

BOOK WORLD

OCTOBER 27, 1968

Arthur Schlesinger Jr.
on American history

William Styron
on what he reads

Penn Kimball
on Time Inc.

Robert Morton
on Andrew Wyeth

**He felt his world
was going to hell
—and it was**

THE COLLECTED ESSAYS, JOURNALISM AND LETTERS OF GEORGE ORWELL. Volume I: *An Age Like This, 1920-1940*. 574 pp. Volume II: *My Country Right or Left, 1940-1943*. 477 pp. Volume III: *As I Please, 1943-1945*. 435 pp. Volume IV: *In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950*. 555 pp. Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. Harcourt, Brace & World. Vols. I, II and IV, \$8.95 each; Vol. III, \$7.95.


By Alfred Kazin

I write this on the thirtieth anniversary of Munich. German troops and secret policemen are again in Czechoslovakia, Russian Communists are still being purged by their indefatigable leadership, the German Nazis have shown remarkable strength in the recent provincial elections. Of course the Labor Party was not in office 30 years ago, but a great many English Socialists don't believe that under Comrade Wilson they are any nearer socialism—or class equality—than they were under the Rt. Hon. Neville Chamberlain. In the United States, there is still destitution in Appalachia, while in the big cities of the North whole blocks are on relief. There are even more die-

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George Orwell, in 1943, when he wrote a weekly column for the Tribune of London.

hards on the extreme Left and phony patriots on the extreme Right and bully boys among the police than there were in the days of the *New Masses*, Gerald L. K. Smith, and the Memorial Day Massacre. The hostile great powers have taken over the Vietnamese Civil War even more openly than they took over the Spanish Civil War; the threat of another world war constantly hangs over our heads; everywhere there are displaced persons; and in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America millions upon millions are the helpless victims of imperialist wars, colonial wars, race hatred, military dictatorship, totalitarian ideology.

So for many of us it is still the age of Orwell. By this I mean that for many readers and writers, for people likely to be reading this, for people generally more interested in understanding things than in forcibly changing the destiny of whole classes of people, it is a tragic age when human values are dominated by force, when literature seems entirely under the domain of political concern yet has no influence on the political decisions that move us on. Orwell was a brilliantly topical novelist, an obstinately rational pamphleteer who with intense feeling brought the art of argument to the highest possible clarity not by writing down to his readers but by thinking in behalf of them

as fellow citizens who could be endangered by false logic and demagogic appeals. He was a passionately level-headed reviewer and essayist who loved good literature above all things, but felt with his usual sense of nemesis that literature was coming to an end. As he put it in an essay on Henry Miller, *Inside the Whale* (1940):

Almost certainly we are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships... literature, in the form in which we know it, must suffer at least a temporary death... The literature of liberalism is coming to an end and the literature of totalitarianism has not yet appeared and is barely imaginable... The writer... is merely an anachronism, a hang-over from the bourgeois age...

This is the note of grim clarity — after us, the ice age! — that Orwell always took in discussing literature as a dying art, in defending democracy against Stalinists and Fascists, “this England” against the snotty Socialists of the *New Statesman* and *Nation*. Orwell was an old Etonian who loved England but hated its snobbery and imperialism, an anti-Fascist who was badly wounded in Spain but hated the Communists for murdering Anarchists and Trotskyites, a thoroughly radical intellectual who despised English radical intellectuals for admiring totalitarian Russia. He was a democratic socialist who said from the first that the Moscow purge trials were completely fraudulent. Since the Tories were usually in charge of poor old broken-down England, he hated the Tories. But “since there is no real reconstruction that would not lead to at least a temporary drop in the English standard of (Continued on page 3)

He felt his world was going to hell—and it was

(Continued from page 1) life, left-wing politicians and publicists are people who earn their living by demanding something that they don't genuinely want. . . ." So he was always in opposition, always outside all the parties, groups and groupings—poor and increasingly sick, naturally, for he was sickened by "an age like this." He was a writer dominated by politics, but he believed, with Karl Marx, that only when socialism has solved the economic problem will modern man get to his real problem: his disbelief in personal immortality.

It is so much rationality, clarity, hopelessness on the part of a humanist who felt that his world was going to hell—surely political despair helped to kill him at forty-seven—that makes the age of Orwell, then and now, so sad. But ours is not the age of Orwell, ours is not a sad age for Mark Rudd, Leonid Brezhnev, the Beatles, Marshall McLuhan, Timothy Leary and all assorted activists, swingers, rabble-rousers, acid heads, amateur yogis and hippies, who recognize that ours is an age of riches, chemicals, freedom, love and possibility. It is not the age of Orwell for Abbie Hoffman, founder of the Yippies, who explained the other day—

I don't consider myself a leftist. Say I'm a revolutionary artist. Our concept of revolution is that it's fun. The left has the concept that you have to sacrifice. Who the hell is going to buy that product? A lot of the left is into masochistic theater, if you ask me.

Abbie has something there. These four volumes of Orwell's collected journalism, essays and letters are a magnificent tribute to the probity, consistency and insight of Orwell's topical writings. Orwell forbade any biography of him, but these two thousand pages make up a remarkable self-portrait, precisely because he was the writer most involved in his age. And yet one does not have to agree with C. P. Snow, who thought *Nineteen Eighty-Four* showed a desire that the future "not exist," to see that Orwell, like so many earlier 20th-century radicals, did not expect his side to win. In the end Orwell wanted only to be personally authentic, to remain himself in a bad time, to keep some old-fashioned liberty in England.

The age of Orwell was the age of Hitler and Stalin, of mass unemployment cured only by mass wars, of genocide and atomic warfare, of utopian hopes for the working class as the vanguard of humanity. It was haunted by poverty and unemployment. It began with the postwar slump of the 1920s, and it continued into England's postwar slump after 1945. (Orwell, who died in 1950, did not even have the satisfaction of outliving Stalin.) So it was an age in which the most sensitive consciences knew what it is to live every day with despair for others—an age, as Camus said, in which finally one struggled to keep certain values alive without any illusion that they would triumph. The sense of Orwell's struggle is overwhelming in these painfully clear pages. The necessity of struggle—against commercialism, against rant, against the lying propaganda of Stalin and Hitler, against the re-writing of history by the one and the destruction by the second of history as a human ideal, against the destruction of so many human beings, so many ancient cities, so many cultural traditions, so many valuable habits of moderation and exactness in language (always a prime issue for Orwell)—explains why Orwell always writes here with such burning clarity, such intellectual fervor, such respect for logic as the commonwealth of human intelligence.

By contrast, Abbie Hoffman does not talk very clearly and Mark Rudd does not write very interestingly. Many of the most prominent activists and cheerleaders of the New Left are playing psychological roles first and foremost, see society as all "theater," turn politics into pub-



George Orwell, with his adopted son, Richard, 1946

lic gesture. They are clearly internal rather than political minded; Tom Hayden explained the other day that to show *oneself* not afraid of cops, it helps to call them "pigs!" The most frightening thing about some of the new actionists in the mischievous part they play as *agents provocateurs* of the New Right. This does not bother them, for they believe as firmly as the German Communists did in 1933 that a Hitler in power must inevitably fail and so prepare the way for the Left. And isn't Comrade Ulbricht in power, so to speak, 35 years later?

Nevertheless, the New Left has the virtues of the affluent society that produced it: it is not wedded to depression, social or personal, and in a society bursting with abundance, it may practice austerity as a personal gesture again—one's own thing—but admirably doesn't believe in poverty as a way of life or defeat as a political habit. Orwell certainly practiced one and believed in the other. As everyone knows who has read *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell, the old Etonian and ex-policeman, liked to visit squalor, to see "how the poor die." There was a lot of self-punishing there, for reasons that a biographer might make clear and that his collected papers don't. And though Orwell cared for literature beyond everything else, one reason that literature is "dying" is that Orwell's generation may have made too much of literature as an expression of and substitute for political defeat. Nowadays professors who were once radicals themselves like to praise themselves as "rational" and to condemn their radical students as "irrational." But the "rationality" of these middle-aged contemplatives seems to consist in the belief that literature is not a form of action in itself but a defense against action, not a form of power but a neutralization of power, not even an image of natural violence but a protection against all violence. The logic of this is always lonely and rather vain: there is not much communal life to it and certainly not much fun, by which I mean the energy that youth properly makes so much of as a political virtue.

Orwell certainly practiced poverty, loneliness, logic and defeat. Admittedly, he was an intellectual, not a great imaginative artist: even his brilliant critical essays on great 19th-century novelists, Dickens and Tolstoy, display a characteristic tendency to show them up as bad thinkers even when the final point is that they were too immensely gifted to need intellectual logic. Still, Orwell felt himself alone, pushed and punished himself for un-

known reasons. It is to the point that from these four volumes one learns virtually nothing about his parents or his first wife, Eileen; nothing to explain why he left Eton for the imperial police in Burma. Orwell once told Anthony Powell that he had taken a girl to the park to make love to her because there was nowhere else to take her. That is especially interesting because of his conscious poverty and because Orwell, who occasionally lost his temper at the "pansy Left" and the "cosmopolitan scum," obviously had as strong a sense of propriety as he did of poverty, and managed to make ordinary English life in the Thirties seem even grimmer than it was. When a reader of his column in the left-wing *Tribune* observed that Orwell always found everything worse than it used to be, Orwell answered that the rosebushes that Woolworth's sold for sixpence were still very good.

Orwell was a loner as a novelist, which may be partly why he was so captious about Evelyn Waugh, who liked to play the country gentleman and playfully joined the Commandos. But he was also a loner in England's Left circles—"not one of us," a Labor Party bureaucrat pompously said to me during the war. I would suggest that Orwell was a mystery to himself. From the more than two thousand pages I have just admirably read—and often re-read with the greatest interest—I can remember very little about the *characters* of other people, such as a novelist ordinarily delights in. What one finds most here is a remarkable gift for analyzing other people's favorite propositions, for spotting dishonesty in public figures and moral faults in intellectuals. Orwell certainly knew how to evoke the traditional intellectual loyalties of the English conscience. He had a great gift for dissecting whatever shocked his conscience. He had the critic's born sense of reaction and opposition, to whatever he saw in the England of his time—and the politics of his time—that he disliked.

In short, he never saw himself in a position of leadership, as many young radicals do in our day. Orwell saw himself as a man whose only treasure was his moral judgment, and for this he needed to stay poor. The frontispieces to the last two volumes bring back Orwell with the fierce crease lines down his cheeks, the writer's colored shirt and shabby tweed jacket, in all his suffering and grim honesty. He said in 1944 that

... to make life liveable is a much bigger problem than it recently seemed. Since about 1930 the world has given no reason for optimism whatever. Nothing is in sight except a welter of lies, hatred, cruelty and ignorance, and beyond our present troubles loom vaster ones which are only now entering into the European consciousness.

He went on from that to describe certain reasons for hope, and he beautifully said that although "all revolutions fail, they are not the same failure." But the real basis of his tragic sense was his commitment to solitude: secular man feels utterly alone in the face of death and writing is too much the activity of a man alone.

One reason for the greater feeling of hope among radicals in the post-Orwell age is that the new technology makes for more community than did the old. Another is that many young intellectuals are not writers, don't live by literature or for it, as Orwell did, don't have his sense of solitude. Still another is that the young are so used to having things work that they can't imagine "politics" not working either; Orwell was a product of the agonizing period between the wars when it seemed as if unemployment would never end. But above all, Orwell's solitude represents a writer who knew how much he embodied something that was visibly passing. His life was unbearably filled with the poignance of mortality because he could always see *himself* being swept away as an historical moment.

But of how many radical pundits today will one want to read two thousand pages in another generation? ❧