

Odd Man In

THE COLLECTED ESSAYS, JOURNALISM AND LETTERS OF GEORGE ORWELL. Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. Four volumes (2,041 pages). Harcourt, Brace & World. \$34.80 the set.

By all odds, George Orwell is the most unlikely culture hero to emerge in the '60s. The ideological passions that rent the Red '30s, strewing literary corpses and real bodies over the Marxist battlefield, leave the current generation cold. Yet this minor English novelist (*Burmese Days*, *A Clergyman's Daughter*) is now accepted generally in England and the U.S. as a major prophet for his political journalism, for his anti-Stalinist fable *Animal Farm* (1945), and for the political-science-fiction shocker *1984*.

His posthumous honor is a tribute to his passion for truth; as the current cant goes, he told it like it was. Almost alone among the discredited figures of the '30s, Orwell, with his clarity, charity and honesty, is undiscredited. He can be read today by the young without boredom or nausea—despite the fact that he was in most ways as square as an unsoaked sugar cube. Reading him today is like taking a guided tour through the seven circles of the political hell that Western Europe built for itself on the bases of the Depression, the Spanish Civil War, World War II and the cold war. There is no trace here of the characteristic vices of the political intelligentsia of his day ("The thing that frightens me about the modern intelligentsia is their inability to see that human society must be based on common decency, whatever the political and economic forms may be"). Nor is there rhetoric, or the striking of attitudes; for these pleasurable vices, he substituted his own spare prose, and instead of striking an attitude, he took action.

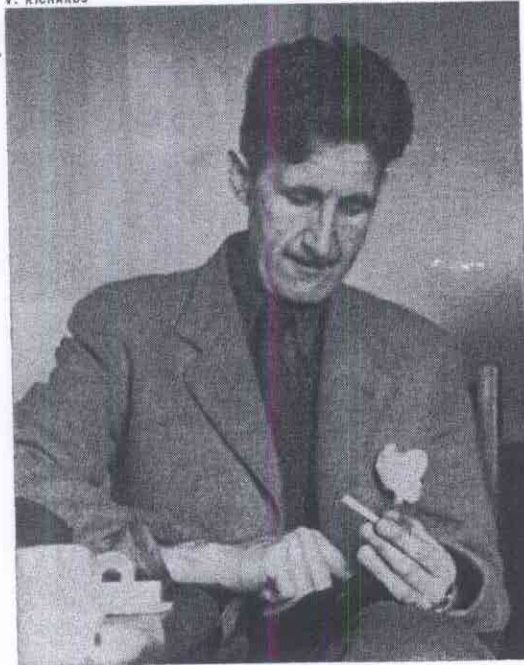
**Whales, Dogs and Windbags.** Orwell died in 1950 at 46. He asked in his will that no biography be written of him. It may now not be necessary. The four volumes of his journalism, critical pieces and letters, collected by his widow and meticulously edited, annotated and indexed, are biography enough. They testify to the fact of Orwell's acknowledged eminence, and will give him semiofficial status as the Great Survivor of the '30s, as the man who knew what it was like to live *Inside the Whale* (the title of his famous essay on Henry Miller) and to resist absorption by the corrosive digestive juices of the British imperial leviathan.

This Jonah was no theoretician. He was, wrote old School Friend Cyril Connolly recently, "a political animal [who] could not blow his nose without moralizing on conditions in the handkerchief industry." Though Orwell was a socialist, the metaphysical system under-

lying Marxian socialism meant nothing to him, and he had an empirical Englishman's distrust of other philosophical abstractions; to him, the existentialist Sartre was a windbag. But he also held an immense advantage over English intellectuals in politics who, by comparison, seem like dishonest children.

Their dishonesty fell into two main patterns. They willfully blinkered themselves against the fact, obvious to Orwell, that British society and ultimately the socialist movement itself rested on imperialist exploitation and the comparative prosperity it conferred on worker and capitalist alike. Dishonesty also expressed itself in the left by a simul-

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GEORGE ORWELL

*Through the seven circles of hell.*

taneous clamor for a "strong line" against Hitler (read "war") and demands for peace and disarmament. The British intellectuals, wrote Orwell in August 1941, "for ten dreadful years have kept it up that Hitler is merely a figure out of comic opera. All this reflects is the sheltered condition of English life."

In the war against fascism, he preferred a patriot like Churchill to the antifascist pacifists, whom he skewered on a couplet:

*Which will sound better in the days to come,  
"Blood, toil and sweat" or "Kiss the Nazi's bum."*

His refusal to be any party's dog made a political pariah of him and a near pauper (he was unable at the height of his powers to get more than a \$60 advance for a book). Doubtless today he would be equally unpopular for pointing out the moral obliquity of those doves on Viet Nam who became hungry hawks in the Israeli-Arab war.

To Orwell, political issues were mor-

al issues. He understood that peace and social justice would descend on the world, if at all, from a moral impulse, and where was that impulse to come from? Not from the "self-justifying complacent hypocrisy of the boiled rabbits... of the left intelligentsia." The real problem of the West, as he saw it, was to preserve mankind's ethical values—honor, mercy, justice, respect for others—in the face of an almost universal disappearance of a belief in the immortality of the soul. Being naturally a good man, he was a good humanist, but being a logical man, he saw that others were not. When people ceased to be Christians they did not necessarily become good humanists but superstitious fanatics and political madmen.

In these volumes, it is the nonpolitical pieces, diaries, letters and odd bits on diverse subjects that most hold the mind. Orwell was a classic Englishman, full of quirks. This shines through every line he wrote, whether on the puzzling sex life of the common toad who "salutes the coming of spring [and] after his long fast, has a very spiritual look, like a strict Anglo-Catholic towards the end of Lent," or on the "modern habit of some writers who describe lovemaking in detail... It is something that future generations will look back on as we do on things like the death of Little Nell." He discussed hop pickers in Kent; nit pickers in the academic world of Oxbridge; the habits of male prostitutes in Trafalgar Square and intellectual prostitutes in the BBC's Portland Place.

**Down and Way Out.** By all the laws of bloodlines and training, George Orwell should have been a Blimp. Born Eric Blair, into a military-official family, he went on scholarship to a spar-

tan prep school designed to groom likely lads for their destined place in the Establishment. Like any dutiful upper-class English boy, he journeyed East to govern the lesser breeds as an officer in the Burmese police. The experience was decisive. His sketch *Shooting an Elephant* is a picture in microcosm of two imperial centuries of interracial injustice and violence. Unlike most people, he could take it but he could not dish it out. Back home on leave, he quit to become a writer. This was rougher duty than bashing natives, or the even rougher self-imposed duty of feeling guilty about the bashing. He became a sort of European native—one of the very poor. In a religious age, his eagerness not merely to write for the poor but to be poor would have been acknowledged as a saintly passion.

His first book *Down and Out in Paris and London* records in an oral-tactile way what it was like to be a dish washer, a tramp and a louse-ridden outsider. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he ex-

perienced the squalor of hopelessness while his pink pals were pitying the proletariat. At the end of his life, when he was dying of TB, he characteristically decided to treat it on a fog-swept island off Scotland's west coast. Evelyn Waugh visited him on his deathbed, and the reactionary Catholic gourmet saw a rare quality in the socialist agnostic puritan. To Cyril Connolly, Waugh solemnly said: "He is very near to God." Told of this, Orwell sniffed: "Waugh is about as good a novelist as one can be while holding untenable opinions."

Whatever his standing with God, Orwell had small status among political men. He stood apart from what he called "the smelly little orthodoxies contending for our souls." He had enjoyed the painful honor of being wounded by fascists and hunted for his life by the gunmen of the GPU. He had fought against Franco in Spain, but with the wrong mob—the semi-anarchist POUM instead of the Stalinist-sponsored International Brigade. Back in London, he had found himself nudged into near oblivion by the fellow-traveling leftist press. Such experiences toughened his mind and help to explain his standing with today's young left. He was untainted either by success or by the envy and rancor that marks the "liberal" who is merely a power worshiper out of power.

High intellectual and personal honor shines through these volumes. Far from being a resection of yesterday's cold political cadavers, they compose the record of one of the most notable lives of the 20th century.