

# ORWELL

During this time, Orwell also began reviewing novels for the *New English Weekly* and took a job as a part-time clerk at a bookstore.

In January 1936, Victor Gollancz, Jim Strachey, and Harold Laski commissioned Orwell to write a book for the Left Book Club about the conditions of unemployed miners in the depressed industrial section of Northern England.

(Note: *The Left Book Club* was a club which commissioned and selected books which it sold to its members at discount rates. The aim of the club was to "help in the terribly urgent struggle for World Peace and a better social and economic order, and against Fascism, by giving to all who are determined to play their part in this struggle such knowledge as will immensely increase their efficiency. At one point the club had as many as 38,000 members. Interestingly enough, when Orwell wrote *Politics and the English Language* one of the examples of bad writing he used was by Harold Laski.)

**"And it was at that moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands that I first grasped the hollowness..."**

Orwell spent two months gathering material in industrial towns such as Wigan Pier and Sheffield.

In May he began writing *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The first part chronicles the horrendous conditions under which the working class lived. He tells of the slum houses with no heating, windows that do not open, roofs that leak, and a 200 yard dash to the bathroom, of the even more squalid living conditions, with as many as three people sharing the same bed, full chamber pots under the table, and scarcely any room to move about. He tells of miners spending 11 hours a day at their job - and getting paid for 7.5 - and having to support a family on as little as thirty shillings a week (£1.50)

"As we moved slowly through the outskirts of the town we passed row after row of little grey slum houses running at right angles to the embankment. At the back of one of the houses a young woman was kneeling on the stones poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe which ran from the sink inside and which I suppose was blocked. I had time to see everything about her, her sacking apron, her clumsy clogs, her arms reddened by the cold. She looked up as the train passed and I was almost near enough to catch her eye. She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriage and drudgery; and it wore for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen. It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that 'It isn't the same as it would be for us' and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant

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Orwell's press card.

suffering of an animal, she knew well enough what was happening to her - understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold on the slimy stones of a slum backyard poking a stick up a foul drainpipe."

In the second part of the book Orwell attempts to explain why socialism, which "makes such elementary sense" has not established itself. His answer is that too many Socialists are cranks and hypocrites: "As with the Christian Religion, the worst advertisement for

socialism is its adherents."

"One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words Socialism or Communism draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit juice drinker, nudist, sandal wearer, sex maniac, pacifist, vegetarian, and feminist in England..."

"Socialists, while theoretically pining for a classless society, cling like glue to their miserable fragments of social prestige. I remember my sensation of horror on first attending an ILP (International Labour Party) branch meeting in London... every person there, male and female, bore the worst stigma of sniffish middle class superiority. If a real working man, a miner, dirty from the pit for instance, had suddenly walked into their midst, they would have been embarrassed, angry and disgusted: some, I would think, would have fled holding their noses."

Orwell had great contempt for comfortable middle-class people who had never been among the tramps or miners - as Orwell himself had been - trying to impose a system on the working class. He called them the "pansy left."

Gollancz duly published the book, but only after including a publishers note saying while the first part of the books was "the sort of thing likely to win converts... I have marked at least a hundred places (in the second part) where I should like to argue with Orwell."

In the meantime, Orwell had married Eileen O'Shaughnessy (June 9) and the Spanish Civil War had broken out (July 18).

Orwell finished *Wigan Pier* on December 15 1936 and by December 30 he was at the Lenin Barrack in Barcelona enlisted in the militia of the POUM (Workers Party of Marxist Unification).

He wanted to fight Fascism.

Orwell was immediately affected by the revolutionary atmosphere of Barcelona.

"It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flags of the Anarchists... almost every church had been gutted and its images burnt... Every shop and cafe had an inscription saying that it had been collectivized... Waiters and shop walkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal. Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had disappeared... Tipping was forbidden by law... There were no private motor

**"...the communist's emphasis on centralism and efficiency, the anarchist's on liberty and equality."**

cars... Practically everyone wore rough working class clothes or blue overalls or some variant of the militia uniform...

"There was much in it that I did not understand and in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for."

But Orwell also found the government forces fighting Franco in disarray; "In the whole of the Lenin Barracks there were I believe no rifles except those used by the sentries."

Nevertheless, the militias were holding their own. Orwell was impressed by the Anarchist and the POUM in which everyone received equal pay and privilege and no one could order anybody else to do anything.

"In the militias, the bullying and abuse that go on in an ordinary army would never had been tolerated for a moment..."

"Revolutionary discipline depends on political consciousness... on understanding why its orders must be obeyed... The journalists who sneered at the militia-system seldom remembered that the militias had to hold the line while the Popular Army was training in the rear... A conscript army in the same circumstances - with its battle police removed - would have melted away. Yet the militias held the line."

Indeed, the Anarchist was "noticeably the best fighter."

Orwell saw that Stalin was only supplying arms to the official Communist Party. And the Communists were as interested in fighting the Anarchists as Franco.

"Philosophically, Communism and Anarchism are poles apart... The communist's emphasis is always on centralism and efficiency, the anarchist's on liberty and equality," Orwell wrote.

After all, it was the Anarchists who had collectivized the farms and factories, the communists merely wanted to establish another bourgeois democracy.

Orwell took part in the Barcelona street fighting between the Communists and Anarchists. He returned to the front and was wounded in the throat. Meanwhile, the POUM had been outlawed by the Communists and as soon as he recovered, Orwell and his wife fled to France. They crossed the border on June 23, 1937.

Immediately after his return to England, Orwell began writing an account of his adventures in Spain.

But before a word had been written, Victor Gollancz refused to publish the tale fearing that a book exposing the infighting among the government forces would only aid Franco.

This attitude was common among most of the leftist press in England: the only papers which would publish Orwell's political views were the *New English Weekly* and *Time and Tide*.

Finally, on Sept. 1, 1937, Fredric Warburg con-

tracted to publish a book by Orwell about the war in Spain. *Homage to Catalonia* was published on April 25, 1938.

In early March 1938, Orwell developed a tubercular lesion on his lung. He had to give up the idea of going to India to collect material for a book and later in the month he entered the Preston Hall sanatorium in Aylesford, Kent.

In June, he joined the International Labour Party (ILP).

Throughout his time in the sanatorium, Orwell was



Orwell and the ever present cigarette.

only allowed to write the occasional review. He was released on September 1.

His doctors advised Orwell to spend the winter in a warm climate. The novelist L.H. Myers, anonymously donated £300 and so on September 2 Orwell set sail for Tilbury, Morocco.

In 1939 Orwell wrote a novel set in Morocco and published a collection of essays called *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*. This collection included Orwell's most famous essay, *Politics and the English Language*.

Orwell's father, aged 82, died on June 28.

When World War Two broke out, Orwell tried to enlist but was physically unfit. Instead, he began writing for the *Tribune*, a socialist weekly.

In 1941 Orwell got a job writing propaganda for the BBC. He quit on November 24, 1943, well before the war was over.

Before the end of the month, he was the literary editor of the *Tribune* and began writing a column called *As I Please*.

Orwell found it difficult to keep his political opinions out of the literary pages with the result that, as Michael Foot said, "how many readers (Orwell) offended no one can calculate."

In early 1944 Orwell and Eileen adopted a son, Richard.

In February 1944, Orwell finished the manuscript for *Animal Farm*.

**In 1941 Orwell got a job writing propaganda for the BBC. He quit on November 24, 1943, well before the war was over.**

Also in February, Orwell went to France as a war correspondent for *Observer*.

He returned to England a little more than a month later when his wife died.

Victor Gollancz, Jonathan Cape, Faber and Faber and host of others refused to publish *Animal Farm* on the grounds that Orwell's none-too-subtle parody of Stalinist Russia would hinder the Allied war effort.

Once again Fredric Warburg came to the rescue and *Animal Farm* was published on August 17, 1945.

*Animal Farm* was picked for a Book of the Month Club selection, and for the first time in his life, Orwell did not have to worry about money.

In 1946 Orwell and his son moved to Jura, in the Hebrides, off the coast of Scotland.

In total isolation and interspersed with bouts in the hospital to treat his worsening tubercular condition - Orwell began work on a novel tentatively titled *The Last Man in Europe*.

Later he decided to reverse the final two numerals of the year in which he was writing, 1948; and call the book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in June 1949. By September Orwell was in University College Hospital.

On October 13, after a series of unsuccessful proposals to various women, Orwell married Sonia Brownell.

Orwell died on January 21, 1950. Despite the fact that he had been an agnostic most of his life, his last request was to be buried in an Anglican churchyard.