CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85842-7 - The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell
Edited by John Rodden
Excerpt
More information

1

JOHN ROSSI AND JOHN RODDEN

A political writer

George Orwell was primarily a political writer. In his essay 'Why I Write' (1946), Orwell stated he wanted 'to make political writing into an art'. While he produced four novels between the years 1933 and 1939, it was clear that his real talent did not lie in traditional fiction. He seems instinctively to have understood that the documentary style he developed in his essays and his semi-autobiographical monograph, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1932), was unsuitable to the novel format. Ultimately, the reason for this is simple – what profoundly interested Orwell were political questions. His approach to politics evolved during the decade of the 1930s along with his own idiosyncratic journey from English radical to his unique, eccentric form of socialism.

Orwell claimed he had an unhappy youth. If one believes the memories of those like his neighbour Jacintha Buddicom, who knew him as a carefree, fun loving young boy, Orwell's claim of unhappiness seems exaggerated. In his essay 'Such, Such Were the Joys', he portrays his school, St Cyprian's, as an unpleasant amalgam of snobbery, bullying and petty acts of tyranny. The truth lies somewhere between these two extremes, something Orwell himself understood. 'Whoever writes about his childhood must beware exaggeration and self-pity', he wrote of his years at St Cyprian's.

Orwell's experiences at Eton were more positive. Although he failed to distinguish himself academically, he received a solid education, one that he drew on for the rest of his life. But what is true is that in these years Orwell first began to carve out for himself the persona of the outsider, a role he would play the rest of his life.

Too young for the First World War, Orwell at Eton experienced the reaction against the twisted nationalism and extreme propaganda of the war that became commonplace in the early 1920s. The young generation of the 1920s despised the 'old men' who had sent England to war and rejected all the values the pre-war generation believed in. Orwell says at this time he was, in reality, both a snob and a revolutionary. 'I seem to have spent half

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85842-7 - The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell
Edited by John Rodden
Excerpt
More information

the time in denouncing the capitalist system and the other half in raging over the insolence of bus-conductors'. At this stage of his life Orwell's political ideas were largely unformed, although he says he flirted with socialism like most young men. During his school years he rebelled against all forms of authority, or as he puts it in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 'a revolt of youth against age'. His rebellion was rooted in a belief that he didn't fit in. One form this anti-authoritarian stance took was a simple dislike of his better-off, nouveau riche fellow students. His initial political opinions – if they deserve to be called that – were little more than a facile form of egalitarianism.

The maturing of Orwell's political beliefs really can be dated from the five years (1922–27) he served as a policeman in Burma. Instead of following the traditional route of bright young men of going up to Oxford or Cambridge after graduating from Eton in 1921, Orwell joined the Indian Civil Service. He was young and a keen admirer of Kipling, and India promised adventure as well as a comfortable income. Perhaps it was also a way of appeasing his father for his mediocre performance at Eton.

Burma saw Orwell's naïve rebellion against authority take on a bitterly anti-imperial atmosphere. His egalitarianism now gave way to a hatred of the British Empire and all it represented. Culled from his essays about his job as a policeman and from references sprinkled throughout his other writings, it appears that Orwell grew disgusted ruling over people who despised him. He says in the autobiographical second part of *The Road to Wigan Pier* that 'in order to hate imperialism you have to be part of it'.

Orwell was highly regarded by his superiors. His anti-imperialism took on a peculiar form. Orwell came less to identify with the Burmese and other oppressed races of the Empire than to see the whole process as debasing the ruler even more than the ruled. The imperialist deceives himself, he argued, when he believes he is doing civilising work. The imperialist, he says, 'wears a mask and his face grows to fit it'. His Eton contemporary, Christopher Hollis, wrote that when he visited Orwell before he left the police, he already was a critic of what he called the racket of imperialism.

In his best writing about Burma, the novel *Burmese Days* (1934) and the essays 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936) and 'A Hanging' (1933), one can follow the development not only of Orwell's disenchantment with Empire, but also his growing radicalism. He came to hate not only what he was doing but also what he was becoming. As he writes in 'Shooting An Elephant': 'with one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny . . . with another part I thought of that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts'.

When Orwell resigned his position in the Indian Civil Service, his political development had not progressed much beyond the frustrated anger he

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85842-7 - The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell
Edited by John Rodden
Excerpt
More information

felt as a young man fresh from Eton. He hated the Empire, had difficulties dealing with authority, and was radical in a superficial way. His political ideas remained unformed. The only thing he was sure of when he returned to England was an 'immense sense of guilt that I had to expiate' for his part in enforcing the rules of an Empire he despised. All he wanted to do he says in *The Road to Wigan Pier* was 'to submerge himself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them on their side against the tyrants'.

If Burma confirmed Orwell's radicalism, unfocused as it was, the next four or five years gradually moved him further to the left, to an identification with the poor and the downtrodden.

Between 1930 and 1935 Orwell worked at becoming a writer. In those years he published three novels, numerous essays, book reviews, as well as a semi-autobiographical documentary of life on the edge of society, *Down and Out In Paris and London* (1933). The novels were traditional works of fiction without a strong political bent, although they all reflected a kind of vague radicalism and discontent with the direction of society. From *Down and Out* it would be difficult to extract any political meaning other than a general bias in favour of the poor and downtrodden. Running through all his early writing was an unfocused anger at the injustices of the capitalist system. Orwell, however, had no programme or even clear suggestions of how to solve society's ills. The best that one can say of Orwell's political views before 1935–36 is that they were a cross between Tory Anarchism and leftist outrage. Later he would say that he was something of a socialist even then but the evidence is lacking. Orwell was angry and in rebellion against the English society of his time, but as the novelist Anthony Powell shrewdly noted: 'Like most people in rebellion, he was more than half in love with what he was rebelling against'.

It was not until his publisher, the left wing socialist Victor Gollancz, asked him to study the conditions of the poor and unemployed in the North of England, that Orwell's views advanced beyond political pique. In January 1936 Orwell travelled north to investigate this area, among the hardest hit by the Depression. It was the turning point of his life. Bernard Crick, his biographer, calls this period of Orwell's life, 'The Crucial Journey'.

The book that emerged from Orwell's investigation, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, achieved two things. It made his reputation as a sharp critic of capitalism and it launched him on the road to his own eccentric brand of socialism. Orwell only spent a couple of months in the North of England gathering material for his book. Gollancz adopted *The Road to Wigan Pier* as part of his highly successful Left Book Club which he controlled. Gollancz got more than he bargained for.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85842-7 - The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell
Edited by John Rodden
Excerpt
More information

The Road to Wigan Pier divides into two distinct parts. The first section is a brilliant piece of reportage on what unemployment did to the working people of the north of England. There are unforgettable portraits of poverty: the tripe shop filled with black beetles in the house where he boarded, his trip down a coal mine, a woman glimpsed from a moving train trying to clear a blocked drain. Orwell's vivid, colloquial, almost matter-of-fact prose, first evidenced in 'A Hanging', reached maturity in part one of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. While completing the book, Orwell would write the essay, 'Shooting An Elephant', which clearly showed that he had found his voice. By 1936 Orwell had mastered the distinctive sense of someone talking directly to the reader that made his writing unique. He had come a long way as a writer in six years.

The second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier* embarrassed Gollancz. Orwell argued that in order to convince the public that socialism was the answer to England's problems, you first had to analyze why the movement failed to attract a mass following. The answer, he wrote, lies in the flaws of the socialists themselves. They were isolated from the working classes, and what is worse, looked down their noses at them. Unlike the working classes who Orwell argued possessed a real culture, socialism attracted a strange type of intellectual cut off from the people – in a celebrated passage he labelled them an unhealthy amalgam of fruit juice drinkers, nature cure quacks and nudists.

Until the socialists overcame this sense of distance from the working classes, Orwell believed there was little chance of their movement succeeding. The Marxist class argumentation he rejected as worthless logic chopping. The bourgeois baiting of the typical Marxist, he said, was a sign of weakness antagonising the very people you needed to convert. Despite his left wing views Orwell had little time for class warfare. He was an old-fashioned English radical in the sense that he believed that the English people had more features of their lives and history that united than divided them.

By the time he finished writing *The Road to Wigan Pier* in December 1936, Orwell had taken a major step toward socialism. For the rest of his life he would describe himself as a socialist. His brand of socialism, however, remained idiosyncratic, as eccentric as the man himself, combining egalitarianism, idealization of working class culture, and an intense dislike of Marxist bickering. Orwell's emphasis on egalitarianism is what separated him from many of his fellow socialists. He thought they wanted power, and he feared they wouldn't use it in the best interests of the working class. One could describe Orwell as a twentieth-century utopian socialist but for the fact that he distrusted all intellectual formulae based on power worship.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85842-7 - The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell
Edited by John Rodden
Excerpt
More information

If *The Road to Wigan Pier* demonstrated Orwell's embrace of socialism, his experiences in Spain during the Civil War completed the process while adding another dimension to his thought – a pervasive distrust of communism.

Early in 1937 Orwell went to Spain to fight on the Republican side. He spent six months there as a member of a Trotskyist-anarchist group, POUM, stationed on the Catalonia front. Spain changed him forever. When he first visited Barcelona he was thrilled to see a society in which the working classes were in control and where class distinctions seemed to have disappeared. He enjoyed the military atmosphere in Spain, spending about 100 days at the front. Toward the end of his stay, he was shot through the throat and invalided out of the war. Orwell had not understood the bitter divisions within the Republican camp when he went to Spain, and he underestimated the determination of the Communists to control all the Republican forces. He was shocked when his comrades in the POUM were labelled as objectively pro-fascist and then ruthlessly purged. Among the lasting impressions Orwell took from his time in Spain was that true socialism was possible, but the Communists would destroy any left wing forces they could not control.

Orwell was outraged when he returned to England and tried to tell how Stalin's agents were betraying the revolution in Spain. He discovered that his views were unacceptable. They contravened the Popular Front line of 'no enemies on the left'. Those parties not cooperating with the Communists were regarded as objectively fascist.

Orwell was disgusted by the way the war in Spain was distorted for political reasons and for the first time began to fear that the idea of objective truth was in danger of disappearing. 'I saw great battles reported', he wrote later, 'where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed . . . I saw newspapers in London retailing these lies and eager intellectuals building emotional superstructures over events that never happened'. ('Looking Back on the Spanish War', p. 197)

Orwell found that articles and reviews he wrote about Spain were rejected by leading left wing journals such as the *New Statesman*. The editor, Kingsley Martin, refused to run one of Orwell's Spanish articles on the grounds that it would 'cause trouble'. As a sop he offered Orwell a book on Spain to review but then rejected Orwell's review too. What pained Martin was Orwell's insistence that in Spain Fascism and Communism differed 'in degree, not in kind'. Orwell never forgave Martin whom he described as a 'decayed liberal'. Years later Orwell and Malcolm Muggeridge were having lunch and Orwell asked to change seats. When Muggeridge enquired why, Orwell said Martin was at an opposite table and he couldn't abide looking at his corrupt face.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85842-7 - The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell
Edited by John Rodden
Excerpt
More information

Orwell began writing a memoir of his Spanish experiences almost as soon as he returned in June 1937. Despite owning a contract for Orwell's next two publications, Gollancz rejected the book because of its political opinions. Fredric Warburg's small firm, Secker and Warburg, took it on and *Homage to Catalonia* was published in April 1938. It is in many ways one of the most personal of Orwell's books and the most powerful. His anger at the betrayal of socialist forces in Spain is overpowering. He tells the story from his personal standpoint while weaving in examples of communist perfidy.

Homage to Catalonia received decent reviews including a comment in *The Observer* that 'Mr. Orwell is a great writer', the first time that had been said of him. It was savaged in the left wing press, the communist *Daily Worker* calling it Trotskyist propaganda. *Homage to Catalonia* sold poorly in the Popular Front atmosphere of the late 1930s but it cemented Orwell's reputation as an arch-foe of communism.

Spain embittered Orwell and made him pessimistic about the future. He argued that Europe was drifting toward an imperialist war which would see the eventual triumph of some form of Fascism. If a war broke out between England and Germany, he said it would just be 'one band of robbers against another'. With all its flaws, socialism was the 'only real enemy Fascism has to face'. His faith in socialism remained strong but he was disgusted by its adherents' blind hero worship of Stalin's Soviet Union. Looking for a political home, Orwell joined the radical Independent Labour Party in 1938. He found their combination of a fierce anti-communism and a slightly anarchist version of socialism appealing. His conviction that the next war would lead to a fascist triumph even made their pacifism palatable. By this time Orwell knew what he was against: Fascism in all its forms. But he had difficulty articulating what kind of socialist he was. He would spend the last decade of his life defining his own esoteric brand of socialism.

On the eve of the Second World War, Orwell was in conflict with himself. He had lost his faith in the left in England. Aside from his novel, *Coming Up For Air*, which was published in June 1939, he wrote little in those two years save for some reviews and one significant essay, 'Marrakech', a reflection on how long it would take before the non-white races overthrew the domination of white imperialism. Orwell was rethinking his role as a writer. He had published four novels, none of which sold well or showed much understanding of traditional fiction. On the other hand, his documentary, semi-autobiographical, non-fiction revealed unique qualities. His best essays showed a talent for sociological insight combined with a crisp, adjective-free prose style. While considering his future, the Second World War broke out in September 1939.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85842-7 - The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell
Edited by John Rodden
Excerpt
More information

The war alleviated Orwell's pessimism. In fact he enjoyed its hardships and crises. He believed that a major conflict could create a revolutionary situation in England. His own bedrock patriotism had surfaced on the eve of the war and he was convinced that this concept could unite the otherwise class-ridden English nation.

During the first two years of the war, when England faced a serious threat of invasion and defeat, Orwell stressed the importance of revolutionary patriotism. He saw no contradiction between socialism and patriotism. In the face of the critical struggle against Nazi Germany, he wrote: 'a revolutionary has to be a patriot and a patriot has to be revolutionary'. It even was possible, he argued, to build 'socialism on the bones of a Blimp'.

The war also matured Orwell's socialism. He saw it as necessary if England was to survive and win the war. Over the next two years Orwell argued in a series of essays – most importantly, 'My Country, Right or Left', and the book, *The Lion and the Unicorn* – that the left wing intelligentsia failed to grasp that patriotism was the glue that bound the middle and working classes together and that it could serve as a lever for a people's revolution. By stressing the revolutionary nature of patriotism, Orwell was reacting against the way his enemies had portrayed him as a frightened bourgeois. He believed that 'the class racket', as he always referred to it, was a fraud. Unlike most Marxists, Orwell was convinced that nationalism trumped class identity. His fellow socialists, he said, had lost their fatherland but still needed something to believe in. For most socialists that belief was a romanticised version of the working class or, what was worse, Stalin's Russia. He noted that English leftists were 'ashamed of their own nationality'.

Orwell's linking of socialism and patriotism was too much for many on the left. They especially disliked *The Lion and the Unicorn*, dismissing it as little more than an argument in favour of social fascism. As in Spain, Orwell found himself politically isolated on the left. At the same time he was gaining recognition as an unorthodox, often original, political thinker.

Unable to secure a military commission because of his poor health, Orwell joined the BBC in June 1941, specialising in cultural programming aimed at India. By this time he believed that the quasi-revolutionary conditions that had prevailed in 1940 were disappearing. The focus in England, especially once Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, was on defeating the Axis. The English left, many of whom had been neutral up to this point, rallied to the Soviet cause. The left's amnesia about Stalin's purges and the Nazi-Soviet Pact reaffirmed Orwell's distrust of communism and its fellow travellers in England. For the left, Orwell wrote in 'Inside the Whale', communism was nothing more than 'the patriotism of the deracinated'.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85842-7 - The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell
Edited by John Rodden
Excerpt
More information

Orwell spent a little over two years at the BBC, years he regarded as wasted. He wrote numerous scripts for the Indian audience plus an occasional essay for Cyril Connolly's monthly, *Horizon*. The best of these, a study of comic postcards, 'The Art of Donald McGill', is a classic example of how Orwell could take a popular topic and mine it for profound insights about the nature of English society. From his time at the BBC Orwell absorbed many of the ideas that would later surface in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The Ministry of Truth, some elements of Newspeak, and the ghastly cafeteria in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were inspired by Orwell's time at the BBC.

In September 1943 Orwell resigned from the BBC. Two months later he was named the literary editor of the left wing weekly, *Tribune*. He was happy to return to serious writing and had already begun work on the book that would make him famous, *Animal Farm*.

Animal Farm had been incubating for years, at least as far back as Orwell's experiences with communist perfidy in Spain. He wanted to write a satire – he called it a fairy tale – about the way a revolution can be corrupted. *Animal Farm* perfectly correlates with the events in the Soviet Union in the years after the revolution, but does so through the guise of a beast fable. The allegory was both ingenious and ingenuous: a child and a sophisticated adult could understand *Animal Farm* at different levels.

It took less than a year to complete *Animal Farm*. Orwell then confronted the problem of finding a publisher because of the implied criticism of the Soviet Union. Gollancz wouldn't touch *Animal Farm* and the rest of the English publishing community rejected it out of hand. The Ministry of Information let it be known that they regarded the book as not in the national interest. It was the same argument over *Homage to Catalonia* again – Orwell was causing trouble for the left.

Fredric Warburg again came to the rescue. He took a chance and brought *Animal Farm* out in August 1945, just as the war ended. The first edition sold out in a matter of days and a second printing of 10,000, a large print run in those days of paper shortages, also sold out quickly. A year later *Animal Farm* appeared in the United States where it achieved greater success. Almost a half million copies sold, largely because the book was adopted as a Book of the Month Club selection. After fifteen years of struggling as a writer, Orwell had become famous and financially comfortable.

Animal Farm's timing was perfect. It came out just as the Cold War was intensifying. It also captured the growing doubts and fears about the future of Stalin's Russia that would crystallise in the West six months later with Winston Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech.

The popularity of *Animal Farm*, followed shortly by the successful publication of his *Critical Essays* in February 1946, enabled Orwell to leave

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85842-7 - The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell
Edited by John Rodden
Excerpt
More information

London, a city he never liked. The death of his wife on the eve of his triumph with *Animal Farm* left him alone to raise their adopted son, Richard. Her death also reaffirmed an idea Orwell had to move to the island of Jura off the west coast of Scotland. In May 1946 he took up residence there, entering what would be the last phase of his life.

By the war's end Orwell's health had deteriorated badly. His tuberculosis was serious – both lungs were infected. He would be in and out of hospitals for the rest of his life. None of this deterred him from starting a new life on Jura and beginning work on his last great work, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Orwell started the novel in August 1946. Like *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had been forming in his mind for years. His Spanish experiences, his frustrations with the BBC's bureaucracy and his growing conviction that the idea of objective truth was being undermined by totalitarianism all played a part in giving birth to Orwell's dystopia.

Nineteen Eighty-Four was written in a series of drafts between 1946 and the end of 1948. The title was a play on reversing the last two digits of the year he finished the novel. None of Orwell's work has generated such controversy. Some critics see it as an example of profound pessimism, Orwell's dark vision of what the future would be like. Others have argued that it was a reflection of the last stages of the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him. Christopher Hitchens believes that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is Orwell's only work of fiction that rises to the literary level of his essays.

The evidence that Orwell was depressed about the future is weak. He was doing what he had done so well since 1936 – writing a book which he hoped would point out the dangers of what happens when a revolution is betrayed. He had been gathering material on images of dystopia for years. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was designed to show how one man, Winston Smith, representing everyman, was controlled by the all-powerful forces of the state. The book posed the question: Can the individual survive in the face of the collective power of the modern state? Some of Orwell's insights were prophetic: the omnipresent telescreens, the manipulation of language by Newspeak, etc. But Orwell was not saying this had to happen. He was arguing that it *might* if the people were not alert to the way government can be corrupted by those who abused power. The book had clear connections to events in the Soviet Union under Stalin, but Orwell meant to generalise about what will happen to the free individual if the trend of concentrating power in the hands of the state wasn't reversed.

Many critics seized on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an indictment of socialism, which Orwell forcefully denied. He told an American labour leader, Francis A. Henson, that his book was not an attack on socialism or the British Labour Party but was designed to show 'the perversions to which a

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85842-7 - The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell
Edited by John Rodden
Excerpt
More information

centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism'.

When *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in 1949, Orwell was hospitalised in London. While there he married a second time. His wife Sonia Brownell had been Cyril Connolly's assistant at *Horizon* and was a well-known figure in London literary circles. For Orwell marriage was a defiant gesture – a way of saying he wanted to live. He kept a notebook during the last months of his life, which contained material for essays and articles he planned to write – hardly the sign of a man expecting to die. But die he did on 21 January 1950 of a massive hemorrhage of the lungs. He was six months shy of his 47th birthday.

The Politics of Posthumous Reputation

George Orwell died, but 'Orwell', the brilliant Cold Warrior and the man within the writings with the ever-living voice and compelling literary personality, did not die. Indeed, more than six decades after his death, he has still not died.

To the contrary, 'Orwell' is in some respects more alive today – as an intellectual and moral presence in Anglo-American culture – than he was during his own lifetime. Certainly the catchwords of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – 'Some animals are more equal than others', 'Big Brother', 'Newspeak', 'doublethink', 'thoughtcrime', and so on – are in far wider circulation today than they were at the time of his death. Orwell's afterlife brings to mind a famous line of Horace in his *Odes*: '*non omnis moriar*'. 'Not all of me will die'.

Without doubt, not all of 'Orwell' has died. His last two books, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, have sold almost fifty million copies in sixty-two languages, more than any other pair of books by a twentieth-century author. No other English writer of his generation – for example, not even Graham Greene or Evelyn Waugh – has matched his influence. His works remain in print and are still widely read.

But the outsized scale of Orwell's literary reputation is rivaled by the intense degree of political controversy surrounding it. As we have seen, he was chiefly a political writer during his lifetime, and the main interest in his work since his death has been shown by politically minded critics and readers.

Unfortunately, his politicised reception has resulted in his work undergoing distortion by admirers as well as adversaries. His last two works are variously taken as direct political statements or prophesies or satires, his fictional characters are read as autobiographical mouthpieces, his non-fiction

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org