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Orwell

The Life

D. J. Taylor

Richard Paul Hore (1928–2002)

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How much do we need to know about a writer, personally? The answer is that it doesn't matter. Nothing or everything is equally satisfactory. Who cares in the end? As Northrop Frye has said, the only evidence we have of Shakespeare's existence, apart from the poems and plays, is the portrait of a man who was clearly an idiot. Biography is there for the curious; and curiosity gives out where boredom begins. – Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché*

Obviously, no full explanation of a man is ever possible. – Richard Rees, *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory*

1

An Oxfordshire Tomb

In a shortish working career of a little over two decades, Orwell produced nearly two million published words. The twenty volumes that Peter Davison's monumental *Complete Works* needed to accommodate them take up nearly four feet of shelf space. If he lived to be seventy, Orwell once proposed, comparing his professional output with that of the average coal-miner, the chances were that he would leave a shelf-full of books. He died young, the novels and essays that would have occupied his fifties and sixties were never written, and yet posthumously at any rate, with the help of devoted editors and compilers, he achieved his ambition. Again – and these comparisons say something about the way in which his mind worked – Orwell once calculated that the lifetime output for a prolific writer of boys' school stories would, were the pages to be lined end to end, have carpeted the best part of an acre. His own *oeuvre* spread out sheet by sheet would occupy an area roughly the size of Norwich city centre. The fifty years since his death have brought perhaps two million words more: biographies, critical studies, memoirs by literary colleagues and childhood friends, even a novel (David Caute's *Dr Orwell and Mr Blair*) in which he plays a starring role. Why add to them?

Thackeray once declared that when he read a book all that remained in his head was a picture of the author. This defies all known precepts of modern literary theory, but the point remains. Orwell has obsessed me for the best part of a quarter of a century. The first 'adult' novel I ever picked off the

bookshelf in my parents' house was a Penguin paperback of *A Clergyman's Daughter* that some ineluctable instinct had led my mother to buy in the early 1960s. The GCSE O-level English paper essay that I prophetically set out on a year or so later was: 'Whose biography would you most like to write?' Always in my adolescence, Orwell was there, the ghostly figure on the back of the book jacket
urging me on. The sense of sheer personality that rises from his work – that urgent need to communicate vital things – is immensely strong, all the more so if you are a teenager who barely knows that books exist.

'He knows all about me,' you feel, 'he wrote this for me' – which, curiously enough, is what Orwell himself wrote about Henry Miller. Were I ever to meet his shade in the celestial equivalent of the Groucho Club – not, you suspect, somewhere Orwell would ever allow himself to be found – I should say what Philip Larkin maintained that he said to Cyril Connolly when the two of them were introduced at Auden's memorial service: 'Sir, you formed me.' Cheap Penguins in those days, procurable at fifty pence a throw from the University of East Anglia bookshop, the four volumes of Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus' *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* were my private cornucopia in the sixth-form years, a vast, sprawling bran tub into which repeated scoops yielded up anything but bran. Dickens, Thackeray, Gissing, Smollett, hosts of minor writers washed up on the early-twentieth-century shore: hardly any of the people who came to occupy my mental lumber room would have taken up residence there had it not been for Orwell.

There was more to it than this, of course. Marking down Orwell's collected works as a hugely idiosyncratic version of

the *Good Book Guide* is perhaps the equivalent of regarding Sir Winston Churchill as a moderately effective leader of the Conservative Party. For Orwell is, above all, a moral force, a light glinting in the darkness, a way through the murk. His status as a kind of ethical litmus paper stems not so much from the repeated injunctions to 'behave decently', and some of the implications of behaving decently for the average western lifestyle, as from the armature that supported them. Broadly speaking he realised – and he did so a great deal earlier than most commentators of either Right or Left – that the single most important crisis of the twentieth century was the decline in mass religious belief and, its corollary, in personal immortality. God was dead and yet the secular substitutes put in His place, whether totalitarianism or western consumer capitalism, merely travestied human ideals and aspirations. The task facing modern man, as Orwell saw it, was to take control of that immense reservoir of essentially spiritual feeling – all that moral sensibility looking for a home – and use it to irrigate millions of ordinary and finite lives. The atrocities of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia – and this point is repeated endlessly in his later writings – could only have been designed by the godless because they presuppose a world in which there is no moral reckoning, and where the only power that matters is the
ability to control not only your fellow men but the history of which they are a part and the knowledge on which that history rests. The idea that there was a life after death was unsustainable, but the moral baggage that accompanied that belief was indispensable. As it happens, and for reasons it is superfluous to explore here, I don't believe that God is altogether dead, but I do believe in the materials which Orwell used to construct his opposition to – that eternally memorable phrase from an essay published in 1940 – 'the

smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls'. It is worth pointing out that these orthodoxies still exist sixty years later, if in rather different forms and wearing yet more elaborate disguises, and that it is our duty to resist them with exactly the same vigour with which Orwell resisted Hitler and Stalin.

And so in a curious way I always knew that I would end up writing about Orwell, that the contents of the Oxford history syllabus were as nothing compared to – say – the essay 'Oysters and Brown Stout', which first alerted me to the fact that there was a writer called Thackeray, or the essay on Dickens, which leaves you with the feeling that Dickens and for that matter Orwell himself are sitting in the room talking to you as you read. The intensity of this fixation was such that it took me most of my twenties to establish the areas in which Orwell, mysteriously, was fallible, principally those breathtaking generalisations which close, adult inspection reveals to be a little less watertight than they seem. Take the famous statement that 'Good prose is like a window-pane'. One doesn't have to be a literary theorist to know that this is nonsense. Ronald Firbank, Marcel Proust and James Joyce (the last of whom at least Orwell profoundly admired) wrote varieties of 'good prose' and none of their sentences is remotely like a window-pane. Transparency, surely, is not the only virtue? It is the same with some of Orwell's no-nonsense prescriptions for linguistic frankness, his hatred, for example, of those double-negative formulations of the 'His was a not insignificant talent' type. Arguably the complexities hinted at when one writer remarks of another that his talent was not insignificant are worth going into, something that redounds to language's credit rather than its capacity for obfuscation. I believe, for example, that Orwell's own attitude to the Jews

was not unprejudiced. Equally, one suspects that Orwell, in one of his less hard-line moments, would have seen this.

Meanwhile the process of finding out about Orwell, of accumulating, both openly and surreptitiously, that stock of Orwell lore went on. Any sixtysomething littérateur with some kind of track record met in early
days around literary London was immediately pinioned with the question 'Did you know George Orwell?' The first book I ever reviewed – sniffily: how dare anyone crash in on my private party?– was Bernard Crick's *George Orwell: A Biography*. All this – the harassing of literary notables, the snootiness over Professor Crick – was undertaken not in a spirit of fluttering antiquarianism but in the absolute conviction that Orwell, to borrow the original title of Christopher Hitchens' recent polemic, *matters* in a way that ninety-nine out of a hundred writers do not. As a reader I have always been wary of 'relevance' in literature: so often it means the cast-off manuscripts of Group Theatre, Soviet social realism and novels with titles like *Brixton Superfly*. All art, Orwell famously suggested, is propaganda; equally, not all propaganda is art. At the same time it is accurate to say that in the fifty years since his death Orwell has managed to colonise vast areas of political thinking and ordinary language in a way that would have seemed remarkable to the friends who gathered round his deathbed. As with Dickens – perhaps the writer whose absorption into the national subconscious Orwell's case most closely resembles – several of his most resonant utterances are used on an almost daily basis by people who have never read a line of his books. Again, as with Dickens, people mysteriously *know* about Orwell at second hand: that all animals are equal but some are more equal than others; that Big Brother is watching you; that

Room 101 is where you go to be confronted by your worst horrors.

This centrality to a whole area of our national life was confirmed, on one very narrow level, by the tumult of approbation that greeted Peter Davison's edition of the *Complete Works* on its appearance in 1998, and on another, much more expansive plateau, in media reaction to the events of 11 September 2001. Without warning Orwell was everywhere: mentor, guide, motivating spirit, conscience. As readily as one commentator inveighed against the 'pansy left' and proposed that every British soldier sent to Afghanistan should have an edition of Orwell's essays packed in his rucksack, so another would dole out some of his less comforting observations about war's inescapable moral consequences. All this may seem a considerable distance from the emaciated figure dying in a hospital bed half a century and more ago, and not the least fascinating speculation about Orwell is what he might have made of it all. Distinguishing the reality from the myth was difficult enough in the week after his death, Malcolm Muggeridge thought. Fifty-three years later it is harder still. And yet it is this contemporary fixation with Orwell, with that grey and curiously *sorrowful* face staring remorselessly
back across time, that justifies the attempt to get inside his head: to establish not only what can be said about him and the world he inhabited, but what he can tell us about ourselves.

The tortuous history of Orwell biography is largely down to its subject. Orwell requested in his will that no biography of him should be written. Orwell's widow Sonia spent many years trying to enforce this edict against increasingly sophisticated opposition. The first critical studies of Orwell's

work by Laurence Brander (who had known him at the BBC) and John Atkins appeared within a few years of his death. By the late 1950s there was a ready market for Orwell reminiscences. Paul Potts' memoir 'Don Quixote on a Bicycle' appeared in the *London Magazine* in 1957. Richard Rees' full-length study, *Fugitive from the Camp of Victory*, which contains many biographical fragments, followed four years later, along with his sister Avril's radio broadcast 'My Brother, George Orwell'. Sonia's response to this rising tide of interest was twofold. On the one hand she set to work with Ian Angus, then Deputy Librarian at University College, London, on what eventually became the four-volume *Collected Journalism, Essays and Letters*, published by Secker & Warburg in 1968. On the other she appointed Malcolm Muggeridge, a close friend of Orwell's in the 1940s, as official biographer. The Muggeridge benediction, it now seems clear, was a deliberate spoiler. A full-time editor, television presenter and controversialist, Muggeridge – as Sonia, one imagines, had foreseen – found the demands of a full-scale biography beyond him. His preliminary research survives, but there is no evidence that he made any serious effort to complete the book. In any case Sonia intended the four-volume, 1,500-page selection of Orwell's work to be his memorial. As for the real biographical monument, there were other interested parties at work. Peter Stansky and William Abrahams' *The Unknown Orwell*, uncountenanced by Sonia but displaying the fruits of a great deal of painstaking research, was well received on its publication in 1972. Cyril Connolly was moved to declare that the years he and Orwell had had in common were 'described with so much tenderness and insight that I am often deluded that the writers were there'. It was this that apparently decided Sonia to appoint a new 'official' biographer and ensure that he actually produced

a biography. Having read and been impressed by something he had written, she selected the then Birkbeck politics don Bernard Crick. *George Orwell: A Biography* duly appeared in late 1980. Sonia, who survived long enough to read the proofs,
supposedly went to her grave believing that she had betrayed her late husband's memory.

Quite why Sonia took this view of a punctilious and in many ways ground-breaking account of Orwell's life is uncertain. You suspect that by this stage in the proceedings any biography would have fallen short of the exacting yardsticks she had in mind. Sonia, as this book will perhaps show, was an odd woman and an odder literary widow: loyal, protective, keen to do the right thing, but simultaneously erratic in her judgement and capricious in her personal likes and dislikes. In her absence the floodgates of Orwell studies were opened. The year 1984, inevitably, brought a deluge of material: Audrey Coppard and Bernard Crick's assemblage of first-hand testimony, *Orwell Remembered;* a similar collection, *Remembering Orwell*, edited by Stephen Wadhams; W.J. West's *Orwell: The War Broadcasts*, based on scripts discovered in the BBC archives at Caversham. (A companion volume, *Orwell: The War Commentaries*, appeared the following year.) Subsequently the tide became a torrent: a second biography by the American scholar Michael Shelden in 1991; a third by Jeffrey Meyers in 2000. In between these high-water marks there have been studies of Orwell's fiction, of the intellectual climate in which his books were published and received, further reminiscences and dissections of the 'Orwell myth'. This is a well-trodden path, and the scenery can be distressingly familiar. Writing once to a woman to whom Orwell had diffidently proposed marriage in 1946, I

got back a letter which amongst other information listed the seven previous researchers who had come to interview her. What more was there to be said? this lady wondered.

It was, and is, a good question. Practically anyone of any consequence who came across him during the decade and a half of his life on the public stage has left a record of the encounter. The Orwell who turns up in the recollections of ordinary people is a rather different figure: less touched by fifty years of posthumous sanctification, more human. Three years ago, for example, I went to a village near Didcot in Oxfordshire to interview an old gentleman named George Summers, then in his early nineties. As it happened, I had met Mr Summers nearly two decades before when I was at college with his daughter Annie and had heard rumours of his connection with Orwell even then. Mr Summers, re-encountered in his front room, was affable but cagey. The story itself, pieced together through numberless digressions, involved Orwell's attempt, back in Suffolk in the early 1930s, to worm his way into the affections of Mr Summers's then fiancée, a woman
named Dorothy Rogers. It ended with a chase – Orwell on foot, Mr Summers pursuing on a motorcycle – across Southwold common, remembered by the pursuer sixty-five years later as follows (this is a direct transcription from the tape): 'I tried … I missed him … I went I suppose fifty yards, and there he was, and there was she … I was the guardian angel … I ran up the bank … I sort of pushed him off … I didn't kill him,' Mr Summers innocuously concluded.

However laboriously reassembled in a ninety-year-old's memory, this is an extraordinary image: the vengeful figure crouched over the handlebars; the lanky interloper fleeing

before him over the springy turf. (It is worth asking, too, what Dorothy was doing. Following behind? Watching the chase from the vantage point of the bank? Carrying on home, leaving the boys to fight it out?) However incongruous, nothing in twenty years of reading and writing about Orwell has quite so narrowly conveyed to me what, in a certain sense, Orwell was like. It took perhaps three-quarters of an hour for Mr Summers to finish, and embellish, his tale. Later Annie and I drove to Sutton Courtenay, a few miles away over the back roads, to examine Orwell's grave in the village churchyard plot secured for him by his friend David Astor. Not the least of the many ironies that have attached themselves to Orwell is that this professional man of the people should have been buried amidst the Oxfordshire verdure, through the agency of an Anglo-American aristocrat.

Just over fifty years earlier another couple could have been found lingering in the graveyard at Sutton Courtenay: a striking blonde woman in her early thirties, pale with strain and anxiety, supported by a slightly older man. The two of them – David Astor, editor of the *Observer*, and Sonia, Orwell's widow – were not alone. They came accompanied by a solicitor, an undertaker's van and its attendants and a very long coffin. Orwell's funeral and interment took place on 26 January 1950. Among several interested spectators who left records of the event, Malcolm Muggeridge was perhaps the most intrigued. It is Muggeridge, more than anyone else, who conveys something of the sheer difficulty involved in getting the deceased underground. Somewhat to the general surprise, Orwell had requested in his will that his funeral service should follow the rites of the Church of England and that he should be buried in a cemetery. For one who had never professed Christian beliefs, still less been affiliated to

any place of worship – at any rate in his later years – this demand would be difficult
to realise. In the end the idea of a London burial place was abandoned and Astor influence was brought to bear on the vicar of Sutton Courtenay. Meanwhile, Muggeridge and Orwell's close friend Anthony Powell ('churchy' people, according to Astor, and aware of the protocols involved) engaged the vicar of Christ Church, Albany Street, where the Powells worshipped, to conduct the service in London. Muggeridge, who had an eye for this kind of detail, was interested to find that the undertaker knew the Reverend Rose, in fact was lunching with him the same day to talk over future business. Sonia, deeply distressed by the events of the past few days, was consulted but took no active part in the arrangements. She was 'quite helpless in the matter', Muggeridge noted.

Thursday 26 January was bitterly cold. London lay in the grip of winter. Travelling to the church in a taxi with Orwell's sister Avril, and seeking to break the ice with a woman who had little small-talk, David Astor asked her who she thought that Orwell had most admired. Avril misunderstood the question – Astor meant an individual rather than a type – and shot back 'the working-class mother of eight children'. Sonia had not felt up to greeting the mourners as they entered the church. Instead the vestibule was manned by Orwell's publisher, Fred Warburg, and his business partner Roger Senhouse, both of them behaving 'as if it were a publisher's party', according to Lady Violet Powell. Stationed inside, Muggeridge allowed his wintry eye to rove over the congregation. Largely Jewish, he decided, and almost entirely unbelievers. The Reverend Rose was 'excessively parsonical' and his church unheated. As for the mourners themselves,

Fred Warburg and his wife Pamela occupied the front row, followed by a file of relations of Eileen O'Shaughnessy, Orwell's first wife, whose obvious grief seemed to Muggeridge 'practically the only real element in the whole affair'. However artificial Muggeridge may have thought the proceedings, he was impressed by the lesson (chosen by Powell) from the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes: 'man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets … Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it'. This was, everyone agreed, a desperately sad affair: not some ancient literary eminence called to his eternal rest in a blaze of pomp and glory but a man of forty-six who had not survived long enough to taste the fruits of his success. Sonia seemed 'dazed'. Muggeridge felt a pang as the coffin was removed, particularly because of its length: 'Somehow this circumstance, reflecting George's tallness, was poignant.' A quarter of
a century later Anthony Powell remembered the service as one of the most harrowing he had ever attended.

Afterwards the majority of the congregation repaired to the Powells' house in Chester Gate. Astor, Sonia and the hearse departed for Oxfordshire. Following the burial service, read by the Reverend Gordon Dunstan from the Book of Common Prayer, the 'small company' (the vicar's words) proceeded outside. By chance the graveyard at Sutton Courtenay abutted a government building used for testing water samples from the Thames. Apart from Sonia, himself and their professional attendants, Astor recalled, Orwell's interment had only a single spectator: a scientist in a lab coat smoking a cigarette and looking, Astor thought, horribly like an extra from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Back in London, reading through the

obituaries by Arthur Koestler, V.S. Pritchett, Julian Symons and others, Muggeridge felt that he saw in them ‘how the legend of a human being is created’.

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