

by Mark Roppel

I can remember reading Politics and the English Language for English 215. It was about the only worthwhile thing in the whole Norton Anthology. I thought, "Wow!" Not only did he manage to confirm a substantial number of my prejudices, he did it with such style. The writing was so vivid. (I particularly liked the metaphor about "tea leaves blocking a sink.")

Of course, as I read more of Orwell's work, I was impressed with his honesty and integrity. But on the other hand, how honest it for someone whose real name is Eric Blair to call himself George Orwell?

Eric Arthur Blair was born on June 25, 1903 at Motihari, Bengal. His father, Richard Walmesley Blair was a sub-deputy agent in the Opium Department of the Indian Civil Service.

Eric was one of three children. He had an older sister Ida, and a younger sister, Avril.

In the summer of 1907, the Blairs came to England on leave. In the autumn, Richard Blair returned to India, leaving his family behind in England.

When he was eight, Eric was sent away to St. Cyprian's, a private preparatory school on the Sussex Coast.

Blair hated the school but he did manage to win two scholarships - one to Wellington, another to Eton.

Blair's unhappy experiences at St. Cyprian's later provided material for *Such, Such Were They Joys*, an essay attacking the English Educational system. Blair bitterly attacked the mindless process of memorization with no attempt at understanding which students underwent in order to do well on "the exam". Blair was also disgusted by the young schoolboy's obsession with class consciousness, who would discuss endlessly how much their fathers earned: "Failure, failure, failure - failure behind me, failure ahead of me - that was by far the deepest conviction that I carried away."

Eric spent one term in 1917 at Wellington College and then entered Eton as a King's Scholar. At Eton he contributed to the various college magazines but generally neglected his school work.

"Between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two, I hardly ever did a stroke of avoidable work," he later wrote.

Blair graduated from Eton in 1931, but instead of going to university, he elected to join the Indian Imperial Police in Burma so he could experience some "real life."

As a policeman in Burma, Blair saw the dirty work of the empire at close quarters.

The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the gray, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos - "all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt," wrote Blair.

Blair wrote two disturbing essays about his experiences as an agent of imperialism.

*A Hanging* is the straightforward account of the execution of an Indian prisoner for some unknown crime.

"Till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man... I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness of cutting a life short, when it was in full tide."

Not long after his arrival in Burma, Blair became convinced that imperialism was an evil thing, but in *Shooting an Elephant* he points out the futility of trying to control others.

He tracks a mad elephant through the streets of Moulmein only to find it peacefully eating grass at the roadside. But he must shoot it anyway, because the crowd expects this of him.

"And it was at that moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's domination in the East. Here was I - the white man with his gun standing in front of the unarmed native crowd - seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy - the conventionalized figure of a Sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life trying to impress the 'natives' and in every case he has got to do what the natives expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it."

In August, 1927, Blair, at the end of his first five year term, returned to England and decided not to re-enlist in His Majesty's Service.

*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.*

On his return from Burma, Blair "profoundly wanted to find some way of getting out of the respectable world altogether."

He wanted to get amidst "the lowest of the low" - the tramps and beggars.

Throughout the autumn and winter of 1927 he lived in a cheap flat in Notting Hill and undertook the first of his expeditions to London's impoverished East End.

In spring 1928, Orwell moved to the Fifth Arrondissement of Paris, a working-class district.

On October 6, 1928, an article appeared in *Le Monde* about censorship in England. It was Eric Blair's first article as a professional. While in Paris he also published articles about the unemployment in England, a day in the life of a tramp, the beggars of London, and Burma for the paper *Progres Civique*.

Blair also wrote some short stories and two novels - none of which made it to print.

In February 1929, Blair contracted pneumonia, and was hospitalized.

Blair was earning some money by giving English lessons, but these soon ended and by the summer he

# GEORGE

was desperately short of money. He was forced to pawn all his belongings, and most of his clothes.

On the verge of starvation, Blair got a job as a *plongeur*, through a friend, at one of the large luxury hotels in Paris.

A *plongeur* is a step below a dishwasher. Blair described him as "the slave of slaves."

After ten weeks at this job, Blair wired a friend for money and returned to England. He tramped about London for several weeks before landing a job as a private tutor.

He wrote articles for the paper *Adelphi* and began writing an account of his adventures in Paris and as a tramp in London.

Blair gives a rather bleak account of the life of a *plongeur*. He would work up to 17 hours a day six or seven days a week, barely earning enough to live on.

Similarly, Blair's accounts of being thrown in jail for public drunkenness, shaving in the fountain at Trafalgar Square, scrounging for cigarette butts in the gutter, being strip searched at the spike (a flophouse) to make sure he was truly destitute, and so on, are a fascinating form of journalism.

By October 1930, Jonathan Cape and T.S. Elliot had rejected the manuscript for *Down and Out in London and Paris*. Both men told Blair that he used his amazing powers of description inappropriately and that the book was too short.

In April 1932, Blair took a teaching post at the Hawthornes, a small private school for boys, and in July he presented a new and longer version of *Down and Out in London and Paris* to Victor Gollancz who agreed to publish the book.

But Blair was afraid the book would embarrass his family and furthermore he was afraid it would be a failure. He decided to publish under a pseudonym - and settled finally on George Orwell. The Orwell was a river which Blair had frequented while a child.

*Down and Out in London and Paris* was published on January 9, 1933, and sold approximately 900 copies in its first printing.

In September 1933 Blair quit Hawthornes and began teaching at Fray's college, a private school for boys and girls.

Just before Christmas 1933, Orwell fell seriously ill with pneumonia. Upon recovery, he had to give up teaching.

Between 1933 and 1936, Orwell wrote three novels: *Burmese Days*, *The Clergyman's Daughter*, and *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*.

Victor Gollancz refused to publish all three books. Subsequently, they underwent revisions for libel, and in the end Gollancz repented.

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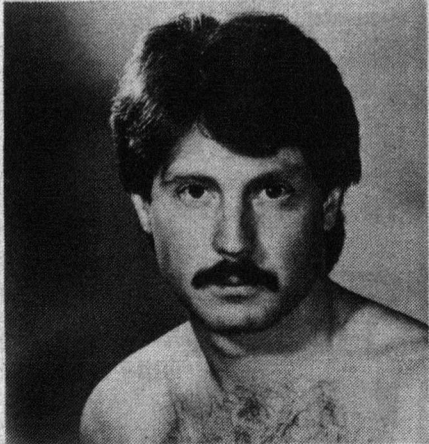
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