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George Orwell

By Landon Y. Jones

This Is the Year for the Enigmatic Writer Who Devoted His Life to Speaking Unwelcome Truths

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He had big feet. His size-12 boots had to be handmade, and George Orwell was sometimes forced to

order them from friends in America. A soldier who met him in the trenches during the Spanish Civil War was astounded: He'd "never seen boots that were so large, clogged in mud."

In photographs Orwell's face has the weathered look of an old shoe left out too long in the rain. His weary gaze seems to prove one of his best-known aphorisms—"At 50, everyone has the face he deserves"—though Orwell himself never lived that long. His reedy voice was surprising for such a large man—he stood 6'3"—but not even a bullet wound through the throat could rid him of the upper-class accent he detested.

He dressed in shabby, genteel garb, suggesting a decent chap who'd come on hard times. His large head and hands protruded from moth, leather-patched tweeds, worn corduroy trousers and dark, frayed shirts. His gaunt, ungainly shape often reminded friends of Don Quixote. "His sleeves always seemed to be halfway up his arms," said one. "You could not be with him for an hour without being aware that he thought of himself as a member of the awkward squad."

Most of his life—he died at 46 in 1950—Orwell was convinced that he was indeed an odd man out. As a schoolboy athlete, he was described as "conspicuously bad," "very slack," and "not at all energetic." As a military policeman in Burma, he reported, "I was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me." As a volunteer on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War, he was unable to pull the trigger on a fleeing enemy soldier who was holding up his trousers as he ran. ("I had come here to shoot at 'Fascists,' but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist,' he is visibly a fellow creature.") He was convinced that he was unattractive to women. When widowed with an infant son and desperately sick, he proposed to four women within a year. They all turned him down.

Rejection also dogged much of his working life. His first book, Down and Out in Paris and London, published in 1933, had twice been turned down—once by one of his literary heroes, T.S. Eliot, then a Faber & Faber editor. His second book, Burmese Days, was considered so libelous that it could only be published in the United States. Another volume, The Road to Wigan Pier, appeared only after his publisher wrote a preface disclaiming it. Even Animal Farm was rejected by three British publishers (including Eliot, again) and nearly 20 in America, one of whom told Orwell that "it was impossible to sell animal stories in the U.S.A." By the time Nineteen Eighty-Four, his stark, scarifying portrait of a future totalitarian society ruled by the ubiquitous, yet unseen, "Big Brother," brought him financial success, George Orwell was too sick to enjoy it. Even in his last year of life, he felt that "there has literally been not one day in which I did not feel that I was idling, that I was behind with the current job, and that my total output was miserably small..."

In 16 years Orwell wrote nine major books and 700 essays and articles. Animal Farm remains the greatest political satire since Swift. Nineteen Eighty-Four has been translated into 62 languages and has sold more than 10 million copies. Orwell's vigorous prose style helped raise political-literary journalism to an art. His writing was, as one critic said, like a splash of cold water in the face. During the bombing of London in World War II, he began an article with typical lack of nonsense: "As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me." He thought good prose should be "as clear as a windowpane"—a phrase that aptly describes his own intellectual integrity.

Yet even Orwell's friends could be taken aback at the relish with which he could go on the attack. Orwell once branded W.H. Auden "a gutless Kipling" and his circle "the pansy Left." (Later, after they met, Orwell came to like Auden, which made him resolve to avoid meeting people he wrote about.) One day Orwell made this entry in

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his notebook: "Abusive letter from H.G. Wells, who addresses me as 'you shit,' among other things." (Another time Wells called him "that Trotskyite with big feet.") Orwell visited his friend Arthur Koestler the day after he'd panned one of Koestler's plays. When Koestler complained, Orwell replied, "Well, it's a lousy play, isn't it?"

Yet for all his roughshod opinions, Orwell was a gentle man who could be as fustily English as tea and crumpets. His tea was always measured six teaspoons to two pints of water. His marmalade was spooned first into a dish. During WWII Orwell had hot cocoa (always Cadbury's) at 10 p.m. each night, drinking it in a special mug and fussily mixing it with only a wooden spoon. He loved animals and the outdoors and was simple in his tastes. "So long as I remain alive and well," he said, "I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth and to take pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information."

In working-class pubs Orwell tried somewhat unsuccessfully to pass himself off as a common man. He drank bitter (never the more genteel lager) and smoked what friends remember as "terrible" foul-smelling, shag tobacco cigarettes, which he deftly rolled with one hand. As he explained, "I like English cookery and English beer, French red wines, Spanish white wines, Indian tea, strong tobacco, coal fires, candlelight and comfortable chairs. I dislike big towns, noise, motor cars, the radio, tinned food, central heating and modern furniture."

This quintessential Englishman was not born in England at all, nor was he legally George Orwell. He was born Eric Blair in Burma, the middle son of a minor government official in the then legal opium trade. Returned to England for schooling, young Eric was sent to St. Cyprian's, "a lukewarm bath of snobbery." There, terrified by a bullying schoolmistress and flogged for bed-wetting, he first felt the kind of totalitarian horror that would surface in Nineteen Eighty-Four. "I was in a world where it was not possible to be good," he wrote later. "I was ugly, I was unpopular, I had a chronic cough, I was cowardly, I smelt."

He won a scholarship to Eton, but "I did no work there and learned very little." After such an undistinguished career, Orwell was left with few choices. His parents could not afford college; his grades could not win him another scholarship. So, in 1922 at age 19, he signed up with the Imperial Indian Police and went to Burma for "five boring years within the sound of bugles."

Orwell returned determined to become a writer. In search of material, he went to Paris—but instead of patronizing Left Bank cafés, he dropped into the impoverished underclass, washing dishes in a hellish kitchen down "a little dark doorway like a rathole" in an elegant hotel just off the Place de la Concorde. He learned two things: "Pepper in the bedclothes drives away bugs; the secret of a successful restaurant is sharp knives." He next traveled with English tramps before publishing *Down and Out* in Paris and London under the pseudonym George Orwell. (To protect his parents he'd considered several names—P.S. Burton, Kenneth Miles, H. Lewis Allways—before combining the names of England's patron saint and a small river. He was known by friends both as "Eric" and "George" for the rest of his life, though he kept his given name for legal purposes.)

In the next few years Orwell worked as a bookseller's assistant and schoolmaster near London while earning a reputation as a minor satirical novelist with *Burmese Days*, *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*. At the suggestion of a publisher, he went to an English coal-mining town to study the effects of the Depression among the miners. He saw "a frightful landscape of slag heaps and belching chimneys" and rats "running slowly through the snow, presumably weak from hunger." The result was *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a classic piece of advocacy reporting.

In the meantime, Orwell had married Eileen O'Shaughnessy, an Oxford graduate and psychology student, and had begun writing essays on anything that caught his fancy, from the decline of the English murder to the mating habits of toads. He sold them to literary and political journals.

The turning point of his life came when he went to Barcelona to enter the Spanish Civil War. "It was the first time I'd ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle," he explained in his memoir, *Homage to Catalonia*. "I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for." Orwell joined the fight against Fascism and spent 115 mostly wet, mostly cold days in what a friend described as "a comic opera with an occasional death."

By all accounts, Orwell fought bravely until a sniper's bullet passed cleanly through his throat. Rendered briefly speechless (a vocal chord was paralyzed), he was released from duty—only to witness the ruthless suppression of his United Marxist Workers' Party by the Communists. Later, frustrated by England's leftist press in his efforts to tell what really happened in Spain, he commented, "This kind of thing is frightening to me because it gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. Lies will pass into history."

After Spain, Orwell said, "Every line of serious work that I have written has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism." In November 1943 Orwell began writing *Animal Farm*, a parable that for the first time merged his bold, clean style with political purpose. But publishers resisted, many of them nervous over discomfiting a wartime ally with such a devastatingly anti-Soviet allegory. "If liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear," Orwell protested. *Animal Farm* eventually came out in England the week after the Hiroshima bombing, and George Orwell was suddenly famous.

His satisfaction, however, was sadly muted. While Orwell was abroad in June 1945 reporting the fall of Germany, he was stunned to receive a telegram informing him that his wife Eileen, then 40 and anemic, had died under anesthesia during what he thought was routine surgery.

Alone, Orwell took his adopted son Richard [see following story] to the remote Scottish island of Jura, one of the most inaccessible spots in the British Isles. There,

ailing increasingly with tuberculosis (his doctor had also attended D.H. Lawrence in his final illness), Orwell began to work on Nineteen Eighty-Four, using as a working title The Last Man in Europe. "It isn't a book I would gamble on for a big sale," he fretted to his publisher. The first printing in 1949 sold out quickly; it hasn't stopped selling since.

But by then he had little time left. "The tragedy of Orwell's life is that when at last he achieved fame and success he was a dying man and knew it," his friend Cyril Connolly has observed. In October 1949 Orwell was finally able to remarry and thus, he felt, protect his estate and small son. His wife was beautiful Sonia Brownell—she was 31, he 46—a London magazine editor. Orwell donned a smoking jacket for the ceremony in his hospital room. On the foot of his bed lay a fishing rod that he hoped to use in Switzerland during his convalescence. Instead he died four months later, 34 years before the year he'd already made famous.

**MORE FROM THIS ARTICLE**

**The Only Heir Scarcely Knew His Adoptive Father**

His pastimes are playing squash, tending roses and attending Scottish country dance classes. He earns his living writing sales manuals. Few know that the unassuming Richard Blair is George Orwell's adopted son and sole beneficiary. "It's not something I talk about much," says Blair. "If my name were Orwell, there would be a problem. I'm grateful it isn't."

At 39, Richard Blair is a reluctant and disassociated heir. His adoptive mother died when he was 10 months old, and Orwell passed on when he was just 6. The author, using a cigarette, had burned the names of Blair's real parents off the adoption papers. "He didn't want me to know and maybe didn't want to know himself," Blair says. "He wanted to consider me his very own." After the author's death from TB, Richard was sent to live with Orwell's childless sister and her husband on a remote farm in Scotland. Blair milked cows, watched over grazing sheep and, instead of attending Westminster School as his father had hoped, was educated in Scotland. He dropped out of agricultural college to work as a farm laborer. His stepmother, Sonia, remained in London's literary circle, but they never grew close and she excluded him from the activities of Orwell's holding company. "As far as she was concerned, I didn't have the intellectual background for it," Blair says. He seems to agree with her, putting himself in the category of "intellectual philistines. I suppose," and adds, "I have no regrets."

Blair has only fragmentary memories of the father who washed and dressed him and made him crude wooden toys. When he talks about his father's work, he praises its simplicity: "When asked why he made pigs the villains in Animal Farm, he said it was because he didn't like pigs." Since his stepmother's death in 1980, Blair, who makes \$15,000 a year writing for a farm-equipment company, stands to inherit the remainder of Orwell's estate. Depending on claims, it could be worth from "absolutely nothing" to "something in six figures." Whatever the amount, it's not likely to alter his quiet life-style, though he allows he might buy the farm he's always wanted. "George never minded what I'd do," he says, "so long as it was what I wanted."

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