

From Wigan Pier to Airstrip One:

**A Critical Evaluation of George Orwell's
Writing and Politics post-September 11**

**Submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

**by
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2005

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

30/03/2005

David L. Urry

Acknowledgements

This thesis was written under the auspices of Associate Professor Tara Brabazon. I am grateful too for additional support from Professor Steve Redhead, my family and friends, and postgraduate colleagues. Thanks to everyone concerned.

Eric Arthur Blair **GEORGE ORWELL**



Figure 1

Abstract

This thesis summons a contemporary reading of George Orwell, evaluating his current role and function as novelist, essayist, and twentieth century cultural icon. The year 2003 marked the centenary of Eric Blair's birth and proved a productive year for Blair (*and* Orwell) enthusiasts. After nearly three years of research, my journey through Orwell's words and world(s) has undergone significant re-evaluation, taking me far beyond such an appropriate commemoration. In the tragic aftermath of 9/11 — through Afghanistan and Iraq, Bali, Madrid, and London — Orwell's grimly dystopian vision acquires renewed significance for a new generation. Few writers (living or dead) are as enduringly newsworthy and malleable as George Orwell. The scope and diversity of his work — the sheer volume of his letters, essays, and assorted journalism — elicits a response from academics, journalists, critics and readers. My research, tempered by a 'War' on terror and a televisual *Big Brother*, shapes these responses at a time when 24-hour surveillance is viewed as the path to instant celebrity.

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* provides unique insights into a highly pervasive and secretive regime, which in light of post 9/11 political trajectories is highly admonitory. These pathways and connections are produced in my research. I do not make easy links between past and present — Eric and Tony Blair — at the level of metaphor or simile. Indeed, the pages that follow traverse the digital archives and probe the rationale for mobilising Orwell in this time and place. I am focussed on writing a history and establishing a context calibrated to the fictional Oceania.

This doctorate commenced as an investigation of George Orwell's journalism and fiction one hundred years after his birth. At the outset of the candidature, the Twin Towers fell and new implications and interpretations of Orwell arose. My research demonstrates that the Oceania of Orwell's imagining presents an evocative insight into the contemporary alliance forged by the Bush, Blair, and Howard triumvirate in its quest for world peace. Using Orwell as a guide, I move through theories of writing and politics, in the process uncovering capitalism's inherently hostile and negligent attitude towards those who are materially less fortunate. I began my work convinced of Orwell's relevance to cultural studies, particularly in understanding popular cultural writing and the need for social intervention. I concluded this process even more persuaded of my original intent, but shaped, sharpened and compensated by new events, insights, tragedies and Big Brothers.

It is imperative for the future directives of cultural studies that critical, political, pedagogic and intellectual links with Orwell are (re-)formed, (re-)established and maintained. My text works in the spaces between cultural studies and cultural journalism, pondering the role and significance of the critical — and dissenting — intellectual. Memory, History, and Identity all circulate in Orwell's prose. These concerns and questions have provided impetus and direction for this thesis. They have also shaped the research.

Few expect Orwell's totalitarian dystopia to materialise unchallenged from the pages of a book. The wielders of power are more capable and more subtle. Yet it is impossible to deny that the litany of lies and contempt central to Big Brother's Oceania is reproducible by any administration assisted by a complicit media and a malleable citizenry. The emergence of such a phenomenon has been well documented in the post 9/11 United States. This thesis has arisen out of the miasma of hubris, lies and contempt framing and surrounding Mr. Bush's war on terror. My purpose — not unlike Orwell's in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* — is to warn, not judge or berate. Orwell understood political rhetoric. He was not a prophet but a journalist who interpreted the nuances and temptations of excessive power. He had witnessed the extraordinary 'death' of history in Spain, and thereafter he raised his pen to combat intellectual hypocrisy and dishonesty wherever he found it. Under Orwell's tutelage, plain words pierce, probe and unsettle. They are sharp cutting instruments, fully capable of transcending time. How else are we to explain his enduring popularity as a writer? This thesis offers a critical and interpretative homage to George Orwell, a man who recognised the beauty of well chosen words, who loved and appreciated their enduring complexity and power.

A framing structure has been chosen that places Orwell in close relation to poverty, class and politics, war and journalism. Individual chapter headings (and their contents) exploit Orwell's unique response to the significant talking points of his era. After resolving to write professionally, Orwell starved and struggled in Paris, and frequented 'doss houses' in and around London. I track these wanderings in chapter one. He studied the effects of the Depression and unemployment in Yorkshire and Lancashire

(chapter two), and fought and was wounded in Spain (chapter three). Thereafter he turned to political writing and journalism (chapter four). What he failed to anticipate was a post war Britain overwhelmed by despondency and dissolved by internal devolution (chapter five). His concluding apocalyptic discharge, the dystopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, was directed at the higher echelons of institutional power and corporate corruption in Britain, America, and Europe, which I explore in chapter six.

The world has changed significantly since Orwell (and J. B. Priestley) went in search of England's faltering 'pulse' in the 1930s. Englishness and traditional working class values have distorted and shifted in unexpected ways. These transformations are partly the result of war and the loss of empire. They are also a response to American cultural and economic hegemony, the privatisation of industry, offshore investments, the emergence of the European Economic Community, and the burgeoning global economy. George Orwell matters, even after this scale of change because he faced his own prejudices on the page and developed a writing style that enabled him to challenge the accepted orthodoxies and hypocrisies of his era. This is evident when returning to his essays and journalism, fifty-five years after his death. He possessed the ability to make readers feel uncomfortable, raising topics and concerns that we would rather not discuss. Denounced as a traitor by the pre-1956 unreconstructed left and feted as a hero by the self-congratulatory right, Orwell resists labelling and easy categorization. We owe him a considerable debt for exposing the likely directions of unchecked political ambition, and this insight should not be treated lightly. As I read him, Orwell *was* the last man in Europe, 'the canary in the mine.' He is a literary world heritage site of considerable

iconic appeal and international significance. He is an outsider's 'outsider' perpetually facing inwards, and we need him now.

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Figure 1: George Orwell, Islington, North London (1946). Photo is part of the Vernon Richards Estate, and can be found on Jackie Jura's website: *Orwell Today*.

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Figure 2: Additional information about the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* facsimiles can be found on Jackie Jura's website: *Orwell Today*.

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Figure 3: This facsimile page from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be found on Jackie Jura's: *Orwell Today* website.

<http://www.orwelltoday.com/manuscript1984.shtml> (12/03/2005).

Thanks are due to Jackie Jura at *Orwell Today*, for permission to use the illustrations displayed in this thesis.