

Biography George Orwell

Early Life of George Orwell



George Orwell, (25 June 1903 – 21 January 1950) has proved to be one of the twentieth century's most influential and thought provoking writers. His relatively small numbers of books have created intense literary and political criticism. Orwell was a socialist, but at the same time he did not fit into any neat ideology. At times, he exasperated the more doctrinaire left wingers with his enthusiasm for taking opposing views. He was foremost a political writer, but for Orwell his object was not to promote a certain point of view, but to arrive at the truth; exposing the hypocrisy and injustice prevalent in society.

Orwell in Burma

Orwell had a fascinating life story. Brought up by in a poor, aspiring middle class family, Orwell was educated at Eton and left with firmly held “middle class” values, but at the same time a sense of unease with his social position. For want of a better job, Orwell took a job with the Burmese civil service. It was here in Burma, that Orwell would begin to assert his independence from his privileged upbringing. Revealingly, Orwell later told how he found himself rooting for the local population, and despising the Imperial ideology which he represented. He resigned from his position in 1927. In an essay *Shooting the Elephant* he describes he feelings on Burma:

“Theoretically and secretly of course, I was always for the Burmese and all against the oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear” (1)

It was in the nature of George Orwell to try and see a situation from other people's point of view. He was unhappy at accepting the conventional social wisdom. In fact, he grew to despise his middle class upbringing so much he decided to spend time as a tramp. He wanted to experience life from the view of the gutter. His vivid experiences are recorded in his book “*Down and out in Paris and London*”. No longer could Orwell be described as a “Champagne Socialist”; by living with the poorest and underprivileged, he gained a unique insight into the practical workings of working class ideas and working class politics.

The Road to Wigan Pier

In the middle of the great depression, Orwell undertook another experience travelling to Wigan; an industrial town in Lancashire experiencing the full effects of mass unemployment and

poverty. Orwell freely admitted how, as a young child, he was brought up to despise the working class. He vividly tells how he was obsessed with the idea that the working classes smelt:

“At a distance.. I could agonise over their sufferings, but I still hated them and despised them when I came anywhere near them.” (2)

The Road to Wigan Pier offered a penetrating insight into the condition of the working classes. It was also a right of passage for Orwell to live amongst the people he had once, from a distance, despised. *The Road to Wigan Pier* inevitably had a political message; but characteristically of Orwell it was not all pleasing to the left. For example, it was less than flattering towards the Communist party. This was despite the book being promoted by a mostly Communist organisation – The Left Book club.

Orwell and the Spanish Civil War

It was fighting in the Spanish Civil war that Orwell came to really despise Communist influences. In 1936, Orwell volunteered to fight for the fledgling Spanish Republic, who at the time were fighting the Fascist forces of Gen Franco. It was a conflict that polarised nations. To the left, the war was a symbol of a real socialist revolution, based on the principles of equality and freedom. It was for these ideals that many international volunteers, from around the world, went to Spain to fight on behalf of the Republic. Orwell found himself in the heart of the Socialist revolution in Barcelona. He was assigned to an Anarchist – Trotskyist party – P.O.U.M. More than most other left wing parties, they believed in the ideal of a real Marxist revolution. To members of the P.O.U.M, the war was not just about fighting the Fascist menace but also delivering a Socialist revolution for the working classes. In his book, “*Homage to Catalonia*” Orwell writes of his experiences; he notes the inefficiency with which the Spanish fought even wars. He was enthused by the revolutionary fervour of some of his party members; however, one of the overriding impressions was his perceived betrayal of the Republic, by the Stalinist backed Communist party.

“the Communists stood not upon the extreme Left, but upon the extreme right. In reality this should come as no surprise, because the tactics of the Communist parties elsewhere” (3)

Unwittingly he found himself engaged in a civil war amongst the left, as the Soviet Union backed Communist party turned on the Trotskyite factions like P.O.U.M. In the end, Orwell narrowly escaped with his life, after being shot in the throat. He was able to return to England, but he had learnt at first hand how revolutions could easily be betrayed; ideas that would later shape his seminal work “*Animal Farm*”

During the war Orwell was declared unfit for active duty. He actively supported the war effort (He didn’t wait for the Soviet Union to enter like some communists.)

The two great novels of Orwell were “*Animal Farm*” and “*1984*”. *Animal Farm* is a simple allegory for revolutions which go wrong, based primarily on the Russian revolution.

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