

PART I

BACKGROUND



## CHAPTER I

### A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Since much of Orwell's writing is autobiographical, it will be useful before discussing individual works, to outline briefly the main events of his life; one can hardly assess a writer's motive without knowing something of his early development.

He was born in 1903 at Mornari in Bengal, India. The family name was Blair and he was christened Eric Hugh. His father, Richard Walmesley Blair, was a minor official in the Customs and Excise Department. Very soon after he was born, the family, but not his father, moved to England and he went to a preparatory school on the south coast of England. The years before he was sent to the school were lonely; although devoted to his mother, Orwell felt unable to speak freely to her, while his sisters were too far separated from him in age to be his companions. In this environment, he reacted to his isolation in a strongly individual way, and from the start, this inner independence, his way of asserting himself against the environment, seems to have been connected with the idea of writing.

The sense of failure must have been confirmed by his prep-school experience. His account of those years can be found in an essay, Such, Such Were the Joys, Orwell had his own problems at the school. He suffered a long series of unjust punishments from the headmaster and his bullying wife. He wrote, "This was the great, abiding lesson of my boyhood; that I was in a world where it was not possible for me to be good."<sup>2</sup> Then there was the disgusting favouritism of the headmaster towards boys from the moneyed classes. There were three castes in school: boys who came from aristocratic families or the sons of millionaires, boys from the rich upper middle class families and boys from poor families. Orwell realized that he belonged to the third class and he was never allowed to forget it. He could not enjoy good food, good living and other privileges like the rich boys. Though he won a scholarship, he was repeatedly reminded, sometimes in public, of his poor background by the headmaster and his classmates. Unhappiness and a feeling of inferiority haunted him for a long time afterwards. He left the school, hating the past and unsure of his future. "Failure, failure, failure, failure: failure behind me, failure ahead of me—that was by far the deepest conviction that I carried away."<sup>3</sup>

In a general way, it is easy to see this sense of failure at work in Orwell's early novels. His central characters are all isolated figures who resist a hostile society for

a time and try to exist by their own standards, but are then forced to capitulate. These elements have a natural correlation with the suffering of his schooldays.

Orwell obtained a scholarship to Eton. After his prep-school, the Eton atmosphere was comparatively congenial. At Eton he was popular, not bad at games and noted as unusual in appearance. He did not get much from Eton and the place was not much of a formative influence in his life. Nevertheless, in few other schools would Orwell's independence have been given room to flourish as it did there. After Eton, he joined the Indian Imperial Police, and spent the years 1922-7 as a sub-divisional officer in Burma. The five years of isolation in Burma must have been decisive for his approach to writing. Here he was given action and responsibility and the solitude in which to meditate on the injustice to which his work made him a party. He gathered his experience long before he had the opportunity to write about it, or at least to write for publication; for all his accounts of this period were both written and published after his return to Europe. His experience in Burma made such an impression that striking, accurate details dominate his descriptions of the life and nature of Burma, as for instance, in his essays, Shooting an Elephant and A Hanging.

He returned to England on leave in 1927 and was determined to give up the job in Burma. The climate in Burma was

bad for him and the Empire was certainly not being run with efficiency and confidence. Orwell stuck to his resolution and did not go back. He decided to become a writer. In 1928-9, he lived in Paris but had little success in selling his work and was finally reduced to taking jobs as a dishwasher in hotels and restaurants. His experience of Paris life, especially, life as a dishwasher in the subterranean world of dirt, sweat and curses led him to write Down and Out in Paris and London 1933. His novel, Burmese Days appeared in 1934. The latter was based, of course, on his experience in the Imperial Police.

From 1934 onwards he was able to earn a meagre living by his pen. In his third novel A Clergyman's Daughter (1935), he drew upon his experience as a tramp and as a school teacher. Over a sprawling great shop on a corner near Hampstead Heath, Orwell rented room from the bookseller for twelve shillings and six pence a week, and when he found it difficult to pay, arranged to work in the shop in the afternoons. He used that experience in Keep the Aspidistra Flying to paint a dark picture of a hard-up shop assistant. In 1936 he was in the north of England, commissioned by "The Observer" to make a tour of Lancashire and Yorkshire to study the living conditions of unemployed miners. His report was published by the Left Book Club under the title The Road to Wigan Pier 1937. It does not tell us much about unemployment, but it does tell us

about Orwell and about Socialism. It was when he returned from that assignment in the summer of 1936 that he married Eileen O'Shaughnessy. At the end of that year, he went off to Spain to observe the first fight of democracy against the totalitarians. On arrival in Barcelona he enlisted in a unit of the Socialist militia. After nearly six months at the front, he was wounded and almost immediately afterwards became involved in the street fighting in Barcelona when the unit he was attached to was denounced as "Trotskyist" and suppressed. Escaping from the political police, he returned to England where he wrote an account of this adventure: Homage to Catalonia (1938). At this time, his health began to break and he was under observation for tuberculosis of the lungs. The test proved negative, but he was advised to spend the winter abroad, which he did, in Morocco, returning to England in the spring of 1939. In that year, his fourth novel Coming Up for Air was published. During the war, he lived in London and worked for a time in a department of the B.B.C., responsible for broadcasts to India. His book of essays, Inside the Whale, appeared in 1940 and a long essay The Lion and the Unicorn in 1941. In 1945, his wife died and in the same year he published Animal Farm.

From 1946 to 1949 he lived mainly on the island of Jura in the inner Hebrides, and his health steadily deteriorated. He published no more books until 1949 when 1984 appeared. He

wrote this work while his energies were failing; he wanted to warn the nation and the world about future catastrophe. In 1950, a day or two before he was due to fly to Switzerland for convalescence, he died.

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## CHAPTER II

### THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

In nearly all his work, Orwell reacts, usually with violence, to the contemporary situation. Some of his judgments are, to say the least, questionable, since his argument is often based on prejudiced exaggeration or the emotional excess of earnest commitment. However, one cannot deny that his work contains, to some extent, a considerable amount of substance and wise evaluation of the politics or the society of his time. Before we begin to study individual work, an examination and evaluation of the contemporary political and social scene must be attempted.

It was very unfortunate for Orwell to live in Europe in the period between 1920-1940 and as a writer, his reaction was inevitable. After the First World War had ended with the Treaty of Versailles, all the countries involved, the victors and the vanquished, were confronted with many serious and delicate problems arising in succession from the ruins of the war. One was the inflation affecting most countries which fought the war, resulting in chronic unemployment. When unemployment prevailed, people began to be worried by the new threat to their security. The economic depression started in



1929 and lasted for many years. In this economic crisis, people had less faith in their government and some were led to think of a new kind of government or regime which in their expectation might cope with the problem in a better manner than the old democratic methods. Thus people were fairly receptive to the many new political movements in Italy, Germany, England, Russia and Spain. The leading political movements worth discussing are Fascism, Nazism and Communism.

The name Fascism was first used by Benito Mussolini in March 1919. In its primary stage, it had no definite programme; it just served as a technique for usurping and retaining power by violence. When Mussolini came to absolute power in 1926, Fascism became the ruling regime of Italy and its leaders elaborated certain principles. The theme of this political doctrine is that the individual exists for the state, not the state for the individual. If an individual acts freely in society as he does in a democratic one, his act is unworthy and meaningless. His act will be worthwhile only when he acts as a part of the whole society.

Humanity in the mass is never capable of rising above the level of its immediate selfish and ignoble wants; it is capable of high destiny only when it submits itself to a leader, to 'those rare great minds' which alone have the genius to shape history.<sup>4</sup>

In its essence, the fascist doctrine is in sharp contrast to that of democracy which has an increasing faith in the dignity and virtue of the individual and which sees the

state, not as an end but a medium through which people can achieve an ideal life. In 1936, Fascism did not find its place only in Germany and Italy but also in Rumania, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Greece and Japan. In principle, Nazism was the same as Fascism; that is to say people have to ignore their individual responsibility and decision in state affairs and instead, they are subject to a single will from the top: the Fuehrer. Moreover, Nazism placed emphasis on racial supremacy. When Hitler, the leader of Nazi party, took power in Germany in 1933, the racial campaign against the Jews was carried out with cruel intensity.

Fascism, then, in Orwell's day was widespread and a menace to other neighbouring countries. Britain in this period suffered from the expansion of Fascism, but to a small degree and, in the case of Communism, an even smaller one. There was a Fascist movement in England led by Sir Oswald Mosley, but it could only command the attention of poor people. Britain had to take immediate action against the movement by the passing of special acts in 1936.

The most important gain achieved by Fascism outside of Italy and Germany was the Fascist conquest of Spain in the Spanish Civil War 1936. It is very interesting to study the politics of Spain in that period; they form of course the background to Orwell's Homage to Catalonia. In 1930, the monarchy in Spain came to an end and in its place a republic was

established. Unfortunately, the government could not cope with friction among political parties. Italy took this opportunity to encourage the Spanish army officers to plan a revolt. In July 1936 General Franco instigated the military rebellion from Spanish Morocco. This revolution inspired considerable international intervention in Spanish affairs. The Fascist countries, Germany and Italy sided with General Franco, the head of the Nationalist Party. Russia supported the Republicans while Britain and France, bound by the agreement of non-intervention, showed some sympathy for the fallen government of Spain. The civil war ended with the victory of the insurgents in March 1939. In 1942, when fascist victory still seemed probable, Franco expressed his faith that totalitarianism had considerably displayed its superiority over democratic institutions. The victory of Fascism in Spain hence showed the international strength of the doctrine and at the same time weakened democracy. From 1936, the leading fascist countries, Germany and Italy increased the power of Fascism by entering into a number of political, cultural and military agreements and in 1937 Japan was a party to the military agreement with the fascist countries. In the light of subsequent events, Fascism in the beginning posed itself as a national movement but in 1940 as an international movement aiming at world domination. It was, however, defeated in the Second World War.

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While social and political unrest in Italy and Germany gave rise to totalitarianism, similar events were taking place

in Russia. After the abdication of Czar Nicholas II in 1917, a provisional government headed by Kerensky was formed but it could not last long. Shortly afterwards, the Kerensky government was overthrown and succeeded by a soviet government composed of the Bolshevik party with Lenin as leader. Within the period 1918-1921, Russia was torn by civil war and military intervention by foreign powers. In 1924 Lenin died and was replaced by Josef Stalin who introduced the First and the Second Five Year Plans to restore the economic order in the country. Stalin came into conflict with his chief political rival, Trotsky on the issue of establishing socialism in Russia rather than aiming at world revolution. Trotsky lost the fight, was deprived of his important position and was expelled from Russia in 1929. After this, Stalin became the supreme ruler of Russia; then began the period of purges, trials and executions of people who were against his communist government.

In theory, Communism regards the class struggle as a dominating feature of capitalist society and the state is always an instrument of the rich people or the capitalists. To end the struggle, Communism has to resort to the strategy of gaining power by revolution and only by the revolution of the working class. After the transitional period under the dictatorship of the workers, there will emerge a society that is classless and attain the full harmony of individuals and collective welfare. Moreover, the far-reaching ambition of the doctrine is to expand its principles to capitalist

countries. Though Stalin shifted his ambition from worldwide domination to the internal affairs of Russia, still the force of this ambition was potentially very strong. Its principles, so far as the classless society and economic justice are concerned, appealed to the lower class people in democratic countries. It certainly drew the attention of the working class people in so far as the doctrine promised them a better future and superiority to the workers in a socialist society. Poor people, were undoubtedly fascinated by the proclaimed purposes of the doctrine. Communism, though it did not speak much in praise of the poor people, yet it was arresting. It gave them hope. One reason why Orwell was so concerned about poverty was because poor people were an easy prey of communism and other totalitarian regimes.

Fascism, Nazism and Communism are varieties of totalitarian regimes in which private liberty and freedom are rejected and complete obedience to the state is required. Orwell had a strong hatred of totalitarianism in all its forms. He saw it as a menace to the world of his day. This hatred moved him to write Animal Farm and 1984 in which the chief methods of the regime were seriously presented, such as fear, trial, torture, distortion of facts and the ceaseless check on the private activities of individuals. 1984 is a warning against the expansion of totalitarianism and Animal Farm against the immediate spreading of Communism by Russia as a world power after the Second World War.

The partial success and frightening popularity of totalitarian regimes in Britain in the early thirties can be attributed to economic and social unrest. The world economic depression, beginning in 1929, together with the financial collapse of Germany and Austria in 1931 affected the situation in Britain. The British Labour Government faced unemployment spreading throughout the country, in spite of the active effort of the government in the social field. In September 1932, between 6 and 7 million people were living "on the dole."<sup>5</sup> Even in 1934, with recovery well started, massive unemployment prevailed over some areas—mostly in the northern parts of England. The unskilled workers were the people who suffered most severely. In this poor situation, Communism and Fascism found their ways into the national conscience. England could not compete with other new industrial countries in producing new products and in exploring the new market. English exports declined while imports were maintained; this led to a fall in the national income and the standard of living of people in general. In addition, England was forced to develop new industries: chemicals, rayon, cars and radio. New industries might be helpful to those who were employed by them but they were damaging to those who were still engaged in the old heavy industries such as shipbuilding in Clyde and Tyne, cotton manufacturing in Lancashire and coal-mining in South Wales and Durham. In depressed areas of this kind of industry, there was misery for those who worked hard for a small income.

In consequence, in this period the employed were poor and the unemployed were tramps. The degree of poverty was reflected in the writing of certain authors. Walter Greenwood gave a picture of prolonged unemployment in his novel Love on the Dole (1933). J.B. Priestly in his English Journey (1934) wrote about the contrast between the economic situation in the north and the south of England. Seebohm Rowntree published in 1934, The Human Needs of Labour, pointing out the standard of living that should be maintained by the workers. By Rowntree's standard, it was estimated that the income of a majority of the workers in cotton and coal-mining fell below the standard wage necessary for a decent life. In chapters two and three of The Road of Wigan Pier, Orwell gives us a clear picture of a miner in his daily performance. It was a hard life in which he could earn only enough to keep him alive; nothing was left for his immediate future or his dependents.

Political and economic situations are usually closely related. Orwell hated totalitarianism as much as he did economic injustice and social differences. His economic and social writings he submitted as preventive measures against totalitarianism.

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