

## Reviews

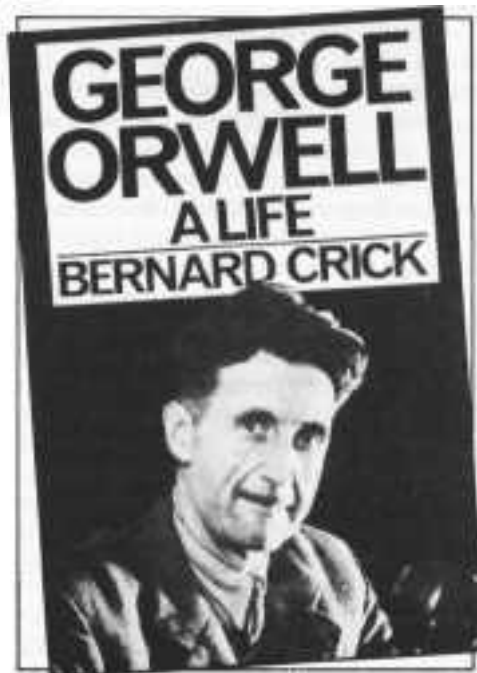
### GEORGE ORWELL, A LIFE

**Bernard Crick**

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'Marxists as a rule are not very good at reading the minds of their adversaries'. That was Orwell in 1936. Many Marxists have since found it necessary to try to read Orwell's mind, and at least from his public effect as a major adversary. One of the merits of Crick's new biography, which is the first to have been written with full access to his papers, is that it contains many new details at some of the crucial points. Whether in the end these affect the argument is uncertain. It is clear, on the one hand, that early and angry responses to him as a cold war propagandist were wrong. The writing, and the positions underlying it, were always more complicated

and contradictory than that. But then, on the other hand, while he was early and vigorous in identifying difficulties, errors and crimes in the international socialist movement, so



many of his responses were negative that even those of us who now agree (or who from the beginning agreed) with much or all of his diagnosis have still to consider him as an adversary. What he might eventually have

arrived at, through the changes in the fifties and the sixties, we cannot say. But what he actually arrived at, by the time of his early death, was a transformation of what had been mainly humane, vigorous and truthful arguments into a corrosive despair of a kind which wrecked a large part of his generation of the Left. That this despair was then marketed to and by others who would in any case have been hostile to socialism was a fact about the politics and culture of his last years. But still, though he provided the material, that marketing is not really a fact about him, and while he lived he did what he could to stop it.

It is now all quite a long time ago, and while historians will need to argue about the details of many of those phases, they will, as historians, know better than to centre their inquiries on this single paradoxical figure. There is a sense in which Orwell's life has become the most effective of his works: the Old Etonian drop-out from the Imperial Police; the plain man exploring and recording poverty; the wounded volunteer in the Spanish Civil War; the radical patriot of the war against Hitler; the international figure of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But then one of the effects of celebrity, and of the literary form of biography, is that it isolates a man from his contemporaries and tends to read history through his changing mind. In fact, and especially in Orwell's case, once you get close to the details you see how selective

that worked image is. Crick's book is as full of detail as anyone could ask, but though he does not press interpretation he both sustains the popular image and yet includes enough material to illustrate the radical confusions and uncertainties which the reputation overrides as simply an honest facing of the facts. Thus at one level I can record my own impression, after a long acquaintance with Orwell's writing and accounts of his life, that the man I read about in Crick is someone I like and respect a good deal less than I had previously supposed, though I am sure that was not the biographer's intention. At various points Crick questions the kind of analysis I made in my 1970 book, that George Orwell was a created figure, a fictional writer, out of the often very different life of Eric Blair. That was a figurative analysis rather than a whole explanation, but I can only now say that I have never felt it more strongly than while reading this biography.

One key moment is the 1936 journey to the north and the subsequent writing of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The significant differences between what happened and what he wrote are a key to that effective but simplifying and at the edges misleading Orwellian plain style. Crick is very useful on this: establishing the status of what has been published as his working diary, which now looks more like a draft (though still with interesting differences) of the eventual book; interviewing and recording the critical opinions of the socialists and other working families he then met; specifying the material and its subsequent composition. I learned a lot from this, but nearly all of it strengthened the point about an ideological process which passed as plain reporting: a willed separation of the facts of poverty and unemployment from the actual and of course diverse practice of socialist struggle. In the later and equally significant periods of Spain and the change of mind about the war there is again much fascinating detail, but it is all more intricate and engaged, and in relation to Spain, though involved with ideology, is not, so far as I can judge, ideological.

The other main interests of this biography, of a political kind (though at a personal level it is the last years of his relationship with his first wife that I cannot get out of my mind), is in the detail of his positions in his last years. The programme he held to was broadly that of the Labour Left and indeed (except in relation to the Soviet Union) of the Communist Party. He wanted the nationalisation of land, mines, banks, railways and major industries; the end of colonialism; the end of the class system in education; the abolition of the House of Lords. It is a programme that would still qualify today as 'extremist'. After

the success of *Animal Farm* he insisted on keeping clear of the Right which was exploiting it:

I cannot associate myself with an essentially Conservative body which claims to defend democracy in Europe but has nothing to say about British imperialism'.

He had a good general record on civil liberties, and was an early and vigorously perceptive opponent of nuclear weapons. Yet these were the years of *Nineteen Eight-Four* and of Ingsoc, which needed no footnote to be translated as English socialism. It is a bitter and tragic contradiction, and it is in more than Orwell's mind; it was the deadlock of a generation.

This is where the damage was done. As he put it himself, 'to take a rational political decision one must have a picture of the future'. But while he like others could list progressive and transforming measures in one part of his mind, all he actually saw ahead was 'a welter of lies, hatred, cruelty and ignorance': the nightmare that went round the world, mocking and destroying hope. It is impossible to forgive; it may be possible to understand. Crick has not written a major biography but he has assembled more evidence than ever before, and there are enough connections to our own changes and problems to keep most of it relevant.

**Raymond Williams**