

Ben Pimlott: Introduction to Orwell's England

I have always felt as if I lived in Orwell's England. Like every English child born at the end of the Second World War, I grew up in it. My first memories are American – colourful, plentiful and warm. My first English memories are of London in 1948. By contrast, they are grey and sepia, like a backdrop to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I recall a city of bombsites and soot-covered, pock-marked buildings, of gas fires turned low to save fuel and curtains lined with blackout material to keep in the warmth, of sweets on ration, cod-liver oil capsules and undrinkable National Health orange juice. Germany had been beaten, the Soviet Union was the next enemy, capitalism was on the slide and everybody looked to the state as the provider.

As it happens, I also grew up in Orwell's England in a more personal way. From a very early age, I was aware of a connection with the writer which was no less evocative for being remote. One of my childhood treasures was a christening mug given by my godmother, Gwen O'Shaughnessy, sister-in-law of Orwell's first wife Eileen. George Orwell died of tuberculosis in January 1950, at the age of forty-six. In the mid-1950s, my elder sister and I used to stay with Gwen and her half-sister Doreen Kopp in Norfolk, where Gwen continued to practise as a doctor, and where the two of them brought up a pooled brood of five children. Gwen and Doreen were both widows. It was a happy household, but one that was full of the echoes of dead men.

I remember George as a ghostly presence: a difficult, often exasperating, yet beloved spectre, whose name conjured up muddy boots and dirty finger-nails, adventures in foreign parts, and a stubbornly masculine failure to be practical. For me, Orwell's stern whimsicality has ever since been bound up with a pre-affluent world that no longer exists – of long-faced, heavy-smoking, *New Statesman* & *Nation*-reading men (and a few women), who treated the well-to-do with tolerant condescension, and regarded a commitment to history, literature and the public service as taken-for-granted attributes of any civilized human being.

Today – in my mind, at least, but also I think more widely – Orwell's England still conveys a sense of time and place: in particular, the atmosphere of a capital city traumatized by two world wars, London during the threadbare 1930s and the austere 1940s. Sometimes the metropolis is in the foreground. For example, few things Orwell wrote are more grainily evocative of austerity London than *The English People*, a text written during the Second World War as semi-propaganda, though not published until 1947. At other times, what the author writes about seems to have nothing to do with London. But London is there, nonetheless: *The Road to Wigan Pier* is as much about the mentality of the capital, as it is about the North. Thus, the rootedness of Orwell, the precision of his social comment, make it tempting to see his work as a kind of old-fashioned art movie. England, after all, no longer has coal-mines: and there are probably more wine bars than tripe shops in Wigan.

Yet there is a paradox. On the one hand, Orwell is quintessentially an English writer, carrying into his work many English qualities (suspicion of theory, for example), and his work will always be cited for its representative Englishness. On the other hand – like Boswell's Samuel Johnson, another firmly based Englishman, whom in some ways he resembles – Orwell is the reverse of parochial. Indeed, by one reading, Orwell's England is not a place at all. It is a state of mind. That is why the writings in this volume will continue to be appreciated by

people who have only the haziest knowledge of, and only the most limited interest in, the national context in which they were written.

As well as a paradox, there is an irony. Somebody who pitted his satirical talent against the mid-twentieth-century obsession with utopias, appears today – more than fifty years after his death – as one of the most persuasively utopian writers who ever put pen to paper. If Orwell continues to nibble and gnaw at the reader's moral conscience, it is because of the conviction infusing all his work that a satisfactory way of living with neighbours is attainable. Orwell was a socialist – the point needs underlining, for there have been many who have preferred to ignore this fundamental aspect of his life and work. His attacks on other socialists derived, not from a rejection of their goal, but from his own assessment of the vanities and humbug of many of those who self-consciously adopted the label.

Abolishing cant was his aim. What gives him his unique moral appeal is a passion for honesty which acknowledges that nobody is ever completely honest. If he had a universal message, it was this: a better life can be achieved, not by the repetition of stock phrases, but by examining the actual world we inhabit.

George Orwell was a socialist. Was he also a hero, even a martyr? It is important to get things into perspective. One obstacle to a proper understanding of his work is the posthumous cult that grew up in the years after his death, and especially (another irony) after the publication of Bernard Crick's masterly and not at all reverential biography. The cult focused on the life, presenting the writer as a Christ or John the Baptist, and conveniently dividing the narrative into New Testament segments: youthful promise, followed by retreat into the wilderness and period of obscurity; self-examination in the company of outcasts and the needy; brief, brilliant and controversial ministry; even briefer period of celebrity; early death. The cult apparently solved the problem of Orwell's refusal to be categorized: morally perfect and above reproach, the writer became the property of everybody. As a result, his work is nowadays quoted as scripture, often by people to whom he would not have given the time of day (and, no doubt, vice versa).

Orwell would laugh at this, and so should we. The passage of time ought to enable us to see him today as altogether fallible, struggling for most of his adult life to find a voice and earn his crust. To regard him in this light does not diminish his work but, on the contrary, makes it more remarkable: it helps us to appreciate that author, social inquirer and human being are of a piece. In place of the god or prophet, we discover a 'degenerate modern semi-intellectual' (his self-description) trembling on the edge of failure. We see writing that stems not from a master plan, but from a series of false starts. Indeed, so far from being structured, Orwell's actual life was chaotic. The Orwell we encounter at the beginning of this book is Eric Blair, the Old Etonian drop-out and insecure drifter, more or less on his beam ends. If England is his topic, this is *faute de mieux* – it has less to do with a fascinated interest in his native country, than because it is the material most readily at hand.

By the mid-1930s, the scene has changed. With three published books under his belt and another on the way, he has acquired a literary persona (as well as a name). Yet he remains an eccentric, if by now well-directed, outsider – eking out a meagre existence on the margins of London journalistic and political life. We see an ambitious author who rather pettishly resents the success of his better-organized contemporaries. We see a rebel whose rebellion is more against the caste of left-wing fellow-writers, than against the shabby-genteel stratum which he identifies as his own. We see a vocal critic of social snobbery, whose access to publishing

houses and literary journals owes more to doors opened through old-boy connections with people like Cyril Connolly, than he is ever prepared to admit. In such a context, Orwell's famously savage indictment of brutality and conditioning at his prep school ('Such, Such Were the Joys') appears almost ungrateful.

Yet if Orwell in this pre-war period is an aspirant writer like any other, seizing at every opportunity to climb the greasy pole, he stands out from the rest – because of his relationship to his subject. He observes, and he chews at his observations, like a dog with a bone. Orwell is a classic documentary writer, not because experts say he is – stylistically he breaks practically every rule – but because of his story-teller's instinct for conveying the emotions of a social traveller. Orwell's skill is in convincing his audience that his own non-conventional feelings are actually the same as theirs would be, if they had shared his experience. He is not just a voyeur, peering at the dirty linen and messy lives of people the world prefers not to know about. He is a collusive, seductive voyeur. His achievement is to abolish (or appear to abolish) self-censorship, and to provide in his account an almost embarrassing intimacy: the reader is told to peer into the writer's psyche and see the unpleasant things, as well as the good ones.

In this he differs from many of the philosophers and agitators among his contemporaries who saw themselves as messengers for a higher cause, interpreting or relaying points of view derived from Continental theories. For such people, documentary was political ammunition in a war with set battle-lines. By contrast, Orwell sniffs orthodoxy at a hundred yards: and, having sniffed, seeks to upset its adherents. Nobody was ever more politically incorrect than Orwell – or, on occasion, more illiberal: so far from being a model for twenty-first century progressives, he reveals attitudes (towards 'Nancy poets' of the literary establishment, for example, and 'birth controllers') which, if expressed for the first time today, would get him thrown out of the faculty of an American university. However, he does not claim superior virtue. He admits that many of his own attributes are undesirable. He self-flagellates as much as he flagellates.

The core of this volume is provided by Orwell's most important non-fiction work. *The Road to Wigan Pier* is a sequel to *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the author's first book, which established his distinctive style, and also himself as a social investigator of a particular, Jack London, type. At the same time, it is transitional, marking the writer's move from amateur to professional status. *Wigan Pier* was commissioned by his publisher, Victor Gollancz, in January 1936, just after Orwell had finished the manuscript of his third novel, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Hitherto, he had lived hand to mouth. The commission marked a step forward in his standing as a writer, and signalled a new confidence.

Orwell's brief was to write about the condition of the unemployed in the North of England, much as he had previously written about tramps and social outcasts. Though non-fiction, it contains a literary convention that is fictional. The portrayal of the author as an impecunious scribbler not far removed from those he is observing ('Economically, I belong to the working class'), is unduly modest. Every other aspect of the book, however, is essentially truthful – as the meticulous 'Road to Wigan Pier Diary', included in this volume, shows. Orwell treated the project with the utmost seriousness. For *Down and Out* he himself became a tramp, to find out what it felt like. For *Wigan Pier* he travelled North as a burgeoning writer, armed with letters of introduction from journalists and political activists, making no pretence of joining the ranks of those he sought to observe. At the same time, he was concerned to write as sensitive a description as he could, in the time available.

The book was based on two months (February and March, 1936) with working people and their families in Manchester, Wigan, Barnsley and Sheffield, together with a spell with his sister and her husband in Leeds, and a visit to Liverpool docks. The author did not seek to be like the people he visited. However, he tried to be more than a typical journalist: he avoided staying in ordinary hotels, adopting instead the style of an anthropologist. After taking a train to Coventry, he made his way to Manchester by bus and on foot through some of the grimmest industrial areas, sleeping in lodging houses and on one occasion in a doss-house. In Manchester, he stayed for four days with a trade union official and his wife, and was directed on to Wigan, a town particularly hard hit by cotton-mill and coal-mine closures. There he lived at a variety of addresses (as his Diary entries record), including lodgings over a tripe shop. He visited homes, attended political meetings, and went down a pit. The fruit of his efforts is a work that combines detailed observation, a matter-of-fact tone, human feeling and political passion. At the same time, the author uses his account of proletarian life as a peg on which to hang what really interested him: not just the lives of working-class people as such, but his own inner dialogue about how middle-class people like himself did and should relate to them.

The Road to Wigan Pier is about class, and its effects. It is not about industry, or the economy. 'I know nothing whatever about the technical side of mining,' the author is at pains to point out. 'I am merely describing what I have seen... I am not a manual labourer and please God I never shall be one.' The book is about the English as they really were, and possibly still are. It is about contrasts, hypocrisy, and convenient amnesia. Thus, the author drives home the unwelcome truth that, whoever you happen to be, the luxury to do what you do depends on hard, physical work done by others. 'In order that Hitler may march the goose-step', he writes, 'that the Pope may denounce Bolshevism, that the cricket crowds may assemble at Lord's, that the Nancy poets may scratch one another's backs, coal has got to be forthcoming.' Middle-class Southerners are a particular target. There may be, he suggests, 'at least a tinge of truth in that picture of Southern England as one enormous Brighton inhabited by lounge-lizards', who know little about the manual labour they require to be performed.

The first part of *Wigan Pier* (buttressed by photos and simple bits of arithmetic which, alas, the passage of time has rendered quaint, rather than shocking) is a Baedeker's guide to the slums, damp, dirt, disease, accident rates and high mortality that are the consequences of poor wages and bad working conditions. Repeatedly, the author stresses how difficult it is for a middle-class observer to take in what is going on. The conditions of the English proletariat, he indicates, are a foreign country. 'Even when I am on the verge of starvation', he points out, 'I have certain rights attaching to my bourgeois status.' The working class are not so lucky. Juxtaposed are the tragedies of squalid lives ('on the day when there was a full chamber-pot under the breakfast table, I decided to leave'); and the confessional, as the author seeks to explain why, to middle-class eyes and nostrils, working-class conditions are repugnant as well as tragic. It is a shattering book, yet surprisingly not a despairing one. It ends on a positive note: the reader is left with a sense that the task of breaking down social barriers is almost impossible – but not quite. The solution, Orwell argues, is for middle-class wage-earners in Southern England to accept that their future lies in alliance with, not in fearful opposition to, the Northern proletariat. The message is uncompromisingly political. If Socialism becomes something 'large numbers of Englishmen genuinely care about', he declares, then 'the class-difficulty may solve itself more rapidly than now seems thinkable.'

Such an upbeat conclusion may have owed something to the author's concern – in view of his heavy criticisms of socialists early in the book – to make clear which side he is on. The Left-

Right struggle was intensifying, and it was not a time for ambiguity. It may also have something to do with an event in the author's private life. In June 1936, Orwell married Eileen O'Shaughnessy. Orwell's friend Geoffrey Gorer once remarked that the only time he ever saw Orwell really happy was in the first year of his marriage. It also happened to be the period when the author was writing up his *Wigan Pier* notes. Whether or not this was a factor, the reader comes away from *The Road to Wigan Pier* horrified by what it describes, but also with a sense of the dignity of those described in it, and of a challenge.

The challenge went beyond England. Orwell wrote *Wigan Pier* just as the attention of radicals at home was moving away from domestic problems to European ones. In March 1936, German troops entered the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland, in violation of the Treaties of Versailles and Locarno. In July, Franco's rebellion against the Republican Government in Spain precipitated a civil war. By the time *The Road to Wigan Pier* was published, its topic had become unfashionable: everybody on the Left was talking about Spain, and Orwell himself had taken time off from writing to arrange to join the Independent Labour Party's expeditionary unit. If the book can be seen as a follow-up to *Down and Out*, it is also a prequel to *Homage to Catalonia* – the final section, on the need to resist creeping fascism, was written against the background of the growing Spanish conflict.

Spain impinged in another way as well. A week after Franco's return to the mainland, Gollancz launched his pioneering Left Book Club, whose monthly 'choices' – selected by a triumvirate of Gollancz himself, John Strachey and Harold Laski – were guaranteed not only a wide but an enthusiastic and committed readership. The Club was a movement as well as a publishing venture. Its primary aim was to whip up support for the Spanish Republican cause and for a pro-Communist, anti-fascist popular front. Most of the 'choices' were by Communists or fellow-travellers. *The Road to Wigan Pier*, with its open scorn for middle-class Marxists, scarcely fitted the Club's mould. Gollancz's publishing instincts, however, were even stronger than his political ones, and as soon as he had read the manuscript he offered the author a place on the LBC list. The book was duly published by the Club in March 1937 – albeit with a preface by the publisher, distancing himself from Orwell's anti-Communist opinions. By then, Orwell was in Spain, and received his copy in the trenches before Huesca. The first edition sold over 47,000 copies.

It is easy to see why *Wigan Pier* made Gollancz both excited and nervous. On the one hand, the descriptions of poverty were grist to the Marxist and 'popular front' mill. On the other, Orwell's attack in the second half of the book on actually existing socialists (which Gollancz urged him to drop), was disconcertingly persuasive. Modern readers may also have difficulty with parts of the book, but for different reasons. Some may be more amused than outraged by the famous passage in which the author provocatively lumps together the many varieties of people he regards as cranks ('One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words "Socialism" and "Communism" draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex maniac, Quaker, "Nature Cure" quack, pacifist and feminist in England'). Harder to take, however, is Orwell's blush-making description of working-class life at its best:

Especially on winter evenings after tea, when the fire glows in the open range and dances mirrored in the steel fender, when Father, in shirt-sleeves, sits in the rocking chair at one side of the fire reading the racing finals, and Mother sits on the other with her sewing, and the children are happy with a pennorth of mint humbugs, and the dog lolfs roasting himself on

the rag mat – it is a good place to be in, provided that you can be not only in it but sufficiently of it to be taken for granted.

Such passages have been used to lampoon Orwell as a naïve and patronizing sentimentalist. Fortunately there are few of them: and they do little to detract from the author's powerful account of a country morally crippled by class, by a bourgeois urge to keep up appearances, and by ignorance of the working and housing conditions of those whose downtrodden lives support the comforts of the better off.

There is a need for people to know. 'It is a kind of duty', he insists, 'to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist.' Smell plays a critical part. Orwell reminds the reader, self-analytically, that people like him – precariously 'lower-upper-middle-class' – were brought up to believe that 'the lower classes smell'. Things may have changed since his own childhood before and during the Great War, he acknowledges. But he doubts if they have changed much.

Wigan Pier presents one picture of Orwell's England. It is refined, but seldom contradicted, elsewhere in the author's writings. A pattern emerges: England (not Ireland or Scotland or Wales – none of which greatly interests him) is a country where social divisions cause the poor unnecessary suffering; and also where the middle and upper classes are maimed by their upbringing and education. It is an England where, because of class, those on the margins of a particular layer attach themselves desperately, and pathetically, to the values of the one above them. There is a lace-curtain, 'old maids biking to Holy Communion' aspect. There is also militarism. 'Most of the English middle class are trained for war from the cradle onwards', the author observes, and asks, 'how is it that England, with one of the smallest armies in the world, has so many retired colonels?'

People of moderate disposition who imagine that Orwell's England may offer them consolation will have to look elsewhere: the author is uncompromising. In *Wigan Pier*, he writes of a need for an 'effective Socialist party... with genuinely revolutionary intentions', in order to resist an English form of fascism. The Second World War radicalizes him still further. Who can be relied on? Not the English police, 'the very people who would go over to Hitler once they were certain he had won'. In his wartime essay, 'My Country Right or Left', Orwell does not mince his words. 'Only revolution can save England', he concludes, 'that has been obvious for ten years. I dare say London gutters will have to run with blood.' But if Orwell's England is a country on the brink, its weaknesses can also be saving graces. Thus, the English 'training for war' and public-school system may even have advantages: turning out stiff-upper-lip idealists of the John Cornford type, splendidly equipped for leadership roles as revolutionaries. Meanwhile if England gets into serious trouble, the loyalty of anybody who has experienced 'the long drilling in patriotism which the middle classes go through' can be relied upon to rally round, regardless of political opinions.

In sum, the England that emerges from this book is a country (and an idea) which Orwell regards with a kind of weary affection and matured respect, even against his own better judgement: an England whose manifold injustices should not obscure its blessings. It is an England of tramps on the way down ('homosexuality is a vice which is not unknown to these eternal wanderers'), trade union officials on the way up ('as soon as a working-man gets an official post in the Trade Union or goes into Labour politics, he becomes middle-class whether he wish or no'), of schools like Roedean ('I could feel waves of snobbishness pouring out'), and a socialist bourgeoisie 'most of whom give me the creeps'; an England

where red pillar-boxes and suet puddings enter your soul, an England of privacy, an England which is also 'the most class-ridden country under the sun'; an irreligious yet vaguely theistic England that maintains an unusual tradition of people 'not killing one another'; a philistine, xenophobic England of compromises, bad teeth, lack of artistic talent or ability at languages. The English are 'not intellectual', the author tells us, approvingly – a dig at the 'Nancy poets' and other members of the intelligentsia who 'take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow'.

Like the writer himself (and, implicitly, the readers he takes into his confidence) Orwell's England is a territory of contradictions – in need of new management, but neither negligible, nor to be disregarded. Orwell indicts the double-standards, lack of warmth and pomposity of the English. No author dissects his fellow countrymen so pitilessly. But he also refuses to scorn English qualities of common sense, empiricism and toleration.

The books, essays, reviews, articles and jottings contained within this volume do not provide a comprehensive picture of the nation in Orwell's head. What they do capture, however, is a sense of the author's changing world view, with England as his point of reference. *Orwell's England* displays a writer and his subject-matter in varying moods – of depression, fear, doggedness, bereavement, make-do-and-mend. It also provides, for the first time, a gathering impression of an outlook that is questioning, affectionate, critical and hopeful: a non-topographical, abstract Albion.

Will a modern young person – a black or brown Briton, born in Wilson's England or Thatcher's – feel any affinity towards it? Would Eric Blair recognize Tony Blair's England? In some respects he would find it unimaginably different, in others only superficially so. Some characteristic features of Orwell's sepia England have undoubtedly faded. The great work-forces of miners, dockers, metal-workers, ship-builders that dominated mid-century proletarian England no longer exist, and blue-collar workers are now supposedly in a minority. In place of slum-dwelling and the Means Test, problems to do with schooling, crime and family breakup dominate the contemporary social agenda. Among the middle class, stiff upper lips are less in evidence and social distinctions, though still harshly divisive, have blurred at the edges. Yet there are elements of bourgeois culture that remain stubbornly recognizable, down the generations:

'How much a year has your father got?'

I told him what I thought it was, adding a few hundred pounds to make it sound better...

'My father has over two hundred times as much money as yours', he announced with a sort of amused contempt.

That was in 1915... I wonder, do conversations of that kind happen at preparatory schools now?

Do they still? It is conceivable. It is equally conceivable that there are people inhabiting what nowadays we call Middle England (not to mention up-market London boroughs where millionaires and beggars live cheek by jowl), who have a small understanding of those below the poverty line – and as small a wish to know – at the start of the twenty-first century as their counterparts had, at the beginning of the twentieth.

Orwell's account of England endures partly because the modern bourgeoisie, complacent and blinkered as ever, still define the essence of Englishness the world sees; and partly because the poor (now called the socially excluded), who constitute the invisible England, are ever with us. It endures as an idea because, in our better moments, many of the most bourgeois of us continue to support Orwell's dream – of an England and a world without barriers of any description; and because everything Orwell ever wrote is part of an extended polemic in favour of seeing truth, however ugly, in ourselves.