

## Orwell's class act. (PERSPECTIVE)

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Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation Jeffrey Meyers W.W. Norton, 320 pp., \$29.95

He was born Eric Arthur Blair, but starting in 1933, with the publication of "Down and Out in Paris and London," the literary world would come to know him under the pseudonym George Orwell (deriving his surname from the River Orwell in East Anglia) - a master prose stylist and noble adversary of the British class system.

Born during the Edwardian era, Orwell labored in virtual obscurity for years before achieving prominence in the late 1940s by writing his two classics: "Animal Farm" (1945), a biting satirical allegory of the Russian Revolution, brought him immediate fame; that was followed four years later by "1984" (1949), an anti-utopian science-fiction classic reflecting his lifelong distrust of autocratic government, his fears about a bureaucratic state of the future (the "Orwellian" nightmare), and his sense of the evils of Nazism and Stalinism.

Orwell was also a prolific journalist who penned newspaper articles, reviews and serious criticism, most notably his brilliant and influential essay "Politics and the English Language" (1950).

Jeffrey Meyers, a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, is a respected biographer and no stranger to his subject, having widely contributed to the expanding library of Orwell scholarship over the years. His previous work - deft biographies of Poe, Hemingway, Frost, D.H. Lawrence and F. Scott Fitzgerald - has served him well. The writing is sure, and the research terrific. This is the first biography to make use of Peter Davison's superb 20-volume, 8,500-page edition of "The Complete Works" (1998).

Meyers successfully presents Orwell as "the wintry conscience of a generation," as writer V.S. Pritchett dubbed him. Orwell's extraordinary political and cultural influence in today's society stems from his passionate drive to unite the disparate classes and create a just society in England.

His formative experiences, as an outsider of the British class system who longed at times to be an insider, were key to his world view. Early on, he won a scholarship to Eton, but didn't go, because his family was financially unable to send him on to Oxford or Cambridge. He was large-hearted but also violent, capable of cruelty and

tormented by guilt. Thin and ascetic-looking, and often willfully poor, he yearned to be handsome and rich, and later sought female relationships outside of his marriage.

He spent five years (1922-1927) with the Imperial Police in Burma. He came to be ashamed of his role as an officer, realizing how the Burmese people were confined under British rule. Meyers relates that these experiences left Orwell with deep inner conflict, which was later reflected in his novel, "Burmese Days" (1934), an attack on British imperialism, and the classic essay, "Shooting an Elephant" (1950).

He later lived the life of a drifter in Europe, as told in "Down and Out in Paris and London" (1933). Orwell fought in the Spanish Civil War, where he was shot through the throat. His disillusionment during the war was presented in "Homage to Catalonia" (1938), which criticized Communist deceit. From that point onward, Orwell said that all his works were directed against totalitarianism.

The final chapter of Meyers' biography is a summation of Orwell's rich legacy and universal appeal by detailing his powerful influence in Japan and the political impact his work had in Eastern Europe and around the world.

We learn that Pope Paul II, as Archbishop of Krakow in 1977, allowed a lecture on "Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four and Contemporary Poland" to be delivered in church despite its being banned by the authorities.

When Orwell's works were celebrated around the world in 1984, the Polish Solidarity Movement issued a clandestine Orwell stamp, illegal calendars and suppressed editions of "Animal Farm" and "1984," and showed films based on his novels.

Meyer credits Orwell's dark vision of the future with powerfully influencing the novels of Ray Bradbury and Anthony Burgess, as well as the playwright Tom Stoppard.

Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" (1953) takes up Orwell's theme of "repression through the destruction of culture." Burgess' "A Clockwork Orange" (1962) "considers the Orwellian theme of the lust for power and discusses the problem of evil itself." Stoppard's "Professional Foul" (1978) "attacks intellectuals for their hypocrisy and collusion with suppression."

The life he chose to lead - he had suffered from lung problems as a child and was a dedicated smoker - made his unusually brief. Orwell died of tuberculosis at the age of 46, leaving behind a body of work that remains unmatched in the quality and courage of its convictions.