

THE PARADOX
OF
GEORGE ORWELL

by

Richard J. Voorhees



Purdue University Studies

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 61-62508
Manufactured in the United States of America

Fourth Printing, June 1971

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PREFACE

THREE books, as well as dozens of articles, have already been written about George Orwell. All of the books are by British writers who knew him personally. Laurence Brander (*George Orwell*, 1954) and John Atkins (*George Orwell*, 1954) became acquainted with him during the War. Christopher Hollis (*A Study of George Orwell*, 1956) was at Eton with him and also saw him off and on for the rest of his life. Richard Rees (*George Orwell*, 1961) was a close friend during the last twenty years of Orwell's life. Although these books have the advantage of first-hand knowledge, this knowledge is limited by the respect of the authors for Orwell's wish that there be no biography of him; they have included in their books only those facts that have been previously recorded, some of them by Orwell's friends, but most of them by Orwell himself here and there in his published work.

The facts, in brief, are these. George Orwell was born in Bengal in 1903. His father was an official in the Indian Civil Service. Both of his parents were Scottish, and he was christened Eric Hugh Blair. (When he was twenty-seven, he took as a pseudonym the name by which he is generally known, Orwell from a river in Suffolk near which he once lived, and George as a typical English name.) At the age of eight he was sent as a scholarship boy to the preparatory school on the South Coast of England which he described in the essay "Such, Such Were the Joys." At twelve he won scholarships for both Eton and Wellington, and chose to go to Eton. He always said that he did no work at Eton, although he read widely among books of his own choosing, yet he managed to keep a middle place among a form of scholarship boys. Advised by his tutor not to go on to a university, he enlisted in the Indian Imperial Police. He was sent to Burma, where he served from 1922 to 1927. His experiences there furnished the material for his first novel, *Burmese Days*. The Indian Imperial Police had heavy duties, being responsible for detective

work and prison administration, as well as general law and order. Orwell took his duties very seriously, but he found himself unsuited for the job of governing a subject people. Moreover, the climate, he considered, was ruining his health. Given leave after the usual five years, he returned to Europe and later resigned.

For a year and a half he lived in Paris, writing (but not publishing) novels and short stories. Afterwards there followed several years of poverty, during which Orwell was dishwasher, private tutor, teacher in cheap schools, clerk in a book store, and tramp. The experiences of these years led to the autobiographical *Down and Out in Paris and London* and to the novels *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*. In 1935 he settled in the country and combined writing with other occupations, first running a pub and then keeping a small general store. In 1936 he was commissioned to investigate unemployment in the North of England. *The Road to Wigan Pier* is the result of his investigation. Before the end of the year he went to Spain to observe the Civil War, but he stayed to fight in it on the Republican side. *Homage to Catalonia* records his observations of the fighting in Spain and the operations of totalitarianism. On his return to England he wrote *Coming Up for Air*, a book which looks both backward to the comparative peacefulness of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and forward to World War II.

Though rejected on grounds of health when he volunteered for the British Army, Orwell served in the Home Guard. During the War years he wrote newspaper and magazine articles and talks for the Indian Service of the B.B.C. and, as the European War was coming to a close, *Animal Farm*. In 1947 he went to live on a Scottish island. Two years later the bronchial and lung disorders which had troubled him all his life made it necessary for him to enter a tuberculosis sanatorium in Gloucestershire and then University College Hospital in London. In spite of his illness, he managed to finish *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As soon as he had sufficient time and strength, he planned to turn from political writing to writing about human relationships in the manner of Conrad. He was to go to Switzerland for further medical treatment, but the day before he was scheduled to leave, he suffered a fatal hemorrhage. In accord with his request, he was buried in an English village churchyard.

Besides chapters which give the above biographical information in greater detail, the three British books have chapters which analyze each of Orwell's works or groups of works in turn. In my own study I have tried to pursue certain lines of paradox which run through Orwell's life and writing. [Because Orwell was a paradoxical writer, he has made contradictory and sometimes very queer impressions on readers and critics. Some of them see him as the embodiment of common sense, some as a hero of liberalism, some as a peevish or perverse eccentric. In an effort to help to clarify Orwell and his books, I have explored in three chapters the following paradoxes.]

First, Orwell was a rebel with a remarkably strong sense of responsibility. When he was a child, he revolted against the religious teachings and the discipline of his school. The mature equivalents of his boyhood feelings were his hostile attitudes toward organized religion and toward social, political, and cultural authority. As charitable organizations, Orwell thought, the churches were demoralizing; as moral and political forces, they were puritanic and reactionary; as a spiritual force, they were worthless. Orwell felt contempt for the aristocracy and resented every sort of governmental and social pressure. His rebellion extended even to literary criticism: he rejected the usual critical assumptions and denied that criticism was a force, good or bad, in culture. Because Orwell's rebellion was comprehensive and occasionally violent, some critics have considered him to be neurotic. Their theories, however, attribute to him feelings which his whole life and all of his writing contradict. Orwell's sense of responsibility was eminently sane and practical. He lived with the poor to find out exactly what poverty was like. Though deficient in religious feeling himself, he recognized what society loses when religious feeling deteriorates. And despite his rejection of all political orthodoxies, he was closely engaged in the political issues of his time

Second, Orwell was horrified by large concentrations of power, but he was determined to resist them. In the first stage of his career he was preoccupied with the evils of imperialistic power. In the last stage he was preoccupied with the evils of totalitarian power. The preoccupation with totalitarianism, however, was not a surrender: in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he does not predict universal totalitarianism in our time. To begin with, he was always

dubious about the value of political prediction. Besides, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he takes countless details from totalitarianism just as it was at the time of the book.

Third, Orwell crusaded for a socialistic society, yet he had important reservations about socialism. The inequalities and inefficiencies of capitalism proved to him the urgent need for socialism. Socialists would have to contend, however, not only with privilege and tradition, but with certain types in their own ranks, such as crackpots and petty despots. Orwell was confident that socialism would, nevertheless, succeed; but he was not pleased with some of its corollaries. He knew that socialism implied increased mechanization, but he had an aversion to modern machinery. Similarly, he knew that a socialistic government would have to invade areas of life which capitalism does not. He felt, in consequence, a nostalgia for nineteenth-century England, where life was simpler and in some ways freer than it would be in the society toward which he worked.

R. J. V.
West Lafayette, Indiana
November 1, 1960

CONTENTS

	Page
Preface	9
Chapter 1	
Rebellion and Responsibility	15
Chapter 2	
Perspective on Power	75
Chapter 3	
Socialism and Nostalgia	89
Notes	115
Bibliography	121
Index	125