man he was going to horse-whip him."

Orwell handles the book's sharp attacks on the colonial establishment much better than the romance between the main character—John Flory—and Elizabeth Lackersteen, a striking young woman whose "yellow" hair may have been suggested by the novelist's memories of Elisa-Maria Langford-Rae. Lonely and tormented by self-pity, Flory is tempted to think that fate has sent Elizabeth to brighten his dreary life. But his awkward yearning for love doesn't get him very far with the young woman, who is colder and more calculating than she first appears.

The doomed affair is uninspiring, but it is partly redeemed by Orwell's use of the lush landscape of Burma as a sensual backdrop for romance. It reveals a poetic side that Orwell cultivated in his younger years, but one that he downplayed as he became more political in his later career. On the night that Flory almost manages to propose to Elizabeth there is a full moon which is so extraordinarily bright that it looks like a "white-hot coin" in the sky, its brilliance making the stars invisible. Flory says that the night is "brighter than an English winter day," and even Elizabeth, who is usually "indifferent to such things," is stunned by the spectacle.

In a description of great beauty Orwell writes, "Elizabeth looked up into the branches of the frangipani tree, which the moon seemed to have changed into rods of silver. The light lay thick, as though palpable, on everything, crusting the earth and the rough bark of trees like some dazzling salt, and every leaf seemed to bear a freight of solid light, like snow."

Because his oversensitive British publisher, Gollancz, was worried that some colonials might seize on a few small details to claim that Orwell was libeling them, the book was published first in America, where Harper and Brothers felt safer taking a risk on the novel. The first copies appeared in New York in



© HarperCollins*Publishers*

"The life of the Anglo-Indian officials is not all jam. In comfortless camps, in sweltering offices, in gloomy dakbungalows smelling of dust and earth-oil, they earn, perhaps, the right to be a little disagreeable."

~George Orwell,
Burmese Days, 1934

October 1934, but the British edition didn't come out until June 1935. It enjoyed modest success on both sides of the Atlantic, but it was sufficient to make Orwell think that he needed to keep turning his experiences into fiction instead of dealing directly with them in autobiographical prose, where describing real people was problematic unless they were sympathetic friends or unidentifiable characters far removed from the public spotlight—like tramps, for example.

In a period of just five years—from 1934 to 1939—Orwell published four novels. At one point he even aspired to give his great Irish contemporary James Joyce a run for his money, carefully studying the novelist's masterpiece, *Ulysses*, for stylistic and narrative tricks that he could use in his own work. He didn't have much luck in that respect. The weakest of his books written in the 1930s—*A Clergyman's Daughter*—is also the one most heavily influenced by Joyce's example.

Within a few days of completing the typescript of *Burmese Days*, Orwell wrote a long, rambling letter on the subject of fiction in general, and Joyce's *Ulysses* in particular. It was addressed to one of his closest friends in England, Brenda Salkeld, a teacher. Theirs was a warm relationship that existed somewhere between physical intimacy and intellectual companionship. She and Orwell had been reading *Ulysses*, and he enjoyed discussing it with her.

"The fact is Joyce interests me so much that I can't stop talking about him once I start," he wrote Brenda. Many intellectuals, he told her, are cut off from the ordinary life of the man in the street and wouldn't usually be tempted to look into the mind of a common man like Leopold Bloom—Joyce's hero—much less want to capture his point of view.

"If you read the words of almost any writer of the intellectual type, you would never guess that he is also a being capable of getting drunk, picking girls up in the street, trying to swindle somebody out of half a crown, etc. I think the interest of Bloom is that he is an ordinary uncultivated man described from within by someone who can also stand outside him and see him from another angle."

What Orwell is describing here is the very talent that can be found in his own work, especially in his nonfiction. In *Down and Out in Paris and London* he tries to observe the world of social outcasts from both within and without, subjecting himself to their pains while also analyzing their plight from an intellectual distance. Later in the 1930s, he would employ this same technique in his book on the Spanish Civil War—*Homage to Catalonia*—and his revealing book on the working poor, *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

But he had difficulty with the same approach in fiction. After struggling to enter the mind of an ordinary English woman in *A Clergyman's Daughter*—his next novel after *Burmese Days*—he compared what he was writing with what James Joyce had done and didn't like the comparison.

"It gives me an inferiority complex," he wrote. "I feel like a eunuch who has taken a course in voice production and can pass himself off fairly well as a bass or baritone, but if you listen closely you can hear the good old squeak just the same as ever."

It was useless to measure himself against Joyce's work. Their talents had equipped them for different tasks. When Orwell was at his best, there was always a strong social issue or intellectual problem that he wanted to address. Being a storyteller wasn't enough. It would take him a while to realize that. By 1946, when he produced the important essay, "Why I Write," he knew exactly what his literary motives were. "When I sit down to write a book," he declared in that essay, "I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art.' I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing."

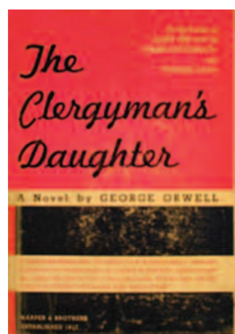
> *"For a creative writer possession of the 'truth' is less important than emotional sincerity."*
>
> ~George Orwell

But in the early 1930s he still had a lot to learn about his own talents. *A Clergyman's Daughter* was published to modest acclaim when it appeared in 1935, but it did little to advance his career. Its main character, Dorothy Hare, never comes to life. The view Orwell gives of her is clearly that of an outsider who has only a limited understanding of her conventional life in the middle class. He gives her a few adventures drawn from his wanderings in England, but he can't transfer his interest in those experiences to her.

The reviewer V.S. Pritchett gave a balanced assessment in the *Spectator*, praising Orwell for trying "to make the flesh of vicars' daughters creep and to show the sheltered middle-class women that only a small turn of the wheel of fortune is needed for them to be thrown helpless among the dregs of society." But the experiment wasn't ultimately successful because the novel too often resorts "to the glib cruelties of caricature."

Orwell himself was a bit more blunt. "I am afraid I have made a muck of it—however, it is as good as I can do for the present."

> *"There could hardly be a town in the South of England where you could throw a brick without hitting the niece of a bishop."*
>
> ~George Orwell,
> *A Clergyman's Daughter*, 1935



Cover for Orwell's *A Clergyman's Daughter*, which was incorrectly printed with the wrong title.

© Victor Gollancz

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How does *Burmese Days* reveal Orwell's poetic leanings?
2. Why didn't the British colonials in Burma like *Burmese Days*?
3. How did James Joyce influence Orwell's development as a writer?

Suggested Reading

Orwell, George. *Burmese Days: A Novel*. Orlando: Mariner Books, 1974 (1934).

Other Books of Interest

Gross, Miriam, ed. *The World of George Orwell*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971.

Websites of Interest

1. *Orwell Today* provides a detailed review (with excerpts) of *A Clergyman's Daughter.* — http://www.orwelltoday.com/clergyman%27s.shtml
2. The *Guardian* (London) website provides an article entitled "There's More to George Orwell Than Politics," in which *A Clergyman's Daughter* is compared to other of Orwell's works. — http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2010/jan/21/more-to-george-orwell-politics

Lecture 5

A Window on Wigan, 1935–1936

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

In his early career, the demanding work of writing books didn't earn Orwell enough to live on. When he grew tired of teaching, he couldn't simply quit and concentrate on literature. Instead he managed to find a job that brought him some practical knowledge of the literary marketplace and also supplemented his small income from writing. In the last months of 1934 he began work at a shop in Hampstead, North London. Offering used books and a small lending library, Booklovers' Corner occupied two rooms and was owned by a kindly couple who required Orwell to work only five hours a day. When he wasn't minding the shop, he was free to write.

His day job gave him some insight into readers' tastes and reminded him that publishing was a business, not a philanthropic endeavor. At his level, he could see that books were a commodity, a manufactured item consumed by people with diverse tastes, and though he wanted to think of books as great repositories of knowledge and wisdom, he saw how easily they could be reduced to serving particular appetites, produced in quantity and devoured rapidly, like so many sausages.

Once again he looked to his own life for the material to construct his fiction. His new novel—*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*—featured a character named Gordon Comstock who works in a bookshop while he tries to write a long poem called "London Pleasures" (which is projected to be "two thousand lines or so, in rhyme royal, describing a day in London"). It will be a sort of miniature *Ulysses* in verse. The plot is thin, but its critical portrait of the self-absorbed Gordon is fascinating because it is, in effect, Orwell's effort to look in the mirror and criticize himself.

© Jupiter Images

"Before, he had fought against the money code, and yet he had clung to his wretched remnant of decency. But now it was precisely from decency that he wanted to escape. He wanted to go down, deep down, into some world where decency no longer mattered; to cut the strings of his self-respect, to submerge himself—to sink, as Rosemary had said."

~George Orwell,
Keep the Aspidistra Flying, 1935

He uses Gordon's dreary life to satirize his own lack of self-confidence, his sometimes bitter cynicism, and his unrealistic literary ideas. Gordon is defeated by these things, giving up on his poem after completing only one-fifth of it, and returning to his previous career in advertising, a trade that Orwell describes as "the rattling of a stick inside a swill-bucket." Gordon gives up on art because he can't satisfy his own impossibly high standards, and because he loses faith in its importance against the menacing background of world events. "Poetry!" he exclaims. "Poetry, indeed! In 1935."

Gordon throws away his unfinished poem and gives what remains of his talent to the service of writing advertising copy for a new foot deodorant. Fortunately, Orwell didn't follow the same path and sacrifice high art for low commerce. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* does mark, however, the end of his moody, uncertain apprentice period as a literary novelist. From this point forward, he concentrated his energy on perfecting the more confident, determined voice of a writer who wants—as he says in "Why I Write"— "to make political writing into an art."

It was a major turning point in his career. "In the world of 1935," he noted at the end of the decade, "it was hardly possible to remain politically indifferent." With fascism on the rise in Hitler's Germany and elsewhere in Europe, and with industrial economies everywhere mired in depression, he felt the call to speak his mind in defense of individual liberty, and to become an advocate for the dispossessed and the vulnerable in society.

His first great chance to do this came only a few days after he submitted *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* to his publisher. Victor Gollancz commissioned him to write a book about unemployment and general living conditions in the manufacturing towns of the North of England. He seized the opportunity immediately. By the end of January 1936 he had quit his job at Booklovers' Corner and was on his way north.

For two months he gathered material for his book, staying in common lodgings, interviewing workers and the unemployed, visiting factories and mines, and doing research at local libraries. He found the plight of the unemployed especially bad in the town of Wigan, where families were living in dirty trailers on a "miry canal." He considered the area worse than the slums he had seen in Burma. "Nothing in the East could ever be quite as bad," he wrote, "for in the East you haven't our clammy, penetrating cold to contend with, and the sun is a disinfectant."

As he had experienced in Burma, he found that what engaged him most on his tour of the North were the looks on the faces of the people living under a system that had curtailed their freedom and made it almost impossible to escape poverty. In a Wigan alley, he noticed a young woman trying to unblock a drain and saw that she had "the usual exhausted face of the slum-girl who is twenty-five and looks forty." He thought her expression was the most "hopeless" he had ever seen. It forged a connection in his mind.

"It struck me then," he writes in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, "that we are mistaken when we say that 'It isn't the same for them as it would be for us,' and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. . . . She knew well enough what was happening to her—understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe."

Images such as this one helped to push Orwell toward socialism. He felt that something needed to be done urgently to even the odds in the economic struggle that had brought so much misery to towns like Wigan. But, of course, his approach to socialism is individualistic. Though he wants to be part of a collective effort to fight poverty, he doesn't want everything to be determined by one rigid plan. He mocks those socialists whose "desire, basically, is to reduce the world to something resembling a chess board."

> *"We of the sinking middle class may sink without further struggles into the working class where we belong, and probably when we get there it will not be so dreadful as we feared, for, after all, we have nothing to lose."*
>
> ~George Orwell

Gollancz later criticized Orwell for advocating what he called an "emotional socialism" as opposed to the "scientific socialism" he approved. But his author simply couldn't accept that the messy business of life could be managed so strictly by ideology. "The Socialist movement has not time to be a league of dialectical materialists," he warned; "it has got to be a league of the oppressed against the oppressors."

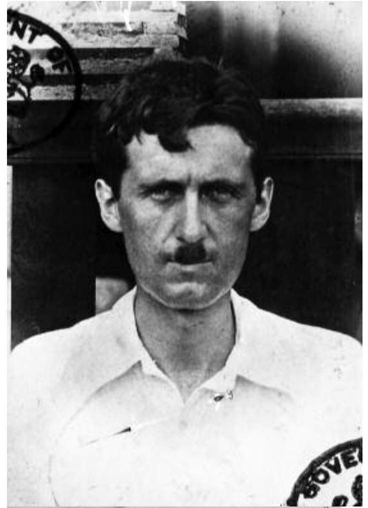
If anything was unrealistic, he argued, it was the temptation to replace one system that left people faceless and voiceless with another that did the same thing by different means. Whether it went by the name of fascism or socialism, an authoritarian system was something he couldn't abide, and that attitude would always make him suspect to true-believers. Sometimes he had the impression, he wrote, that "the whole Socialist movement is no more than a kind of exciting heresy-hunt—a leaping to and fro of frenzied witch-doctors to the beat of tom-toms and the tune of 'Fee, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of a right-wing deviationist!'"

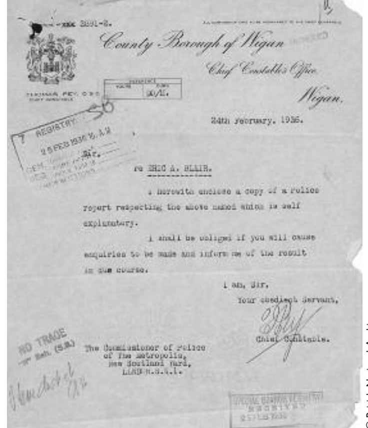
Though he knew that some socialists considered him dangerously unreliable, he also had the suspicion that certain right-wing elements in the government were keeping track of him as a potential troublemaker. His movements in Wigan and elsewhere had been watched by the police. But it was only long after Orwell's death that the extent of the surveillance became known. In 2005, a set of papers released by the National Archives in Britain revealed that the chief constable in Wigan had ordered his men to follow Orwell and to monitor his correspondence. He even requested that Scotland Yard send him a detailed report on the author, whom he described as having a "slim build" and a "long pale face."

Alarmed that Orwell had been seen talking to local members of the Communist Party in Wigan, Scotland Yard dutifully dug into his past and put together a four-page summary of his life that cast him as a shady character who had once been a policeman, but who had resigned from that job because "he could not bring himself to arrest persons for committing acts which he did not think were wrong." The report was so thorough that it included such minor information as the exact dates of his school terms at St. Cyprian's. There was also a passport photo taken at the time he left Burma showing him with a bushy little mustache that made him look like a cross between Charlie Chaplin's movie character the Little Tramp and Adolph Hitler.

The authorities continued to keep track of the writer for several more years. If he became a little paranoid that Big Brother was watching him, we now know why.

Instead of returning from the North and starting a revolution, Orwell took a little time off to do something very conventional. He got married. The bride was Eileen O'Shaughnessy, a thirty-year-old graduate student in educational psychology at University College, London. Orwell had known her for only a year, but he thought her "the nicest person I have met for a long time" and proposed at least twice before she finally accepted. They opened a little village shop in Wallington, about thirty-five miles north of London, and were married in the parish church on June 9, 1936.





County Borough of Wigan

Chief Constable's Office

Wigan,

24th February, 1936.

Sir,

re ERIC A. BLAIR.

I herewith enclose a copy of a Police report respecting the above named which is self explanatory.

I shall be obliged if you will cause enquiries to be made and inform me of the result in due course.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

Chief Constable.

The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, New Scotland Yard, LONDON S.W.1.

NO TRACE

Top: Orwell's 1928 passport photo. Bottom: The Wigan Chief Constable's request for a police report from Scotland Yard.

© British National Archives

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Eileen O'Shaughnessy Blair (1905–1945)

Orwell wanted a peaceful place in the country where he could write and a shop where he could make enough money to meet basic needs. Eileen seemed happy to get out of London for a while, and she put her education on hold while she enjoyed rural life with her new husband. Orwell was delighted to be selling groceries rather than books. His friend Cyril Connolly joked, "He didn't have that same ambivalent feeling that he ought to be creating the groceries, not selling them."

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why was 1935 a major turning point in Orwell's career?
2. Why did Orwell's publisher criticize him for advocating "emotional socialism"?
3. Why might the concept of "Big Brother Is Watching You" owe something to Orwell's experiences in Wigan?

Suggested Reading

Orwell, George. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. New York: Harvest Books, 1969 (1936).

———. *The Road to Wigan Pier*. New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1974 (1937).

Other Books of Interest

Cunningham, Valentine. *British Writers of the Thirties*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Websites of Interest

1. *New Statesman* provides an article entitled "Defeat into Victory: Orwell's Novels of the 1930s Prefigure the Horror of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," which includes a discussion of Orwell's earlier writing compared to his most famous work. — http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2009/06/orwell-novels-himself-nineteen
2. *Netcharles* provides a short transcript from the December 2, 1943, BBC Overseas Service broadcast with Colin Wills, *Your Questions Answered: Wigan Pier* by George Orwell. — http://www.netcharles.com/orwell/articles/wiganpier-bbc.htm

Lecture 6

The War in Spain, 1937

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Richard Rees's *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory*.

Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Orwell was eager to do more than just talk or write about political change. He wanted to take some active part in the international effort to oppose the spread of fascism. His chance to do so came not long after his marriage. That summer Spanish workers took up arms to oppose General Franco's fascist revolt against the nation's elected government. Up to that time the fascist powers in Europe had been enjoying a string of fairly easy successes, including Mussolini's conquest of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) and Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland.

"When the fighting broke out on 18 July," Orwell wrote of the Spanish Civil War, "it is probable that every anti-Fascist in Europe felt a thrill of hope." In his excitement over the news he suddenly decided that as soon as he could finish *The Road to Wigan Pier* he would go to Spain to witness the fighting, and possibly to take part in it.

> *"The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them."*
>
> ~George Orwell

By December the book was done and he was ready to go. He left England two days before Christmas. Eileen, who shared her husband's anti-fascist passions, planned to follow him in a couple of months. In March 1937, while they were in Spain, *The Road to Wigan Pier* was published as a selection of Gollancz's Left Book Club. It sold more than forty-five thousand copies, making it the biggest success of Orwell's books so far.

Before he arrived in Spain, Orwell didn't know if he would be allowed to join one of the political militias fighting Franco's forces. His health was compromised by a chronic weakness in his lungs (which was aggravated by his habit of smoking strong tobacco), and he doubted whether he had the stamina or skill to be a good soldier. But then he saw the disorganized bands of ill-clad and ill-equipped men serving in the militias and knew he was ready for the fight. "After one glimpse of the troops in Spain," he wrote, "I saw that I had relatively a lot of training as a soldier and decided to join the militia."

A 1937 P.O.U.M. recruiting poster stating "Socialism Is Liberty."

© Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives

© K-I Publishing

The P.O.U.M. unit to which Orwell (arrow) belonged marching on the streets of Barcelona before heading to Aragon, January 1937.

He went to Barcelona and promptly joined the militia of an independent socialist group called the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification. It was better known by the letters P.O.U.M. Tall and eager to fight, Orwell stood out among the unprofessional troops as a natural leader. "If we had a hundred men like him," said one of the commanders, "we would win the war."

He left for the Aragon front at the beginning of January and remained in the fight for almost four months, spending much of his time in the trenches watching the enemy on faraway hillsides. From time to time, he came under artillery fire, and on one occasion he took part in a night raid against a fortified fascist position. Using small arms and hand grenades, Orwell and about thirty other militiamen overwhelmed the enemy, killing a few and forcing the rest to retreat.

But while he was risking his life at the front, there was trouble brewing for the P.O.U.M. organization back in Barcelona. The main supplier of weapons for the Spanish militias was the Soviet Union. Franco's troops were backed by

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On the Aragon front at Huesca, Spain, in March 1937. Orwell is the tall figure standing to the center right; Eileen Blair, who was visiting Orwell at the front, is crouching in front of him.

Hitler and Mussolini. But the P.O.U.M.'s brand of Marxism didn't conform to the wishes of the Soviets, and rumors began spreading that it was full of traitors. Stalin's agents in Spain called the group "Franco's Fifth Column," hoping to discredit it as a dangerous force that needed to be purged from the antifascist movement before it could do serious damage from within.

On leave in Barcelona in early May, Orwell and other P.O.U.M. supporters found themselves under fire on the streets from their own supposed allies in a feud over left-wing loyalties. When the shooting died down, Stalin's men blamed Orwell's comrades for starting the trouble and put up posters showing a Nazi devil hiding behind a mask marked P.O.U.M. "Tear off the mask," the poster said.

By this time Eileen was also in Barcelona working as a clerk for a British organization affiliated with Orwell's militia. Instead of abandoning the cause after seeing it undermined by infighting, they decided to stay on. Orwell returned to the front and was given a temporary promotion to lieutenant. He didn't get a chance to do much as an officer because on May 20, 1937, he stood up in the trenches at dawn and was shot in the throat by a fascist sniper hundreds of yards away.

He was evacuated to a nearby hospital, then moved to another one in Barcelona, where—with Eileen's help—he recovered from his wound. Lucky to be alive, he decided it was time to leave Spain. "I had an overwhelming desire to get away from it all," he wrote; "away from the horrible atmosphere of political suspicion and hatred, from streets thronged by armed men, from air-raids, trenches, machine-guns."

But the political situation was growing worse by the day. On June 16 the P.O.U.M. party was outlawed and its head, Andrés Nin, was tortured and murdered by Stalin's agents. Orwell and Eileen were also in grave danger. This is confirmed in a document that came to light many years later at the National Historical Archive in Madrid. It is a security police report that identifies "Enric [sic] Blair and his wife Eileen Blair" as P.O.U.M. agents and "known Trotskyists."

© K-I Publishing

A barricade manned by one of the leftist factions during street fighting along the Rambla de Canaletes near the Hotel Continental in Barcelona in early May 1937.

Their activities are described as part of a case to be used against them at the Tribunal for Espionage and High Treason in Valencia.

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Andrés Nin
(1892–1937)

Suddenly, Orwell was a wanted man. He first learned of the danger when he walked into the lounge of Barcelona's Hotel Continental late at night on June 20. He had been away collecting documents for their departure, and Eileen had been waiting for him. Before he could greet her she came to him, put her arm around his neck and whispered in his ear, "Get out!"

When they were on the street, she hurriedly explained that they were in danger of being arrested. Only two nights earlier a group of plainclothes police had barged into her room and taken away "evidence," as they called it—books, letters, and diaries in which Orwell had recorded the events and impressions of his stay in Spain. Some of this evidence was later included in the report to the Tribunal in Valencia. Eileen believed that she had not been arrested because the police were hoping that she would lead them to Orwell.

To buy time and plot their escape, Orwell went into hiding, using his old tramping skills to help him survive on the streets for a couple of days. He and Eileen met during daylight hours at restaurants and shops, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. On the morning of June 23, they made their escape from Barcelona, using travel documents obtained at the last minute from the British consulate. They boarded a train going to France and managed to avoid detection even when two detectives went through the cars taking the names of foreigners. By the end of June they were safely back in London.

Years later a friend of the Blairs—Richard Rees—recalled paying Eileen a surprise visit not long before her departure from Spain. Having just arrived in the country to serve as an ambulance driver, Rees only vaguely understood the seriousness of the infighting that was then raging among the left-wing parties. He didn't know what to make of her reaction to his visit. "She seemed not so much surprised, as scared, to see me, and I accounted for her odd manner by the strain of living in a revolutionary city with a husband at the front. When she said she could not come out to lunch with me because it would be too dangerous for me to be seen in public with her, I supposed I must have misheard her and made no comment."

It was only later—when he knew more about Spain—that he was able to account for her strange behavior. "In Eileen Blair," he said, "I had seen for the first time the symptoms of a human being living under a political Terror."

Orwell had seen the same thing, and in many faces besides Eileen's. It was an experience that would continue to influence his work for the rest of his life.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did Orwell manage to join a military unit in Spain despite his poor physical condition?
2. Why was Orwell's military unit in the Spanish Civil War accused of acting as a "fifth column"?
3. How did Eileen Blair help her husband escape from Spain?

Suggested Reading

Rees, Richard. *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962.

Other Books of Interest

Thomas, Hugh. *The Spanish Civil War*. Rev. ed. New York: Modern Library, 2004.

Websites of Interest

1. "George Orwell in Lleida": A short article discussing Orwell's involvement in P.O.U.M. and some of Orwell's thoughts. — http://web.mac.com/judith-black/Ramon_Rius%3A_Spanish_Civil_War/Orwell_in_Lleida.html
2. *La Cucaracha*—a website primarily dedicated to the Spanish Civil War—provides a diary with photos describing the events of factional fighting in Barcelona during May 1937. — http://lacucaracha.info/scw/diary/1937/may/index.htm
3. The Hoover Institution Archives website at Stanford University provides an article entitled "The Man Who Saved Orwell" by David Jacobs, in which he discusses the role of the American P.O.U.M. member Harry Milton at the time of Orwell being wounded. — http://www.hoover.org/publications/hoover-digest/article/7610
4. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign website provides a feature entitled "Magazines and War, 1936–1939: Spanish Civil War Print Culture," which includes images and descriptions in English of articles appearing in the magazines during the war. — http://www.magazinesandwar.com/en.html

Lecture 7

Bearing Witness, 1937–1938

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*.

Orwell assumed that many newspapers and magazines would be eager to print the story of his frightening last few weeks in Spain. But his independent political view of events made his account difficult to sell. He was too left-wing for conservatives, and too much of a free thinker for socialists. The *New Statesman* rejected one of his early articles on the Spanish Civil War, and Gollancz rejected his proposal for a book on the subject. In both cases he was told that any strong criticism of the socialist parties opposing Franco would "harm the fight against fascism."

At the time, few people on the Left wanted to hear that terrible things were being done in the name of a Spanish revolution that Stalin and his Soviet henchmen had hijacked. But Orwell was determined to report what he had seen, and he soon managed to find a publisher willing to back him. "You have had an exciting escape," Fredric Warburg of the firm Secker & Warburg wrote him, "and it has been suggested to us that an account of the full story would be of interest to the reading public."

Orwell and Warburg agreed on terms in July, and it was expected that a complete typescript would be ready by the end of the year. Knowing that his subject was timely, the author worked at high speed to meet his deadline. He made it, but events were moving so fast on the political scene in the late 1930s that the subject of the Spanish Civil War was soon overshadowed by the approach of a war that would engulf all of Europe. When his book *Homage to Catalonia* was published in April 1938, Franco's forces were winning the war and would soon have the entire country in their grip.

To Orwell's great dismay, his book sold a mere seven hundred copies after four months in print. It was such a complete commercial failure that surplus copies of the modest first edition were still gathering dust in the publisher's

"I knew that I was serving in something called the P.O.U.M. (I had only joined the P.O.U.M. militia rather than any other because I happened to arrive in Barcelona with I.L.P. papers), but I did not realise that there were serious differences between the political parties."

~George Orwell,
Homage to Catalonia, 1938

© Secker & Warburg

warehouse a dozen years later. (An American edition didn't appear until 1952.) In disbelief, Orwell wondered whether the figure of seven hundred was "a typist's error." Surely, there were at least 1,700 or 2,700 readers willing to buy a book written about a stay in Spain that had nearly cost him his life.

Orwell tried to explain the bad sales to a friend. "The trouble," he said, "is that as soon as anything like the Spanish Civil War happens, hundreds of journalists immediately produce rubbishy books which they put together with scissors and paste, and later when the serious books come along people are sick of the subject."

It is extraordinary that so few of Orwell's contemporaries recognized the greatness of a war story that is both brutally honest and lyrically beautiful. His book is full of the sound and fury of battle, but it is often told in a gentle, poetic tone. Instead of being bitter over his wound, or the treachery of his supposed friends on the Left, he pays touching tributes to the countless acts of heroism and decency that he encountered everywhere in Spain. Ultimately, the homage is not merely to one country, but to all places where good men and women sacrifice everything for liberty.

All the same, the unmistakable hero of the book is the tall Englishman whose courage and vulnerability make him such a compelling figure in his story of service to a doomed cause. The fascination of his tale lies in his struggle to make sense of a senseless war. With his previous training in police procedure, he must make a real effort to comprehend the tactics of the Communist police. He is genuinely bewildered by the thought that he could have been arrested for no apparent reason. "I kept saying, but why should anyone want to arrest me? What had I done?"

Typically, he plays down his own courage and integrity, but they shine from every page. With an ancient, rusty rifle he stands guard on a hilltop and contemplates the hopelessness of his position, which is at once tragic and highly comic. "There were nights," he writes, "when it seemed to me that our position could be stormed by twenty Boy Scouts armed with air-guns, or twenty Girl Guides armed with battledores, for that matter."

When he was being carried away from the battlefield after surviving the sniper's bullet, he looked up in wonder at the world he had almost lost. He was thrilled at the touch of a few leaves from an overhanging limb: "The leaves of the silver poplars which, in places, fringed our trenches brushed against my face; I thought what a good thing it was to be alive in a world where silver poplars grow."

But for all its lyrical moments, *Homage to Catalonia* doesn't fail to confront squarely the ugly, often contradictory facts behind the failure of the socialist revolution in Spain, a failure that so many people in Britain refused to acknowledge because it

> *"So much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don't even know that fire is hot."*
>
> ~George Orwell

would have "controverted policy," as the editor of the *New Statesman* put it. The overall mood of the book, however, somehow manages to stay optimistic. Though Orwell doesn't deny that the war was a disaster, he is careful to note that "the result is not necessarily disillusionment and cynicism. Curiously enough the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings."

Most of all, he remembers fondly the streets of Barcelona as they were during his first week in Spain, when hope was in the air. He had a glimpse of a different world then, one that he describes as a true egalitarian society, where even the brothels were preaching equality ("Please treat the women as comrades," a notice requested). "No one," he said, "who was in Spain during the months when people still believed in the revolution will ever forget that strange and moving experience. It has left something behind that no dictatorship, not even Franco's, will be able to efface."

© Jupiter Images

Three *milicianas* (military militia women who fought primarily with the Republican Left) posing for the camera in 1936.

The ups and downs of his time in Spain, and his race to tell his story, left him exhausted and ill. Two months after finishing *Homage to Catalonia*, he developed a bad cough and began spitting up blood. He was taken by ambulance to a sanatorium specializing in lung diseases. Tuberculosis was suspected, but definite proof of the disease couldn't be found. All the same, his condition was considered serious enough to keep him under care at the sanatorium for almost six months.

At the end of that time, in the summer of 1938, his doctors advised that he continue his recuperation in a dry climate. They suggested Morocco, and Orwell agreed to go there. He had published six books in the last five years and survived a war. He deserved a long rest. But he had not been allowed to do much writing at the sanatorium, and he was eager to start a new book. There was so much he wanted to say as a writer, but he worried that he had only a short time to say it—not simply because of his poor health, but also because he feared the world was hurtling toward a disaster that might make the notion of free speech look hopelessly quaint.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why did *Homage to Catalonia* fail to attract a large readership when it was first published?
2. Why did Orwell consider his early days in Barcelona his best period in Spain?
3. How did Orwell's experience as a policeman affect his perception of the Spanish Civil War?

Suggested Reading

Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1980 (1938).

Other Books of Interest

Newsinger, John. *Orwell's Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Woodcock, George. *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell*. New York: Schocken Books, 1984.

Zwerdling, Alex. *Orwell and the Left*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.

Websites of Interest

1. The *Complete Works of George Orwell* website provides an essay Orwell wrote in 1942 entitled "Looking Back on the Spanish War." — http://www.george-orwell.org/Looking_Back_On_The_Spanish_War/index.html
2. A review of John Newsinger's *Orwell's Politics* discussing Orwell's socialism in an article entitled "George Orwell: A Literary Trotskyist?" by Anna Chen from issue 85 of *International Socialism Journal*, Winter 1999. — http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj85/chen.htm
3. The BBC website provides the audio from a BBC4 Radio broadcast of the show *In Our Time* from April 3, 2003, entitled "The Spanish Civil War: Causes and Legacy" featuring Paul Preston, Helen Graham, and Dr. Mary Vincent. — http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00548wn
4. Posters of the Spanish Civil War from the University of California at San Diego's Southworth Collection. — http://orpheus.ucsd.edu/speccoll/visfront/vizindex.html

Lecture 8

Coming Up for Air, 1938–1939

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*.

Europe was already beginning to move perilously close to war when Orwell and his wife left for Morocco in September 1938. The Munich crisis was beginning to take shape. By the end of the month Hitler's demands for Czech territory would have most of the world worrying that war was imminent. Though he was living far from the major events of the time, Orwell followed them closely while he was in Morocco and studied maps. He suspected that many people back home were having trouble figuring out what was happening where.

"I suppose 50 percent of them knew whereabouts Austria was," he said, "and about 20 percent knew where Czechoslovakia was, but where is the Ukraine? . . . not to mention Russian Subcarpathia?"

Eileen and Orwell settled in one of the more exotic spots in Morocco—the city of Marrakech, deep in the heart of the country. They rented a small villa that stood in the middle of an orange grove. It had its charms, but they were mostly lost on Orwell, who didn't care for the arid landscape of the region and was distressed by the abject poverty of the great majority of native people. As far as he could tell, they were barely getting by, while the French who ran the country had all the best land and exploited it "pretty ruthlessly," as he put it.

In a sketch he wrote about the place—simply called "Marrakech"—he makes the point that the local people are mostly ignored by the French colonials, who tend to live in their own little world. Whatever the future holds, he can't see how the European air of superiority can survive another major upheaval caused by widespread war and international chaos. As he watches some French officers confidently riding at the head of a long line of black soldiers, he wonders how any European nation can expect their colonial empires to endure: "How much longer can we go on kidding these people?" he asks. "How long before they turn their guns in the other direction?"

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Orwell at his desk in Marrakech, 1938.

While much of Europe was busy preparing for war at the end of 1938, Orwell kept busy in his dusty villa writing his next novel about an average Englishman trying to understand the future and to make his peace with the past. Published in the early summer of 1939—just before Hitler invaded Poland and began the Second World War—*Coming Up for Air* is full of foreboding. The main character—George Bowling—is a disappointed middle-aged man with a boring job and a boring family in a boring suburb, but he feels instinctively that his dull world is about to undergo cataclysmic change, and he's not sure whether to welcome it or pretend it won't happen.

"I felt in a kind of prophetic mood," Bowling says, "the mood in which you foresee the end of the world."

All he knows for sure is that he misses the carefree Edwardian world of his youth, when everything seemed to have more sparkle and promise. In the novel he returns to that world in memory, and also in the flesh when he pays a visit to the village where he grew up—Lower Binfield. In memory, the place still glows. It is always green and peaceful, a golden world of simple village pleasures where time stands still and modern evils don't intrude.

But, as he discovers on his visit, contemporary Lower Binfield has been spoiled by modern progress, with ugly factories and dismal housing estates sprawling over the countryside. In search of familiar sights from his boyhood, he finds that many of them have been changed beyond recognition by new construction. Rather than accept such change as inevitable, he begins to think that having the old village wiped out by bombing may not be such a bad fate.

By making it clear that destruction of one kind or another is on its way, Orwell tries to awaken in his readers an awareness of what will be lost in "total war." Any chance of remaking places like Lower Binfield may be lost forever, along with the kind of ordinary freedom they represented—"the feeling of not being in a hurry and not being frightened." It may sound too simple, but in practical terms a peaceful life is often one characterized by just two things—the freedom to take things at your own pace and a confidence that you won't be punished for it.

© Victor Gollancz Publishing

"I'm fat, but I'm thin inside. Has it ever struck you that there's a thin man inside every fat man, just as they say there's a statue inside every block of stone?"

~George Orwell,
Coming Up for Air, 1939

At his village shop in Wallington, Orwell had set out to create a little haven for himself and his wife where he could write, and where they could live on easy terms and have time to enjoy the countryside. But as *Coming Up for Air* makes clear, the battle to maintain retreats like Wallington and Lower Binfield has to be fought in the larger world, where the raging forces of competing ideologies will determine whether freedom will survive, peace will be secure, and basic needs will be met.

The great warning in the novel is that nothing will be accomplished politically if the fight is always about power and one side destroying the other. At a public lecture George Bowling listens as an anti-fascist campaigner whips up the crowd to feel an intense hatred of the enemy.

"It was a voice," Bowling observes, "that sounded as if it could go on for a fortnight without stopping. It's a ghastly thing, really, to have a sort of human barrel-organ shooting propaganda at you by the hour. The same thing over and over again. Hate, hate, hate. Let's all get together and have a good hate. Over and over."

> *"All the war-propaganda, all the screaming and lies and hatred, comes invariably from people who are not fighting."*
>
> ~George Orwell

Already in this novel Orwell is giving his readers a glimpse of the world he will create in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a brutal one where power and hate are the dominant forces. It thrives on a ceremony called the "Two Minutes Hate," a daily explosion of venom against the enemies of Big Brother.

Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club is satirized in *Coming Up for Air* as the organization that sponsors the hate-filled dogmatist whose lecture Bowling attends. No doubt this was Orwell's way of getting back at Gollancz for rejecting *Homage to Catalonia*. It was probably meant also as a kind of poison

© British National Archives

Oswald Mosley and the "Blackshirts" of his British Union of Fascists organization (left) were the focus of several anti-fascist demonstrations throughout Great Britain during the mid-1930s. The "Battle of Cable Street" (right) on October 4, 1936, in London's East End was a clash between the London Metropolitan Police—who were overseeing a march by Oswald and his group—and an estimated 300,000 anti-fascists, including local Jewish, socialist, anarchist, Irish, and communist groups. Over 150 people were injured during the running battles in which the estimated 10,000 policemen were attacked with rubbish, rotten vegetables, and the contents of chamber pots. Mosley and his group abandoned the march to "prevent bloodshed."

pill that would make it impossible for Gollancz to consider publishing the novel. According to their contract, the publisher had an option on Orwell's next three novels.

To make sure that Gollancz rejected *Coming Up for Air*, Orwell insisted when he turned in the finished book that he wouldn't change a word except to avoid a libel suit. The publisher was not going "to bugger me [about]," Orwell told a friend.

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Victor Gollancz (1893–1967) walking near his office at Covent Garden, London.

But after he and Eileen returned home from Morocco in the early spring of 1939, he was amazed to find that Gollancz was willing to take the book as it stood. Apparently, the publisher was willing to overlook any digs at him so long as they appeared in a work that was merely fiction. Whatever the reason, he didn't waste time bringing it out. He must have realized, as Orwell did, that its theme was timely. It came out on June 12, 1939, and was well received, selling much better than *Homage to Catalonia* did, and even going into a second printing.

The London *Sunday Times* called the novel "brilliant," and the headline proclaimed, "Mr. George Orwell's Success." The praise gave Orwell great satisfaction, especially since he was able to share it with his father, who was now eighty-two and dying of cancer. The review was read to him on his deathbed, and he was pleased. "I am very glad," Orwell wrote after his father's death, "that latterly he had not been so disappointed in me as before."

Finally, Orwell had accomplished enough to demonstrate that he had indeed made the right decision when he left Burma to become a writer. With his health improving, and his career on the upswing, he should have been able to relax a little and enjoy life with Eileen in Wallington. But only two and a half months after *Coming Up for Air* was published, the Second World War began. Once again, he had to prepare himself to face a new ordeal, but now he would be in the same boat with the rest of the world, expecting the worst but hoping for something better.

© Orwell Today

The Orwells' cottage in the village of Wallington, Hertfordshire, approximately 35 miles north of London.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did Orwell's experiences in Morocco give him an insight into Europe's future?
2. Why is a sense of foreboding so prevalent in *Coming Up for Air*?
3. How did Orwell use *Coming Up for Air* to criticize Victor Gollancz?

Suggested Reading

Orwell, George. *Coming Up for Air*. New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1969 (1939).

Other Books of Interest

Edwards, Ruth Dudley. *Victor Gollancz: A Biography*. London: Gollancz, 1987.

Websites of Interest

1. *Saudi Aramco World* provides an article by Professor Daniel Pawley (Northwestern College, St. Paul, Minnesota) discussing the connections between Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* and the history of Morocco during that time. — http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/199501/coming.up.for.air.in.morocco.htm
2. *The Orwell Prize* website has serialized Orwell's diaries (in the form of a blog) that he kept from 1938 to 1942, including his time spent in Morocco. — http://www.theorwellprize.co.uk/diaries.aspx
3. The War on Want: Fighting Global Poverty derived originally from a letter written by Orwell's publisher Victor Gollancz to *The Guardian* (London) in February 1951. His letter asked people to join an international struggle against poverty. Harold Wilson coined the name. The result was the birth of a movement that has been at the forefront of the fight against injustice since that time. — http://www.waronwant.org

Lecture 9

Surviving the Blitz, 1940–1941

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is George Orwell's *Collection of Essays*.

On September 9, 1939—only six days after war was declared—Orwell voluntarily submitted his name to the government for employment in the war effort. With his bad lungs, he knew there was little chance of getting into the military, but he was willing to serve in any other way possible. Unfortunately, he wasn't wanted. Eileen, however, had more luck. She got a job as a government clerk in London and soon moved to the city, coming back to Wallington on alternate weekends.

Orwell kept busy by writing book reviews, but he didn't feel that he could begin a major work. The times were too uncertain. At first, the war seemed to be happening a long way from England, with German troops avoiding a large attack on the Western front. All that changed dramatically in the spring of 1940, when Hitler sent his troops racing into Norway, Holland, and Belgium. This move didn't surprise Orwell, who fully expected the war to reach British soil in a matter of months. In April, he was busy sowing a huge crop of potatoes as a precaution against a "famine," which he anticipated in the wake of a long war of attrition.

> *"Prolonged, indiscriminate reviewing of books is a quite exceptionally thankless, irritating and exhausting job. It not only involves praising trash but constantly inventing reactions towards books about which one has no spontaneous feeling whatever."*
>
> ~George Orwell

Meanwhile, he began writing short essays for *Horizon*, the new monthly magazine that his friend Cyril Connolly had started in London with the poet Stephen Spender, who came to know Orwell in this period and developed a great liking for him. They enjoyed having long discussions about politics and literature whenever Orwell visited the magazine's office.

"I remember this rather drizzly voice," Spender said many years later. "Listening to one of Orwell's monologues, with all its rambling speculations, was very English in a way. It was like walking through a drizzly street—hearing his monotonous voice."

During its ten-year existence *Horizon* published some of Orwell's best essays, beginning with "Boys' Weeklies" in March 1940. Other important contributions were "The Ruling Class" (December 1940); "Wells, Hitler and the

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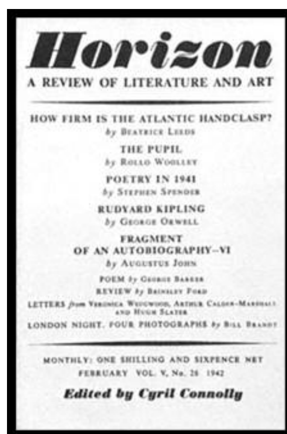
Cyril Connolly
(1903–1974)

World State" (August 1941); "The Art of Donald McGill" (September 1941); "Raffles and Miss Blandish" (October 1944); and, most famous of all, "Politics and the English Language" (April 1946).

Serious essays on popular culture are common today, but Orwell was a pioneer in this field, and Cyril Connolly was happy to give his friend the space to express what were then novel ideas. Many editors might have dismissed out of hand an essay that subjected something as common as a boys' magazine to serious analysis, especially when a war was going on, but Connolly liked Orwell's unconventional ways and encouraged him to do more work of this kind.



Horizon

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND ART

HOW FIRM IS THE ATLANTIC HANDCLASP? *by* Beatrice Leeds

THE PUPIL *by* Rollo Woolley

POETRY IN 1941 *by* Stephen Spender

RUDYARD KIPLING *by* George Orwell

FRAGMENT OF AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY—VI *by* Augustus John

POEM *by* George Barker

REVIEW *by* Brinsley Ford

LETTERS *from* Veronica Wedgwood, Arthur Calder-Marshall and Hugh Slater

LONDON NIGHT. FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS *by* Bill Brandt

MONTHLY: ONE SHILLING AND SIXPENCE NET

FEBRUARY VOL. V, No. 26 1942

Edited by Cyril Connolly

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The cover of a 1942 issue of *Horizon* featuring an essay by Orwell on Rudyard Kipling.

In June 1940, the war finally threatened Britain directly. France had fallen and Germany seemed ready to land an invasion force on the English coast. Orwell thought the big fight was here at last and moved to London, where he joined the Home Guard (originally known as the Local Defence Volunteers). This group of irregular soldiers was the last line of defense in case of an invasion. Despite his poor health, Orwell was welcomed into the ranks as a sergeant, partly because of his experience fighting in Spain.

One of the volunteers who served under Sergeant Eric Blair was Corporal Warburg, otherwise known as Fredric Warburg, the publisher of *Homage to Catalonia*. An army in which a publisher can be subordinate to an author is indeed an ideal one, and many years later Warburg had nothing but praise for the way his sergeant had treated him, recalling affectionately Orwell's pride in serving as a member of a grassroots fighting unit. There was nothing fancy about his way of leading troops.

In drills with Orwell, his publisher noted "the zeal which inflamed his tall skinny body. His uniform was crumpled, but . . . Orwell's expression was Cromwellian in its intensity."

The Home Guard never had to fight Nazi troops in the streets of London, but like so many other people who stayed in the city during the war, Orwell was frequently in danger from the bombs that were dropped on British civilians by German planes, beginning in the fall of 1940. On the first night of heavy bombing in London, Orwell was at Cyril Connolly's flat in Piccadilly, and from the rooftop they could see the burning docks in the East End. With cool objectivity, Orwell silently

© Normandy Historians

A 1940 recruitment poster for the Home Defence.

surveyed the scene and was amazed by "the size and beauty of the flames." Earlier, on the way to the flat, he had felt the effects of bombs falling near Piccadilly. He had been forced to duck into a doorway to avoid the flying shrapnel, "just as one might shelter from a cloudburst."

Connolly came to believe that Orwell rather enjoyed this danger. "He felt enormously at home in the Blitz," Connolly recalled, "among the bombs, the bravery, the rubble, the shortages, the homeless, the signs of revolutionary temper."

Given all the drama of these early war years, it isn't surprising that Orwell failed in this period to follow the success of *Coming Up for Air* with another novel. At its outset the brutal realism of the war seemed to demand that he comment on events rather than invent fictions. His most important works of this time are the essays he collected in a book he called *Inside the Whale*, which was published in 1940 by Gollancz, and *The Lion and the Unicorn*, which Warburg brought out in 1941.

"As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead trying to kill me. They do not feel any enmity against me as an individual, nor I against them. They are only doing their duty, as the saying goes. Most of them, I have no doubt, are kind-hearted law-abiding men who would never dream of committing murder in private life. On the other hand, if one of them succeeds in blowing me to pieces with a well-placed bomb, he will never sleep any worse for it. He is serving his country, which has the power to absolve him from evil."

~George Orwell

© British National Archives

Children of an eastern suburb of London, made homeless by the random bombs of the Nazi night raiders, waiting outside the wreckage of what was their home, September 1940.

The best part of *Inside the Whale* is his long essay on Charles Dickens, which reveals as much about Orwell as it does about the great Victorian novelist. His brilliant analysis of Dickens as a social critic includes the famous remark, "The vagueness of his discontent is the mark of its permanence." The same, of course, could be said of Orwell, who could never squeeze all his views into one ideological straitjacket. "Vagueness of discontent" will not win the admiration of theorists, but Orwell argues that "a merely moral criticism of society" (such as his own and that of Dickens) may prove more revolutionary than some "politico-economic criticism" that may be fashionable at any given point.

Like Dickens, Orwell had too much respect for the ordinary jumble of life to favor theory over experience. His highest praise for Dickens is that, as a moral critic, he had passion and generous anger, and trusted his emotional

response to events rather than insist that they fit into a certain philosophical framework. As a result, Orwell declares proudly, Dickens is "a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls."

> *"The atmosphere of orthodoxy is always damaging to prose, and above all it is completely ruinous to the novel, the most anarchical of all forms of literature."*
>
> ~George Orwell

The *Lion and the Unicorn* is both a fond tribute to the good sense of the English people and a stirring indictment of their traditional rulers. The England that Orwell declares his loyalty to is a place where tyranny can't easily establish a foothold because of the deep commitment to what he calls "private liberty," by which he means "the liberty to have a home of your own, to do what you like in your spare time, to choose your amusements instead of having them chosen for you from above." Though this liberty is threatened by the pressures of modern life, as long as it is respected, the general tendency of the people will be against authoritarianism and its symbols.

Orwell takes comfort in the knowledge that goose-stepping Storm Troopers were more an object of ridicule in England than of fear or admiration. "There are, heaven knows, plenty of officers who would be only too glad to introduce some such thing. It is not used because the people in the street would laugh."

Ultimately, he sees the country as one large family that should be working together but that has suffered because, in his memorable phrase, it is "a family with the wrong members in control." What he advocates is a new order arising from "a specifically English Socialist movement, one that appeals to the English character, and is not tainted by Marxism, which was a German theory interpreted by Russians and unsuccessfully transplanted to England."

His socialism wouldn't be "doctrinaire, nor even logical," and would "leave anachronisms and loose ends everywhere." But the essential order of society would change by instituting radical reforms—incomes would be limited so that the difference between the income of the wealthiest person and the poorest is no greater than ten to one; the educational system would be operated on democratic lines and give everyone a chance to learn in the best possible environment; and the Empire would be reformed to give India its freedom and the other colonies more representation.

Perhaps the most important element of this English socialism lies in one sentence: "It will never lose touch with the tradition of compromise and the belief in a law that is above the State." Some of Orwell's ideas may be unworkable or unappealing, but there is a great deal to be said for any system that would respect the limits of its own power.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was *Horizon* magazine's importance in Orwell's career?
2. Why did Cyril Connolly think that Orwell felt at home in the Blitz?
3. In his essay on Charles Dickens, why does Orwell praise the "vagueness of his discontent"?

Suggested Reading

Orwell, George. *A Collection of Essays*. New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1981.

Other Books of Interest

Shelden, Michael. *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of* Horizon. New York: HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1989.

Websites of Interest

1. The *George Orwell* website (Russia) provides the text of Orwell's essay "England Your England" written during the Blitz in 1941. — http://orwell.ru/library/essays/lion/english/e_eye
2. The *BBC British History In-depth* website provides an article by Graham McCann from November 2009 entitled "The Home Guard and 'Dad's Army'." which discusses the real history of Local Defence Volunteers (LDV) (who were also known as "Dad's Army") and the depiction of them on the BBC television show *Dad's Army*. — http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/britain_wwtwo/dads_army_01.shtml

Lecture 10

A Voice on the BBC, 1941–1943

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Robert Hewison's *Under Siege: Literary Life in London, 1939–1945*.

Besides his service in the Home Guard, Orwell's other important contribution to the war effort was his work as a radio producer for the British Broadcasting Corporation. In 1941, he was assigned to the Empire Service, where he spent two years preparing cultural programs for transmission to India and doing occasional live broadcasts himself. At first glance, such a job may seem unrelated to the war, but India—with an army of two million men—was of great strategic importance to the British military, and government officials were anxious to keep the country a loyal part of the Empire in the face of threats from Japan and Germany.

The Nazis were constantly broadcasting propaganda to India in an effort to undermine British rule. To combat that influence, the BBC was charged with the responsibility of providing Indians with a positive view of British cultural and political values. In other words, it was more propaganda designed to counteract whatever bad things the Germans were telling India.

This was not the right job for Orwell, and he knew it from the start. But when so many men and women were engaged in some sort of war work, he wanted to try at least to do his part, and this happened to be the best thing he was offered. The longer he worked at the BBC, however, the more he disliked being part of its bureaucratic machinery and its propaganda mission. He had never been employed in a large office before, where the schedule was fixed and rules were numerous. The sheer paperwork of the job was enough to drive him to distraction. Meticulous to a fault, the BBC managers liked to have everything in writing and often required multiple copies for even the simplest correspondence or program transcript. To

Orwell (left, standing) and T.S. Eliot (third from left seated in front of Orwell) during a pre-program rehearsal at the BBC in 1942.

© British Broadcasting Corporation

Orwell, the long paper trail behind his work was just so much "bilge."

He did do a good job of recruiting excellent participants for his cultural programs, bringing in such notable figures as the novelist E.M. Forster and his friend Stephen Spender. But he was disheartened to learn that his audience was tiny. In a country of nearly three hundred million people, only about 150,000 Indians had the shortwave sets necessary to receive the broadcasts. And it was estimated that most of those listeners tuned in for the news programs and didn't stay around to hear people like Spender read a poem or discuss Shakespeare.

© British National Archives

Orwell at the BBC in 1943.

Some things he experienced at the BBC did eventually prove useful to him. He came to appreciate more than ever before the power of telling a tale in a concise, straightforward manner with words that rolled easily off the tongue. Having this lesson impressed on him while he was working in radio made a difference when he began writing *Animal Farm* shortly after leaving the BBC. The book owes much of its enduring popularity to the short, simple way in which it is told. Listen to any good reading of the book, and you can hear right away that it is perfect for reading out loud—as though a radio performance was always in Orwell's mind when he wrote the book.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the propaganda mission of the BBC seems to have influenced Orwell's creation of the Ministry of Truth and its ponderous bureaucratic machinery. Measured against the insidious ministry in his novel, the real BBC may seem harmless, but it came to irritate him enormously as an example of an organization with a tendency toward obfuscation and circular reasoning.

After he resigned, he turned with evident joy to writing a regular newspaper column called "As I Please." It appeared in the left-wing weekly *Tribune*, where he was indeed allowed to write pretty much whatever he wanted. He very much needed that freedom after working for so long under the thumb of BBC management. And he was properly appreciative, referring to the paper as the only weekly that "makes a genuine effort to be both progressive and humane."

"Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

~George Orwell

His choice of subjects was amazingly eclectic. In one column he might discuss old political pamphlets, in another church architecture or the price of tea or the reception British people were giving the American GIs flooding into the country for the expected invasion of the Continent.

He also became a regular contributor to the *Observer*, one of England's most respected newspapers. David Astor, who would soon take charge of the paper, asked him to write about politics and do the occasional book review. The son of a British lord, Astor had no trouble warming to Orwell, whose unassuming manner and dress reminded him of "a prep school master."

Astor visited Orwell at the little Victorian house in London he had rented in 1943 and was amused to find that his favorite hobby was carpentry—there was a small workshop in the basement—and that he had recently begun raising chickens in the back garden. Some of his friends believed that Orwell's love of carpentry was connected to a deep desire to do something practical and straightforward, something untainted by contradictions.

© British National Archives
Orwell at work on a piece of wood in his basement, 1943.

"Don't you ever feel the need to do something with your hands?" Orwell asked a visiting writer. "I'm surprised you don't . . . I've installed a lathe in the basement. I don't think I could exist without my lathe."

Having spent so much of his spare time in recent years tending a village shop, keeping a vegetable garden, raising chickens, and building various things out of wood, he seemed destined to discover that he might be able to make his political views more understandable by looking at them in relation to life on a small English farm.

Eileen immediately grasped the significance of the new book he began writing at the end of 1943. He called it *Animal Farm*, and she followed its progress with great interest and humor. Suddenly, her very serious husband had found a way to write a book that was both funny and politically serious. She would sit up in bed at night chuckling as she read what he had written during the day. Orwell later acknowledged that she even helped him plan some of the book. Her friends recalled that she used to refer approvingly to it even while it was being written, making it clear that her hopes for its success were high. But even his supportive wife couldn't have imagined how successful the book would become. Within a few years *Animal Farm* would be well on its way to becoming one of the bestselling books of all time.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why was Orwell unhappy working at the BBC?
2. How did Orwell's experiences at the BBC influence his writing?
3. What is significant about the title of Orwell's *Tribune* column?

Suggested Reading

Hewison, Robert. *Under Siege: Literary Life in London, 1939–1945*. London: Methuen, 1988.

Other Books of Interest

Edwards, Ruth Dudley. *Victor Gollancz: A Biography*. London: Gollancz, 1987.

Websites of Interest

1. The BBC website provides a collection of letters, memoranda, and transcripts from its George Orwell Collection. — http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/orwell
2. *Scribd* provides an article by Douglas Kerr entitled "Orwell's BBC Broadcasts: Colonial Discourse and the Rhetoric of Propaganda," which originally appeared in the journal *Textual Practice* 16(3), 2002, pp. 473–490. — http://www.scribd.com/doc/122580/Orwells-Bbc-Broadcasts

Lecture 11

Animal Farm, 1944–1945

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

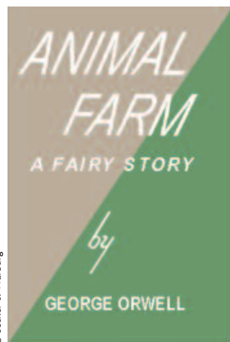
To defeat Hitler, the leaders of Britain and America believed a second front in Eastern Europe was a vital way of preventing the Nazis from concentrating all their power against the West. The Soviet Union was generally hailed as a valiant wartime ally, and many people in Britain and America were inclined to overlook Stalin's dark side. There was particular reluctance to mention his long habit of slaughtering his own citizens. As Orwell joked in the last months of the war, the Soviet leader had become "a Christian gent whom it is not done to criticise."

Public Domain

Joseph Stalin
(1878–1953)

Fortunately for all of us, Orwell could not resist turning this sacred cow into a fat pig, a ravenous creature whose barnyard empire is a model of despotism. With its brilliant display of wit and imagination, *Animal Farm* dealt an enormous blow to Stalin's reputation, reducing him to the ludicrous level of the pig Comrade Napoleon prowling Manor Farm with a whip in his trotter. An immediate critical and commercial success, Orwell's little book made it easy for everyone to laugh at a monster who had seemed invulnerable.

More important, the book did a great deal to discredit the whole Soviet system, and its publication in Britain on August 17, 1945, helped to revitalize the



© Secker & Warburg

"Remember, comrades, your resolution must never falter. No argument must lead you astray. Never listen when they tell you that Man and the animals have a common interest, that the prosperity of the one is the prosperity of the others. It is all lies. Man serves the interests of no creature except himself. And among us animals let there be perfect unity, perfect comradeship in the struggle. All men are enemies. All animals are comrades."

~George Orwell,
Animal Farm, 1945

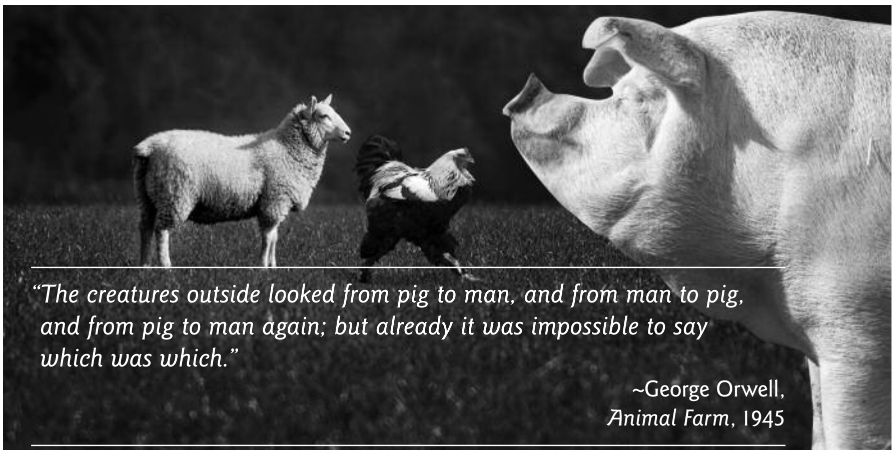
anti-Communist movement in the West. Despite the fact that he had never visited the Soviet Union, Orwell understood its flaws as well as anyone and, long before the advent of *perestroika*, he predicted the empire's fate. In 1946, he wrote, "The Russian regime will either democratise itself, or it will perish."

While other intellectuals were struggling to make excuses for the Soviet system, Orwell risked his reputation to expose its many evils. The risk paid off, bringing him fame and fortune with the huge international sales of *Animal Farm*, but we should never forget that his triumph began as a conspicuous break with the orthodox view. Before the world took notice of him, he was one of those rare creatures in history—a solitary voice speaking with the courage of his convictions.

Although Stalin was the principal target of the satire, *Animal Farm* continues to attract new readers because the pigs are much more than caricatures of the Soviet hierarchy. The swine of Manor Farm have always been with us. Whatever the time or place, they are the ones who jump first when the stick hits the swill bucket. It is not ideology that drives Comrade Napoleon, but greed. Capitalism can serve his ambition just as easily as socialism.

Indeed, by the end of the story, he has adopted a bourgeois look, with his pipe, black coat, and leather leggings. The ordinary animals, we are told, can no longer tell the difference between the pigs and their arch-enemy—man.

Ugly snouts can be found on capitalists as well as on revolutionaries. Hungry for power, they squeal and grunt at board meetings and protest marches. Brazenly, they can grab what they want and still pretend to be humble servants of a greater cause. On Manor Farm the cry "Forward in the name of Rebellion" is nothing but a way of concealing baser intentions. Orwell's book is a universal guide to power politics, and the lessons of his fable are as relevant to us as they were to his first readers. With slight changes, we can apply the satire to any number of prize boars in the corporate world or in the regimes of several cruel despots.



At this very moment, some well-fed piggish type is probably defending the indefensible commandment given in the book: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

Of course, in writing *Animal Farm*, Orwell was deliberately testing the limits of intellectual freedom, espousing a point of view that was taboo in the most important political and intellectual circles. His book was never subjected to official censorship, but he knew that it could be suppressed by a campaign of whispers against it. "Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy," he remarked, "finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness."

If he had not been such a determined and courageous advocate of freedom, *Animal Farm* would never have appeared in print. More than a dozen publishers in England and America rejected it, primarily because it was considered too controversial. Only Dial Press in New York objected to its aesthetic quality, but the confused editor seems to have missed the point entirely, telling Orwell that American readers did not like animal stories.

For a short time, Orwell believed that T.S. Eliot might publish the book at Faber & Faber, but the poet quickly returned the manuscript when he realized the risky political implications of the satire. In his rejection letter, Eliot made the absurd suggestion that the animals would be better off if they were led by "more public-spirited pigs." The worst threat to *Animal Farm* came from Orwell's long-time publisher, Victor Gollancz. Not content merely to reject the book, he used a previous contractual agreement with Orwell to discourage other publishers from taking an interest in the new work. As an ardent defender of the Soviet Union, he was not anxious to see the book in print, and he clearly hoped that his stern opposition to it would discourage Orwell from seeking another publisher.

Thanks in part to Gollancz's tactics, there was an eighteen-month delay between Orwell's completion of *Animal Farm*, in early 1944, and its publication. When Fredric Warburg finally found the courage—and the necessary paper ration—to publish the book, the full effect of its satire was blunted. In August 1945, the war in Europe was over, and Stalin's usefulness as a Western ally was beginning to look questionable. If the book had appeared in the previous summer, in accordance with Orwell's plans, it would have caused a real uproar.

A British Ministry of Information poster printed in 1943 that promoted the Anglo-Soviet alliance to defeat Hitler.

© Signet

Referring to the summer of 1944, Gollancz later remarked: "We couldn't have published it then. Those people [the Soviets] were fighting for us and had just saved our necks at Stalingrad." The long publication delay also had an impact on Orwell's personal life. Eileen shared his desire to see the book published promptly, and she hoped that its success would ease the financial burdens of their marriage. Throughout their nine years together, their annual income had rarely risen above several hundred pounds.

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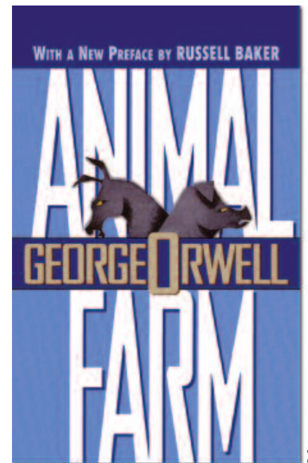
Eileen and Richard Blair, October 1944.

But in March 1945, Eileen needed a routine operation and went into surgery fully expecting the result to be relatively painless. Instead, she had a bad reaction to the anesthesia and suffered a heart attack on the operating table. She didn't recover, dying at the young age of thirty-nine. Even more tragic is the fact that only a few months earlier she had become a mother when she and Orwell adopted a baby boy. Before Richard Horatio Blair, as the child was called, was even a year old he had lost his new mother.

Concerned about money, Eileen had worried that the fifty pounds needed for her operation was excessive. She went to her grave without knowing that *Animal Farm* would transform her husband's career, and that its considerable royalties would provide for the future support of their newly adopted son. Many decades and twenty million copies later, the money is still flowing in, and Richard is the chief beneficiary.

There can be no doubt that Orwell's book has staying power. Future generations may not care much about his quarrel with Stalin, or his problems with Gollancz, but the things he stood for will always be apparent. He had the genius to make his story so clear and simple that almost no one can fail to appreciate his love of liberty, truth and what he always liked to call "common decency."



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A 1996 paperback edition of *Animal Farm* is indicative of the continuing appeal of Orwell's novella nearly fifty years after his death.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How does Orwell satirize Joseph Stalin in *Animal Farm*?
2. Why did Orwell have difficulty finding a publisher for *Animal Farm*?
3. Why is *Animal Farm* much more than an attack on Communism?

Suggested Reading

Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. New York: Signet, 1996 (1945).

Other Books of Interest

Dickstein, Morris. "*Animal Farm*: History as Fable." *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*. Pp. 133–145. Ed. John Rodden. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Rodden, John, ed. *Understanding* Animal Farm*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*. Literature in Context. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Websites of Interest

1. *Ancient Liberty* provides the text of *Animal Farm*'s original "suppressed" preface, titled "Freedom of the Press," and the preface to the Ukrainian-language edition by Orwell. — http://ancientliberty.blogspot.com
2. *The Antigonish Review* (a quarterly literary journal published by St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia) provides an article entitled "George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: The Little Book That Could" by Steve Pyle. — http://web.archive.org/web/20070108225314/http://www.antigonishreview.com/bi-111/111-pyle.html

   (Note: Please use the entire url above, as the article has been archived to a special server by the host.)

Lecture 12

Last Man in Europe, 1945–1946

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is George Orwell's *Essays*.

When Orwell was told of his wife's death, he was taken completely by surprise and was left in a state of deep shock. "No one had anticipated anything going wrong," he wrote. "It was a terribly cruel and stupid thing to happen. If only one hadn't left so much unsaid."

Rather than entrust young Richard's upbringing to one of his relatives or Eileen's, as many men of the period in his position might have done, he made up his mind to raise the boy himself. Though he came late to fatherhood, he found that he liked having a child and he did everything in his power to make sure the boy was loved and properly cared for. They spent hours together almost every day, and when Orwell's work took him away from home, he made sure that Richard was looked after by a trusted housekeeper. Some of the best photographs taken of Orwell date from his time as a single father. His great love for the boy is obvious in their several pictures together.

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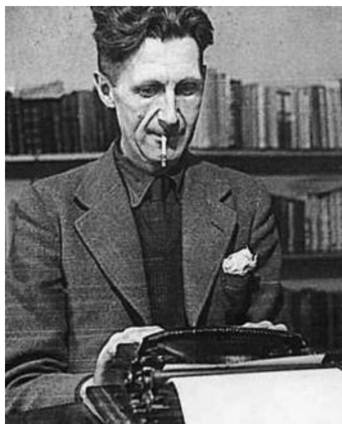
Orwell and son Richard, 1946.

To deal with the sadness of Eileen's death, he spent hours at his typewriter absorbed in the business of writing essays and reviews. In the year following her death he turned out more than one hundred thirty articles and reviews. Moreover, he also finished the single most important essay of his career—"Politics and the English Language"—and published it in *Horizon* magazine in April 1946. For many decades now, the essay has been a staple of the college classroom, where it is used for its sound verdicts on the difference between good writing and bad, and the effect that bad writing has on political discourse.

The tone throughout is unusual for the way it uses moral terms to describe weak habits of writing. Bad writers, Orwell says, suffer from "mental vices" and their stylistic faults are termed "swindles and perversions." In his view they are "dishonest" because they have failed to communicate in an authentic voice, relying on a convenient stock of stale words and phrases rather than working to achieve fresh, personal expressions of thought.

The chief attraction of writing such empty prose is that it is easy. The mind doesn't have to be fully awake to stay at it. After commenting on the hard work that good prose requires, Orwell says, "But you are not obliged to go to all this trouble. You can shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself."



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Orwell at work, 1946.

If no one is truly "obliged" to bother with the demands of good writing, then why not take the easy way out and let the "ready-made" language do the job? Because the result, Orwell says, is that nothing genuine gets communicated. And in politics empty language becomes a danger to everyone. It can be used to deceive and corrupt or—in Orwell's powerful description—it can be used to defend the indefensible. In that case it relies on clever euphemisms to disguise ugly facts.

"Villages are bombarded from the air," Orwell writes, "the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them."

"But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought."

~George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," 1946

Though Orwell wrote these words long ago, the habit of employing euphemisms to make bad things seem less bad has turned into almost a permanent industry in Washington and other world capitals. High-flying jets don't kill innocent citizens any more. Now they simply cause "collateral damage." Similarly, terrorism becomes a "man-caused disaster"; torture becomes "enhanced interrogation"; higher taxes are "revenue enhancements"; doing something stupid is "ill advised"; and lies are "inoperative statements."

Good writers avoid such meaningless phrases, Orwell says, because they recognize a moral obligation to communicate honestly. You are perfectly free to

"shirk" this obligation, he says, but the word "shirk" is itself carefully chosen to indicate the failure of responsibility that bad writing entails.

To show the difference between the good and the bad, he takes the beautiful verse from Ecclesiastes, "I returned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," and translates it into modern jargon: "Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity."

The verse that directly precedes it is also relevant here: "Whatsoever thy hand finds to do, do it with thy might." This is roughly the same advice that Orwell's essay offers. Its purpose isn't to make readers think of themselves as potentially brilliant, faultless writers, but as plainspoken, conscientious ones determined to put forth the effort good writing requires. The emphasis, therefore, is on that moral effort, not on the artistic considerations. This fact alone makes the essay a daring and original argument to use in writing classes, especially those run by teachers instead of "composition specialists."

Not wanting to "shirk" his own work, Orwell kept so busy that he was exhausted by the middle of 1946 and needed a break. "Everyone," he complained, "keeps coming at me wanting me to lecture, to write commissioned booklets, to join this and that, etc.—you don't know how I pine to get free of it all and have time to think again."

David Astor had just the solution. His family owned an estate on the remote Scottish island of Jura. There was a large farmhouse—Barnhill—overlooking a green bay far from any other humans. The whole island had only three hundred people in a total area of one hundred sixty square miles. Astor was happy to let Orwell use the place as a retreat where he could rebuild his strength and write a deserving follow-up to *Animal Farm*.

"The English are not happy unless they are miserable, the Irish are not at peace unless they are at war, and the Scots are not at home unless they are abroad."

~George Orwell

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A recent photograph of Barnhill on Jura, Scotland. Inset: A picture of the farmhouse as it appeared during the time Orwell lived there.

He and Richard spent a glorious summer living on Jura in 1946. Several friends came to visit, and he enjoyed showing off the rugged beauty of the place. Believing that Richard needed a mother, and wanting a companion for himself, he asked a few women friends to come to Jura. He was hoping that one of them might want to marry him. Of all the women he knew, he was perhaps most fond of Celia Kirwan, a bright and vivacious personality widely known and liked in London literary circles. Her twin sister, Mamaine, was married to Orwell's friend and fellow campaigner against totalitarianism Arthur Koestler.

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Celia (Paget) Kirwan (1916–2002)

To his disappointment, Celia politely resisted his attempts to make her see the fun of living at an isolated farm on a distant island. She loved her social life in London and wouldn't have been happy on Jura. But in this period Orwell was so desperate for companionship, and so entranced by Celia, that he was willing to do almost anything to prove he was worthy of her regard. And that caused him to do something for her that would create an uproar fifty years later.

Public Domain

Arthur Koestler (1905–1983)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How does Orwell use moral points to criticize bad writing?
2. Why are euphemisms so prevalent in political discourse?
3. Why does Orwell think that writers should avoid jargon?

Suggested Reading

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Other Books of Interest

Davison, Peter. *The Lost Orwell*. London: Timewell Press, Ltd., 2007.

Websites of Interest

1. An article appearing in the December 10, 2005, issue of *The Guardian* by D.J. Taylor entitled "Another Piece of the Puzzle," reviewing *The Lost Orwell* by Peter Davison, which was based in part on a cache of letters between Eileen and Eric Blair. — http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/dec/10/georgeorwell.classics
2. Text of Eileen (O'Shaughnessy) Blair's poem "End of the Century, 1984" that some believe was the inspiration for Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. — fc.deltasd.bc.ca/~lholland/S0196F553.4/End%20of%20the%20Century.doc
3. *George Orwell: The Chestnut Tree Cafe* provides the text of an article originally appearing in the January 9, 1984, issue of *People Weekly* entitled "The Only Heir Scarcely Knew His Adoptive Father." — http://www.netcharles.com/orwell/ctc/docs/onlyheir.htm

Lecture 13

Orwell's List, 1946–1947

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Michael Shelden's *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*.

Orwell's friend Celia Kirwan had an unusual job. She was employed by a shadowy organization in the British Foreign Office known as IRD. Until the 1970s, very few people knew that the Information Research Department was an anti-Communist propaganda section responsible for undermining Soviet attempts to sway public opinion in the West. At some point in the late 1940s, Kirwan made it clear to Orwell that his vast political knowledge might be of some use to her bosses. If she had not been involved with the IRD, it is doubtful that the author would have agreed to give it assistance. He was naturally suspicious of all such agencies, but he was eager to help a woman to whom he had once proposed marriage, and whose friendship he valued immensely.

The story of how Orwell compiled a list of "crypto-Communists" and how it came to be sent to a secret government department reads like some lost episode from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The tale begins not with politics but with the author's love for Celia. After Eileen's death he had written some of his most revealing and intimate letters to Celia—declaring in one that the touch of her body against his had sent an electric sensation of pleasure through him. He reluctantly accepted her friendly refusal to become his wife; but his romantic image of her haunted his thoughts as Julia's haunts Winston Smith's in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. He wanted to make her see that he was serious about his political interests, and he wanted to set the record straight if no one else was going to step forward to attack the evasive, but effective, "fellow-travellers" and "crypto-Communists" in the West.

Acutely aware of the pressure of time, he composed his list and gave parts of it to Celia. If matters worsened and the Stalinists gained greater influence in the West, the list would continue to stand as a warning against certain people who might want to disguise their

A contemporary image of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London in which the IRD was originally housed.

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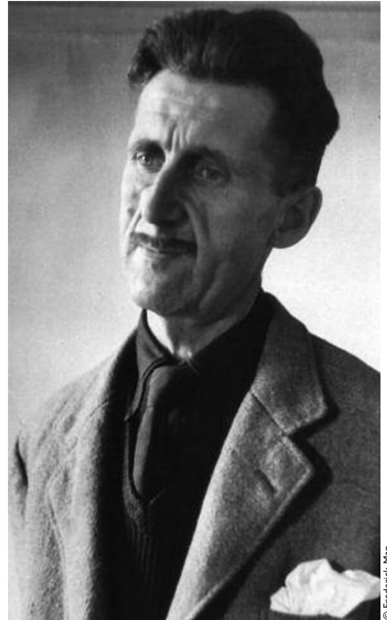
true intentions. He called them by some of the worst terms in his vocabulary. "Dishonest" and "unreliable" are the most frequent charges Orwell levels against the names in his blue notebook. It is not a hit-list or blacklist, but a record of those whom Orwell considered deceptive—and thus a collection of people whose influence needed to be resisted and whose offers of help needed to be carefully scrutinized. He was not out to suppress Communism or Communists, but merely to level the playing field by identifying the sympathies of those who tried to hide them. If such people "could get inside the Labour Party as an organised body," he warned, "they might be able to do enormous mischief."


© Frederick Man
George Orwell in 1947.

As the history of the Cold War amply demonstrates, his concerns were not unfounded. In many different ways the sins of Stalin's Russia were minimized and concealed by a small army of apologists in the West. He had personally suffered from such efforts when he wrote *Animal Farm* and discovered that Stalin's friends in England were determined to stop its publication. Among those who rejected the book was Jonathan Cape, on advice from an unnamed official in the wartime Ministry of Information. The identity of that government official has been an intriguing mystery for many years.

However, Professor Peter Davison, editor of the twenty-volume *Complete Works of George Orwell*, has identified the villain as Peter Smollett, a former correspondent of *The Times* of London and chief of the Russian section at the Ministry of Information. Interestingly, Smollett's name not only appears on Orwell's list, but it is also labeled as "very dishonest" and "almost certainly agent of some kind."

The novelist was right. Both Professor Davison and other scholars have discovered that Smollett was indeed a Soviet agent who used his trusted position at *The Times* to spy on the West and spread subversion. His real name was Peter Smolka and he came to London from his native Austria in the 1930s, when an English friend invited him to London. The friend's name was Kim Philby—the infamous Soviet mole in British intelligence—and, for a short time in the mid-1930s, Smolka and Philby were partners in a small news service used as a front for gathering confidential information for Stalin.

It is doubtful that Orwell knew much about Smolka, but his instincts told him to be wary of the man. He would not have been surprised to learn that this

Austrian Communist disguised as a respectable journalist and bureaucrat was among the enemies of *Animal Farm*. The advantage that such enemies enjoyed was anonymity, and one purpose of Orwell's list was to take some of that protection away from them. Sadly, in Smolka's case, no one paid much attention to the warnings against him. He served *The Times* for many years as their man in Vienna and died with his reputation unsullied in 1980.

The most serious problem with Orwell's list is that he relied too much on instinct and guesswork. In some cases he was right, in others wrong. In the beginning, he kept his list as a kind of private exercise in which he could speculate at will and cast doubts on people who might not deserve such treatment. To his credit, he would come back and cross off names or place question marks beside them whenever further reflection or events caused him to reconsider. He did this for Charlie Chaplin, who appears in the notebook despite Orwell's complete lack of personal contact with him. In America, Orwell is sometimes seen as a kindred spirit of John Steinbeck, but it is interesting to note that he had no respect for him, calling him a "spurious writer." A few other important writers receive unexpectedly strong disapproval. Orwell's friend Stephen Spender is described as "very unreliable" and "easily influenced." George Bernard Shaw cannot be trusted because he is "reliably pro-Russian on all major issues." The distinguished scientist and government adviser Solly Zuckerman is nothing less than "politically ignorant."

> *"I always disagree, however, when people end up saying that we can only combat Communism, Fascism or what not if we develop an equal fanaticism. It appears to me that one defeats the fanatic precisely by not being a fanatic oneself, but on the contrary by using one's intelligence."*
>
> ~George Orwell,
> Letter to Richard Rees, 1949

The release of the list in the late 1990s caused a great stir in the press, with many commentators accusing Orwell of helping to create a blacklist. But there was never any desire to use it as a means of destroying careers nor was there any dark conspiracy to keep the list from the reading public. There was only the fear that living people might sue for libel. Orwell was well aware of that fact and sought to keep it confidential simply to avoid being sued. "I imagine that this list is very libellous, or slanderous, or whatever the term is," he wrote Celia, "so will you please see that it is returned to me without fail."

Eventually, he decided to give the IRD only a partial version of his list, selecting "about 35 names" he was fairly sure of. He modestly informed Celia that it was not a "very sensational" list; but he made a point of saying that it might do some good here and there. Specifically, he mentioned that such warnings might stop "people like Peter Smollett worming their way into important propaganda jobs where they were probably able to do us a lot of harm."

Though some critics may say that Orwell was simply engaging in Red-baiting, the truth is that his list had little impact on anyone's career. It may have amused Celia and a few other officials at the IRD, but, in a practical sense, it could do little to undermine the determined efforts of the many pro-Stalin propagandists in the West. In *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell achieved his aim by giving the world powerful stories that exposed duplicity and betrayal in universal ways.

"While the game of deadlocks and bottle-necks goes on, another more serious game is also being played. It is governed by two axioms. One is that there can be no peace without a general surrender of sovereignty: the other is that no country capable of defending its sovereignty ever surrenders it. If one keeps these axioms in mind one can generally see the relevant facts in international affairs through the smoke-screen with which the newspapers surround them."

~George Orwell

What the list gives us is a vivid sense of the context in which Orwell's mind worked. His prejudices and raw emotions are at play in the list and reveal both his deep distrust of the Left and his vague hopes for a new form of democratic socialism. Above all else, he wanted more honesty and openness in public life. He betrayed no one by compiling his list. The betrayal had already occurred from his supposed friends on the Left, such as Victor Gollancz and Kingsley Martin, who tried to stop him doing what he did so well—namely, facing unpleasant facts and discussing them freely.

"All writers are vain, selfish and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives lies a mystery. Writing a book is a long, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand."

~George Orwell

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One of the last photographs of George Orwell, 1949.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What did Orwell hope to achieve by keeping a list of political and cultural personalities whom he considered "dishonest" or "unreliable"?
2. Why was Orwell particularly concerned by the activities of Peter Smollett?
3. Why did Orwell show Celia Kirwan his list of "crypto-Communists"?

Suggested Reading

Shelden, Michael. *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*. New York: HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1991.

Other Books of Interest

Hitchens, Christopher. *Why Orwell Matters*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

Websites of Interest

1. The *New York Review of Books* website provides an article entitled "Orwell's List" from September 25, 2003, by Timothy Garton Ash. — http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2003/sep/25/orwells-list
2. The *George Orwell: Eric Arthur Blair* website provides photos and information on "The Women Who Knew Orwell," including Celia Kirwan. — http://georgeorwell.t35.com/Photos/women/index.html

Lecture 14

Big Brother and the World, 1948–1950

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell set himself the task of revealing the inner workings of all totalitarian regimes as a warning against accommodating tyranny. In part to emphasize that an urgent battle was raging for the soul of Western civilization, he planned to call the novel *The Last Man in Europe*.

© Secker & Warburg

The first British edition cover of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* published in June 1949 by Secker & Warburg.

Writing the book became a race against time. Orwell feared that some calamity might erupt and cause the Cold War to grow hot. Also, his chronic lung trouble—now clearly linked to tuberculosis—was catching up with him. At the end of 1948, he was so weak that he could barely sit up. With his old manual typewriter awkwardly positioned on his lap, he spent hours banging away on the machine, coughing and spitting up blood.

He put up a brave and determined fight against his illness, submitting to the latest experimental treatments and enduring great pain. His friend David Astor went to heroic lengths to obtain for him the new American drug streptomycin, but nothing seemed to work.

Exhausted and near death, he finished the book and checked into a sanatorium high up in the Cotswolds at a little village called Cranham. He was given large doses of the latest experimental drugs, which caused his skin to peel and his hair to fall out. Unfortunately, isoniazid, the most effective drug to be developed for tuberculosis, was to come out in 1952, two years too late for Orwell.

When his publisher, Fredric Warburg, visited him at Cranham in January 1949, the typescript of *The Last Man in Europe* was more or less complete, but at first the

© Cranham Sanatorium

Patients in deck chairs taking fresh air outside a portion of the Cranham Sanatorium, ca. 1930s.

two had doubts about the title. After some discussion, they agreed that some date in the distant future might make a more evocative title, so Orwell decided to reverse the last two digits of the previous year, 1948. There was no intention to make the year essential to the story; he was even willing to let the American publishers use a different title, though this did not prove necessary.

So when the year 1984 arrived, the fuss made over it missed the point. For Orwell, 1984 was simply a date in the not-too-distant future when the world could come undone if it did not heed his warnings. It was a symbolic date that could stand as a historical warning long after its passing.

It is true that the main character of the novel, Winston Smith, loses his battle against the state, confessing his crimes before the ultimate managerial despot—the party official O'Brien, who is happy to make all kinds of dishonest excuses for tyranny, and who enjoys breaking Winston's will because its stubborn quality is such a challenge. But while readers follow the story to its final, dark conclusion, there is a powerful subtext at work arguing for the "last" free members of society to fight back before it is too late.

The novel pleads for preservation of many things—old liberties, old loyalties, old delights. There must be a place in every life for things that have no power associated with them, that would advance no one's career nor make anyone a fortune nor allow one person's will to dominate another's. There must be room, in other words, for paperweights and fishing

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The "Ministry of Truth"

The imposing structure of the Senate House (now London University's administrative center, located on Malet Street in Bloomsbury, London) was believed to have inspired Orwell's description of the Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

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rods and penny candies and the village shops that sell them. And there must be time for making the perfect cup of tea or reading old novels or spending a summer on an island with a green bay. Such things may be derided by stern intellectual types, but they are the things that form the real texture of a life.

> *"Whether he went on with the diary, or whether he did not go on with it, made no difference. The Thought Police would get him just the same. He had committed—would still have committed, even if he had never set pen to paper—the essential crime that contained all others in itself. Thoughtcrime, they called it. Thoughtcrime was not a thing that could be concealed forever."*
>
> ~George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four

Winston fails in the novel, but so does the society that allowed the state to take away its freedoms by first removing the choice in simple pleasures. Most basic of all was the loss of a rich language with many choices. Big Brother's language of the future—Newspeak—is the perfect way to control society because its severely reduced vocabulary makes real communication impossible. Orwell describes it as "the only language in the world whose vocabulary grows smaller every year." Before it corrupts politically, such language corrupts morally, since it allows writers to cheat themselves and their audiences with ready-made prose.

Nineteen Eighty-Four rightly captured the world's imagination when it appeared on both sides of the Atlantic at the same time. It was instantly hailed as a masterpiece. V.S. Pritchett wrote that it was "impossible to put down," and the distinguished American critic Lionel Trilling called the novel "profound, terrifying, and wholly fascinating." In July the *New York Times* reported that the critical response to the book was overwhelmingly favorable, "with cries of terror rising above the applause."

It was just the reaction that Orwell wanted. But he had almost no time to enjoy his triumph. When his condition worsened, he was taken to University College Hospital in London and placed under the care of Britain's leading chest specialist, Dr. Andrew Morland, who had treated D.H. Lawrence for tuberculosis many years earlier.

More experiments were tried, but nothing could save Orwell. Worried about his son's future and the future of his writings, he made a deathbed marriage to one of Cyril Connolly's assistants at *Horizon*, Sonia Brownell. She vowed to look after young Richard and to protect the author's legacy, and she proudly called herself Sonia Orwell until her own death in 1980.

© British National Archives

Sonia Mary (Brownell) Blair
(aka Sonia Orwell)
(1918–1980)

After Orwell died on a cold day in January 1950, David Astor hastened to honor one of the author's last wishes. He wanted to be buried in a country churchyard. Astor found him a place at All Saints Church, beside the Thames, in the village of Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire. And there he lies, under a stone that identifies him by his real name, Eric Arthur Blair. In death he chose to go back to the relative anonymity of the name he bore before fame touched him.

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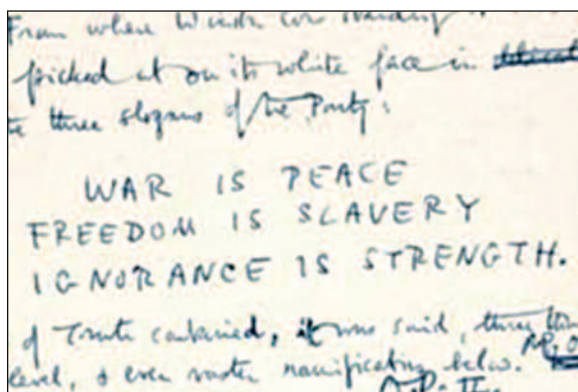
In the 1930s, Orwell had written to a friend about how a good song can take on a life of its own after the composer has come and gone. The words may change, the composer may be forgotten, and the tune may be adapted for different purposes, but it continues to live. "It struck me," he wrote, "that an idea is very like a tune in this way, that it goes through the ages remaining the same in itself but getting into such very different company."

Like so many good tunes, Big Brother, the Thought Police, and the rest have taken on a life of their own, appearing in all sorts of unexpected contexts and entering the vocabulary of people who may know nothing about the writer. But Eric Blair was modest enough to know that the idea was the thing that mattered. Those ideas not only continue to live, but they grow stronger and more resonant with every passing year.


WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.

The slogans of Newspeak in a draft of Orwell's handwritten manuscript for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

© The Orwell Project/O. Dag, 2008

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why was 1984 chosen as the year for the title of Orwell's novel?
2. Why is Newspeak such a dangerous tool of oppression in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?
3. What does Orwell's grave tell us about his character and his literary work?

Suggested Reading

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. New York: Plume, 2003 (1949).

Other Books of Interest

Rodden, John. *Every Intellectual's Big Brother: George Orwell's Literary Siblings*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

Websites of Interest

1. *Time* magazine review of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from June 20, 1949, entitled "Where the Rainbow Ends." — http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,800425,00.html
2. An audio presentation of the 1949 NBC radio adaptation (*NBC University Theater*) of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* starring David Niven. — http://greylodge.org/gpc/?p=78
3. *WikiSummaries* provides a chapter-by-chapter summary of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. — http://wikisummaries.org/1984
4. An article entitled "George Orwell in the World of Science Fiction," by L.J. Hurst. — http://dialspace.dial.pipex.com/l.j.hurst/orwellsf.htm
5. PBS website provides a transcript from its radio program *Think Tank with Ben Wattenberg* of a broadcast panel discussion (Ben Wattenberg, Christopher Hitchens, and John Rodden) from 2003 (the one hundredth anniversary of Orwell's birth) about the impact of Orwell's writing. — http://www.pbs.org/thinktank/transcript990.html

A GEORGE ORWELL TIMELINE

1903	Eric Arthur Blair born at Motihari, Bengal, India, June 25, son of Richard Walmesley Blair and Ida Mabel Blair (née Limouzin).
1904	Brought to England by his mother. Family settles in Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire.
1908–1911	Educated at Sunnylands, an Anglican school, Eastbourne, Sussex.
1911–1916	Boarder at St. Cyprian's preparatory school, Eastbourne, Sussex.
1912	Richard Blair, retired from India Civil Service, returns to England. Family moved to Shiplake near Henley.
1914	First work published: "Awake Young Men of England" (poem).
1915	Blair family moves back to Henley.
1917	Spends Lent term at Wellington College.
1917–1921	King's Scholar, Eton College.
1921	Parents move to Southwold, Suffolk (December).
1922	Blair attends cramming establishment in Southwold (January–June) to prepare for India Office examinations.
1922–1927	Assistant Superintendent of Police, Indian Imperial Police, Burma.
1928–1929	Lives in Paris, writing and later working as a dishwasher. Hospitalized with pneumonia (February).
1930–1931	Goes tramping in London and Home Counties. Writes early version of *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Contributes essays to *Adelphi* ("The Spike" and "The Hanging") under his own name.
1932–1933	Teaches at the Hawthorns, a small private school in Hayes, Middlesex.
1933	First book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, published by Victor Gollancz. Uses pseudonym "George Orwell" for the first time. Teaches at Frays College, Middlesex. Hospitalized with pneumonia.

1934	Gives up teaching. Spends ten months in Southwold. *Burmese Days* published in the United States (October). Moves to Hampstead, London (November).
1934–1935	Works as part-time assistant in Booklover's Corner, Hampstead. *A Clergyman's Daughter* published (March 1935). *Burmese Days* published in England (June 1935). Meets Eileen O'Shaughnessy, age 30.
1936	In industrial Lancashire and Yorkshire, investigates working-class life and unemployment at the suggestion of Victor Gollancz (January–March). Moves to Wallington, Herts (April). *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* published. Marries Eileen O'Shaughnessy (June). Attends I.L.P. Summer School, Letchworth, Herts (July). Leaves for Spain (December).
1937	In Spain (January–June). Corporal with Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (P.O.U.M.) detachment of the Aragon front. Involved in street fighting in Barcelona between government and anarchist troops. Wounded in throat by sniper. Honorable discharge for medical reasons from P.O.U.M. militia. Evades arrest during anti-P.O.U.M. purge in Barcelona. *The Road to Wigan Pier* published (March). Left Book Club edition of forty thousand copies.
1938	In tuberculosis sanatorium, Kent. *Homage to Catalonia* published (April). Joins I.L.P. (June). Goes to Morocco for his health (September).
1939	Returns to England (March). *Coming Up for Air* published (June). Death of father.
1940	*Inside the Whale* published (March). Moves to London (May). Writes reviews for *Time and Tide* and *Tribune*. Joins Local Defense Volunteers (Home Guards).
1941	*The Lion and the Unicorn* published (February).
1941–1943	*Talks* producer, Empire Department, BBC, in charge of broadcasting to India and Southeast Asia. Death of mother.
1943–1946	Literary Editor of *Tribune*.
1944	Orwell and Eileen adopt a one-month-old child, whom they name Richard Horatio Blair (October).
1945	War correspondent for *The Observer* in Paris and Cologne (March–May). Death of Eileen while under anesthetic for operation (March 29). Covers first post-war election campaign (June–July). *Animal Farm* published (August).
1946	*Critical Essays* published (February). Moves to Barnhill, Isle of Jura (May).
1947	Enters Hairmyres Hospital, near Glasgow, with tuberculosis of the left lung (Christmas Eve).
1948	Returns from hospital to Jura (July). Completes revision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by December.
1949	Enters Cotswolds Sanatorium, Cranham, Gloucestershire (January). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* published (June). Over 400,000 copies sold in first year. Transferred from Cranham to University College Hospital, London (September). Marries Sonia Brownell, an editorial assistant with *Horizon*, in hospital (October).
1950	Dies suddenly in University College Hospital of a hemorrhaged lung (January 21). Buried in the churchyard of All Saints, Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire (Oxfordshire).

ADAPTATIONS

George Orwell's writing has been adapted several times since his death. Besides inspiring other literary works, his writing has been made into movies, television series, an opera, and even a famous television ad.

1984. (Rated "R.") Starring John Hurt, Suzannah Hamilton, and Richard Burton. Directed by Michael Radford. MGM. DVD and VHS. 2003. The most recent film adaptation of Orwell's work, it was originally released in 1984.

1984. An opera composed by the American conductor Lorin Maazel, with a libretto by J.D. McClatchy and Thomas Meehan. The opera is based on George Orwell's novel and premiered on May 3, 2005, at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, in a production directed by Robert Lepage. More information on the opera and a DVD made from the production are available at http://www.1984theopera.com.

1984. American television advertisement. This famous award-winning ad appeared only once, on January 22, 1984, during the third quarter of Super Bowl XVIII. It introduced the Apple Macintosh personal computer for the first time. The video is available on YouTube. — http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYecfV3ubP8

A Merry War. (Rated "PG-13.") Starring Richard E. Grant and Helena Bonham Carter. Directed by Robert Bierman. An adaptation of Orwell's novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1999), this is a fairy tale that takes place in a perpetually sunny 1930s London.

Animal Farm. Animated. (Not Rated. Aimed at an adult audience.) Voices of Gordon Heath and Maurice Denham. Directed by John Halas and Joy Batchelor. Homevision. DVD. 2004 (Originally released as an animated movie in 1955).

Animal Farm. (Rated "G.") Live action (animals and puppets), made-for-TV version. Starring the voices of Kelsey Grammer, Ian Holm, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Patrick Stewart, and Peter Ustinov. Directed by John Stephenson. Hallmark Films. DVD. 1999.

Big Brother. Reality television gameshow on British and American networks (2000 to present).

Nineteen Eighty-Four. (Not Rated.) Starring Peter Cushing and Andre Morell. Directed by Rudolph Cartier. PR Studios/BBC. DVD. 2009. This is the classic black-and-white version that appeared on BBC Television in 1954.

Nineteen Eighty-Four. (Not Rated.) Starring Peter Cushing and Andre Morell. Directed by Rudolph Cartier. A2zcds/Columbia Pictures Production/BBC. 2 DVDs. 2009. This set contains the BBC Television version and the movie directed by Michael Anderson and starring Edmond O'Brien, Michael Redgrave, and Jan Sterlin, released in 1956 by Columbia Pictures.

COURSE MATERIALS

Suggested Readings

Hewison, Robert. *Under Siege: Literary Life in London, 1939–1945*. London: Methuen, 1988.

Larkin, Emma. *Finding George Orwell in Burma*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. New York: Signet, 1996 (1945).

———. *Burmese Days: A Novel*. Orlando: Mariner Books, 1974 (1934).

———. *A Collection of Essays*. New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1981.

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———. *Down and Out in Paris and London*. New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1972 (1933).

———. *Essays*. New York: Everyman's Library, 2002.

———. *Homage to Catalonia*. New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1980 (1938).

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———. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. New York: Plume, 2003 (1949).

———. *The Road to Wigan Pier*. New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1974 (1937).

Rees, Richard. *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962.

Shelden, Michael. *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*. New York: HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1991.

Stansky, Peter, and William Abrahams. *The Unknown Orwell* and *Orwell: The Transformation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.

Books by Michael Shelden

Shelden, Michael. *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of Horizon*. New York: HarperCollins*Publishers*, 1989.

———. *George Orwell: Ten "Animal Farm" Letters to His Agent, Leonard Moore*. Bloomington, IN: The Private Press of Fredric Brewer, 1984.

———. *Graham Greene: The Enemy Within*. New York: Random House, 1995.

———. *Mark Twain: Man in White: The Grand Adventure of His Final Years*. New York: Random House, 2010.

These books are available online through www.modernscholar.com or by calling Recorded Books at 1-800-636-3399.

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE COMMON TOAD

An Essay by George Orwell, 1946

Before the swallow, before the daffodil, and not much later than the snowdrop, the common toad salutes the coming of spring after his own fashion, which is to emerge from a hole in the ground, where he has lain buried since the previous autumn, and crawl as rapidly as possible towards the nearest suitable patch of water. Something—some kind of shudder in the earth, or perhaps merely a rise of a few degrees in the temperature—has told him that it is time to wake up: though a few toads appear to sleep the clock round and miss out a year from time to time—at any rate, I have more than once dug them up, alive and apparently well, in the middle of the summer.

At this period, after his long fast, the toad has a very spiritual look, like a strict Anglo-Catholic towards the end of Lent. His movements are languid but purposeful, his body is shrunken, and by contrast his eyes look abnormally large. This allows one to notice, what one might not at another time, that a toad has about the most beautiful eye of any living creature. It is like gold, or more exactly it is like the golden-coloured semi-precious stone which one sometimes sees in signet-rings, and which I think is called a chrysoberyl.

For a few days after getting into the water the toad concentrates on building up his strength by eating small insects. Presently he has swollen to his normal size again, and then he hoes through a phase of intense sexiness. All he knows, at least if he is a male toad, is that he wants to get his arms round something, and if you offer him a stick, or even your finger, he will cling to it with surprising strength and take a long time to discover that it is not a female toad. Frequently one comes upon shapeless masses of ten or twenty toads rolling over and over in the water, one clinging to another without distinction of sex. By degrees, however, they sort themselves out into couples, with the male duly sitting on the female's back. You can now distinguish males from females, because the male is smaller, darker and sits on top, with his arms tightly clasped round the female's neck. After a day or two the spawn is laid in long strings which wind themselves in and out of the reeds and soon become invisible. A few more weeks, and the water is alive with masses of tiny tadpoles which rapidly grow larger, sprout hind-legs, then forelegs, then shed their tails: and finally, about the middle of the summer, the new generation of toads, smaller than one's thumb-nail but perfect in every particular, crawl out of the water to begin the game anew.

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I mention the spawning of the toads because it is one of the phenomena of spring which most

deeply appeal to me, and because the toad, unlike the skylark and the primrose, has never had much of a boost from poets. But I am aware that many people do not like reptiles or amphibians, and I am not suggesting that in order to enjoy the spring you have to take an interest in toads. There are also the crocus, the missel-thrush, the cuckoo, the blackthorn, etc. The point is that the pleasures of spring are available to everybody, and cost nothing. Even in the most sordid street the coming of spring will register itself by some sign or other, if it is only a brighter blue between the chimney pots or the vivid green of an elder sprouting on a blitzed site. Indeed it is remarkable how Nature goes on existing unofficially, as it were, in the very heart of London. I have seen a kestrel flying over the Deptford gasworks, and I have heard a first-rate performance by a blackbird in the Euston Road. There must be some hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of birds living inside the four-mile radius, and it is rather a pleasing thought that none of them pays a halfpenny of rent.

As for spring, not even the narrow and gloomy streets round the Bank of England are quite able to exclude it. It comes seeping in everywhere, like one of those new poison gases which pass through all filters. The spring is commonly referred to as "a miracle," and during the past five or six years this worn-out figure of speech has taken on a new lease of life. After the sorts of winters we have had to endure recently, the spring does seem miraculous, because it has become gradually harder and harder to believe that it is actually going to happen. Every February since 1940 I have found myself thinking that this time winter is going to be permanent. But Persephone, like the toads, always rises from the dead at about the same moment. Suddenly, towards the end of March, the miracle happens and the decaying slum in which I live is transfigured. Down in the square the sooty privets have turned bright green, the leaves are thickening on the chestnut trees, the daffodils are out, the wall-flowers are budding, the policeman's tunic looks positively a pleasant shade of blue, the fishmonger greets his customers with a smile, and even the sparrows are quite a different colour, having felt the balminess of the air and nerved themselves to take a bath, their first since last September.

Is it wicked to take a pleasure in spring and other seasonal changes? To put it more precisely, is it politically reprehensible, while we are all groaning, or at any rate ought to be groaning, under the shackles of the capitalist system, to point out that life is frequently more worth living because of a blackbird's song, a yellow elm tree in October, or some other natural phenomenon which does not cost money and does not have what the editors of left-wing newspapers call a class angle? There is not doubt that many people think so. I know by experience that a favourable reference to "Nature" in one of my articles is liable to bring me abusive letters, and though the key-word in these letters is usually "sentimental," two ideas seem to be mixed up in them. One is that any pleasure in the actual process of life encourages a sort of political quietism. People, so the thought runs, ought to be discontented, and it is our job to multiply our wants and not simply to increase our enjoyment of the things we

have already. The other idea is that this is the age of machines and that to dislike the machine, or even to want to limit its domination, is backward-looking, reactionary and slightly ridiculous. This is often backed up by the statement that a love of Nature is a foible of urbanized people who have no notion what Nature is really like. Those who really have to deal with the soil, so it is argued, do not love the soil, and do not take the faintest interest in birds or flowers, except from a strictly utilitarian point of view. To love the country one must live in the town, merely taking an occasional week-end ramble at the warmer times of year.

This last idea is demonstrably false. Medieval literature, for instance, including the popular ballads, is full of an almost Georgian enthusiasm for Nature, and the art of agricultural peoples such as the Chinese and Japanese centre always round trees, birds, flowers, rivers, mountains. The other idea seems to me to be wrong in a subtler way. Certainly we ought to be discontented, we ought not simply to find out ways of making the best of a bad job, and yet if we kill all pleasure in the actual process of life, what sort of future are we preparing for ourselves? If a man cannot enjoy the return of spring, why should he be happy in a labour-saving Utopia? What will he do with the leisure that the machine will give him? I have always suspected that if our economic and political problems are ever really solved, life will become simpler instead of more complex, and that the sort of pleasure one gets from finding the first primrose will loom larger than the sort of pleasure one gets from eating an ice to the tune of a Wurlitzer. I think that by retaining one's childhood love of such things as trees, fishes, butterflies and—to return to my first instance—toads, one makes a peaceful and decent future a little more probable, and that by preaching the doctrine that nothing is to be admired except steel and concrete, one merely makes it a little surer that human beings will have no outlet for their surplus energy except in hatred and leader worship.

At any rate, spring is here, even in London N.1., and they can't stop you enjoying it. This is a satisfying reflection. How many a time have I stood watching the toads mating, or a pair of hares having a boxing match in the young corn, and thought of all the important persons who would stop me enjoying this if they could. But luckily they can't. So long as you are not actually ill, hungry, frightened or immured in a prison or a holiday camp, spring is still spring. The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it.

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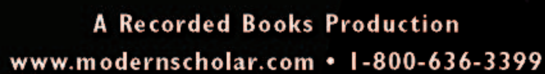

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