

George Orwell (1903 - 1950) — writer, socialist, eccentric and tuberculosis sufferer

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George Orwell, born Eric Blair in India in 1903, the third generation of colonial service stock, joined the Indian Imperial Police in Burma in 1922 after leaving school in England. Rejecting the racial and cultural barriers of colonial rule he encountered there, he returned to England to become a writer. He became allied to leftist and labour causes and, based on personal participation, documented the life and work of the underprivileged and working classes in England and Paris. He also fought with the leftist alliance in the Spanish Civil War against Franco's army revolt against the Republican Government. Although a fine essayist and master of English prose, he is best known for *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, two political satires on the Soviet system and totalitarianism respectively. These brought him fame and financial security shortly before his death of tuberculosis at the age of 47, after a life of recurrent ill health and economic hardship.

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Orwell was born Eric Blair in India, where his father and grandfather were minor officials in the civil service. His family moved to England, where he attended a private preparatory school at a reduced fee on account of his father's low pension. His brilliance won him a scholarship to Eton. On leaving school he joined the Indian Imperial Police, and served in Burma for 5 years until his resignation in 1927. He was motivated by the ambition to become a writer and his abhorrence of colonialism, reflected in his breaking with the past and his family's tradition of service to imperial Britain. Eric Blair then became George Orwell. He chose the pseudonym Orwell in 1933 from a river in Suffolk where he was teaching at the time to supplement his writing income. George Orwell was generally used by new acquaintances, while he retained Eric Blair for legal purposes. Orwell supplemented a precarious existence as a writer by working in a bookshop. He experienced repeated attacks of pneumonia at this stage. After the death of his first wife in 1945 he brought up an adopted son with the help of his sister. During the war he worked for the BBC in the Talks Department of the Indian Service.

Literary heritage

Orwell's best known work is *Animal Farm* (1945),¹ an allegorical fable that attacks the Soviet system. It was written in the wake of his experience as a member of the International Brigade, which consisted of several factions and in 1937 supported the Spanish republic against the army revolt led by General Franco. The latter was supported by the fascist governments of Germany and Italy. Although an ardent socialist, Orwell became disillusioned with Russia, which favoured the Spanish communist group of the leftist alliance. The latter regarded the Marxist fighting group which Orwell had joined as too extreme in its socialism. Its members were arrested by the Spanish republican government and some died in prison. Orwell barely managed to escape to England. *Animal Farm* is a parody of the Soviet system and its events and characters are caricatures of those of the Russian revolution.

Orwell's other great work, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,² written in 1948, is also a satire. It describes life in the dystopia, Oceania, as one without privacy, individuality and activity which the state may consider a threat to itself. It is set in England and recounts the tribulations of two young lovers, Winston and Julia, who attempt a human relationship in a system controlled by 'Big Brother', who monitors all activity on a telescreen transmitted from every home. The adjective Orwellian, used to describe these concepts, has entered our vocabulary and is applied today to any technology such as bugging. The term 'newspeak' describes the use of language as a political tool. Examples thereof include 'pacification' for bombardment of defenceless villages and 'fraternal assistance' and 'protective reaction' for attack.

These two well-known works have diverted attention from Orwell's essays,³ considered to be his best writing; they display a mastery of English prose and show Orwell to have been a perceptive student of his times. The essays handle divergent subjects and include an account of *How the Poor Die*, his experience as an indigent patient with pneumonia in Paris in 1929 while working there as a kitchen hand. This was the first of his elective experiences of the life of the poor and outcast in order to obtain literary material. He refers in the essay to callous treatment by students and staff, and an agonising experience of scarification and cupping to his chest that caused blistering prior to the application of a mustard plaster pack. He subsequently spent periods in doss-houses with tramps and the unemployed in London in 1932, and recounted these experiences in *Down and Out in Paris and London*.⁴ His next documentary was a study of unemployment in the coal-mining areas around Wigan. This was published as *The Road to Wigan Pier*.⁵ Orwell considered his last documentary, *Homage to Catalonia*,⁶ which dealt with the Spanish Civil War, to be his best writing. There were two reasons for satisfaction. He considered the camaraderie of the battlefield and the casual discipline of his group as representative of true socialism. As a member of the Officers Training Corps at Eton, he had also wished to experience the trench warfare of World War I, which fascinated his generation. In reality he found the civil war in Spain a 'bad copy of 1914 - 1918' with 'mud lice and stagnation' in cold conditions. This illustrates his contradictory character: having experienced serious chest infections every winter since childhood, he still chose to undergo these hardships.

Orwell was wounded in the throat during the 7 months from December 1936 that he spent on the battlefield. Historians consider his account a valuable reference work on the Spanish Civil War.

Orwell considered his novels inferior. The first, *Burmese Days*,⁷ reflected his sensitivity to the barriers of race and caste he observed while serving with the Burma police and his rejection of the imperial system.

Tuberculosis

Orwell's recurrent chest problems commenced at the age of 2 years when his mother records in her diary that he had attacks of 'bronchitis' and was kept in bed for long periods. A friend relates⁸ that when Orwell lived alone in cheap lodgings in London in 1928 while trying to establish himself as a writer after his return from India, he was 'far from well', with inadequate heating, clothing and food. She considered him to be 'pre-tubercular'. That was in 1929 when he began a 3-year period of living and working with the underprivileged in England and Paris for the purposes of documentary research. On his return to England in 1933 he had a serious attack of pneumonia while teaching to supplement his writing income. While investigating working conditions in the coalfields at Wigan in 1936, he developed a severe bronchitis after an underground observation spell.

Only in 1938 was Orwell finally diagnosed as having tuberculosis. This was on his return from trench warfare in Spain, and it is probable that the repeated episodes of winter chest infections from infancy were progressions from primary tuberculosis to tuberculosis pneumonia or secondary infections on tubercle. He had a sudden severe haemoptysis⁹ in March 1938 and was admitted to a sanatorium in Kent. Its source was a tuberculosis lesion in the left lung. He was treated with strict bed rest and only allowed to use his typewriter after 3 months. Orwell progressed well enough to be discharged after 6 months to recuperate in Morocco with the financial help of a benefactor. After spending some years in London, from where he made trips to France, Germany and Austria as a war correspondent in 1945, Orwell moved in 1946 to what was to be his last home, an isolated farmhouse on the island of Jura in the Hebrides. Here he commenced writing his final work, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but had a relapse requiring admission to a sanatorium¹⁰ in Glasgow with an extensive cavity of the left lung with a right apical lesion. He underwent crushing of the phrenic nerve in the cervical region to paralyse and elevate the diaphragm, followed by artificial pneumoperitoneum — the introduction of air to the abdominal cavity as a form of lung relaxation therapy to enhance this effect. Through contacts in the USA, he was able to secure 70 g of the new drug streptomycin at a cost of \$300, which he could now afford given an adequate income from the publication of *Animal Farm*. After 50 days of 1 g per day he developed a hypersensitivity to streptomycin with a general rash, exfoliation, oral ulceration and loss of hair and nails. These resolved on cessation of treatment and he was able to return to Jura after 7 months to complete *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This was done with difficulty, as he was too weak to work more than half a day. His condition deteriorated, he was forced to give up living in Jura and in 1949 was admitted to a private sanatorium,¹¹ in the Cotswold hills. This provided superior accommodation in

private chalets with luxuries such as central heating; rest and fresh air were the basic treatments. He was well able to afford these amenities, not only on account of the extraordinary success of *Animal Farm* but because *Ninety Eighty-Four*, published that year, had been selected Book of the Month in the USA. Orwell comments in his notebook that 'one cannot help feeling the difference in the texture of life when one is paying one's own keep', as opposed to that in the government-subsidised institutions he had experienced. He appreciated the quietness with 'none of those abominable rattling trolleys' as everything was brought by hand. There was 'not much noise of radios either — all the patients have headphones', and the left-wing socialist evidently enjoyed the benefits of capitalism! However, his radicalism came to the fore in a notebook entry commenting on the 'cultivated accents' of 'upper-class English voices' of visitors to this most expensive block of chalets. 'And what voices! A sort of over-fedness, a fatuous self-confidence, a constant bah-bahing of laughter about nothing, above all a sort of heaviness and richness combined with a fundamental ill-will . . . People one instinctively feels . . . are the enemies of anything intelligent or sensitive or beautiful.'

As Orwell's progress was not satisfactory he was moved to University College Hospital⁸ in London. The consultant reported 'severe disease of the left lung and a relatively slight amount on the right' and as his 'prognosis was hazardous' he was warned that 'if he ceases to try to get well and settles down to write another book he is almost certain to relapse quickly'. Another book would not have been necessary financially as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had the prospect of bringing in £10 000 - 15 000 and he could afford the £17 per day for his private room.

Despite his poor condition he married Sonia Bronell, a journalist, in a ward ceremony in October 1949. She was 31 and they had been friends for some years. He was 46. They had been married for 95 days when he died suddenly and alone of a massive haemoptysis on 21 January 1950. At the time arrangements were in progress to move him by chartered aircraft to a sanatorium in Switzerland, a venture regarded by his physician and friends as a forlorn hope. Cyril Conolly,⁹ friend and writer, offered this perspective on Orwell's illness:

'The tragedy of Orwell's life is that when at last he achieved fame and success he was a dying man and knew it. He had fame and was too ill to leave his room; money and nothing to spend it on; love in which he could not participate; he tasted the bitterness of dying. But in his years of hardship he was sustained by a genial stoicism, by his excitement about what was going to happen next and by his affection for other people.'

Epilogue

Orwell's funeral arrangements (Crick,⁸ p. 403) epitomise his ambivalent character. These were left in the hands of his friends and fellow writers, Anthony Powell and Malcolm Muggeridge, his executors, whom he had requested to arrange that his 'body shall be buried (not cremated) according to the rites of the Church of England in the nearest convenient cemetery . . .' with 'Eric Arthur Blair' on a plain brown stone.⁸ This created a problem, as Orwell had had no connection with any church. A vicar who had never heard of Orwell was found to perform the ceremony in the

country churchyard of All Saints, Sutton Courtenay, near the family estate of David Astor and through his good offices. He was the owner of the newspaper *The Observer* and had befriended Orwell during his last years. It required the influence of a newspaper magnate to get the left-wing sceptic buried in sacred ground.

Contrary to the international ethics of left-wingers, Orwell was essentially nationalistic in his love for England, especially its language and the liturgies of the English Church. Furthermore his personal tastes, as quoted by Crick,⁸ were closer to capitalism than socialism:

'I like English cookery and English beer, French red wines, Spanish white wines, Indian tea, strong tobacco, 'coal fires, candle-light and comfortable chairs. I dislike big towns, noise, motor cars, the radio, tinned food, central heating and "modern furniture".'

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50 years ago . . .

Measures by British doctors of the Indian Army Medical Corps on the Indo-Burmese Border during World War II have resulted in three important discoveries. These will profoundly influence future military malaria control.

. . . They are:

- (a) The use of suppressive mepacrine, which must lead to a considerable reduction of malaria once its administration is finally placed on a firm basis.
- (b) The introduction of D.D.T., which will enable a more rapid and a more complete control of larger areas than has been possible with the methods hitherto employed.
- (c) The use of repellent fish-nets, which will protect patrols and troops in contact with the enemy, malaria in whom has so far been difficult if not impossible to prevent.

It is felt that the narrow margin of safety conferred by the anti-malarial measures hitherto employed [including anti-larval drainage and pyrethrum spraying] will be greatly widened by the introduction of the above three methods of protection, but strict and expert supervision will still be necessary if the ultimate goal of one hundred per cent. protection is to be attained.

(Brigadier M. K. Afridi and Lieut.-Col. J. Hay Arthur, *S A Medical Journal*, 13 October 1945, p. 361.)