

I FIRST became aware of the existence of George Orwell in the middle thirties when I read some articles of his on the Spanish Civil War which appeared in the *New English Weekly*, a publication founded by A. R. Orage to expound the principles of Social Credit. They provided the basis for *Homage to Catalonia*, one of his best books. These articles made a great impression on me. I liked their clear, simple style, and the obvious honesty of purpose which informed them. They touched a chord of personal sympathy, too. I saw in Orwell's strong reaction to the villainies of the Communist *apparat* in Spain a comparable experience to my own disgust some years previously with the Soviet regime and its fawning admirers among the intelligentsia of the West as a result of a stint as Moscow correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*. So I sent Orwell an appreciative note, to which I received a polite reply.

Later, when I got to know Orwell, he told me the story of how the articles had been turned down by Kingsley Martin, then editor of the *New Statesman*. I pointed out that, in the same sort of way, my messages to the *Guardian* from the USSR – for instance, about the famine caused by Stalin's collectivization policy in the Ukraine and the Caucasus, and about the arrest of some British engineers on spurious espionage charges – had been either whittled down or unused when they were more than mildly critical of the Soviet regime. Orwell certainly felt very strongly about this matter. Once when we were lunching together at a Greek restaurant in Percy Street he asked me if I would mind changing places. I readily agreed, but asked him why. He said that he just couldn't bear to look at Kingsley Martin's corrupt face, which, as Kingsley was lunching at an adjoining table, was unavoidable from where he had been sitting before.

Orwell was to have a comparable experience with *Animal Farm*, which was offered first to Gollancz. His loathing of progressive publishers and publications, as a result of these incidents, was even greater than mine. He told me once with great relish that his model for the Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had been the BBC, where he worked without much satisfaction during some of the war years. I was not inclined myself to regard Kingsley Martin, C. P. Scott and the other ostensibly 'enlightened' operators in the communications business as being intrinsically more despicable than the Northcliffes, the Beaverbrooks and the Henry Luces, though of course they brought into what is essentially a competitive, profit- or influence-seeking trade an extra dimension of sanctimoniousness. It gave me no anguish to eat my luncheon with Kingsley Martin in vision. Incidentally, neither Kingsley nor Gollancz retracted from their position *vis-à-vis* the Spanish Civil War articles and *Animal Farm*. In his autobiography Kingsley continues to contend that he was right not to publish the articles, and when I asked Gollancz, in the course of a television interview,

whether he regretted having turned down *Animal Farm*, one of the few undoubted masterpieces of our time, he replied that, from the professional publishing point of view, it was undoubtedly a mistake, but he still thought that the considerations which led him to make it were valid. One of the great weaknesses of the progressive, as distinct from the religious, mind, is that it has no awareness of truth as such; only of truth in terms of enlightened expediency. The contrast is well exemplified in two exact contemporaries – Simone Weil and Simone de Beauvoir; both highly intelligent and earnestly disposed. In all the fearful moral dilemmas of our time, Simone Weil never once went astray, whereas Simone de Beauvoir, with I am sure the best of intentions, has found herself aligned with apologists for some of the most monstrous barbarities and falsehoods of history.

Orwell himself, of course, would never have accepted this dichotomy; if anything, he would have pronounced himself on the Beauvoir side. He was allergic to institutional and devotional Christianity, and considered himself – in a way, justly – as being temperamentally irreligious. Yet there was in him this passionate dedication to truth, and refusal to countenance enlightened expediency masquerading as it; this unrelenting abhorrence of virtuous attitudes unrelated to personal conduct such as was to be found in the disparity between Kingsley's editorial principles and editorial practice. The point is well put in a hitherto unpublished letter to me from Richard Rees, Orwell's close friend and subsequently mine, dated 8 March 1955, five years after Orwell's death:

I am at the moment engaged in trying to write a longer and better sketch of Eric (Blair, Orwell's real name) than the one I wrote shortly after his death in which I try to show that his value consists in his having taken more seriously than most people the fundamental problem of religion. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example, is more than a pessimistic political prophesy. The crisis of the book is when the hero, under torture, says: 'Do it to Julia, don't do it to me.' Eric was appalled, like the saints, by the realization that human nature is fundamentally self-centred; and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the triumph of the totalitarian state is not complete until it has been demonstrated to the last resister that in the last resort he would sacrifice the person he loves best in order to save his own skin. Personally, I think the book is morbid, because he was so ill when he was writing it. But it *does* reveal his true and permanent preoccupation; and that is why I always think of him as a religious or 'pious atheist'.

The 'longer and better sketch' became Rees's study of Orwell (*George Orwell, Fugitive from the Camp of Victory*, published in 1961), in my opinion easily the best there is. Rees was Orwell's closest friend, whom he chose with his widow, Sonia, to be his joint literary executor, and after whom he named his adopted son. It was in the *Adelphi*, when Rees was editing it, that Orwell's first published

work appeared (as, indeed, did mine), still signed with his own name, Eric Blair, before he had adopted the pseudonym by which he is now universally known. Only someone who was naturally religious – even if unconsciously so – could possibly have made a friend of Rees, whose own view of life was essentially a mystical one. When, to the great grief of his many friends and admirers, Rees died last year (1970), he had just completed his long arduous, and brilliantly perceptive work on Simone Weil with the publication of her *First and Last Notebooks* – something for which I personally owe him a deep debt of gratitude. I am not saying that Orwell would have shared his admiration for Simone Weil; only that there is support for Rees's view of Orwell as someone concerned with the fundamental problem of religion in the fact that both of them – Orwell and Simone Weil – should have found in Rees their most sensitive interpreter, and Orwell his most intimate friend. Rees came to see me shortly before he died, and we talked about Orwell, as we often did. It struck me then how both of them, in rather different ways, recalled Cervantes's famous Knight of the Woeful Countenance. They were two Don Quixotes who never found a Sancho.

I made Orwell's acquaintance in the flesh through Anthony Powell, with whom for a number of years I was on intimate terms. Now, alas, we are estranged. Powell had spoken to me about Orwell as being an Etonian and a gifted writer, and I mentioned the *New English Weekly* articles. It was arranged that the three of us should lunch together in, I think, a restaurant in Fleet Street, and that was my first sight of Orwell. I had a certain stereotype of an Etonian in my mind, so Orwell's appearance came as a complete surprise. He was dressed in a sort of proletarian fancy dress; an ancient battered sports jacket and corduroy trousers, not actually tied up with string as in old comic drawings, but of the kind that could still be bought in those days in working-class districts and in seaside towns where fishermen live. In this, as in other matters, Orwell was ahead of his time; his costume is now *de rigueur* in public schools and universities, and is more or less the uniform of the middle- and upper-class young. He seemed very tall, the more so because he was so exceedingly thin; his face was decidedly cadaverous, with sad eyes, not particularly bright, and a thin moustache which left a narrow shaved strip between itself and his upper lip. As one can see very clearly in his writings about himself, and in his self-impersonations in his fiction, he was obsessed with the notion that he was physically unattractive. There is, for instance, the ugly birthmark which always shows up with particular vividness on the face of Flory, the hero of *Burmese Days*, in moments of stress and passion. He seems to have seriously believed that the poor smell, as he thought he did himself by comparison with the richer and better favoured boys at his preparatory school and Eton.

This notion of himself as abnormally plain and unalluring was, of course, quite absurd. He was decidedly attractive to both men and women. I personally took to him from the beginning, and grew even fonder of him; not just because of his kindly disposition, true humility and workaday attitude to his writing, and inflexible honesty, but also because there was something charming and winning about him. It was not that he was an amusing talker, or outstandingly original in his ideas. He was original in himself; a card, a dear fellow. If not witty, he was intrinsically funny. For instance, in the extraordinary prejudices he entertained and the naïve confidence with which he propounded them. Thus, he would come out with the proposition: 'All tobacconists are Fascists!', as though this was something so obvious that no one could possibly question his statement. Momentarily, one was swept along. Yes, there was something in it; those little men in their kiosks handing out fags and tobacco all day long – wouldn't they have followed a Hitler or a Mussolini if one had come along? Then the sheer craziness of it took hold of one, and one began to laugh helplessly, until – such was his persuasiveness – one reflected inside one's laughter: after all, they are rather rum birds, those tobacconists. His charming sister, Avril, who kept house for him when he was living in the island of Jura in the Inner Hebrides, gave me another example which greatly pleased me. Talking with a farmer, it seems, he slipped out, as though it was something everyone took for granted, the statement that in the old days ploughmen, following their hand-ploughs, developed an inequality between their shoulder blades, one rising higher than the other, so that special coats had to be made for them taking account of this, some of them even having leather patches for the higher shoulder. The farmer looked incredulous, and subsequent investigation failed to produce any confirmation of Orwell's statement, which he seems to have dreamed up entirely on his own. Even so, I still find myself, if I happen to pass a shop where agricultural clothing is displayed, looking to see whether any of the coats have a single leather shoulder-patch.

I once put the point about Orwell's obsessive sense of being physically unattractive to Cyril Connolly, who was with him at his preparatory school and at Eton. 'He was not a pretty boy', he said laconically, which I took to mean that he was not up to the minimum standard required for participation in the call-boy arrangements prevalent at boarding schools. It is likewise obvious that Orwell did not find relations with the opposite sex easy. (Who, by the way, does?) The subject occasionally cropped up during our subsequent meetings; he and Powell and I got into the habit of lunching regularly, quite often with Julian Symons as well. Orwell characteristically held forth upon the logistic difficulties which dogged the penurious amorist. Where was he to go if he could

not afford a hotel room and had no private accommodation at his disposal? He himself, he said, had been forced through poverty to avail himself of public parks and recreation grounds. As he dwelt upon this theme, he began to chuckle – a throaty, rusty, deep-down chuckle very characteristic of him. His laughter had the same rusty quality as did his voice, due, I understood, to a throat wound he received in Spain. It would have been a droll experience, I decided, to come upon Orwell stretched out on a summer's evening with the lady of his choice in Kensington Gardens or Regent's Park.

I never met Orwell's first wife, Eileen, but everyone who knew her speaks well of her. As it happened, I saw something of him in Paris in 1945 when she died. I was stationed there for the last year of the war as liaison officer with the French *Services Spéciaux*, and Orwell turned up as correspondent for the *Observer*. He had tried so hard to get into the army, but his poor state of health disqualified him, and he had to content himself with the Home Guard, in which, as a former belligerent, he was considered a gunnery expert. This, says Fred Warburg who served with him in the same platoon, represented a greater danger than anything they had to fear from the enemy. Now, at last, he was in what passed for being a theatre of war, and wearing battle-dress, though naturally trying to look as much like a private, and as little like an officer, as possible. With his quite extraordinary reticence about everything personal, one had no idea how he felt about his wife's death. I stuttered out a few words of sympathy, as one does, and then we talked of other things. My impression is that he was quite stricken.

Somehow, the memory I have of him in those Paris days is particularly clear and loveable. It was not that we did anything much or said anything much, but in the squalid circumstances of a war ending and an empty victory looming, his presence was reassuring. I always think of him as a hero – a hero of our time in the Lermontov style; and never more so than then, sloping about in his battle-dress, and, presumably, seeking out news stories for the *Observer* – though he never spoke about any such activities, and I never saw any of his messages. I had occasion to go to London from time to time, and he would ask me to bring him back some shag he used for making his deplorable cigarettes. It was difficult to track down in wartime London, and I recalled a remark of Mrs Naidu to Gandhi when he was a guest in her house, and she had been desperately searching round for goat's milk and other of his dietetic specialities: 'You've no idea, Mahatma, how expensive it is providing the wherewithal for you to fast.'

We often talked about India, where, as it happened, I had been – actually, teaching at a Christian college in what was then Travancore and is now Kerala –

when he was serving in the Burma Police. The generally held opinion is that his time in Burma turned him against the British Raj and made an anti-imperialist and Socialist of him; that to, as it were, purge himself of his involvement in the Raj, he subjected himself to the experiences which resulted in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. From our conversations on the subject, and a careful reading of *Burmese Days*, I consider this to be a great over-simplification. In many respects he quite liked his Burma service; Christopher Hollis, a fellow-Etonian, dined with him in Rangoon at the time, and found him a perfectly ordinary and relatively contented officer. There was, remember, a strain of violence in him which came out from time to time. Rayner Heppenstall has described one such occasion, when he was sharing a flat with Orwell and came home drunk, and Orwell beat him up mercilessly. It was a source of great pride to him that he was once arrested in Glasgow for drunken disorder, and spent the night in the cells. The parts of *Burmese Days* that most come alive are when he is describing hunting expeditions, and the general attitude of the book is much more Kipling-esque than Marxist. The 'natives' behave despicably; the *Sahibs* may be boors and bullies, but they dominate the scene in a time of crisis. After all, Orwell came from a family with a strong Anglo-Indian background. In a certain sense, he belonged to the Raj; he once told me that he thought *The Road to Mandalay* the most beautiful poem in the English language. I could sense his disapproval when I described to him how in Travancore I used to wear an Indian *dhoti* made of *kadi*, the homespun cloth which was the uniform of the nationalist movement, and live on Indian food which I ate with my fingers, and travel third-class on the railways, and suffer the tortures of the damned by making myself sit cross-legged on the ground. It was all pretty silly, I am sure, but well meant. To him it signified missionaries, whom he regarded with contempt. What he disapproved of, basically, in the Raj was that we in England, as he was fond of putting it, lived off the backs of under-paid, under-nourished and exploited coolies. This is what he felt he must expiate. Indian independence, when it came, gave him no particular satisfaction, but he saw it as an act of retribution.

Orwell's mania to identify himself with the poor and outcast in England had the same sort of basis. They had been wronged by his class, and he must somehow make it up. So he stayed in workhouses, consorted with down-and-outs, and in *The Road to Wigan Pier* gave what he considered to be an authentic picture of working-class life. Actually, as I occasionally ventured to remark to him, I think his data was derived much more from the *News of the World* and seaside picture postcards – two of his ruling passions – and even from Dickens, than from direct observation. In addition to his proletarian fancy dress, he was always trying to conform to what he considered to be proletarian behaviour.

Hence the shag and the rolled cigarettes; in a public bar he would whisper that a pint of bitter should be ordered in such a way and drunk in such a way. He was concerned lest his voice and bearing should suggest the Etonian. Here, I really believe he need not have worried; but it is true that, however careful he might be about his clothes, his accent and his behaviour, he was always noticeable; not as an Etonian in a public bar, nor, for that matter, as a down-and-out in a saloon bar, but as Orwell, a dear oddity.

Though I should, I suppose, pass for being much more reactionary (whatever that may mean) in my views than Orwell, in our talk it often seemed the other way round. He was always going on about nancy poets and pacifists and sandal-wearing vegetarians with what seemed to me unnecessary and unfair virulence; he was inclined at times to be vaguely anti-Semitic, and he lambasted contemporary literary mandarins in a way that stirred up even in my breast a tepid desire to come to their defence. The truth is he was by temperament deeply conservative. He loved the past, hated the present and dreaded the future. In this he may well have been right, but it somehow went ill with canvassing on behalf of the Bevanites, and being literary editor of *Tribune*. In his own mind, however, he managed to work it all out, and considered himself the most consistent of beings. Part at least of his great popularity, on both sides of the Atlantic, has derived from this conservative undertow in his leftist course. A bourgeoisie like ours on the run is always looking for someone who combines impeccable intelligentsia credentials with a passion, secret or avowed – but better secret – for maintaining the *status quo*. They found it in a T. S. Eliot, in a W. B. Yeats, in an Aldous Huxley, in an Ezra Pound who has at different times expounded racialist views which would make any Afrikaner go pale with horror. They thought they found it, and perhaps to some extent did, in Orwell; though in his case the confection was characteristically weird.

Immediately after the war I saw Orwell occasionally in London, and, of course, rejoiced over the great success of *Animal Farm*. My older children read it with interest, and one of them wrote to him about it, receiving a charming note in reply. Then I went to Washington as a newspaper correspondent, and by the time I returned Orwell had gone to live in Jura. I had a letter from him there asking me to get him a saddle – God knows why, or what particular kind was required. The furthest I got in carrying out the assignment was to look vaguely at a saddle in the window of a shop in St Martin's Lane. I was living practically next door to Powell, and we quite often went for walks round Regent's Park. The subject of Orwell naturally cropped up from time to time. I think I admired him more than Powell did, but he and Powell had more in common; partly, I dare say, because they were both Etonians, and, in the best

sense of the word conservative – something I have never succeeded in being. When word came that Orwell's health had again collapsed, and that he was in a sanatorium near Stroud in Gloucestershire, we decided to go and see him.

We walked the last bit of the way. It was a very beautiful day, and I remember feeling unreasonably cheerful considering the purpose of our journey. Orwell was in a wooden hut by himself. He looked terribly wasted and thin, and I think I knew then that he was likely to die. Visiting tuberculosis patients was, for me, part of the experience of childhood; my father's family was riddled with the disease, and when I was seven I developed symptoms myself and had to go away into the country. So I was familiar with that particular soft, purring cough; that almost mystical transparency of the skin – like a thin sheet of fibre-glass with a furious furnace the other side. Orwell was in good spirits. He had managed to finish *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but said little about it. He was as secretive about his work as about everything else. Incidentally, Avril told me that this secretiveness was hereditary; their father had been just the same. Powell and I had been laughing over an incident in a novel by Koestler; the hero, in seducing one of the female characters, through being circumcised, reveals that he is a Jew. Orwell was not as amused as we were. Of course it's not true, he said, that in this country only Jews are circumcised; but it is true that, generally speaking, the upper classes are and the lower classes aren't. He cited his own case at Eton, where in the changing-rooms he was very ashamed at being uncircumcised, and kept himself covered. It was a vintage Orwell point. On the way back I suggested to Powell that he should tell Evelyn Waugh, who then lived in the neighbourhood of the sanatorium, that Orwell was there, so that he might visit him. Whether at Powell's suggestion or someone else's, I learnt afterwards that Waugh did go and see Orwell several times, and afterwards corresponded with him in a very delightful way. Despite all Waugh's efforts to appear to be an irascible, deaf old curmudgeon, a sort of innate saintliness kept breaking through. I should have loved to see them together; complementary figures, his country gentleman's outfit and Orwell's proletarian one both straight out of back numbers of *Punch*.

Shortly afterwards, Orwell was transferred to University College Hospital, near to where Powell and I were living. We visited him quite often, but mostly separately so as to tire him less. He was full of projects for books he was going to write; on Conrad, on Gissing – a dismal writer for whom he had a great admiration – on anti-British feeling in the United States. He quoted a remark in one of Hugh Kingsmill's books to the effect that a writer who has more to write cannot die. I think that quite often before he would have been glad enough to die; now he passionately wanted to live. He was going to remarry,



and go to Switzerland; he had become a famous writer, his financial worries were at an end. Sonia Brownell who became his second wife represented everything he had always longed for; she was beautiful, and in a generous, luxuriant way; gifted socially, the familiar of writers and painters. Yet I knew it was all a dream; writers still with things to write *can* die. His mind was turning more than ever on what he had never had and must not look to have – physical strength and beauty. He indignantly showed me an advertisement for sock suspenders that he had cut out of a newspaper; it was based on the notion of Perseus, and showed his gilded winged calves wearing these particular suspenders. How disgusting, he said, to use something so beautiful for so base a purpose! It shocked him more than anything. There seemed rather a lot going on in the world just then to be shocked about, but I let it pass, and agreed that the advertisement was disgraceful.

Sonia and Orwell were married in the hospital. It turned out to be quite an elaborate legal procedure getting permission, the intention being, I suppose, to protect dying millionaires from designing nurses. There was also a long discussion about what Orwell should wear. In the end a mauve velvet smoking-jacket was decided upon, which he wore over his pyjamas. Powell bought it for him at Moss Bros. After the wedding (at which I was not present) he continued to wear the smoking-jacket in bed. I see him now in it, sitting up and holding forth about how, when he and Sonia set up house, all the kitchen fitments were to be in black rubber. At the bottom of the bed he had his fishing-rod, all ready for when they went to Switzerland in a few days time by special charter flight. Lucian Freud was going to accompany them. It never happened, of course. He died the day before they were due to leave. Sonia came to see us the same evening. She cried and cried. I shall always love her for her true tears on that occasion.

It turned out that Orwell had left in his will that he wanted a church funeral and to be buried in a country churchyard. Powell and I had the task of arranging the service. First, we went to an undertaker in Warren Street, and he said he would deal with all that side of things. Then we visited the rector of a nearby Regency church. He had, it was clear, never heard of Orwell, but we were able to persuade him that he was a writer of distinction. When he heard the name of the undertaker he noticeably cheered up; the two of them were, he said, in close touch. We imagined them ringing one another up – ‘Anything doing today?’ The service went off without a hitch, though it was obvious that a good many of those present were unfamiliar with Anglican liturgy. The thing that held my attention all the time was the enormous length of the coffin. It seemed they had difficulty in procuring one long enough. Arranging for his burial was more

difficult. In the end the problem was solved by invoking the help of the Astor influence to find a place for him in a country churchyard. It somehow recalled Bakunin's death in Geneva, where in the public cemetery, along with other data, the profession of the deceased has to be indicated. As being an anarchist is not a profession, the only thing they could put in Bakunin's case was: 'Bakunin - Rentier'.

Another provision in Orwell's will was that no biography of him should be written. This did not prevent the publication of a number of books about him, and in the end Sonia decided that it would be best to announce an authorized biography, with me as the putative author. I made various vague moves in the direction of doing it; such as going through whatever letters and other documents there are, meeting various people who had been connected with him, and trying to sort out my own thoughts on the subject. In the end the project defeated me, partly through my own indolence, and distaste for collecting and absorbing the masses of tape-recorded talk, much of it necessarily intensely boring, which would constitute the bulk of one's material. It seemed to me that Orwell, with a cunning he sometimes displayed in life, had posthumously laid down a great smoke-screen of boredom between himself and any explorer who tried to invade the privacy in which he had lived and died. There was the additional difficulty of the validity to be attached to Orwell's own testimony. Is, for instance, the account of his prep-school days in 'Such, Such Were the Joys' to be taken at its face value? Avril considers that, like Orwell's account of their home life, it is grotesquely distorted. She remembers him as a cheerful, eager schoolboy, and their home as a happy and contented one. Even Connolly suggests in the politest possible way that Orwell laid it on a bit thick. Art is a lie and facts are true; but art is the way to truth, whereas facts lead only down the plastic path of fantasy. Orwell is an artist, and as such lived and wrote his own biography. I think, as he wished, his will prove the definitive work.