



George Orwell

Gordon Bowker

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George Orwell was one of the greatest writers England produced in the last century. He left an enduring mark on our language and culture, with concepts such as 'Big Brother' and 'Room 101.' His reputation rests not only on his political shrewdness and his sharp satires (*Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) but also on his marvellously clear style and superb essays, which rank with the best ever written. Gordon Bowker's new biography, written to coincide with Orwell's centenary, includes fascinating new material which brings his life into unfamiliar focus. He writes revealingly about Orwell's family background; the lasting influence of Eton on his work and character; his superstitious streak and youthful flirtation with black magic; and his chaotic and reckless sex life, which included at least one homoerotic relationship. It highlights the strange circumstances of his first marriage and provides remarkable new evidence of his experiences in Spain and their nightmarish consequences. It also offers a fresh look at his peculiar deathbed marriage to a woman fifteen years his junior. All this has enabled Bowker to give Orwell's life a brilliantly fresh and distinctive interpretation.

George Orwell Details

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From Reader Review George Orwell for online ebook

Mikey B. says

An Inside Look at a GREAT Author

The title is indeed descriptive as the author probes the inner workings of the great author - Eric Blair (aka George Orwell). Bowker exposes the dualism of Blair/Orwell to describe many of the man's layers. Blair, in his twenties, was a policeman for the British colonialist empire in Burma. He came to loathe the job and what he did. Just what he did can only be conjectured - but one can imagine the power of a colonial authority in Burma in the early 1900's.

In later years George Orwell would write about power in a far more pervasive atmosphere - notably in his two great twentieth century works - Animal Farm and 1984.

While it is true, as Bowker says that his two major works were misinterpreted, they are so substantial in scope that they can be given many different interpretations. In their beauty, power and longevity they are multi-faceted. I feel that Bowker left out one for "Nineteen Eighty-Four" which is the cult of mediocrity (as seen through the proles). We certainly have been experiencing this for many years on TV, newspapers and magazines which constantly aim for the lowest common denominator.

Also, while Bowker explores Orwell's relationship to several British authors (Maugham, Wells), he has skipped over the American side. What about Hemingway's "For Whom the Bell Tolls" which is the most popular book on the Spanish Civil War. As Bowker points out it was Orwell's participation with the Republicans in Spain that led almost directly to "Animal Farm" and "Nineteen Eighty-Four". Also what of Sinclair Lewis whose social satire books were extremely popular during Orwell's era?

Nevertheless he does paint a portrait of an extremely troubled man - his many affairs, his constant health problems. His dualism to experience poverty with people who were barely literate, I found perplexing; and as Bowker says, anthropological: his accent would immediately set him apart and made him ill-suited to assimilate with homeless people - even though it led to his "poverty books."

Also Orwell could misread events - he sided with Chamberlain on the Munich appeasement. During the onset of war (the London Blitz) he predicted a forthcoming revolution to a classless society.

Bowker's description of Orwell's essay on Dali's paintings is illuminating. Was Orwell seeing something of his inner self in the surreal and underworld Dali paintings - perhaps getting an all to close glimpse of himself in Burma, his philandering and sexual mistreatment of women (Orwell was not one to shy away from direct sexual approaches to woman).

Orwell died at age 46 - what other major works were hidden within him?

John says

Brings Orwell's character to life and doesn't shy away from his flaws. Enjoyed it as much for being transported back in time to the first half of the 20th century as I did as a biography.

Bettie? says

CELEBRITY DEATH MATCH REVIEW: Divine Comedy versus 1984

Due to the lightening of the stifling religiosity that once held sway o'er continental Europe, the caverns, grottoes and circles that once were known collectively as Hell lay all but dormant for a fair few years.

Then this guy called Virgil, with his mate Bird Brian Brains, started up an excursion business, and also started letting out areas for film crews, authors and any number of conspiracy theorists. The most lucrative was this:

and maybe not *so* funny but amusing enough was this moment:

We have seen Drizzt, House of Leaves, Tolkein's goblins and Pratchett's Dwarves; all the coins thrown into any well comes straight down into the coffers.

[image error]

Of course they have their share of accidents, it is bound to happen in a place such as this. Why only last week there was a cave-in on the room 101 set...

No loss there. No loss at all

Win for the circles

Allen says

My first biography read to learn more about the person rather than as history to learn more about the time in which they lived. George Orwell, born Eric Blair, is familiar to most as the author of Animal Farm and

Nineteen Eighty-Four, his last two and most famous novels, written just before his death from TB in 1950 at the age of 46. The book is well researched, presenting Orwell as the extremely complex person that he was, womanizer, journalist, anti-Imperialist, and political activist "attacking the Left from the right and the Right from the left".

He fought for the Republicans in Spain where he learned, almost at the cost of his life that the Communists were no different than the Fascists. His last two books were often used by the Right to condemn socialism but the truth was that Orwell was a socialist, a progressive social democrat, who hated totalitarianism as embodied by both Stalin and Hitler.

Orwell also wrote a great many political essays and other works which are introduced in the book and which I am now going to find and read.

Horza says

Digs up some interesting biographical details but runs out of analytical steam, particularly towards the end. The concluding chapter is a mess and there are significant typographical errors and stylistic idiosyncrasies.

Stuart says

This biography is certainly not fawning, Bowler doesn't shirk from the more undesirable qualities of his subject. Nevertheless, this is a good introduction to Eric Blair the man and George Orwell the author. I especially appreciated his underlining the fact that with "Animal Farm" and "1984", Orwell was attacking Stalinism and Communism from the left (Labour party style Socialism). Those on the right who twisted his works for their own ends need constant reminding of this fact. In an age when people felt compelled to pick a side, Orwell was one of the few to denounce both Fascism and Communism. For this reason and for his clear forceful writing makes him one of the most important figures of the 20th century.

Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

George Orwell was born in June, 1903. No, he wasn't. George Orwell was born in January, 1933. Actually, both are true. What; is there something Orwellian here; are we to entertain contradictory statements without being aware of the contradiction? Are we in the foothills of double-think?

OK, then, let me clarify: Eric Arthur Blair, who was to become George Orwell, was indeed born in June, 1903. Although he had previously published some minor articles with the by-line E. A. Blair, the pen name by which he is best known comes with the publication in January, 1933 of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, his George Gissing-like odyssey into the nether world.

So this year is an anniversary in two senses – the one hundred and tenth of his birth and the eightieth of his first reasonably successful literary endeavour, the kind of perceptive, unadorned and matter-of-fact sociological analysis that he was to make a unique feature of his writing.

Orwell - like Charles Dickens a social analyst as well as a novelist - is one of my favourite writers. Like him, my own ambition is to make political writing into an art, an aim he set out in *Why I Write*, one of his most brilliant essays. Like him, I discovered the sheer joy of words when I was in my mid-teens. I first read *Animal Farm*, his exposé of the fraudulent character of Soviet Communism, when I was fourteen. I have been reading his work on and off ever since, his novels, his reportage, his criticism, his occasional pieces and his journalism.

This anniversary year I've been re-tracing my steps, overwhelmed by the sheer brilliance and insight in the likes of *Charles Dickens*, a critical essay of outstanding ability. As with so much of his work there is a slight element of biography. I give you, from the conclusion, how Orwell saw Dickens and how I see Orwell:

When one reads any strongly individual piece of writing, one has the impression of seeing a face somewhere behind the page. It is not necessarily the actual face of the writer. I feel this very strongly with Swift, with Defoe, with Fielding, Stendhal, Thackeray, Flaubert, though in several cases I do not know what these people looked like and do not want to know. What one sees is the face that the writer ought to have. Well, in the case of Dickens I see a face that is not quite the face of Dickens's photographs, though it resembles it. It is the face of a man of about forty, with a small beard and a high colour. He is laughing, with a touch of anger in his laughter, but no triumph, no malignity. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is generously angry — in other words, of a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls.

I've been looking for this face also in biography. I looked for it in *George Orwell* by Gordon Bowker. This is not the first account of Orwell's life that I've tackled. I read Bernard Crick's study while I was still at school, though I remember little of it now. What can I say about Bowker? He has given us an honest and decent account of honesty and decency, the major themes, if you like, of Orwell's literary career. What I do remember about Crick is that his book was primarily political in purpose. Bowker, I suppose, is more classic biography, a warts and all portrait. It's a good workman-like effort, though I have to say I could have done without the occasional 'he would have thought', the kind of tiresome and speculative formula used to fill gaps in the narrative. This sort of thing simply will not do!

I think I probably know as much about Orwell about as anyone, which is to say I'm not sure how much I really know. He certainly left traces, including *Such, Such Were the Joys*, his posthumous exposé of life at Saint Cyprian's, his prep school, where he says that he does not want to make it sound like Dickens' Dotheboys Hall and then makes it sound remarkably like, well, Dotheboys Hall! At other times he can be quite guarded, saying very little about his five years as an imperial policeman in Burma, his version, I think of Gorky's 'university.' It left him with an abiding hatred of imperialism and left us with two superlative essays – *A Hanging* and *Shooting an Elephant*, but not much more besides. It also gave us *Burmese Days*, his first novel and, in my estimation, his best.

That's the other thing about Orwell – he was an artist first and foremost, not beyond a certain amount of embellishment and poetic licence. Did he really shoot an elephant? Yes, it seems he did, but perhaps not in the way he suggested. I imagine the political symbolism was just a brilliant afterthought.

As I say, Bowker gives us a decent warts and all portrait, not avoiding some of the less savoury aspects of the writer's character, including his apparent homophobia, his anti-Semitism and his misogyny. Sex for Orwell seems to have been something of an imperial experience, picked up clearly during his formative years in Burma, quick possession and rapid fulfillment being the only aims! Ah, but he was man of his times, for

all of his progressive attitudes, replete with the residual prejudices of his time and his class, things which have become rather amusing with the passage of time. His fulminations against fruit juice (fruit juice!) and nudism in *The Road to Wigan Pier* are a joy to behold. Eileen O'Shaughnessy, his first wife, was in the habit of pulling his leg over some of his more outrageous statements, which he took in good humour.

When I think of Orwell I also think of Jonathan Swift, who just so happens to have been one of his favourite authors. Orwell was the Swift of the Age of Ideology, exposing in the most biting satire the lies and deceptions that had become part of contemporary political discourse. If Swift was a frustrated Tory, Orwell was a frustrated Socialist, more critical of his own side than the enemy. It was in Stalinism that he saw the greatest evil, particularly after his experiences in Spain, recorded so memorably in *Homage to Catalonia*. Here, with language abused for political ends, with the truth turned inside out, with today's orthodoxy becoming tomorrow's heterodoxy, the foundations were laid for the *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the ultimate nightmare of the age.

I believe that Orwell is best approached through his work. But if you are coming to him for the first time, or if you are looking for a thread through the labyrinth, then *George Orwell* is a useful companion. It's well-situated, well-structured and well-written without a superabundance of detail. It's a little lacking, perhaps, in critical analysis, but I do not believe that to be a great fault.

For so many years success and recognition had eluded Orwell, often reduced to the same tenuous straights as Edwin Reardon in George Gissing's *New Grub Street*. It came eventually, particularly after the publication of *Animal Farm*, but by now the author was approaching a premature death, carried away eventually by the lung ailment that had troubled him for most of his life.

Just before Orwell's death at the tragically early age of forty-six in January, 1950 Desmond MacCarthy, a distinguished editor and literary critic, wrote saying that he considered him "among the few memorable writers of your generation", one who had left "an indelible mark on English literature." It serves, I think, as an abiding epitaph. Bowker has done good service in reminding us just how memorable he was.

Matthew Carr says

Superb warts-and-all biography of Orwell, whose analysis of Orwell's complicated personality enhances the reader's understanding of his work. Full of insight, intelligence and empathy.

Emmett says

to be honest, it was so poorly written i gave-up reading it "conventionally" before i even reached 100 pages, and just decided to flick through the index, reading segments on subjects i'm most interested in.

Linda says

Not as good as most literary biographies

Todd says

In my college days I read everything by George Orwell that I could get my hands on. Since it was the early 70s, this meant all of the published novels, essays, and reviews. Today there is much more available, including diaries and letters, and this more recent material I have not read. Mainly, I think, I loved the clarity of his writing. It was more his voice and his ability to give clear expression to an idea, rather than his politics or ability to tell a story, that attracted me.

I recall that he had expressly wished that no biography of him be written, and at the time of my intense reading of his work there seemed to be almost nothing written about him. Now however there have been several biographies, including the one I am just finishing up by Gordon Bowker (who also wrote a biography of Malcolm Lowry, another favorite writer of my youth). Evidently, Orwell could not make the injunction against any account of his life stick.

Orwell emerges from this biography as a somewhat secretive and contradictory character. Bowker provides the background against which to see and understand the public Orwell, who spoke out in support of socialism, who went off to fight in the Spanish Civil War, and who protested loudly against the advance of the totalitarian state. My main interest has to do with the psychology at work in this man.

A formative period was his experience in Burma as a young twenty-something serving as a police officer in the Indian Civil Service. Clearly, Orwell was repelled by what he saw himself turning into, an upholder of an oppressive order, with all of the attendant attitudes of superiority and arrogance. He came away after several years determined to go in a different direction. It is in the Burmese period that Orwell's sensitivity to the demands of an oppressive ideology was activated. The mentality that he became acquainted with among the ruling class in the Subcontinent morphed over the years into the ideology of the state depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Interestingly, he had the personal background of a member of the elite class. Although a child of the lower middle class (as he described his social position), he received an Eton education, which was a prime credential of the privileged in his day. For him to disguise himself as an indigent and work as a hop-picker, as he reported on in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, shows the extent to which he was intent on working against expectation in his post-Burma days. Later on, when the left-wing intellectuals of his day made excuses for the Soviet Union, Orwell would have none of it and spoke out strongly against the Soviet regime. This won him the admiration of generations of conservatives, for whom he is a hero to this day. (However, Orwell remained a member of the left to the end. He called himself an anarchist and advocated socialism.)

But what I find most interesting about Orwell is how he made himself over from the Eric Blair of his birth into the George Orwell of his mature years. "George Orwell" clearly was a creation, a fiction. Eric Blair -- and some of the cultural inheritance that went with it -- was suppressed. Some of the suppressed items included cruelty, aggression, misogyny... In the biography we learn that he kept a Burmese mistress during the Burma period, that later he paid for sex with a young Moroccan woman, and that he was chronically unfaithful to his wife. Nothing very shocking about all of that, but it's somewhat inconsistent with the public Orwell one gets to know in the published writings, who has been called a secular saint. It makes sense that having created this public persona, Orwell would be secretive and be opposed to any effort to dig into his personal life and publish the findings to the world.

The biography seems like a solid piece of work. It's not brilliant or revolutionary, but it sets out much of the information that a reader of Orwell's published work would be missing and would want to know.

Kim says

This is a perceptive and well-written biography of a complex, eccentric and flawed man. Bowker does a great job coming to grips with his subject, whose life he details in straightforward chronological order. He occasionally engages in some unnecessary speculation of the "Orwell must have thought ..." variety, but not so often that it adversely affects his credibility as a biographer. Bowker's prose is clear and uncomplicated and if the list of sources is any indication his research appears to be thorough. This is a "warts and all" biography and although Orwell had plenty of warts to be revealed, Bowker conveys empathy for his subject without making excuses for his sometimes problematic behaviour.

In recent times I've fallen in love with Orwell's "window pane"** prose and have started working my way through his novels and his non-fiction. Reading this biography has given me insight into the man behind the writer. Highly recommended for Orwell fans.

*Orwell's description of what good prose should be like.

Brigi says

I read this book for my BA thesis, but it was actually quite an interesting read which made me want to know more about Orwell. It's very detailed, it accentuates the childhood of the author (probably as an influence of the man himself - he declared that the childhood of an individual is essential in its forming). Gordon Bowker did a great job - tried to illustrate the great author and the great man through letters, articles and fragments from the journals of Orwell's friends. He also kind of separated Eric Arthur Blair from the literary man George Orwell which was a sensible thing in my opinion - Eric Blair did some strange things.

So Mr. Blair was an odd person and did some things which kind of shocked me, but then I'd remember his education and the era he lived in with all its repressions and I understand the poor "guy" (note: biographies always make you feel closer to that personality and a strange familiarity develops in you, so don't mind me if I refer to him as guy). He just wanted someone to love him. I think his second marriage was a huge mistake (she married him for the money, that's clear), but that's not my problem. Also, I'm quite mad that his TB wasn't discovered sooner. Truth is he wasn't taking care of himself either. But the thought that he could have lived at least 10 years more and could have produced other novels - well, that's upsetting. He took his ideas to the grave.

All in all, I liked the biography, it must have been really hard work to collect all the letters. I also greatly enjoyed the pictures in the book. I recommend it to all George Orwell "fans", but be prepared to find out some weird things. :))

John Park says

He was Eric A. Blair for much of his life. Born into an upper-middle class English family, he endured the harsh, even brutal, environments of a convent school and then English boarding schools including Eton. Of his experience at the convent school the following anecdote offers a hint:

When we were children we had a story that after Robin Hood was done to death in the Priory, his men raped & murdered the nuns, & burned the priory to the ground. It seems this has no foundation in the ballads—we must have made it up. An instance of the human instinct for a happy ending.

[p. 22]

This anecdote touches on themes Bowker finds throughout Orwell's life: a latent thread of sadism, along with his resentment of injustice, a lurking misogyny combined with a need for promiscuous sexual relations.

When Orwell graduated from Eton, a tutor's assessment denied him a university scholarship; financial pressure and a need to rebel then led him to a job with the colonial police in Burma. There he made real efforts to understand local culture and learn the languages languages; he was appalled by racial discrimination and by the brutality he was required to enact in the name of maintaining the Raj.

Perhaps out of a sense of guilt, he then worked in squalid conditions as dishwasher in Paris. Back in England he periodically took on the life of tramp (sometimes having to pretend to be a fallen member of the upper class) and saw the fear and hatred and envy that maintained class divisions, much as the colonial British had feared and despised the Burmese. He fought in the Spanish civil war and was lucky to come out alive after being shot in the throat and later being betrayed and hunted by Stalinists. For most of life he was dogged by chest infections, and was ultimately killed by TB just as he was achieving international fame as the author of *Nineteen Eight-Four* and *Animal Farm*.

Three and a half stars.

Kerra says

I read this book for an assignment and it definitely had more than enough information for me to use. I'm also genuinely interested in reading biographies and I legitimately enjoyed reading it. It wasn't the most fun book I've ever read but I still liked it.
