

RECOLLECTIONS OF GEORGE ORWELL

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Imagine Don Quixote without his horse and his drooping whiskers, and you will get a fair idea of what George Orwell looked like. He was a tall and angular man, with a worn Gothic face that was elongated by vertical furrows at the corners of the mouth. His rather narrow upper lip was adorned by a thin line of moustache, and the general gauntness of his looks was accentuated by the deep sockets from which his eyes looked out sadly.

I first met Orwell during the early years of the last war, when he was working at the Indian Department of the B.B.C. in London. He had sent me an invitation to take part in a discussion panel on poetry which he was organizing, and, since we had recently indulged in a rather violent dispute in the *Partisan Review*, I was a little surprised at such an approach. But I agreed, mostly, I think, to show that I bore as few ill feelings as Orwell himself evidently did.

A few days later I went along to the improvised wartime studio in a former Oxford Street bargain basement. Orwell was there, as well as Mulk Raj Anand, Herbert Read and William Empson, whom I already knew, and Edmund Blunden, whom I had not met before. The program turned out to be a made-up discussion which Orwell had prepared skilfully beforehand and which the rest of the participants were given a chance to amend before it went on the air. All of us objected to small points, as a matter of principle, but the only major change occurred when Orwell himself produced a volume of Byron and, smiling around at the rest of us, suggested that we should read "The Isles of Greece." At that time the British government was officially opposed to the Indian independence movement (Gandhi was still in prison), and as the ringing verses of revolt were read the program assumed a mild flavor of defiance which we all enjoyed. Orwell, I noticed, had a very rough-and-ready idea of radio production, and his own level voice was not effective for broadcasting. Afterwards we

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went to a tavern in Great Portland Street frequented by broadcasting men, where Orwell discoursed cynically on the futility of the trouble we had taken over a program to which he doubted if more than two hundred Anglophile Indians would bother to listen. He was already feeling the frustration of a job that was mostly concentrated on the dissemination of official propaganda. By the next time I saw him, during 1943, he had resigned from the BBC and become the literary editor of the *Tribune*, a socialist review which upheld the Bevanite wing of the Labor Party and at that time was sharply critical of the Churchill government.

On this occasion I encountered Orwell on the top of a bus at Hampstead Heath. He immediately began to talk about the journalistic disagreements which had preceded our actual meeting. "There's no reason to let that kind of argument on paper breed personal ill feeling," he said. This disarming remark was typical of Orwell's attitude towards opponents with whom he found some common ground of liberal humanity or intellectual scrupulousness. He was ready to fight out debatable ideas in a bold and slashing manner that was reminiscent of the nineteenth century polemicists, but this did not prevent him from remaining on the friendliest personal terms with his opponents, provided they were willing, which was not always the case. The only exception he seemed to make was towards the totalitarians. His battle with them was whole-hearted, and I remember his indignation when he once told me about a Communist poet who had published a bitter personal attack on him and later tried to be affable when they met in a public house. To Orwell this seemed the grossest hypocrisy, because he knew that the Stalinists detested him as one of their most dangerous enemies.

Not long after my second meeting with Orwell, he told me that he had just written a political fairy tale, for which he was then trying vainly to find a publisher. I was connected with a small press, and he wondered whether we might consider it. I mentioned the book to my associates, but none of them was particularly interested, and the suggestion was allowed to lapse. This was unfortunate, for the fairy tale was *Animal Farm*; Orwell's difficulty in placing it was due more than anything else to the widespread feeling at the time that it was undiplomatic and even a little unpatriotic to say very much in criticism of Communist Russia. One publisher, who has since become prominent in his anti-Communism, put about a report that the book was "extreme" and "hysterical," and it was only after much peddling and after he had thought of private publication, that Orwell eventually persuaded Secker and Warburg to bring out *Animal Farm*. He and his publishers were equally surprised when it turned out to be an international best seller.

I began to see more of Orwell while he was working at the *Tribune*,

where, despite the paper's rather narrow political dogmatism, he opened its literary pages to writers of all the left-of-center viewpoints. But his generosity too often submerged his discernment for him to be a really effective editor, and usually the most interesting page of the *Tribune* was his own weekly piece, "As I Please," in which he discoursed on any facet of life or letters that happened to strike his fancy. It was the best short essay writing of the Forties. Orwell's versatility was astounding; he could always find a subject on which there was something fresh to say in a prose that, for all its ease and apparent casualness, was penetrating and direct.

II

My acquaintance with Orwell developed into friendship in the latter part of 1944, mainly through a common concern for civil liberties. As always happens in time of war, the more intransigent minorities of opinion were sometimes rather harshly treated, and their members imprisoned or otherwise discriminated against. There was a great deal of discussion on this point among the English intellectuals. Some claimed that freedom of criticism and protest should be temporarily relinquished in safeguarding what they regarded as greater freedoms. Others, including Orwell and most of his friends, held with varying degrees of emphasis that the liberties of speech and writing could only be abandoned with danger to the general climate of intellectual life.

The issue was given added importance through the attitude of the National Council for Civil Liberties, which had become largely infiltrated by Communists and fellow travellers and was almost completely inactive in protecting non-Communists. The matter came to a head when three editors of a minority paper were sent to gaol for publishing anti-war views. A committee which had been formed to defend them was perpetuated to deal with other similar issues, and, under the name of the Freedom Defence Committee, led a precarious but active existence from 1944 until 1949. Its leading members were a mixed group of intellectuals, artists and political workers drawn from every group between the liberals and the anarchists; only conservatives and communists were absent. Bertrand Russell, H. J. Laski, E. M. Forster, Herbert Read, Cyril Connolly, Benjamin Britten, Henry Moore, Osbert Sitwell and Augustus John were among its supporters, and Orwell became vice-chairman. I recollect that when I transmitted the Committee's invitation to him he was at first hesitant about accepting. "I don't want to get back on the treadmill of administrative work," he said. When I assured him that no great demands would be made on his time, he agreed, and became, while his health allowed, much more helpful, both materially and morally, than his initial hesitation had led us to suppose. He wrote, advised and gave freely, occasionally he would buttonhole some influ-

ential person we wished to interest, and on rare occasions he could be persuaded to speak in public. A throat wound during the Spanish Civil War had robbed his voice of resonance, but he spoke with such unpretentious conviction that I never remember an audience treating him other than with attention and respect. It was through our constant contact with Orwell over such matters that my wife and I became friendly with him, and our business conversations developed into more informal and personal meetings.

III

What made Orwell such an excellent journalist and also gave his novels a reality that was much more than mere verisimilitude was his intense interest in the concrete aspects of living, in "the surface of life," as he would say, and also the way in which his writing seemed to extend and amplify his daily life and conversation. Now, when I re-read his books, I am perpetually reminded of the talk on evenings we spent together, at our respective homes, or sometimes dining in Soho and going on to the Café Royal or some literary public house.

Orwell's own flat, where he lived with a small adopted son to whom he was extravagantly devoted, was in Islington, perched high up under the roof of a tall Georgian house in a square on the edge of a working class district. It was a dark and almost dingy place, with a curious Englishness of atmosphere. There was a great screen plastered with cut-outs from magazines in the living room, on the walls hung Victorian portraits murky with bituminous shadow, and a collection of china mugs, celebrating various popular nineteenth century festivals, crowded on top of the crammed bookshelves. By the fireplace stood a high-backed wicker arm-chair, of an angularly austere shape I have seen nowhere else, and here Orwell himself would sit. His study looked like a workshop; he was very fond of manual work, and when he was in London would often do some joinery as a relaxation from writing.

I do not think Orwell was entirely indifferent to comfort, but he certainly set no great store by appearances, and his times of hardship had given him an easy contempt for the trappings of the bourgeois life. His way of dressing even when he was earning well, remained that of the poorer English intellectuals, and I never saw him clad otherwise than in baggy, grubby corduroys, a worn tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows, and shoes which were never very well polished. John Morris, who disliked Orwell, wrote in *Penguin New Writing* an essay which suggested that this sartorial carelessness was an aspect of a childish and self-conscious rebellion against the standards of polite behavior. It always seemed to me that, having once escaped from middle class manners, Orwell just did not find them

worth the trouble of resuming. Certainly he practised no self-conscious Spartanism, and on the few occasions when we visited fairly expensive restaurants together, I noticed that he enjoyed the food as well as anybody else. He seemed to have naturally modest physical needs, though he never rejected good when it came his way.

Whenever one arrived at Orwell's flat, or when he came wheezing up the stairs to one's own, there was at first a period of relative silence, for Orwell, though a gregarious, was also a reserved man. Then, after a while, the conversation would start, over a meal, or sitting before a coal or peat fire, with Orwell rolling cigarettes of the strongest black shag he could find and drinking tea almost as thick as treacle. Sometimes the talk would develop into a monologue on his part. He had lived a very varied life, had been a policeman in Burma, a dishwasher in Paris, a bum and a grocer in England, had fought in Spain against Franco and lived for a while in Morocco. And he would tell of his experiences in such an entertaining way that one rarely had the least desire to interrupt him. His voice was rather flat, with the slight vestige of an Eton accent, but it had a monotonous kind of fascination and seemed to throw into relief the vividness of his descriptions. At other times we would converse on the strangest variety of subjects, and, however banal our text, Orwell would usually discuss it with such humor and thoroughness that he managed to lift it right out of its pristine dullness. For instance, we would talk about tea, and ways of making it, or about comic postcards, and he would bring in such a wealth of illustration and reminiscence and odd tags of information that one was stimulated to enter into the subject with as much zest as he. And then, a week or two later, one would find that this conversation had become a part of his writing, and formed the basis of a leisurely, fascinating essay in some newspaper or magazine.

At yet other times, the conversation would range over deeper matters, and Orwell would expound his fears of the future of society, and dilate on the way in which the concern for freedom and truth had grown weak in popular consciousness, as well as in literature and politics. In this way he told us all the basic ideas of his masterpiece, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, though, with a characteristic modesty, he talked little of the book itself, and until I saw it finally in print, I had only the slightest idea of the plot. When he talked on such theses he could paint a really horrifying picture of the fate that might befall us. After such a session Herbert Read, who himself is not exactly a light-hearted man, once said to me: "My God, Orwell is a gloomy bird!" And often, indeed, it did seem as though one had been listening to the voice of Jeremiah.

Apart from his accent, the only characteristic of the public school background that Orwell seemed to have retained was his emotional stoicism of

behavior. Even his anger was demonstrative only on paper, and, while his generosity and consideration for other people indicated the presence of deep feelings, he showed them rarely. He was certainly interested in women, but he never displayed the fact, and one unusually beautiful girl remarked to me that Orwell was the only one among her male acquaintances who never made her feel that he was aware of her as a woman.

IV

During 1946 Orwell bought a house on the Isle of Jura in the Hebrides, to which he would retire for months on end. From this time onward we saw little of him, but letters frequently arrived in which he gave vivid pictures of his life there and kept us posted on his activities. In August, 1946, for instance, he told me that he had just started a new novel, which he hoped to finish during the following year. It became *Nineteen Eighty Four* and was destined to be his final book. A month later he sent a lengthy description of life on the island; the following passage shows the intense interest he always took in the concrete aspects of the life that went on around him and also in its social undertones.

“We have been helping the crofter who is our only neighbor with his hay and corn, at least when rain hasn’t made it impossible to work. Everything is done here in an incredibly primitive way. Even when the field is ploughed with a tractor the seed is still sown broadcast, then scythed and bound up into sheaves by hand. They seem to broadcast corn, i.e., oats, all over Scotland, and I must say they seem to get it almost as even as can be done by a machine. Owing to the wet they don’t get the hay in till about the end of September, or even later, sometimes as late as November, and they can’t leave it in the open but have to store it all in lofts. A lot of the corn doesn’t quite ripen and is fed to the cattle in sheaves like hay. The crofters have to work very hard, but in many ways they are better off and more independent than a town laborer, and they would be quite comfortable if they could get a bit of help in the way of machinery, electrical power and roads, and could get the landlords off their backs and get rid of the deer. These animals are so common on this particular island that they are an absolute curse. They eat up the pastures where there ought to be sheep, and they make fencing immensely more expensive than it need be. The crofters aren’t allowed to shoot them, and are constantly having to waste their time dragging carcasses of deer down from the hills during the stalking season. Everything is sacrificed to the brutes because they are an easy source of meat and therefore profitable to the people who own them. I suppose sooner or later these islands will be taken in hand, and then they could either be turned into a first-rate area for dairy produce and meat, or else they would support a large population of small peasants living off cattle

and fishing. In the 18th century the population here was 10,000—now less than 300.”

Towards the end of 1946 the only large independent left-wing bookstore in London was bought out by the Communists. Orwell was appalled when I wrote him the news and immediately replied with a scheme for setting up a rival concern to maintain an outlet for individual publications. In a period of poverty, he had worked as salesman in a Hampstead bookshop, and now he was full of ideas as to how a new store might be run efficiently and independently. Nothing came of the project, and I think the letter he wrote on this occasion was intrinsically more interesting for some comments on his own works which illustrate the rigorously self-critical standards he set himself. I was then studying his books, and I had asked whether he could lend me a copy of a relatively little known novel he had written in the 1930's, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. “I haven't a copy of 'Keep the Aspidistra Flying,'” he answered. “I picked up a copy in a secondhand shop some months back, but I gave it away. There are two or three books which I am ashamed of and have not allowed to be reprinted or translated, and that is one of them. There is an even worse one called 'A Clergyman's Daughter.' This was written simply as an exercise, and I oughtn't to have published it, but I was desperate for money, ditto when I wrote 'Keep the A.' At that time I simply hadn't a book in me, but I was half starved and had to turn out something to bring in £100 or so.”

Actually, both books would have satisfied any ordinary journeyman writer, and Orwell's remarks show the seriousness with which he took his literary craftsmanship. His writing seemed effortless, but it was only so because of the exacting discipline he imposed on structure and verbal texture alike.

Orwell spent the winter of 1946-7 in London, but in the following spring he left once more for the Hebrides, and we never saw him again. Letters followed each other during the summer. Looking through them, I find Orwell approving my own intention to write a book on Wilde. “I've always been very pro-Wilde,” he commented. I particularly like 'Dorian Gray,' absurd as it is in a way.” I suspect that Orwell's liking for Wilde was based mostly on his natural sympathy for the defeated, since there is certainly little in common between the close discipline of his own work and the lushness of Wilde's, except perhaps a shared liking for surface color.

During these months, Orwell was working with difficulty on *Nineteen Eighty Four*, which he did not expect to finish before the following spring. “It always takes me a hell of a time to write a book even if I am doing nothing else, and I can't help doing an occasional article, usually for some American magazine, because one must earn some money occasionally.”

It was at this time that Orwell took a decision which many of his friends

regarded with disquiet. He announced that, apart from a trip to London in November, he intended to stay in the Hebrides over the winter. With his precarious health and his previous attacks of tuberculosis, it seemed rash indeed for him to remain in the damp fall and winter climate of the Isles, but he was the kind of man with whom, one knew beforehand, it would be useless to argue once he had made up his mind. Moreover, he seemed already to have thought of plenty of reasons for staying, and he detailed them to me in a letter which made me feel his real motive was that infatuation with the semi-idyllic life of remote and fairly primitive communities which at times seizes demandingly on city-tired intellectuals. . . .

In any event, Orwell did not get away from Scotland at all that winter. His health had been poor all summer, and in October it was probably made worse by a fishing accident in which his boat capsized and he and his small son were almost drowned. A little while after this it became evident that he was seriously ill with tuberculosis in the left lung. He was bedridden at home for two months, and when he next wrote me in January, 1948, it was from a hospital in Lanarkshire to which he had been removed a fortnight previously. "I have felt a bit less like death since being here," he remarked stoically, and he was hopeful of being about again by the summer and of getting a correspondent's job in a warm climate during the winter.

Sickness did not diminish Orwell's interest in what went on around him, he was still much concerned about civil liberties. A purge of Communists in the British civil service began early in 1948, and, in spite of his hostility to Communism, Orwell thought that the methods of the government, which did not allow suspects to confront their accusers, formed a dangerous precedent. I think his words speak for themselves on this important issue.

"It is not easy to have a clear position," he said, "because, if one admits the right of governments to govern, one must admit their right to choose suitable agents, and I think any organization, e.g., a political party, has a right to protect itself against infiltration. But at the same time, the *way* in which the government seems to be going to work is vaguely disquieting, and the whole phenomenon seems to me part of the general breakdown of the democratic outlook. Only a week or two ago the Communists were shouting for unconstitutional methods to be used against the Fascists, now the same methods are to be used against themselves, and in another year or two a pro-Communist government might be using them against us. Meanwhile the general apathy about freedom of speech, etc., constantly grows, and that matters more than what may be on the statute books."

During the spring and early summer of 1948 Orwell seemed to be recovering, and in July he told us that he was going back to Jura. "They seem to think I am pretty well cured and will end up perfectly O.K. so long as I

don't relapse during the next few months." As soon as he returned to the Isles he resumed work on *Nineteen Eighty Four*. By September his condition had begun to worsen, but, though he was in what he called "a ghastly state," he did not leave the island for treatment until December; he insisted on finishing his novel beforehand. "The effort of doing so didn't make me any better," he said. He certainly seemed moved by an obstinate sense of compulsion, and I have since felt that he knew he was unlikely to recover and wished to present in a complete form the book that was to be his testament.

I heard from him for the last time early in 1949. He had now gone to a sanatorium in Gloucestershire. He seemed contented there, and something of the grim old Orwellian humor came back when he discussed his treatment. "They are giving me something called P.A.S. which I suspect of being a high-sounding name for aspirins, but they say it is the latest thing and gives good results. If necessary I can have another go of streptomycin, which certainly seemed to improve me last time, but the secondary effects are so unpleasant that it's a bit like sinking the ship to drown the rats." He was still interested in the affairs of the Freedom Defence Committee, which was waning fast from the sheer lack of enough supporters who at that time realized the need for a civil liberties organization untrammelled by party ties.

In the spring of 1949 my wife and I left England for Canada ("The sort of country that could be fun for a bit, especially if you like fishing," Orwell had commented when he heard of our plans), and we never seemed able to find the time for a trip to Gloucestershire before we went. It was one of those omissions one regrets after it cannot be rectified. After we reached Canada I wrote a couple of times to Orwell, but he was too sick to reply. We heard that he was getting worse and had gone into a London hospital, and then, at a Vancouver party one snowy evening in the first days of 1950, one of the guests came in and told me that Orwell was dead.

V

Since that time an image seems to have grown up in the popular mind, particularly in countries where his earlier books have been comparatively little read, of Orwell as a writer whose main message was one of anti-Communism. In fact, he had little in common with those frightened mediocrities who have nothing to offer but a negative opposition to the totalitarians. It is true that from many reviews of *Nineteen Eighty Four* one might gain the impression that it was devoted entirely to an attack on Communism, or even to an exposure of left-wing politics in general. Neither impression would be true.

Orwell did, indeed, detest the methods of the Communists, because he regarded them as both tyrannical and dishonest, and he saw in Russia

an extreme example of the suppression of those humanist virtues which seemed to him essential for healthy social life. But it was only the most extreme, and not the only example, for he observed everywhere in contemporary politics the fatal tendency to displace in favor of expediency the necessary virtues of honesty and fair play. He gave a rather nominal support to the British Labor Government, but he realized that there also the dangers outlined in *Nineteen Eighty Four* existed, and his warning should be regarded as applying to any society where the cult of the state becomes more important than the welfare of individual men. Everywhere he saw, in varying degrees, that steady erosion of the personality whose final stage is, after all, the subject of his last novel.

Orwell, more than most of his contemporaries, represented in our time Matthew Arnold's conception of the man who is:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born.

In many respects he was a survivor of the free-fighting liberals of the nineteenth century, a partisan of the values which men like Emerson, Thoreau and Dickens strove to maintain. But he also looked to a future in which he hoped men might outlive the night of tyranny and falsehood, of ignorance and mediocrity, into which we so often seem to be passing. None, indeed, knew better than he how heavy the odds were against such a hope, but he still thought it was worth fighting for with all the indignation and humanity of his nature.