



Biography

Eric Blair was born in 1903 in Motihari, Bengal, in the then British colony of India, where his father, Richard, worked for the Opium Department of the Civil Service. His mother, Ida, brought him to England at the age of one. He did not see his father again until 1907, when Richard visited England for three months before leaving again until 1912. Eric had an older sister named Marjorie and a younger sister named Avril. With his characteristic humour, he would later describe his family's background as "lower-upper-middle class."

Education

At the age of five, Blair was sent to a small Anglican parish school in Henley, which his sister had attended before him. He never wrote of his recollections of it, but he must have impressed the teachers very favourably for two years later he was recommended to the headmaster of one of the most successful preparatory schools in England at the time: St Cyprian's School, in Eastbourne, Sussex. Young Eric attended St Cyprian's on a scholarship that allowed his parents to pay only half of the usual fees. Many years later, he would recall his time at St Cyprian's with biting resentment in the essay "Such, Such Were the Joys," but he did well enough to earn scholarships to both Wellington and Eton colleges.

After a term at Wellington, Eric moved to Eton, where he was a King's Scholar from 1917 to 1921. Later in life he wrote that he had been "relatively happy" at Eton, which allowed its students considerable independence, but also that he ceased doing serious work after arriving there. Reports of his academic performance at Eton vary: some claim he was a poor student, others deny this. It is clear that he was disliked by some of his teachers, who resented what they perceived as disrespect for their authority. In any event, during his time at the school Eric made lifetime friendships with a number of future British intellectuals.

Burma and afterwards

After finishing his studies at Eton, having no prospect of gaining a university scholarship and his family's means being insufficient to pay his tuition, Eric joined the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. He resigned and returned to England in 1928 having grown to hate imperialism (as shown by his first novel *Burmese Days*, published in 1934, and by such essays as 'A Hanging', and 'Shooting an Elephant'). He adopted his pen name in 1933, while writing for the *New Adelphi*. He chose a pen name that stressed his deep, lifelong affection for the English tradition and countryside: George is the patron saint of England (and George V was monarch at the time), while the River Orwell in Suffolk was one of his most beloved English sites.

Orwell lived for several years in poverty, sometimes homeless, sometimes doing itinerant work, as he recalled in the book *Down and Out in Paris and London*. He eventually found work as a schoolteacher until ill health forced him to give this up to work part-time as an assistant in a secondhand bookshop in Hampstead, an experience later recounted in the short novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.

Spanish Civil War

Soon after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Orwell volunteered to fight for the Republicans against Franco's Nationalist uprising. As a sympathiser of the Independent Labour Party (of which he became a member in 1938), he joined the militia of its sister party in Spain, the non-Stalinist far-left POUM (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification), in which he fought as an infantryman. In *Homage to Catalonia* he described his admiration for the apparent absence of a class structure in the revolutionary areas of Spain he visited. He also depicted what he saw as the betrayal of that workers' revolution in Spain by the Spanish Communist Party, abetted by the Soviet Union and its secret police, after its militia attacked the anarchists and the POUM in Barcelona in May 1937. Orwell was shot in the neck (near Huesca) on May 20, 1937, an experience he described in his short essay "Wounded by a Fascist Sniper", as well as in *Homage to Catalonia*. He and his wife Eileen left Spain after narrowly missing being arrested as "Trotskyites" when the communists moved to suppress the POUM in June 1937.

World war and after

Orwell began supporting himself by writing book reviews for the *New English Weekly* until 1940. During World War II he was a member of the Home Guard and in 1941 began work for the BBC Eastern Service, mostly working on programmes to gain Indian and East Asian support for Britain's war efforts. He was well aware that he was shaping propaganda, and wrote that he felt like "an orange that's been trodden on by a very dirty boot." Despite the good pay, he resigned in 1943 to become literary editor of *Tribune*, the left-wing weekly then edited by Aneurin Bevan and Jon Kimche. Orwell contributed a regular column entitled 'As I Please.'

In 1944 Orwell finished his anti-Stalinist allegory *Animal Farm*, which was published the following year with great critical and popular success. The royalties from *Animal Farm* provided Orwell with a comfortable income for the first time in his adult life. From 1945 Orwell was the *Observer's* war correspondent and later contributed regularly to the *Manchester Evening News*. He was a close friend of the *Observer's* editor/owner, David Astor and his ideas had a strong influence on Astor's editorial policies. In 1949 his best-known work, the dystopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, was published. He wrote the novel during his stay on the island of Jura, off the coast of Scotland.

Between 1936 and 1945 Orwell was married to Eileen O'Shaughnessy, with whom he adopted a son, Richard Horatio Blair (b. May of 1944). She died in 1945 during an operation. In the autumn of 1949, shortly before his death, he married Sonia Brownell.

In 1949 Orwell was approached by a friend, Celia Kirwan, who had just started working for a Foreign Office unit, the Information Research Department, which had been set up by the Labour government to publish pro-democratic and anti-communist propaganda. He gave her a list of 37 writers and artists he considered to be unsuitable as IRD authors because of their pro-communist leanings. The list, not published until 2003, consists mainly of journalists (among them the editor of the *New Statesman*, Kingsley Martin) but also includes the actors Michael Redgrave and Charlie Chaplin. Orwell's motives for handing over the list are unclear, but the most likely explanation is the simplest: that he was helping out a friend in a cause - anti-

Stalinism - that both supported. There is no indication that Orwell ever abandoned the democratic socialism that he consistently promoted in his later writings - or that he believed the writers he named should be suppressed. Orwell's list was also accurate: the people on it had all at one time or another made pro-Soviet or pro-communist public pronouncements.

Orwell died at the age of 46 from tuberculosis which he had probably contracted during the period described in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. He was in and out of hospitals for the last three years of his life. Having requested burial in accordance with the Anglican rite, he was interred in All Saints' Churchyard, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire with the simple epitaph: Here lies Eric Arthur Blair, born June 25th 1903, died January 21st 1950.

Orwell's work

During most of his career Orwell was best known for his journalism, both in the British press and in books of reportage such as *Homage to Catalonia* (describing his experiences during the Spanish Civil War), *Down and Out in Paris and London* (describing a period of poverty in these cities), and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (which described the living conditions of poor miners in northern England). According to *Newsweek*, Orwell "was the finest journalist of his day and the foremost architect of the English essay since Hazlitt."

Contemporary readers are more often introduced to Orwell as a novelist, particularly through his enormously successful titles *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The former is considered an allegory of the corruption of the socialist ideals of the Russian Revolution by Stalinism, and the latter is Orwell's prophetic vision of the results of totalitarianism. Orwell denied that *Animal Farm* was a reference to Stalinism. Orwell had returned from Catalonia a staunch anti-Stalinist and anti-Communist, but he remained to the end a man of the left and, in his own words, a 'democratic socialist'.

Orwell is also known for his insights about the political implications of the use of language. In the essay "Politics and the English Language", he decries the effects of cliché, bureaucratic euphemism, and academic jargon on literary styles, and ultimately on thought itself. Orwell's concern over the power of language to shape reality is also reflected in his invention of Newspeak, the official language of the imaginary country of Oceania in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Newspeak is a variant of English in which vocabulary is strictly limited by government fiat. The goal is to make it increasingly difficult to express ideas that contradict the official line - with the final aim of making it impossible even to conceive such ideas. (cf. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis). A number of words and phrases that Orwell coined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have entered the standard vocabulary, such as "memory hole," "Big Brother," "Room 101," "doublethink," "thought police," and "newspeak."