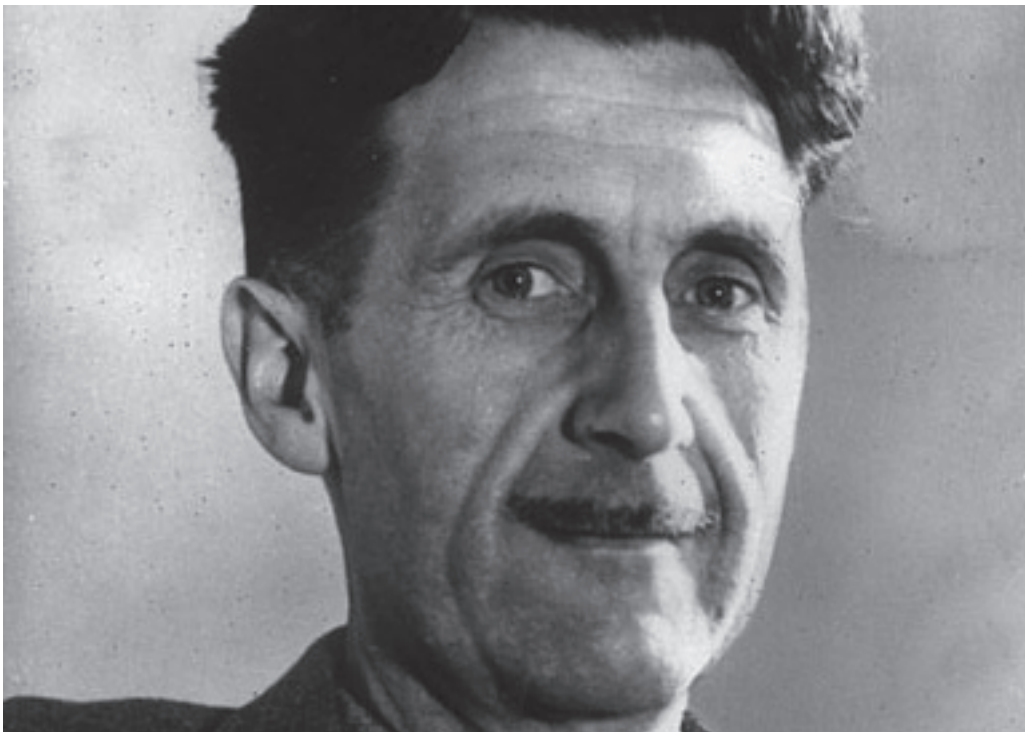
THE ORWELL SOCIETY



Newsletter Number One

In this issue

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THE ORWELL SOCIETY

Founded in 2011, the Orwell Society is dedicated to the understanding and appreciation of the life and work of George Orwell (the pen-name of Eric Blair, 1903-1950), author of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is a society without political affiliation, based in the United Kingdom but open to members worldwide. Our intention is to embrace and understand all aspects of Orwell's life and writings, from his literary criticism to his diaries, and from his political writing to his poetry.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership is open to all, at the following rates:

Annual
UK £20, UK (joint rate) £25, Overseas £30, Student £10, Corporate £50

Life
Life Membership £300

Please see the Society's new website at www.orwellsociety.com for full details of how to join, or contact the Membership Secretary at:

The Orwell Society, PO Box 735, Chichester,
West Sussex, PO19 9QD, United Kingdom

email:membership@orwellsociety.com

Please note that we only take membership dues in sterling, but credit cards and PayPal are accepted.

A WELCOME TO THE ORWELL SOCIETY

It's been a long time in the melting pot but it is finally with great pleasure we welcome you to the first newsletter of the Orwell Society. With the Society still very much in its infancy, the intention is to present a newsletter annually until the membership numbers increase and we attract sufficient material to expand publication to half-yearly or even quarterly editions. With so many accomplished writers among our membership I can only appeal to you on behalf of the society to offer suggestions or articles to make this happen.

RON BATEMAN

'But isn't there already an Orwell Society?' is a question I have often heard over the past few months. Amazingly, the answer is No. Every other great author, it seems, has his or her dedicated society – not just Dickens, Johnson and Austen but Arnold Bennett and Mary Webb, Charles Lamb and Katherine Mansfield. Several of George Orwell's contemporaries or rivals, such as Evelyn Waugh, Herbert Read and Anthony Powell, have their own groups or fellowships. It is time that Orwell's readers all over the world had a forum to discuss, argue or just plain enthuse about Orwell, one of the twentieth century's indisputably great writers.

From the number of times one hears or reads the word 'Orwellian', whether in the newspapers or on radio or television, one would think the world knew enough about the man whose name has been hijacked in this manner. Despite Orwell's own last wishes, accounts of his life began to appear in the 1970s, and the appearance of Bernard Crick's biography in 1980 only stimulated, rather than ended, the discussion about what he did, whom he knew and what his writings meant. The Orwell Society does not intend to take a 'line' on any matter, whether in biography, criticism or politics, but to encourage readers all over the world to engage with Orwell's writings. There is more to his work than the two last novels – dozens of essays and hundreds of reviews, as well as the great books of reportage such as *Down and Out in Paris and London*, or *Homage to Catalonia* – all written in clear, vivid language which makes the world of the 1930s and 1940s seem as immediate as modern-day politics and literature.

The Orwell Society is based in England but wants members from all over the world. Our website, www.orwellsociety.com, is accessible to everyone, wherever they are, and seeks to provoke discussion as well as offer a clearing-house for information about Orwell. As a member, you can log in to read and contribute more. The Newsletter provides a more permanent and physical record of more writing which we hope will encourage others. Please let us know what you think.

CHRISTOPHER EDWARDS

About Our Contributors

Peter Stansky – *From Across the Pond*
The Society introduces Orwell biographer Peter Stansky, our committee affiliate in the USA.

Peter Davison – *Parallel Worlds*
Professor Peter Davison has spent almost three decades editing and writing about Orwell. At the centre of this mammoth contribution is *The Complete Works,* comprising editions of Orwell's nine full-length books followed by an additional eleven volumes of letters, essays and journalism. Here, in an exclusive article for the Orwell Society, Peter focuses on some interesting parallels between George Orwell and the Russian war correspondent Vasily Grossman.

Douglas Kerr – *Living with George Orwell*
Professor Douglas Kerr is the author of *George Orwell* (*Writers and their Work*), (2003). We are delighted that Douglas has established an affiliation with the Society as our representative in the Far East and by way of introduction he has prepared, for the first edition of this newsletter, *Living with George Orwell* which traces the roots of Douglas's own interest in Orwell's work.

Dominic Cavendish – *wwwhere do we go from here?*
Dominic Cavendish, the Society's website editor, spells out his plans for the new Orwell Society Website, introducing exciting opportunities for writers on all Orwell-related subjects.

Philip Bounds – *Orwell and the Paranormal*
Dr Philip Bounds, author of *Orwell and Marxism: The Political and Cultural Thinking of George Orwell,* presents an insight into Orwell's fascination with paranormal experience.

Ron Bateman – *Writers on Hop-Picking*
Somerset Maugham and Jack London are among the writers Orwell particularly admired and who may have influenced his thinking as a writer. Where their attempts at social commentary overlap, their observations tell us much about the ever-changing nature of a certain micro-element of our social culture.

From Across the Pond

We were delighted to welcome our committee representative for the United States, Orwell biographer Professor Peter Stansky, to an informal dinner at the Sloane Club in London hosted by our membership secretary Dione Venables. It was a lively evening during which many suggestions were tabled as we seek to extend the knowledge and the reach of the society far and wide. Aside from the serious business, it was a real pleasure listening to Peter recollect his memories of conversations with so many significant people who had known Orwell throughout his life. Among those interviewed by Peter was the formidable Mrs Vaughan-Wilkes, Orwell's prep-school teacher, described by Orwell in one of his most memorable essays *Such, Such Were the Joys*. It is doubtful that anyone else alive today can claim to have obtained first-hand accounts from so many of the Author's friends and colleagues. Professor Stansky's two biographies *The Unknown Orwell* and *Orwell: The Transformation* (both written with William Abrahams) stand today as remarkable works, rich in detail and bringing to life the young Eric Blair and the embryonic writer who became Orwell. These earliest of all the Orwell biographies survived some difficult pitfalls, particularly when Orwell's second wife Sonia suddenly had a change of heart and re-adhered to the writer's stipulation that no biography was to be written. Peter's essay relating his 'search for Orwell' can be found in the archive section on the Society's website.

Peter Stansky (second left) is pictured with Chairman Christopher Edwards (left), Secretary Ron Bateman (second right) and Membership Secretary Dione Venables (far right)

Parallel Worlds: George Orwell and Vasily Grossman

Peter Davison

Vasily Grossman in Germany – February 1945

Hearing John Baker speak at the PEN Conference in London in August 1944 led Orwell to make a serious start on what would become *Nineteen Eighty-Four.* Baker exposed the perversion of science under Stalin particularly through the part played by Trofim Denisovich Lysenko. Lysenko rejected traditional hybridisation and believed he could make wheat become rye. Stalin had complete faith in him and decreed that any biologist opposing him should be dismissed: some 3,000 were, some to prison camps to die. Baker argued that 'The case of Lysenko provides a vivid illustration of the degradation of science under a totalitarian regime.' Although Lysenko's approach failed utterly he was not discredited in the USSR until 1964.

Orwell's writings were frequently attacked, especially by Communists, but until hearing Baker he believed that science, being 'fact-based', was immune from such prejudice. Thus, 'countless people who would think it scandalous to falsify a scientific textbook, but would see nothing wrong in falsifying a historical fact.' The case of Lysenko demonstrated otherwise to him. The fog of lies and misinformation that affected even the factual – the scientific – showed him only too clearly how destructive of truth was Soviet communism.

Just as Lysenko's work depended on a denial of science, so is science denied in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 'Science, in the old sense, has almost ceased to exist.' In Newspeak

'There was, indeed, no word for "Science", any meaning that it could possibly bear being already sufficiently covered by the word *Ingsoc*'.

What is particularly interesting is how well Orwell sensed the atmosphere of life under the Soviet regime without his ever having lived there. His insight into what motivated and what would eventually undermine Stalin's empire, coupled with his creative genius in offering a warning for all time rather than merely prophesying what might happen, has given *Nineteen Eighty-Four* its enduring power. It was a mark of his genius that in highlighting the significance of scientific truth and the danger implicit in distorting it, the novel is continuously relevant. It is possible to see how accurately he hit the mark by examining the work of his great contemporary, the Soviet novelist Vasily Grossman. His novels, *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows*, show striking parallels with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*. Though neither author knew of the other, nor of what each had written, they both saw the dangers of a society destroying genius and denying people their freedom and individuality in similar terms.

The common element is Lysenko, for Orwell a real-life character, but in Grossman transformed as the fictitious physicist, Viktor Pavlovich Shtrum. Shtrum, however, is the reverse of Lysenko and becomes, as Robert Chandler describes him, the author himself.

Shtrum and Winston betray their better instincts. Shtrum signs a letter asserting that two doctors had killed Gorky, something he knew to be false; Winston screams 'Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! ...'; Grossman felt he had betrayed his mother to the Germans in not getting her out of Berdichev. Hence his perfect epigraph for those who struggle hard to do what is right but, on a single occasion, fail:

> Good men and bad men alike are capable of weakness. The difference is simply that a bad man will be proud all his life of one good deed – while an honest man is hardly aware of his good acts, but remembers a single sin for years on end.

It is impossible in a brief article to list the many parallels between the writings of these two authors, but a select few might be illuminating. Thus, Grossman's description of 'The attitude of a Party leader to any matter, to any film, to any book, had to be infused with the spirit of the Party; however difficult it might be', and Orwell's 'All the beliefs, habits, tastes, emotions, mental attitudes that characterise our time are really designed to sustain the mystique of the Party and prevent the true nature of present-day society from being perceived'. Winston's discovery of a photograph providing 'concrete evidence' contradicting that given at a state trial is paralleled in *Life and Fate* by 'The might of the State had constructed a new past', transforming past events by changing

'the face in a news photograph.' For Winston, 'the past not only changed, but changed continuously'; in *Life and Fate*, 'A new history had been written.' In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* there is the adulation of Big Brother; in *Life and Fate*, Shtrum 'counted eighty-six mentions of Stalin's name in one issue of Pravda; the following day he counted eighteen mentions in one editorial'.

Life and Fate has the story of the proof-reader sent to a labour camp for seven years for missing a typo in Stalin's name; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has poor Ampleforth meeting a similar fate for rhyming 'rod' with 'God.' In both books and in *Everything Flows* there is repeated puzzlement as to why innocent men and women confess to crimes they had not committed. One cannot forget the horror of the false confessions of the animals in *Animal Farm*. The four pigs confess and the dogs tear out their throats; three hens are slaughtered; a goose confesses to secreting six ears of corn; a sheep to urinating in the drinking pool; then two more sheep, all slain on the spot: 'And so the tale of confessions and executions went on, until there was a pile of corpses lying before Napoleon's feet.' One can readily see why it was that the Ukrainian Displaced Persons to whom Ihor Sevczenko read *Animal Farm* responded acutely to Orwell's tale, knowing how, during Stalin's Ukrainian Terror Famine, 'even to glean grain from the field [was] severely punished'.

There are more generalised similarities. Thus, Krymov believes it was Zhenya who had betrayed him just as Winston and Julia confess that they had betrayed each other. In *Everything Flows*, Nikolay Andreyevich has to convince himself he has not betrayed his cousin, Ivan. Krymov's interrogation, though different in detail to Winston's shock treatment and the cage of rats, has parallels in its savage beatings. Both are injected with syringes.

Nothing of this sort appears in Grossman's reports for the Red Army newspaper, Red Star, on Stalingrad, the Battle of Kursk, the taking of Berlin, and Treblinka Concentration Camp. Full awareness of Stalin's monstrosities came later. However, stories written in the 1930s when Grossman was still a loyal Stalinist might suggest he even then had doubts about Soviet life. The BBC's Radio 4 discussion of Grossman on 12 September stated that his early stories are not available in English, but several are. 'In the Town of Berdichev' (where Grossman's mother was killed) and especially 'A Young Woman and an Old Woman' (both in *The Road*, 2010), suggest Grossman's doubts if one reads between the lines. Thus, in the former, Haim-Abram Leibovich-Magazanik says, 'this is the best time for all of us townsfolk. One lot has left – and the next has yet to arrive. No requisitions, no "voluntary contributions", no pogroms'. And, like Orwell, in *Animal Farm*, Grossman also wrote stories from the point of view of animals: the mule in *The Road* and 'The Dog' in that same collection.

George Orwell Statue – Update on Progress

We were very happy to receive confirmation from project leader Ben Whitaker that the George Orwell Memorial Trust has commissioned a full size bronze statue of George Orwell. The task of creating the statue will go to Martin Jennings, the talented Oxford sculptor who created the praised John Betjeman at St Pancras and the Philip Larkin commissioned by Hull. Martin has long been an admirer of Orwell, whose adopted son Richard Blair, the Patron of our Society, gave his full approval of the project. The Memorial Trust felt that, although Orwell himself might well have greeted the idea with a wry smile, a statue says what people think of a person, not what he thought of himself. With many promised contributions, including donations from Ken and Barbara Follett, Sigrid Rausing, Felix Dennis, David Cornwell (John le Carré), Tom Stoppard, David Hare, Andrew Marr, Michael Frayn, Emma Duncan, Neil and Glenys Kinnock, David Peake, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Nicholas Hytner, Christopher Tugendhat, Geoffrey Robinson, Christopher Bland and others, the target has now been achieved.

The most popular suggested site is outside the BBC's new HQ at Broadcasting House in London. It is hoped the statue will be finished and cast by around the end of 2012.

A separate appeal for a bronze head and shoulders of Orwell at Eton, Eric Blair's school, is also close to achieving its target.

Pictured: Jennings' statue of John Betjeman at St Pancras Station

Events to watch out for

April 2012 - First Annual General Meeting of the Orwell Society
To include lunch and presentations

July 2012 – Visit to Eton College

Check our website for details: www.orwellsociety.com

wwwhere do we go from here?
The Orwell Society website re-launch

Dominic Cavendish

What would Orwell think? It's an easy temptation – and an almost to-be-avoided commonplace – to wonder what Orwell would make of such and such a question. What would the great man have made of post-Communist Russia, of the Big Society, of The X-Factor and so on? While it doesn't strike me as a particularly harmful diversion – and the game of 'let's suppose' can, in forcing us back to his writings, make us to look again more closely at what he foresaw and also at what he couldn't possibly foresee – one has to be pretty wary of speaking 'on his behalf' – of extrapolating of-the-moment generalisations from his of-their-period specifics.

I have to declare, though, having recently taken over the running of the website for the Society, that the question of what Orwell would have made of the information revolution – and his own posthumous place in it – has been hard to shrug off. His passion for democracy would surely have led him to be fascinated by the role that social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook have played in last year's convulsions across the Arab world. And yet the satirist (and pessimist?) in him would surely have looked askance at the contracted "newspeak" of Twitter, its relentless distraction from more serious tasks at hand, not to mention the sinister inroads into the concept and practice of privacy that Facebook, especially, has made.

And how should a site devoted to all things Orwell answer to his own principles? How does one serve and honour his legacy without pushing on down a route that ultimately travesties it – through triviality, through misinformation, through unwanted hagiography? In some senses, the job here is made far easier by the fact that the new Orwell site stands on the shoulders of Dione Venables' estimable Finlay Publisher site – with its rigorous, well-researched body of material by some of the best in the field, much of which has now migrated across to its digital successor.

Justifying this site – and clarifying its role in my own mind – I cleave to Orwell's popularising instincts. The articles and material on it will, as the committee has determined, be freely available to all – but there is scope, too, to ensure that serious-minded debate is given sanctuary by means of the members-only forum and comments facility. That said, we hope the tone will never subside into fusty, reverential dullness – and by bringing video onto the home-page (beginning with entertaining reminiscences from Orwell's two nieces, Lucy and Jane, for the first time recorded for posterity) we aim to

suggest there's much invigorating fun as well as archival interest to be had with the 21st-century's televisionary advances.

Above all, I think we want to rise to the challenge that this act of presumption on Orwell's behalf presents: what is there to say – of value – about Orwell, how can we make a difference to the way his life and work gets appreciated? If you look at the three major categories I've established as starting-points for a journey of discovery about him – Orwell and His Work, Orwell and Place, Orwell and His Times – I think it's clear that in continuing to look at Orwell's writing in as much detail as possible, in visiting anew the places that he went to (both as he recorded them, and as we would capture them now) and in reconsidering meticulously the age he lived in, there is ample valuable work – if not several lifetimes' worth – in prospect which should add to our understanding. If the members who have so far joined can – in consort with the writers that we attract to the site – contribute their reflections, their observations, their discoveries too, then together we can create a digital monument in which (we can forgive ourselves for thinking) Orwell himself might take some quiet pride. Watch this evolving space.

Living with George Orwell

Douglas Kerr

George Orwell has been a part of my life for many years. A relationship with a writer is something we can share (hence this Society), but in each case it takes a different form.

When I left school, I compiled a list of about fifty books which I thought I ought to have read before going to university. I was quite afraid that people would discover how ignorant I was. (This fear has not entirely left me.) This list included *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I didn't know much about George Orwell but I was aware that these two books were among the fictional classics of the twentieth century. My recollection is that at the age of seventeen or eighteen I thought *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was inferior to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, to which it was sometimes compared as a dystopian version of the future. Huxley's novel, with its romantic 'savage' and its melodramatic action, appealed to me because it was more colourful and exciting than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with its drab setting and its depressing hero. I still like *Brave New World*, though not as much as I did when I was a teenager. But I have also come to understand *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a triumph of the human spirit, even if it doesn't have a heroic hero. It is a book that continues to surprise and shock me.

Over the next few years, I acquired a copy of Orwell's *Selected Essays* and got to know some of them quite well. 'Politics and the English Language' still seems to me exemplary, though when I first read it I knew next to nothing about the writers, like Harold Laski, that Orwell was complaining about, and had only a thin idea of the political circumstances in which that great essay was written. I loved 'The Art of Donald McGill' – those rude postcards were still to be found when I went for family holidays at the seaside in the 1960s – and 'Boys' Weeklies'; 'Raffles and Miss Blandish' made me think about reading and responsibility in ways that were new to me. In essays like 'Thoughts on the Common Toad', I started to get a sense of Orwell as a personality. Then I read *Homage to Catalonia.* The politics bored me, but the account of what war and wartime were like was gripping. At this time I was becoming a pacifist – which Orwell never was – and reading a lot of English First World War poetry, much of which is anti-war poetry. Orwell's book about the awfulness and betrayals of the Spanish conflict seemed to me to confirm that nothing could ever justify war. But I think now that I was quite wrong in this interpretation of the book.

I was in my late twenties when I came to work in Asia, in Hong Kong, which at that time was still a colony of Great Britain, though its colonial days were numbered: the British lease on the 'new territories' would expire in 1997 and it was clear that when that happened, if not before, Hong Kong would revert to China, which was at that time (I went to Hong Kong in 1979) just emerging from the horrors – you might say the 'Orwellian' horrors – of the Cultural Revolution. It was obviously important for me to understand colonialism and so I turned to Orwell as one of the great historians and critics of modern empire. Now I studied *Burmese Days* and the Burmese stories, 'A Hanging' and 'Shooting an Elephant'. I started to teach these texts to university students, and to write about them. What was becoming clear to me was the way that Orwell's own time in the Burma police, and to some extent also his family's and particularly his father's involvement in the business of empire in the East, decisively shaped the way he looked at the world, and his political understanding and values. Even *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* although set in a recognizable Europe of the near future, is very much determined by what Orwell knew about empire and how it works. In one essay, I tried to show how his ideas about Empire and the East are mediated through the way that animals are described in his writing.

When I came to write a short book-length study of Orwell (*George Orwell,* in the *Writers and their Work* series, published by Northcote House in 2003), this was the central argument, and architecture, of the book: that everything derives from, and opens

up from, Orwell's experience of Asia. So, the chapter sequence of that book goes like this: East, England, Europe, Oceania. My researches on Orwell and the East extended to his wartime work for the BBC, broadcasting to India. After decades of wrangling with the Indian nationalist leaders, and half-promising independence for India, the British were very worried that the people of India might choose to side with the Japanese in the war, and one of the motives of the BBC broadcasts to India was to try to persuade Indians to remain loyal to the Empire. This put Orwell in a difficult position, since in fact he believed that India should be independent and the Empire should be wound up, but he also believed that in order to achieve this, Britain and its allies must first defeat the Japanese. He was pretty sure that the ending of empire would be to the benefit of Britain's colonial subjects in the East, and he was quite sure that it would be to the benefit of the British themselves. Orwell was often in my mind when in 1997 in Hong Kong I witnessed the relinquishing of Britain's last Asian colony – not to independence, but in reversion to China, now in the form of the People's Republic.

I am a literary scholar and not a political scientist. Orwell is first and foremost a political writer, of course, as he acknowledged (even though he did not really want to be one). But my own interest in Orwell is primarily in his writing. His early novels, which are often rather disregarded, seem to me of extraordinary interest in themselves. Over the years I have simply grown in my respect for his literary talents, perhaps especially because I do not consider him a naturally gifted writer: he had to work very hard, and keep on working, to become the writer he wanted to be. In this respect as in others, he is a model for students and writers, as he is for citizens.

The Orwell Society newsletter welcomes contributions from all members on Orwell-related subjects. Please feel free to mail articles or ideas for consideration to rnbateman1@gmail.com

Orwell and the Paranormal

Philip Bounds

George Orwell sometimes complained that the English were incapable of intellectual consistency. One of the areas in which his own inconsistencies were most fascinatingly on display was that of the paranormal. As an atheist who was deeply interested in the ethical, cultural and religious consequences of the decline of religious faith, Orwell might have been expected to eschew all talk of ghosts, mediumship and psychokinesis. In fact he had a casual interest in such things that lasted for the whole of his adult life. While at Eton he famously tore the leg off an effigy of an older pupil called Philip Yorke, reacting with horror shortly afterwards when Yorke died of leukaemia. More than thirty years later one of his last book reviews was a respectful account of Jean Burton's *Heyday of a Wizard*, a well-documented biography of the Victorian medium Daniel Dunglas Home. In between came a fleeting encounter with a ghost in Walberswick cemetery, correspondence with Sacheverell Sitwell on the subject of poltergeists and several other brushes with the world of the unknown. Whatever else it might have done, Orwell's atheism did not preclude the feeling that there was more in heaven and earth than was dreamed of in Bertrand Russell's philosophy.

Why was Orwell interested in the paranormal? And to what did extent did his fascination with it relate to his wider intellectual concerns? His most deeply considered remarks about the paranormal grew out of his engagement with literary modernism. Several of the British modernists were steeped in occultism and while most referred to it only sparingly, at least one of them – the notoriously credulous W.B. Yeats – based his entire life's work on it. When Orwell examined paranormal themes in his writings on modernism, his approach was primarily that of an analyst of ideology. Like other socialist critics of his generation, he tried to explain how a belief in the occult intersected with modernism's political prejudices. The most sustained work along these lines appeared in the essay on Yeats that was first published in *Horizon* in 1943. Characterising Yeats's political 'tendency' as fascist – perhaps a slightly unfair judgement – Orwell suggests that there are several reasons why a devotee of the far right might be attracted to occult doctrine. The first relates to the prevalence among initiates of a belief in what Orwell calls 'our old friend, the cyclical universe'. With their insistence that history moves in cycles, occultists bolster the ultra-right's most deeply cherished hope that the modern values of liberty, equality and fraternity will shortly be superseded by an older commitment to discipline, hierarchy and charity: 'It does not much matter if the

lower orders are getting above themselves, for, after all, we shall soon be returning to an age of tyranny'.[1] Complementing all this is the deep strain of elitism among believers in the paranormal. Just as fascists deplore democracy and advocate the rule of the few, so occultists believe that only a gifted minority can master the esoteric doctrines that make human self-transcendence possible. In a quasi-Nietzschean flourish, Orwell also argues that fascism and occultism are bound together by their 'profound' opposition to Christian values.

In the essay on Yeats, Orwell's stance is that of the no-nonsense critic of occultism. At one point he states quite clearly that Yeats's beliefs are mere 'hocus-pocus'. Nevertheless, there are a number of places in his work where he seems to toy with the idea that the paranormal can play a salutary role in modern life. I shall focus here on two especially suggestive examples, one from the early 1930s and one from the late 1940s. The first is a letter written to Dennis Collings in August 1931 while Orwell was on one of his down-and-out expeditions. Although Orwell's main purpose is to describe the ghost which he claims to have encountered in Walberswick Cemetery, his letter derives its significance from the speed with which it moves back and forth between the mundane and supernatural. In the very first paragraph he says that he has not yet acquired any interesting information about the working classes – the ostensible purpose of his tramping expedition – only to launch into a nicely Gothic account of his ghostly visitor:

> I wasn't looking *directly* at it & so couldn't make out more than that it was a man's figure, small & stooping, & dressed in lightish brown; I should have said a workman. I had the impression that it glanced towards me in passing, but I made out nothing of the features. At the moment of its passing I thought nothing, but a few seconds later it struck me that the figure had made no noise, & I followed it out into the churchyard. There was no one in the churchyard, & no one within possible distance along the road – this was about 20 seconds after I had seen it... [2]

Orwell concludes his description of the ghost with an abrupt explanation for what had happened: 'Presumably an hallucination'. Then he immediately returns to his ex-

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1 George Orwell, Review of T*he Development of William Butler Yeats* by V.K. Narayana Menon, *Horizon*, January 1943. Reprinted in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, Vol. XIV: Keeping Our Little Corner Clean 1942-1943, edited by Peter Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 2001), p. 282.

2 George Orwell, 'Letter to Dennis Collings, 16 August 1931' in *The Complete Works of George Orwell* Vol. X: A Kind of Compulsion 1903-1936, edited by Peter Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 2000), p. 211.

perience of being down-and-out, informing Collings of his intention to go hop-picking and of his conversations with tramps. The whole letter foreshadows some of Orwell's later writings on the fate of the imagination in the modern world. As is well known, Orwell often complained that the crisis-ridden atmosphere of modern life posed a terrible threat to the continuation of high culture. The twentieth-century's hideous combination of wars, recessions and dictatorships forced sensitive men and women to immerse themselves in the grimmer side of life, in the process compromising their appreciation of what Matthew Arnold famously called the 'best that has been thought and known'. What Orwell appears to be doing in the letter to Collings is identifying the paranormal as a sort of minor specific against modernity's woes. In ascribing the appearance of the ghost to the powers of his own mind – and in sandwiching his description of it between references to the penurious – he seems to affirm that the imagination can hold its own even in the most uninspiring of times. An encounter with a phantom in a provincial churchyard is no mere metaphysical anomaly but a symbol of hope.

There is another fascinating attempt to pit the paranormal against modern barbarism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* Orwell's last major work. One of the most startling aspects of the novel is that its leading character sometimes seems to foresee the future. Winston has a vivid dream of the Golden Country before he ever sees it in the flesh, accurately predicts his incarceration in the Ministry of Love ('the place where there is no darkness') and recognises that O'Brien has the ability to anticipate his train of thought. One way of interpreting this little-noticed emphasis on precognition is to see it in the context of Orwell's wider account of the metaphysics of totalitarianism. As O'Brien explains to Winston during his interrogation, Oceania's government has a vested interest in disseminating an extreme form of philosophical idealism. Obsessed with continually rewriting history in order to prove its infallibility, it sedulously fosters the idea that the objective world is merely a projection of the human mind and that necessity can play no part in it. O'Brien's message is that every event in the past, present and future is infinitely malleable and directly reflects the collective will of the Party:

> ...I tell you, Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes: only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever the Party holds to be truth, *is* truth.[3]

3 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 261.

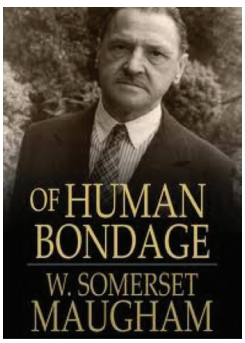
It is in this context that Winston's ability to see into the future acquires its significance. If a man is capable of receiving information about the future by paranormal means, there is a sense in which the events he foresees must occur *necessarily*. To dream of an event years before it unfolds is to recognise that certain aspects of life are somehow mapped out in advance, even if others are not. That is why Winston's precognitive gifts pose such a threat to Party doctrine. His dreams about the future show that there are some things even the Party cannot control. Governed in the final analysis by the laws of predestination, human beings are less in thrall to Big Brother than to an implacable fate.

It would be wrong to ascribe too much importance to Orwell's relatively sparse references to the paranormal. For one thing it is by no means clear that he really believed in the existence of paranormal powers, though there is no doubt that he had a pronounced strain of superstition in his character. However, the point that needs emphasising is that his speculations about ghosts, occultism and precognition were intimately bound up with his broader themes. As much as they conflicted with his atheism, they allowed him to reinforce some of his most important arguments about literature, culture and the nature of political power. They also seem to have brought him a certain amount of reassurance. Unlike the majority of his left-wing contemporaries with their dogmatic adherence to a materialist philosophy, Orwell felt uncomfortable with the thought that he lived in a world from which all traces of religious faith were being expunged. By invoking the paranormal he gave disguised expression to spiritual yearnings that otherwise he felt obliged to suppress. It is not necessary to believe in the paranormal oneself to feel glad that Orwell derived some comfort from it.

Writers on Hop-Picking

Ron Bateman

Many people who either grew up or have ancestral roots stretching into south or east London are likely to be familiar with stories about 'hopping.' Such tales refer to the annual migration of thousands of Londoners to the Kent hop-fields every summer to enjoy the country air and to earn a few extra shillings. Inevitably, with the passing of time, eye-witness accounts of this fascinating micro-element of our social history will become increasingly difficult to find, and this makes it all the more fortunate that a valuable cross-section of reminiscences are available through the eyes of some of the great writers of the twentieth century. Interestingly, the chronology of these accounts reflect some interesting changes with regard to the sections of society the pickers were drawn from, the changes in their working conditions and the regulations to which the pickers were bound.



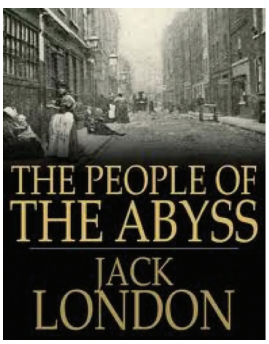
In his hugely successful autobiographical novel *Of Human Bondage*, W. Somerset Maugham wrote of a hop-garden as one of the sights connected with his boyhood, and regarded oast-houses as 'the most typical feature of a Kentish scene.' Maugham, who grew up in Whitstable in Kent, was referring to the 1890s, when much of the picking was still done by local people. He sketches 'hopping' as an easy, carefree time when after-hours activities were as important as the job itself:

> Folk looked forward to it for months as the best of holidays, arriving in carts with bedding, pots and pans, chairs and tables; the work was not hard, and for the children it was a long, delightful picnic. At night it was a pleasant sight to see a line of fires with families grouped round them. Families often had the same hut every year, long, low sheds divided into little rooms about 12 feet square, with beds consisting of a thick layer of hop-bine, on the top of which, was a coating of straw and a blanket.

The organisation of 'the hoppers' was done with almost military precision. As a rule, they were up by five in the morning and were divided into bin companies, usually of around ten pickers. Each company had a bin-man, whose duty it was to supply it with

strings of hops at their bins (the bin was a large sack on a seven foot high wooden frame and long rows of them were placed between rows of hops).

> A call-off by the sounding of a horn was made for breakfast at eight, then again for dinner at twelve. Hoppers talked and laughed as they picked, sitting on chairs, stools or boxes, with baskets by their sides. At intervals the measurer went his round from bin to bin, accompanied by the booker, who tallied-up numbers of bushels picked. As each bin was filled it was measured out in bushel baskets into a huge bag called a poke; and this, the measurer and the pole-puller carried off and put on the wagon. Calling-off time depended on the drying capacity of the oast-house. After the picking was over, the men strolled down to the pub for a well-earned beer, while the younger men would meet the maidens and wander about the lanes making love. The hopping season was generally followed by weddings.



Maugham wrote of the resentment of local pickers towards the intrusion of those whom they regarded as 'foreigners,, from London. The 'respectable country folk' looked down upon the 'foreigners' as a rough lot and generally shunned them. The women would boast that they could pick twice as fast as 'them foreigners'. They also tended to brag about the number of bushels they had picked in a day, but complained that you could not make money now as you did in former times when you were paid a shilling for five bushels. Each year the rate had continued to rise until it was eight or even nine bushels to the shilling. Good pickers could no longer earn enough in the season to sustain themselves or their families for the rest of the year. By the late eighteen-hundreds, 'hopping' had come to mean no more than a free holiday, with no real profit to show for any labour.

By 1902, American sociologist and *Call of the Wild* author Jack London had arrived on the hopfields of Kent. In his study of east-end poverty entitled *The People of the Abyss*, he wrote:

> So far has the divorcement of the worker proceeded that the farming districts, the civilised world over, are dependent on the cities for the gathering of the harvests. Thus it is, when the land is spilling its ripe wealth to waste, that the street folk, who have been driven away from the soil, are called back to it again.

London had joined what appeared to be an annual mass migration of tramps from the slums of Whitechapel and Stepney, all hoping for employment in the hop-fields.

He estimated that Kent now required eighty thousand tramps to pick her hops and out they came –

from the slums, the ghettos, dragging their squat, misshapen bodies along the highways and byways, obedient to the call of their bellies.

A typical 1930s hop-picker's hut (Museum of Kent Life, Maidstone.)

Already, a poor summer and terrible storms had severely reduced the yield, and for weeks, notices had appeared in the newspapers: TRAMPS PLENTIFUL, BUT THE HOPS ARE FEW AND NOT YET READY.

Jack London first made the acquaintance of a 'hopper' in the queue for the doss-house or 'spike.' When asked how much he might make through hop-picking the man replied that plenty of people are too slow and made a failure of it; 'to succeed a man must use his head and be exceedingly quick with his fingers. He and his old woman could do very well at it – working one bin between them for years and not going to sleep over it'.

> 'I 'ad a mate as went down last year, it was 'is fust time but 'e come back wi' two poun' ten in 'is pocket, an' 'e was only gone a month, 'e was quick, 'e was just naturally born to it 'e was'.

London was shocked that a man who claimed to be 'naturally born to the job' could earn just $12.50 for a month's work, in addition to sleeping out without blankets.

When the picking finally began there was another hailstorm that stripped the hops clean from the poles and pounded them into the earth, while the hoppers sheltered from the stinging hail in their huts. Deprived of the opportunity to earn a few pennies, they turned away from the ankle-deep carpet of sodden hops and 'padded the hoof' back to London. It was not to the starving vagrants, but to the owners that newspapers devoted columns of sympathy, where losses amounted to between eight and ten thousand pounds.

On another farm, London and his buddy were assigned to a bin recently deserted by two other men owing to their inability to earn a living wage. 'Don'tcher pick too clean, it's against the rules' warned one woman. London was told he would get a shilling for seven bushels; if he wanted a 'sub', he could only have advanced to him a shilling for twelve bushels. This was a method of holding the picker to work, especially if the

crop ran bad. After working for three and a half hours London and his pal had earned fourpence-farthing a piece – a little over a penny an hour.

In August 1931 George Orwell set out for the hop-fields on foot from central London, begging for food and sleeping in doss-houses en route. Eventually, he managed to cadge enough money for the tram to Bromley then progressed on foot to Sevenoaks, stealing apples, plums and potatoes and cadging broken bread whenever they passed a baker. They arrived at a farm, but were refused a job as the farmer could not provide them with sufficient accommodation. Government inspectors had been scouting around to see that all hop-pickers had proper accommodation. This prevented hundreds of unemployed people from getting jobs in the hop-fields and meant that farmers could only offer jobs to people who lived locally. Orwell writes that one woman was given a job on the pretext that she had accommodation, but she was actually living in a tool-shed in somebody's garden; she slipped in after dark and out again before daylight. When Orwell did find employment, he quickly became alive to the dodges:

> The experienced pickers swell the bulk of their hops by putting in just as many leaves as the farmer will stand for. They pick like lightning and shake all the hops up so they lie loose in the bin. We were generally on our feet ten hours a day.

Other hardships were plagues of plant lice and the damage to ones hands, stained black with hop juice which only mud would remove. After a day or two hands cracked and were cut to bits by the stems of the spiny vines. Orwell observed that the laws about child-labour were 'utterly disregarded' and some of the pickers drove their children pretty hard and claimed to have seen children as young as six drop down and fall asleep on the ground. There was also a song that women and children used to sing –

> Our lousy hops!
> Our lousy hops!
> When the measurer comes round
> Pick 'em up, pick 'em up off the ground
> When he comes to measure
> He never knows when to stop
> Ay, ay, get in the bin
> And take the f***in lot!

The pickers were paid twopence for each bushel they had picked. 'A good vine yields

Kent hop field, 2005

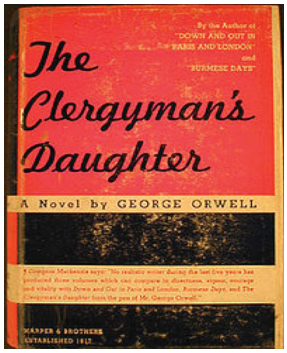
about half a bushel of hops and a good picker can strip a vine in ten minutes.' Unfortunately, the hops varied enormously, being as large as small pears on some vines and hardly bigger than peas on others. The bad vines took longer to strip and were generally more tangled and it sometimes needs five or six of them to make a bushel, and there were all kinds of delays, for which the picker got no compensation. Then there was also the question of measurement. Orwell noted that the hops were soft like sponges and it is was easy for the measurer to crush a bushel of them into a quart if he chose.

> With all these difficulties one can't earn 30s a week or anything near it. The piecework system disguises the low rate of payment. I calculated that I earned about 9s a week.

New pickers had been given a printed copy of the rules, which were designed to reduce the picker to a slave. According to these rules, a farmer could sack a picker without notice on any pretext whatever and pay him off at eight bushels a shilling instead of six. If a picker left his job before the picking was finished, his earnings were docked the same amount; 'you cannot draw what you have earned and then clear off because the farm will never pay you two thirds of your earnings in advance and so you are in debt until the last day', wrote Orwell. Also the bin-men were paid wages instead of being tied to the piecework system and these wages ceased if there was a strike, naturally they moved heaven and earth to prevent one. Many of the illiterate pickers brought Orwell their books for reckoning up. In a number of cases he noted that mistakes were made in favour of the farm, which had a mean little rule that complaints would only be dealt with when all the pickers had been paid-off, meaning those with buses or trains to catch never claimed what they were owed.

The hop-pickers observed by Orwell appeared to be of three types – East-End costermongers, gypsies and itinerant agricultural labourers with a sprinkling of tramps. The local home-dwellers picked at odd times, merely for the fun of it, and on the last morning there was a queer game of catching women and putting them in the bins. Orwell outlined his experiences in his essay *Hop-picking,* and also drew heavily upon them when constructing his second novel *A Clergyman's Daughter,* in which Dorothy, the novel's central character, attempts to escape from her life of drudgery and falls in with a crowd of street urchins 'paddin-the-oof' down towards the hop-fields of Kent, begging

for scraps along the way. When they eventually arrive at the hop-fields, they encounter a Mrs McElligot who opens their eyes to the stark political realities of the day that impinged upon the casual labourers in search of work in the fields.



> In de ole days when you come down hoppin' you kipped in a stable an dere was no questions asked. But dem bloody interferin' gets of a Labour Government brought in a law to say no pickers was to be taken on widout de farmer had proper accommodation for 'em.

This was characteristic of Orwell's early development as a novelist where the general storyline was often overwhelmed by the politics. Yet his descriptions through Dorothy of life among the pickers stand as valuable reminiscences on their own merit.

> It was exceedingly easy work. Physically, no doubt, it was exhausting – it kept you on your feet ten or twelve hours a day, and you were dropping with sleep until six in the evening – but it needed no kind of skill. Quite a third of the pickers in the camp were as new to the job as Dorothy herself. Some of them had come down from London without the dimmest idea of what hops were like, or how you picked them, or why. One man, it was said, on his first morning on the way to the fields, had asked, 'where are the spades?' He imagined that hops were dug out of the ground.

The novel continues with highly detailed descriptions of a typical day spent hop-picking, including a selection of hop-pickers songs that were 'as much a part of the atmosphere as the bitter scent and the blowsy sunlight.' Orwell spent 17 days in all picking hops. Throughout that time, he kept a diary which provides a fascinating record and was only finally published 29 years later under the title of 'Hop-Picking.' In their early biography *The Unknown Orwell*, Peter Stansky and William Abrahams illuminated 'the exceptional qualities' of this example of his earlier writing; particularly the 'sense of happiness that pervades it'. Despite all the squalid details – the bed-bugs, the faecal stink, the vile food, the ill-paid, exhausting work and the sordid living conditions etc, etc, one still takes away the impression from Orwell's account that it was an enjoyable, rather than a miserable experience.


PLAÇA
DE
GEORGE ORWELL