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978-0-521-76923-5 - The Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell

John Rodden and John Rossi

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The Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell

Arguably the most influential political writer of the twentieth century, George Orwell remains a crucial voice for our times. Known worldwide for his two bestselling masterpieces – *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a gripping portrait of a dystopian future, and *Animal Farm*, a brilliant satire on the Russian Revolution – Orwell has been revered as an essayist, journalist, and literary-political intellectual, and his works have exerted a powerful international impact in the post-World War II era. The *Cambridge Introduction* examines Orwell's life, work, and legacy, addressing his towering achievement and his ongoing appeal. Combining biographical detail with close analysis of his writings, the book considers the various genres in which Orwell wrote: realistic novel, essay, reportage, fable, and anti-utopia. Written for both new and for already well-informed readers of Orwell's work, the present study concludes with an extended reflection on why George Orwell has enjoyed a literary afterlife unprecedented among modern authors in any language.

JOHN RODDEN has taught at the University of Virginia and the University of Texas at Austin. He is currently Visiting Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages at Tunghai University, Taiwan. He has published nine books on Orwell, including *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell* (2007). He is presently working on a co-edited volume, *Orwell: Orienting Asian Perspectives*, with Henk Vynckier, Professor at Tunghai University.

JOHN ROSSI is Professor Emeritus of History at La Salle University, Philadelphia. Along with his interest in George Orwell, he has also written extensively about major topics in British history, particularly the life and times of Winston Churchill.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521132558

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First published 2012

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Rodden, John.

The Cambridge introduction to George Orwell / John Rodden, John Rossi.
pages cm

ISBN 978-0-521-76923-5 (hardback)

1. Orwell, George, 1903–1950. I. Rossi, John, 1936– II. Title.

PR6029.R8Z7752 2012

828'.91209–dc23

[B]

2012000082

ISBN 978-0-521-76923-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-13255-8 Paperback

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To Peter Davison
Friend, colleague, and editor *extraordinaire*

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Preface

Since his death in January 1950 at the age of forty-six, George Orwell's critical and popular reputation has ascended and spread wings. Three major biographies were published during the last decade and Orwell's papers have been edited in twenty volumes by the British scholar Peter Davison. Special studies dealing with Orwell's career and writings appear annually.

Recognized internationally chiefly for his last two masterpieces – *Animal Farm* (1945), his brilliant satire on the Russian Revolution, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), his gripping dystopian portrait of the future – Orwell's other body of writing also enjoys an appreciative audience today.

Our study examines the reasons for Orwell's ongoing appeal. Combining biography with an analysis of his writings, we focus on the main literary genres in which Orwell wrote: his traditional novels, his essays, and his documentary journalism.

In the 1930s, Orwell struggled to write realistic fiction. Two of his novels in particular, *Burmese Days* and *Coming Up for Air*, exhibit skillfully developed characters and descriptive passages even as they reveal the limitations of his fictional imagination.

Orwell's essays are among his best writing. He took a format that was being swamped by belles-lettres and breathed new life into it. In his greatest essays – "A Hanging," "Shooting an Elephant," and "Politics and the English Language" – Orwell discovered settings and subject matters that suited the prose style that he had developed: clear, direct, pared of artifice. By writing about topics avoided by serious authors (comic postcards, murder mysteries, and other mundane everyday things), Orwell also helped create the genre of popular cultural studies.

"Good prose," he once wrote, "is like a windowpane, it hides nothing." Orwell's conversational prose influenced a generation of writers and critics.

We also believe that in his documentary journalism, such as *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell pioneered the emerging role of serious investigative journalist at its best.

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Finally, Orwell created a persona that has won the admiration and trust of generations of Western intellectuals. It is the image of the honest man who recognizes his own flaws. This persona turned Orwell in the decades following his premature death into a mythic figure who has spawned imitators in pursuit of his mantle. Our study concludes with an analysis of the powerful myth of “St. George Orwell.”

An original writer and thinker who lived a life of political commitment and social action, George Orwell warrants literary and public attention today.

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Acknowledgments

It is both a pleasure and an honor to have the opportunity to present a cherished author of mine to a new generation of readers in this *Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell*. This study marks my eighth book devoted to Orwell. It is a surprising and wondrous pleasure for me that I continue to learn from his rich and multifaceted work, to discover fresh perspectives about his complicated life and checkered legacy, and above all to gain unexpected insights about these matters from fellow students of his writings.

My debts to both colleagues and friends for sharing their perceptions about Orwell are too many to enumerate here. But let me at least acknowledge the deepest one: to my co-author, John P. Rossi, Professor Emeritus of History at La Salle University in Philadelphia. I have known Jack for nearly four decades, ever since my undergraduate days, and it has been a highlight of my last decade to collaborate with him on several essays about British and American intellectuals, including Orwell. *The Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell* marks our most ambitious joint undertaking, and it has proven yet again to be an intellectually edifying and personally fulfilling experience to learn from Jack anew. These chapters represent a fully cooperative venture – an act of scholarly “teamwork” as intellectual fraternity – and it has been wonderfully enlightening to share our drafts and our doubts in the course of its composition. For me, the most gratifying intellectual outcome of our miniature socialist collective is that I have simply grown further in my respect for Orwell’s literary talents, particularly because I do not consider him to be a naturally gifted writer. He had to work very hard at the craft, and he had to keep on working, in order to become the writer whom he hoped to be. I am enormously impressed with his dogged persistence and his towering achievement. More than ever, I consider him an exemplary figure, not only for aspiring writers and intellectuals, but for us all as citizens.

More than ever, he stands before me as my “intellectual big brother.”

A final word about this book’s dedication is in order. After conferring with Jack Rossi about our collaboration and our larger debts regarding this project,

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both of us wish to acknowledge an academic elder whose own editorial efforts have been indispensable for introducing Orwell to countless new students to his work: Peter Davison.

A scholar's scholar and the dean of Orwell editors, Peter is widely and deservedly known as the editor of the 20-volume *Complete Works of George Orwell*, along with an excellent short study of Orwell's literary and publishing career, among other books. These contributions to Orwell scholarship represent a labor of love that is rare in academic life today.

Quite apart from his scholarly achievements, however, Peter is an extraordinarily generous human being, who readily shares his encyclopedic knowledge of Orwelliana and his sovereign understanding of Orwell's life and times with anyone, whether a seasoned colleague or a fresh student of Orwell's work. I'm always astounded to read an essay on Orwell by Peter, because I usually feel that I am starting from scratch on the topic, as if I had never read any books or criticism about George Orwell before! This would be a humbling, if not humiliating, experience if it were not outweighed by the sheer intellectual excitement of following the argument of a patient teacher who soon infects me with his passion and enthusiasm for his topic. Without exception, Peter succeeds admirably every time. I know that Jack Rossi shares my conviction about all this, for we often say to each other: "We need to consult Davison's work on this point." Or I will simply tell Jack: "I need to ask Davison about that!"

For all these reasons and more, this book is for Peter.

John Rodden
December 2011

Chronology

- 1903 June 25. Eric Arthur Blair born in Motihari, Bengal.
- 1904 His mother returns to England with children and settles at Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire.
- 1911–16 Boards at St. Cyprian’s private preparatory school at Eastbourne, Sussex.
- 1917–21 King’s Scholar at Eton. Contributes to *The Election Times* and *College Days*.
- 1922–27 Serves with Indian Imperial Police in Burma.
- 1927–28 Tramping expeditions to East End of London.
- 1928–29 Lives in working-class district of Paris. Begins early drafts of *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *Burmese Days*.
- 1930–31 Returns to England.
- 1932–33 Teaches full-time at The Hawthorns, a small private school for boys, in Hayes, Middlesex.
- 1933 January 9. *Down and Out in Paris and London*, by “George Orwell,” published by Victor Gollancz.
- 1934 October 25. *Burmese Days* published by Harper & Brothers, New York.
- 1934–36 October 1934 – January 1936. Part-time assistant at Booklover’s Corner, 1 South End Road, Hampstead.
- 1935 March 11. *A Clergyman’s Daughter* published by Gollancz.
- 1936 January 31 – March 30. In north of England for a book on unemployment conditions.
 April 20. Publication of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* by Gollancz.
 June 9. Marries Eileen O’Shaughnessy at parish church in Wallington, Hertfordshire.
 September. “Shooting an Elephant,” *New Writing*.
- 1937 January–June. Serves in Independent Labour Party contingent with militia of the POUM (Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification) during the Spanish Civil War.

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- March 8. *The Road to Wigan Pier* published by Gollancz in trade and Left Book Club editions.
- May 20. Shot in throat by fascist sniper at Huesca.
- June 23. Escapes with Eileen from Spain into France by train.
- 1938 April 25. *Homage to Catalonia*, having been refused by Gollancz, is published by Secker & Warburg.
- 1938–39 September 12 – March 26. In French Morocco (mainly at Marrakech); writes *Coming Up for Air*, published June 12 by Gollancz.
- 1940 March 11. *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* published by Gollancz.
- 1941 February 19. *The Lion and the Unicorn* published by Secker & Warburg (first of Searchlight Books series edited by Orwell and T. R. Fyvel).
- 1941–43 August 1941 – November 1943. Talks assistant, later talks producer, in Indian section of BBC's Eastern Service.
- 1943 November 24. Resigns from BBC and joins *Tribune* as Literary Editor (until 16 February 1945).
- 1945 March 29. Eileen Blair dies.
- August 17. Publication of *Animal Farm* by Secker & Warburg in an edition of 4,500 copies.
- 1946 February 14. *Critical Essays* published by Secker & Warburg. *Animal Farm* published in USA.
- 1947 Writes "Such, Such Were the Joys"; completed about May 1948. First draft composed as early as 1946.
- December 20. Patient in Hairmyres Hospital, East Kilbride (near Glasgow), suffering from tuberculosis; stays seven months.
- 1948 July 28. At Barnhill, Jura, for five months.
- 1949 January 6 – September 3. Patient in Cotswold Sanatorium Cranham, Gloucestershire, with serious case of tuberculosis.
- June 8. Publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by Secker & Warburg.
- July. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appears as Book-of-the-Month Club selection.
- October 13. Marries Sonia Brownell.
- 1950 January 21. Dies of pulmonary tuberculosis, age forty-six.
- January 26. Funeral at Christ Church, Albany Street, London. Buried, as Eric Arthur Blair, All Saints Cemetery, Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire.