

CURRENT BOOKS

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

Prophet with a Typewriter

ORWELL:

Wintry Conscience of a Generation.

By Jeffrey Meyers. Norton.

380 pp. \$29.95

Reviewed by Christopher Hitchens

The subtitle of this book is perhaps purposefully inept. George Orwell was dubbed “the wintry conscience of a generation” by V. S. Pritchett, a leading but uninspiring literary critic who had earlier written that “there are many strong arguments for keeping creative writers out of politics and Mr. George Orwell is one of them.” Pritchett wrote this while denouncing Orwell for his anti-Stalinist masterpiece *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Overcompensating later on, when the political climate was safer, Pritchett rather unctuously termed Orwell a “saint,” perhaps forgetting that Orwell himself held the opinion that “saints should be judged guilty until proven innocent.”

So that’s what I mean by inept. By purposeful I am allowing for the possibility that the biographer wants to draw attention to the salient facts about Orwell: that he was penniless and ill and barely publishable during his lifetime, and only became a garlanded and lauded figure when his sardonic voice had been stilled. The generation of which he was a part was not looking for a conscience, wintry or otherwise. It largely traded conscience for ideology, with consequences now well understood.

The short life (1903–50), during which Orwell combated all “the smelly little orthodoxies,” as he termed them, has been related by several biographers and is

scheduled to be told by many more as the centennial of his birth draws close. Even those who are not Orwell buffs probably know that he was born in India, suffered terribly at a sadistic English boarding school, became a colonial policeman in Burma (and shot an elephant), fought in the Spanish Civil War and was wounded, and conceived a detestation of communism that resulted in two literary masterpieces, *Animal Farm* (1945) and



George Orwell (1983), by R. B. Kataj

Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949). Jeffrey Meyers, a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature who has written biographies of D. H. Lawrence, Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, takes us fairly smoothly over this familiar turf. He is perhaps the first biographer to have benefited from the availability of *Complete Works* (1998), Peter Davison's magisterial 20-volume Orwell compilation, so he has managed to thicken the plot with some new material about the man who insisted adamantly that no biography of him ever be written.

Why are we fascinated by this austere yet grimly humorous Englishman? I submit that it is for one principal reason: Not only did he get the chief issues of the 20th century right, morally and politically speaking, but he did so unaided. To the torrents of lies and propaganda he opposed a solitary typewriter, backed by no party or patron or big publisher, and managed to witness for the integrity of the individual intellect. And though it is the writerly faculty that survives, he also showed physical courage along the way.

The great issues were fascism and Nazism, Stalinism, and imperialism. (The British Foreign Office spokesman who announced after the Hitler-Stalin Pact that "all the isms are wasms" could not have been more wrong.) Having been brought up as the son of a British official responsible for exporting Indian opium to China, Orwell decided early in his life that the white race had no right to rule Asians and Africans. Of all the European writers of his time, he was the most consistent and intransigent about this. His ethical socialism, acquired while combining the roles of journalist and hobo during the Great Depression, made it axiomatic that he would loathe the advent of fascism. This belief he held in common with many others, though few were so quick to sign up for service in defense of Republican Spain in 1937.

It was there, in Barcelona, that he was put to the test. Seeing democracy and local autonomy deliberately betrayed by Stalin's agents, he had the choice of keeping quiet for the sake of unity in the ranks or of being accused of deviation and giving ammunition

to the enemy. He seems not to have hesitated about which course to take, and from then on to have viewed Soviet communism and its surrogates as personal enemies. Meyers gives a fair account of this process, but inexplicably ends his chapter on it by endorsing the pro-Moscow conclusions of the historian Hugh Thomas, whose book *The Spanish Civil War* (1961) is wrong at every point that I've been able to check.

Orwell's heretical stand in Spain determined what followed: his 15-year, one-man war against Stalinism's corruption of the intellectuals. Turned down by publishers as politically orthodox as Victor Gollancz and as conservative as T. S. Eliot (who feared antagonizing Britain's wartime ally and disliked the representation of the Party leadership as pigs in *Animal Farm*), Orwell had an exhausting time of it. As is now notorious, he even composed a "list" of literary and political figures whom he suspected of succumbing to the totalitarian temptation. With the aid of Davison's research, Meyers has no difficulty disposing of the charge that Orwell did this as an informer or as the instigator of a witch-hunt. Indeed, even in the thick of a fight with the most unscrupulous opponents, he upheld all the decencies of free speech and opposed the use of police methods.

There is a fourth great issue of the 20th century, the emergence of the United States as a political, military, economic, and cultural superpower. Here, Orwell was less clear-sighted. Toward America he was somewhat incurious, somewhat distrustful, sometimes snobbish. He wrote little about the United States, and what he did write is mostly unremarkable. (I was interested to learn from Meyers that in 1947 Orwell contemplated a visit, in particular a tour of the South. He was motivated in part by the search for a warm climate where he might resist his gnawing tuberculosis, but still—what a report that might have been!) In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he makes the contending international powers more or less morally equivalent—and shows an early intelligence about the ultimate horror of nuclear war—but he did not in reality split the difference. His preference was for a social-

democratic United Europe, but, absent that possibility, he both hoped and predicted that the Soviet system would implode.

Orwell's personality was angular and occasionally intolerant (he disliked homosexuality, perhaps after a painful experience at school), but nobody who knew him can recall his doing anything mean or base. Meyers adds to my knowledge (at least) of Orwell's relationships with women: He was far more amorous, and somewhat more successful, than most people knew at the time. This cost him something morally in guilt about his devoted first wife, Eileen O'Shaughnessy, who died during a routine operation. And toward the end, when he was desperately ill and believed that remarriage might prolong his life, he virtually proposed to certain women that they might like to become his official widow. This makes painful reading, even if a certain dignity does diminish the pathos. It also prompts the question: Has such a gambit ever worked? In Orwell's case, it did. When he was on his deathbed, the glamorous but sinister Sonia Brownell agreed to become his wife. It was she who tyrannized researchers and potential biographers and anthologists for many years, before expiring as a thwarted and embittered boozier in a shabby Parisian exile. The pall that she threw over "Orwell studies" for so long has now been definitively lifted.

But I doubt that we need to know much more than we do. Orwell's short and intense life has for years borne witness to

some of those verities of which we were already aware. Parties and churches and states cannot be honest, but individuals can. Real books cannot be written by machines or committees. The truth is not always easy to discern, but a lie can and must be called by its right name. And the imagination, like certain wild animals, as Orwell himself once put it, will not breed in captivity. Actually, that last metaphor is beautiful but inaccurate. Even in the most dire conditions, there is a human will to resist coercion. We must believe that even now in North Korea, there are ideas alive inside human brains that were not put there by any authority.

In *The Captive Mind* (1953), Czeslaw Milosz wrote of his astonishment at discovering that the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which he had read in a samizdat edition, had never lived under totalitarian rule. Oh, but he had—in a hermetic and nasty school, and in the precincts of a colonial jail, and in the curfewed streets of Barcelona. It doesn't dilute Milosz's compliment to say that, by a sheer power of facing reality, Orwell was able to distill literature as well as great polemic from the experiences. His very ordinariness is the sterling guarantee that we need no saintly representative consciences. We would do better to make sterner use of our own.

>CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS is the author of *No One Left to Lie To: The Values of the Worst Family* (1999), newly published in paperback, and a columnist for *Vanity Fair* and *the Nation*. He has written the introduction to a forthcoming collection of George Orwell's writings on Spain.

America's Jewish Wars

JEW VS. JEW:

The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry.

By Samuel G. Freedman. Simon & Schuster.

397 pp. \$26

Reviewed by Tova Reich

The First Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. because of idolatry, fornication, and bloodshed, according to the Talmud, and the Second Temple was

destroyed six centuries later because of *sinat hinam*, hatred without cause. Baseless hatred, then, is the equal of the other three destructive forces. Its consequences can be dire indeed.