

# GEORGE ORWELL

1903-1950

AS A YOUNG MAN, HE CALLED HIMSELF A TORY ANARCHIST, INDICATING both his affection for English culture and his hatred of British imperialism. But by 1936, at 33, George Orwell identified himself as a Socialist. That was the political stance, in spite of his persistent criticism of fellow socialists, that he respected: the only one, he felt, that might resist the drift toward totalitarianism in England and in other liberal democracies after World War II. The danger lay in the structure imposed on any country preparing for total war with the Soviet Union, he told his publisher Fred Warburg, "and the new weapons, of which of course the atomic bomb is the most powerful and most publicized." It lay also "in the acceptance of a totalitarian outlook by intellectuals of all colours," and the corruption of language that accompanied it.

This drift—and the threat it posed to civil liberties—provided the theme for Orwell's last and most famous novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949); but the political, social, and economic conditions leading up to that situation had been his concern for a long time, as early as *Homage to Catalonia* (1939), about the Spanish Civil War, and *Animal Farm* (1945), the brilliant Swiftian fable that became a best seller and later a popular film.

Contrary to popular opinion, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is not about Stalinist Russia or Hitler's Germany, but about Great Britain and countries with similar forms of government, including the United States. It is a warning about what could happen to a democratic nation that centers all its energy and resources on war-making, on "right thinking," and on repressing points of view that conflict with the status quo. The novel ends with two powerful images of totalitarianism, one of "a boot stamping on a human face — forever," and another of Winston Smith's loving Big Brother. In the last scene, Smith smiles at the telescreen, "two gin-scented tears trickling down the side of his

nose."

Orwell's warning may sound absurd to us who have survived the "real" 1984; and several critics have suggested that his prophecy was off the mark. But anyone who has paid attention to American history since 1945 will recognize those moments when American politics approached this absurdity.

During the 1950s, for example, militant anti-communism flourished under the leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy and—with the complicity of Republicans and Democrats who should have known better—polluted the atmosphere. In such an atmosphere, as Orwell pointed out, everyone loses, especially those people so blinded by hatred and prejudice that they no longer know the difference between imaginary ills and real ones. Under later administrations, the Orwell condition periodically recurred. Ronald Reagan, for example, described the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," and administrative statements about Latin America and about a "winnable" nuclear war resembled Big Brother's diatribes on the telescreen in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. When this language was accompanied by censorship of the press, during the invasion of Grenada, Americans of every political persuasion—conservative, liberal, or radical—began to feel that basic democratic rights were endangered. From Thomas Paine to George Orwell, "common sense" indicates that totalitarianism is best resisted not by labels, fear tactics, and belligerence, but by open and lively debate and freedom of information.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, especially the epilogue on Newspeak, and in "Politics and the English Language," the most important essay on language in the 20th century, Orwell argued that cleaning up our language, making it more precise and concrete, improved our politics as well. He did this in his own writing through images—pictures and sensations—that left no doubt about the meaning of his argument. This was true when he focused on the injustices of his time or on the simple pleasures of everyday life: flowers in spring; strong, properly brewed tea; and the English countryside.

"Politics and the English Language," for example, which says that political language in our time "is designed to make lies sound

truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind," describes easily recognizable abuses of language from recent history.

Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets; this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry; this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers.

"Such phraseology is needed," Orwell went on to say, "if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them." At a time when many of the ills that Orwell warned against still flourish, readers do well to return to the words and example of this just, rather witty, and very honest man. An unsparing critic of all undemocratic practices, he once described his reason for writing in this way: "Every line of serious work I have written since 1936 has been written directly and indirectly *against* totalitarianism and for democratic socialism." A writer of astonishing integrity, he held to that position, through years of neglect, poverty, and three final years of illness, while completing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Born Eric Arthur Blair, in Motlhari, Bengal (Burma), on June 25, 1903, "George Orwell" moved back to England as a child with his mother just before his father retired from the Indian Civil Service. Orwell attended two prestigious schools on scholarship, St. Cyprian's, which he described in "Such, Such Were the Joys," and Eton. Rather than go on to the university, he joined the Imperial Indian Police in 1922, and served in various posts in Burma until 1927. Reconciled to becoming a writer, he spent much of the next two years in Paris in rather severe poverty, as a dishwasher, tutor, and teacher. This experience and two years living among tramps in England provided material for *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). Subsequently he taught "at one of the most godforsaken places

I have ever struck," and worked in a bookshop, while he wrote two novels and an account of working-class life in England. After his marriage to Eileen O'Shaughnessy in 1936, he went to fight on the Republican side against Franco, in the Spanish Civil War. Wounded and ill from tuberculosis, he lived in Morocco for a year.

Physically unfit for service in the army during World War II, Orwell joined the Local Defense Volunteers, worked for the BBC, and wrote for a Socialist weekly as literary editor. The publication of *Animal Farm* in 1945, the year of his wife's death, made him famous on both sides of the Atlantic. No longer financially dependent on jobs as a journalist, he moved to the island of Jura, in Scotland; there, in declining health, he completed his last novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Returning to a sanatorium in England and, later, a hospital in London, he married Sonia Brownell in October 1949 and died three months later, on January 21, 1950. He remains, thirty-five years later, the most essential writer of our time.

Orwell's best epitaph is in "Why I Write," about his wish to make political writing into an art:

My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. . . . But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience. So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to take pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information. It is no use trying to suppress that side of myself. The job is to reconcile my ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities that this age forces on all of us.

BY GEORGE ORWELL

*The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, 4 vols.  
Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. New York: Harcourt,

Brace, and World, 1968.

*Animal Farm*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954.

*Homage to Catalonia*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1952.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four, A Novel*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949.

*Down and Out in Paris and London*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1933.

And others.

#### ABOUT GEORGE ORWELL

Crick, Bernard R. *George Orwell: A Life*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1980.

*George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Edited by Raymond Williams. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974.

Woodcock, George. *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1966.

*The World of George Orwell*. Edited by Miriam Gross. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973.