Introduction

Just days before he died in January 1950, George Orwell (born Eric Arthur Blair in 1903) penned in his notebook one of the epigrams that typified his stylistic talents: "After 50, everyone has the face he deserves."[1] Unfortunately, he never lived to fifty. He died at age forty-six, on the threshold of becoming "a famous author," his boyhood dream.[2] In the years since his death his fame has only grown.

Orwell's active literary life spanned less than two decades and yet he became perhaps the best-known English literary figure of the first half of the twentieth century. As he declared in "Why I Write" (1946), Orwell aspired to raise "political writing into an art."[3] In his greatest essays and his two final masterpieces, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), he succeeded. In a poll done by Waterstone's, the English bookstore chain, readers ranked Orwell's last two works as the second and third most influential books of the twentieth century. (J. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* cycle came in first.)

Orwell initially wanted to write traditional fiction ("enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings"),[4] and in the 1930s he produced four such novels. They vary greatly in quality. *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) is subpar for him, though his *Burmese Days* (1934) and *Coming Up for Air* (1939) exhibit impressive novelistic skill – the former for its portrait of the British Empire in decline, the latter in its foreshadowing of World War II. All his novels were drawn from his own experiences. Although he tried to recreate them in his fiction, he lacked the imaginative gifts of a D. H. Lawrence or James Joyce. Orwell rejected many of his early writings in later years. But he did believe that *Coming Up for Air* could have been a considerable success if it had not been victimized by its publication date – it appeared in July 1939, just weeks before World War II broke out.

Orwell's finest writings, at least until *Animal Farm* (1945), are his essays and his documentaries, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), which addresses the Depression in England's post-industrial north, and *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), which relates his experience in the Spanish Civil War. These works showed that Orwell had mastered a crisp, clear literary style, a mode of

composition purged of excess words, one that spoke directly to the reader. His deceptively simple prose was actually, according to biographer Michael Shelden, "the product of a highly sophisticated artistic process."[5] His "plain man" style would ultimately endear Orwell to generations of writers throughout the English-speaking world.

Orwell's essays and documentaries also show him to be a talented journalist. Later in his career he would edit the radical leftwing weekly, *Tribune*, and write a popular column that he called "As I Please." It was as idiosyncratic as its title and its author, dealing with anything that took Orwell's fancy: the names of English flowers, how to make a cup of tea, the decline of the English murder mystery, the habits of the common English toad, and so on. His friend Julian Symons noted that there was a deceptive child-like enjoyment of simple things in much of Orwell's writing. "Deceptive" is the operative word. Orwell had mastered the ability to say profound things in clear yet powerful prose. "Good prose," he wrote, "should be like a window pane";[6] it should hide nothing.

Orwell's style redirected the writing of modern English literary prose away from baroque complexity and rotund Johnsonian circuitousness toward smooth, straightforward journalistic directness. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the influence of his oft-reprinted essay, "Politics and the English Language" (1946), which quickly entered the curricula of secondary and university English syllabi. Here Orwell argued that all bad writing is morally wrong as well as politically and esthetically flawed. He also formulated six rules for good writing, which include: use short words instead of long ones, avoid foreign phrases, and cut words if you can do so. His sixth rule was typical of Orwell: break all of these rules rather than write something vulgar. In another Orwell touch, he disarmed the wary reader by noting that on "looking back through the essay" he had probably "committed the very faults I'm protesting against."[7]

Certain themes run through Orwell's oeuvre: his patriotism, his distrust of intellectuals, and his fear of a totalitarian future – especially, though not exclusively, its communist form. Orwell was that rare socialist who was internationalist and yet also patriotic. He was a cultural patriot, never a nationalist or jingoist, a champion of what biographer Bernard Crick called a "gentler patriotism."[8] Orwell's love for all things English, above all the countryside and native customs and habits, runs through his writing. In his first literary success, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), Orwell revealed this deep affection (and also gave evidence of his growing talent for descriptive prose). After his year in Paris in 1928–29, there were many things that made

him glad to be in England once more, he wrote, among them "bathrooms, armchairs, mint sauce, new potatoes properly cooked, brown bread, marmalade, beer made with veritable hops. . ." He added a typical Orwell caveat: "if you can pay for them."[9]

Orwell's patriotism served to divide him from his fellow socialists. His conversion was a gradual process that began in the early 1930s when he first encountered poverty among tramps and the destitute. At first there was a strong Tory anarchist element in his make-up, a William Cobbett-like anger toward the Establishment. As he noted in *The Road to Wigan Pier:* "For a long time, I seemed to spend half my time denouncing the insolence of bus drivers and the other half denouncing the evils of capitalism."

A pair of transformative events in Orwell's life led him to embrace socialism fully: his first-hand experience of mass unemployment and suffering in the coal-mining regions of the north of England and his soldiering in the Spanish Civil War. They turned Orwell into a committed, if idiosyncratic, man of the left. He would later write that it was in Spain that he became a convinced socialist. Yet in Britain his democratic socialism remained suspect on the Marxist left throughout his life and after.

When Orwell returned from the civil war in Spain in 1937, he sought to tell what he had witnessed, particularly the betrayal of the revolution by the Stalinists. Orwell had concluded that fighting fascism required opposing or exposing all forms of totalitarianism, including communism. As he later wrote in an essay on the writer Arthur Koestler, "The sin of nearly all left wingers from 1933 onwards is that they wanted to be anti-fascist without being anti-totalitarian."[10]

When Orwell tried to get that message out, the London literary left blocked him. His articles and reviews were rejected by the leading leftwing journal in England, *New Statesman*. Orwell never forgave those who sought to silence him. The whole experience only deepened his suspicion of those who exercised power, political and cultural. The roots of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be found in Orwell's experiences in Spain and afterward in England.

Orwell's patriotism came to the fore most strongly in the early years of World War II. He had briefly flirted with pacifism, even joining the leftwing (yet anti-war) Independent Labour Party in 1938. But when the war broke out in September 1939, he knew that he would fight even if it meant defending "the bad [English capitalism] against the worst [fascism]."[11] In an essay about his rejection of pacifism, "My Country Right or Left," Orwell wrote that the war showed him that he "was a patriot at heart, would not sabotage or act against my own side, would support the war, would fight in it if possible."[12]

During the first two years of the war (1939–41), Orwell believed that there was a realistic chance for a revolutionary change to socialism in England. He hoped that the dangerous, near-fatal crisis that England faced in 1940 would lead the heretofore opposed working and middle classes to understand their fates as linked.

This never developed, and Orwell as a result soon turned to the issue that came to obsess him – his fear of communism and the related loss of the concept of objective truth. Almost all of his writings in the last years of his life revolve around these two themes. In 1944 he told a friend that "the willingness to criticize Russia and Stalin is the test of intellectual honesty."[13]

In the postwar years, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* firmly established Orwell's reputation as a writer. The satirical portrait of the betrayal of the Russian Revolution in the form of an animal fable showed that Orwell's literary talents were on a par with one of his idols, Jonathan Swift. *Animal Farm* was Orwell's first literary triumph. It not only became a worldwide bestseller and made Orwell rich, but it also won him a wide audience for his views on the corruption of the language. Essays such as "Politics and the English Language," "Notes on Nationalism," "Second Thoughts on James Burnham," "Politics versus Literature" – all written around the same time as *Animal Farm* – demonstrate that Orwell, more than any contemporary writer, recognized how the very concept of historical truth was disappearing.

Nineteen Eighty-Four was written in the late 1940s, during which time Orwell battled the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him. His nightmarish portrait of the near-future is terrifying. Through the experience of its protagonist, Winston Smith, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* sketched out what the totalitarian specter threatened. Truth would disappear, history would be rewritten, individual identity would be smothered by the state, and sheer terror would rule. "If you want to imagine the future," Orwell wrote, "imagine a boot stomping on a human face."[14] It was as if Orwell was saying there would be no future, that indeed history itself would cease. Appearing as it did as the Cold War commenced, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* struck many readers as a prophecy, which only added to the book's impact.

Orwell was actually not as pessimistic as the doomsayers and alarmists. The novel itself holds out a margin of hope – the "proles" would represent the hope for the future. After Orwell's death, some commentators argued that he himself had lost all hope, an interpretation undermined by the fact that he was actively sketching new projects – a long essay on Evelyn Waugh among them. As he remarked on his deathbed to a friend, he believed he would not die so long as

he had another book in him. That proved to be a false prophecy. He died of a severe hemorrhage of the lung on January 21, 1950.

Yet his literary fame was just beginning, and he has experienced an afterlife not only unique among English authors of his generation, but indeed unprecedented among modern writers in any language. His work has become so deeply imprinted in the cultural imagination that Orwell today occupies a status in the contemporary *Zeitgeist* comparable to Milton, Dickens, and even Shakespeare in earlier centuries – and, unlike them, a place not confined to the medium of literature or to the English-speaking world.

Chapter 1

Life and context

Background and schooldays

George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair on June 25, 1903, in Motihari in the eastern part of Bengal Province, India. (For consistency, we will refer to Eric Blair as George Orwell throughout despite the fact that he didn't adopt that pen name until 1933.) Orwell would carefully categorize his family as "lower upper middle class," typical of his fascination with all matters relating to class. His family background was rather better than that. One ancestor on his father's side had married a daughter of the Earl of Westmoreland. Orwell's father, Richard Walmsley Blair, was descended from an eighteenth-century family that had made its living in the expansion of the British Empire. Richard Blair was born in 1857 and joined the Indian Civil Service in 1875 as an agent in the Opium Department. He served in that capacity with moderate success until his retirement in 1912.

Although she also was born in England, Ida Limouzin, Orwell's mother, was of French descent. The Limouzin family had settled in the Far East where they were engaged in the timber business in Burma. While on a trip to India, Ida Limouzin met and married Richard Blair who was eighteen years her senior. The marriage was a typical late Victorian arrangement. Two children were born in India: Marjorie in 1898 and Eric five years later. In 1904 Orwell's mother took the two children to England where they settled in Henley-on-Thames in Oxfordshire. Orwell would not see his father again until he was

eight years old except for a brief visit in 1907 when his sister, Avril, was conceived. The lack of a male authority figure would have consequences later in Orwell's life.

In adulthood Orwell often spoke as if his family's financial position was precarious. This is hardly correct. His father's pension of over £400 was more than enough to provide a comfortable level of life.[1] The family moved about frequently, renting large homes in respectable neighborhoods.

Eric was the middle child, with one sister five years older and another five years younger. He was never very family oriented though he was closer to his mother than his father. With his father in India, Eric was raised in a feminine atmosphere by his mother, her sisters, and his two female siblings. This situation created certain tensions. On the one hand he liked women and enjoyed being spoiled by them. On the other he took them for granted, but he never really understood the feminine mind. His novels reveal an inability to penetrate the female mind. Dorothy in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, Rosemary in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, and even Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are caricatures created by a male mind that doesn't understand women.[2]

Eric's first years were happy. He loved the Oxfordshire countryside, enjoying hunting, fishing, swimming, and just rambling about. His youth established his love of nature. He kept rabbits, dogs, and all kinds of pets. He collected butterflies and developed affection for the plants and flowers of his native England. He never lost this love of the simple things of nature. His journalism shows both sensitivity to the environment far ahead of its time and a love for the plain names of English flowers.

As a young boy he formed a close friendship with a family nearby, the Buddicoms, whose daughter, Jacintha, became his first love. He led the Buddicom children on expeditions around the countryside and was the neighborhood leader in games. Jacintha discovered years later that the famous author of *Animal Farm* was the Eric Blair she knew. She got in touch with him and they exchanged letters. Her affectionate portrait of the young Eric in *Eric and Us* published in 1974 remains one of our best sources for his youth, counteracting many of his claims of a gloomy childhood.[3]

Ida Blair often read aloud to Eric during his early boyhood. He was fascinated by stories and by the sounds of certain words and wrote a poem when he was a child which compared the spokes of a chair to tigers' teeth, an allusion that showed some facility with words and was probably borrowed from William Blake's poem "The Tiger."

Young Orwell was a voracious reader. Kipling, Jack London, Shaw, and especially H. G. Wells fascinated him. From them he absorbed a portrait of a rich, smug Edwardian world that was in need of radical change. Like many

bright children he never lost the sense of wonder at the world that reading opened for him. He would remain an Edwardian radical for the rest of his life. In the words of his friend Cyril Connolly: Orwell was "a revolutionary in love with 1910."[4]

At four Orwell was sent to a small school in the neighborhood run (according to Gordon Bowker's biography of Orwell) by French Ursuline nuns in Henley. Bowker's discovery of Orwell's exposure to Catholic nuns is interesting in light of his later rabid anti-Catholicism. Orwell made no mention of this experience in any of his writings.[5] Because he was precocious, arrangements were made when he was eight to send him to St. Cyprian's, a good preparatory school, near Eastbourne in Sussex.

St. Cyprian's was run by a husband and wife team, the Wilkes. The school had a reputation for producing scholars and winning places at some of the best English public schools including Eton and Harrow. Orwell's fees were reduced in the hope that he might he win a scholarship.

Orwell's experience at St. Cyprians constitutes one of the most controversial periods in his life. In his essay "Such, Such Were the Joys," written (according to Sir Bernard Crick) in 1940 not 1947 as the *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* states, Orwell portrays the harm preparatory schools (or "filthy private schools") could do to young boys on the brink of maturity.

Orwell was desperately unhappy at St. Cyprian's. He felt that he was an outsider among the sons of the rich. The portrait of the school and in particular of the Wilkes, whom he nicknamed "Sambo" and "Flip" in his essay, is unforgettable in its negativity. Vivid images such as the swimming bath with a turd floating in it, ceramic bowls with clotted stale bits of oatmeal on the rim, canings by Sambo and psychological intimidation by Flip have made "Such, Such Were the Joys" one of Orwell's most studied writings. Some commentators argue that the dark aspects of the essay foreshadow the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Others go even further and note the date given in the *Collected Essays* for the essay, 1947, and then connect "Such, Such Were the Joys" to the writing of Orwell's dystopian novel. To disprove this Crick went to great lengths in an Appendix to his biography of Orwell to show that the essay was written earlier, possibly in 1940.[6] There are questions about the essay's accuracy. Others who attended St. Cyprian's had fonder memories of the school and the Wilkes, but throughout his life Orwell never deviated from his opinion that preparatory schools harmed young boys.

Whatever psychological damage St. Cyprian's inflicted on Orwell it enabled him to win a scholarship to both Wellington College and Eton. He left St. Cyprian's possessing a store of memories that he would draw upon as a writer later in life.

Orwell attended Wellington for nine weeks but was unhappy with the military atmosphere and the false patriotism he found there. He transferred to Eton as soon as an opening developed. He was a King's Scholar in the class of 1916, one of seventy young men set apart from the thousand or so that made up Eton's student body. Unlike at St. Cyprian's where he worked hard, he slacked off badly at Eton. He learned little, largely educating himself, reading widely and doing only that school work which interested him. He became fluent in French but did poorly in most other subjects and was satisfied to finish in the lower part of his class throughout his five years at Eton.

Although an outsider, Orwell was happy at Eton. The school left the students alone to progress as they saw fit. Orwell made a handful of friends there such as Cyril Connolly, who would later figure prominently in his literary career, and Steven Runciman, the future historian of the Crusades. Orwell had developed a sense of privacy that enabled him to keep a separate set of friends, a quality that he would follow for the rest of his life.

At Eton, Orwell cultivated the role of the cynic and rebel which suited his persona, fueled by his sense of being a poor boy among the sons of the rich. He was painfully sensitive about his family's social and financial status and was embarrassed when they visited him on parents' day. This sense of alienation was not as great as at St. Cyprian's, a testament to Eton's ability to make room for the rebels. While at Eton he took up smoking for the first time, which contributed to the bouts of bronchitis that would plague him for the rest of his life.

Orwell had told Jacintha Buddicom that someday he would become a famous writer. He filled notebooks with poetry, short stories, and essays, and occasionally contributed to various Eton publications. Orwell was filing away memories and developing that sense of the ironic observer that would characterize much of his later literary work.

World War I overshadowed his days at Eton. He joined the Officers Training Corps which prepared the junior officers for the coming campaigns. But by the time he was old enough to understand the full ramifications of the war, he and his generation were alienated by the crude patriotism and absurd propaganda of the government. Later he would say that every educated young man of his generation was a socialist. In reality, he was part of the vanguard of the alienated and the disenchanted, imitation Lytton Stracheys who flourished in the postwar milieu.

When it came to planning his future, Orwell was not sure what direction he wanted to take. Many of his Eton contemporaries went up to Oxford or Cambridge, but given his mediocre academic record that was out of the question for him. Sometime in 1921 he decided to take the examinations for

the Indian Civil Service, thus following in his father's footsteps. Some commentators believe Orwell's decision was an attempt to win his father's respect. But unlike his father he chose to join the Indian Imperial Police not the Opium Department. He may have been the only Etonian to ever make this career move. Michael Shelden, in his authorized biography of Orwell, believes that his decision was a compound of the prestige and respect that being a policeman would engender.[7] The job also was lucrative. His salary would be £400 a year, a figure that almost matched his father's pension.

Bowker's biography attributes this choice to Orwell's belief that he had missed out on a great moment in history in being too young for World War I. Orwell believed that his generation really had not been tested.[8] Serving in the British Empire would compensate for this loss. At the very least, the Empire would provide a new adventure for the young Orwell. He was of two minds about the British Empire. As a budding radical he saw it as a sham, while his family's past, his reading of Kipling, Rider Haggard, and others gave the Empire a romantic gloss.

In August 1921 Orwell passed the entrance exam for the Indian Civil Service easily, doing particularly well in English and French and surprisingly well in the Latin and Greek that he had neglected since St. Cyprian's. As to his posting, he chose Burma, not the more desirable India, giving as his reason that he had family roots there. Two months later, in October 1921, the eighteen-year-old Orwell sailed for Burma to take up his post as an imperial policeman, a position that was to be one of the defining moments of his young life.

Burma and "the wasted years"

Orwell described his time in Burma as "five wasted years." These five years witnessed the crystallization of his decision to become a writer. His time in Burma also provided him with a storehouse of memories that he would draw upon for the rest of his life. Like Kipling who spent just twelve of his seventy-one years in the East but drew upon them again and again, Orwell did the same. From these "wasted years" he would produce a novel, *Burmese Days*, and two classic essays, "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant," that defined his unique documentary prose style.

Burma in October 1921 was in ferment. It had been annexed to the British Empire only in 1886 and was not integrated into England's imperial centerpiece, India. When after the war the British attempted to placate Indian nationalism by granting a degree of governmental participation, Burma was