



GETTING IT RIGHT

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On at least two occasions George Orwell said he had done his best to be honest in his writings. In a letter to Dwight Macdonald on 26 May 1943 he wrote, 'Within my own framework I have tried to be truthful'; in a 'London Letter' to *Partisan Review*, probably written in October 1944, he said, 'I have tried to tell the truth' and goes on to devote the whole Letter to where in past Letters he had 'got it wrong and why'. When giving titles to volumes X to XX of *The Complete Works*, 'I have tried to tell the truth' seemed to me apposite for one of them (Volume XVI). Telling the truth went further for Orwell. Writing about James Burnham, he was aware that what he had written in his 'Second Thoughts on James Burnham' in *Polemic*, 3 (XVIII, pp. 268-84) would not be liked by that author; 'however,' he wrote, 'it is what I think' (XVIII, p. 232).



Attempting to 'get it right', even in the much lowlier task of editing than in the great variety of activities in which Orwell engaged, is about the only thing I can claim to have in common with Orwell. I am aware and embarrassed by my multitude of mistakes, misunderstandings, and my sheer ignorance. *The Lost Orwell* does what it can to try, belatedly, 'to get it right'. I was once taken to task by a reader who complained that 'typewritten' had been misspelt: how ironic he thought! Would that were all! What one might call 'ordinary, run-of-the-mill, errors' are no more than a matter of paying sustained attention – although maintaining that over some 8,500 pages of *The Complete Works* and seventeen years, with many changes of publisher, is clearly difficult. But there are more serious, and more interesting errors. Before turning to Orwell and his determination to correct himself, let me offer a revealing correction to something I got wrong. In 'Inside the Whale' Orwell refers to its being 'an age of eagles and of crumpets' (XII, p. 98). My annotation rather diffidently suggested a reference to Psalm 103, verse 5, in *The Book of Common Prayer*. Dr Robert Fyson sent me the correct reference – to T. S. Eliot's 'A Cooking Egg', *Poems*, 1920 (for full details see *The Lost Orwell*, pp. 174-5). What intrigued me about this is that when I came to check Dr Fyson's suggestion, I found that my teaching copy of Eliot's poetry showed that at one time I had not merely read but had 'taught' this poem: the page was full of pencilled annotations, questions and

comments. Few of us, I imagine, certainly not me, can remember everything we have come across at some time over fifty years of study, teaching and research. Sad, but, alas, inevitable.

Orwell was very self-critical and always quick to denigrate what he had done. As early as 23 December 1932 he writes to his agent, Leonard Moor, about the 'miserable school play' he has written (*Charles II*) and, like his clergyman's daughter, driven to distraction rehearsing and making costumes. But, rather grudgingly, he admits to Leonard Moore, that it 'went off not badly (note the double negative). He tells Brenda Salkeld on 11 September 1934 that he is pleased with parts of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* – but other parts 'make me spew'. Four years later on 14 December 1938 he is telling Cyril Connolly that he is having to rush *Coming Up for Air*, but 'It's a pity, really, as it's a good idea'. And at the end of life he is oscillating between self-deprecation and hope. 'I am not pleased with the book' he tells Fredric Warburg of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on 22 October 1948, 'but I am not absolutely dissatisfied with it . . . I think it is a good idea but the execution would have been better if I had not written it under the influence of TB'. However, hope springs ever anew with Orwell. 'I have a good idea for a novel' he tells David Astor on 21 December 1948, and on the same day he is even more enthusiastic when writing to Warburg; he now has 'a stunning idea for a very short novel'. But a month or two later, he is once again in self-critical mode. On 4 February 1949, he confesses to Julian Symons of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'I ballsed it up rather'.

Orwell's self-criticism of his creative work is well known but possibly not quite so apparent is just how often he corrected the observations he had entered in his diaries. Turning over the pages of his *Diaries* one cannot but be impressed by how often he went back over what he had entered and made later additions, corrections, amplifications, qualifications, and gave vent to his uncertainty. No observation is too trivial for a footnote. Thus, on 9 July 1939, with war looming, he can still remark on his observation that the newt tadpoles he has collected get their front legs first (unlike, he notes, toads which get their hind legs first – but he is not certain about frogs). Later he adds this: 'Not quite certain about this. They seem to have all 4 legs when still only about ¼-½ inch long'. Well, it is of no great moment and Orwell may have got it wrong, but it is so typical of Orwell's anxiety 'to get it right' even to the slightest detail. In his first diary, that on hop-picking, he almost immediately adds a note to his entry for 30 August 1931 that might strike a chord today. Having written that Government inspectors 'snouting around' had managed to prevent some hundreds of unemployed from getting jobs in the hop-fields that year, he later adds this note: 'Appointed by the Labour Government' (p. 8).¹ Later for that day he remarks that the West Malling spike seemed to indicate that 'spikes have improved a lot since I was last in'. But then he has second thoughts: a footnote says, 'No: a bit worse if anything'. Shortly after, unsure whether he was given tea or cocoa, he notes, 'To this day I don't know which it was' (p. 10). At the end of his Hop-Picking Diary Orwell lists a number of slang words with their definitions. Against 'Bly' (an oxy-acetylene blowlamp) is an asterisk which refers to a longish note that starts 'I forgot to mention that these lamps are hired out to burglars' (p. 21) and he records how much it cost to borrow one for a night and how a stethoscope was used to open a puzzle-lock. Orwell has a lust for facts, for accurate information, and a keen desire to pass

this on to whoever might read his diary – although initially, the person addressed could only be Orwell himself.

These characteristics are even more apparent in the 'Wigan Pier Diary', although here he doubtless had one eye on getting accurate the book he would write on his experiences. Having listed what compensation and payments the Hornbys receive, there is a footnote to 11 February 1936: 'The H.s are well-off by local standards' (p. 33). A remarkable discrepancy is annotated on 24 February. Orwell records that on the way to the coal face, 'there had been a fall of stone during the night – 3 or 4 tons of stuff, I should judge'. Jerry Kennan, he adds in a footnote, 'said 20 or 30 [tons]'. And then modest doubt: 'I don't know which of us would be the best judge' (p. 43). The logical answer would be Kennan but one senses that Orwell is tactfully taking leave to doubt Kennan's estimate, even though he would be unlikely to read Orwell's diary. Most of these footnotes provide later information – that a relatively prosperous father had died suddenly since he made his diary entry leaving the wife badly off (p. 52); that in recording that 4 Agnes Terrace in Barnsley had '3 or 4 rooms upstairs' he later discovered, and succinctly noted, '3'; that Mrs Grey was about ten years younger than her husband, but a later annotation states: 'Actually their ages are 50 & 38' (p. 58).

These examples of Orwell's annotations will suffice to demonstrate the care he took to ensure he was giving readers as true and honest an account of his experiences as he could muster but they are not in themselves of great moment. Of greater interest are his re-evaluations of what he has written in the past. On 17 December 1943 he wrote in his third 'As I Please' column, 'One way of feeling infallible is not to keep a diary' (XVI, p. 27). He goes on, 'Looking back through the diary I kept in 1940 and 1941 I find that I was usually wrong when it was possible to be wrong'. However, he comforts himself, 'Yet I was not so wrong as the Military Experts' – how that must resonate for us if we substitute 'Economic' for 'Military'. He gives a number of examples, such as the supposed impregnability of the Maginot Line; that the Russo-German pact had put an end to Hitler's eastward expansion; and how, early in 1940, that is before the rapid German onslaught on Holland, Belgium and northern France and our evacuation through Dunkirk, we were being told that the days of tank warfare were over. Later, reviewing a biography of de Gaulle, he refers to the 'best' French military opinion at the time of the Fall of France, voiced by Weygand, Darlan, and others, that Britain would collapse in a fortnight (XVI, p. 178). Reverting to this side of the Channel, he asks, 'Where now are the men who told us these things? Still on the job, drawing fat salaries. Instead of the unsinkable battleship we have the unsinkable Military Expert.' (Today, would that not be the impervious Economic Expert?)

Less than twelve months later, probably in October 1944, his thoughts run on the same lines in the 'London Letter' published in *Partisan Review*, Winter 1944-45 (XVI, pp. 411-16). He begins:

It is close on four years since I first wrote to you, and I have told you several times that I would like to write one letter which should be a sort of commentary on the previous ones. This seems to be a suitable moment.

Now that we have seemingly won the war and lost the peace [*Orwell in his typically donkey Benjamin mode*], it is possible to see earlier events in a certain perspective, and the first thing I have to admit is that up to at any rate the end of 1942 I was grossly wrong in my analysis of the situation. It is because, so far as I can see, everyone else was wrong too that my mistakes are worth commenting on.

He goes on –

I have tried to tell the truth in these letters, and I believe your readers have got from them a not too distorted picture of what was happening at any given moment .[*Once again a double negative. Orwell decried double negatives, especially the 'not un-' formation, and it is usually significant when he resorts to one.*]

In attempting to tell the truth Orwell contrasts himself with those journalists who will quite deliberately lie. Thus, in that third 'As I Please', he quotes an astonishing claim in a *Daily Express* leader shortly after the U.S.S.R. entered the war: 'This paper has always worked for good relations between Britain and Soviet Russia'. This 'London Letter' (which readers of this little essay would find more rewarding than any summary I can give) ranges widely, from international relations, the war, to the personal. What impresses me is that he is concerned not simply with major shifts and outcomes, but with how he might have been unfair towards a single individual. Thus, he 'particularly regrets' having said in one letter that Julian Symons 'writes in a vaguely Fascist strain – a quite unjustified statement based on a single article which I probably misunderstood'. Orwell is less concerned with correcting his mistakes than with 'explaining why I made them'. In doing this he touches on his underlying attitudes and beliefs, especially as compared to 'leftwing intellectuals':

In the summer of 1942, the turning-point of the war, most of them held it as an article of faith that Alexandria would fall and Stalingrad would not. I remember a fellow broadcaster [*at the BBC*], a Communist, saying to me with a kind of passion, 'I would bet you anything, *anything*, that Rommel will be in Cairo in a month'. What this really meant, as I could see at a glance, was, 'I *hope* Rommel will be in Cairo in a month'. I myself didn't hope anything of the kind, therefore I was able to see that the chances of holding on to Egypt were fairly good. You have here an example of the wish-thinking that underlies almost all political prediction at present.

I could be right on a point of this kind, because I don't share the average English intellectual's hatred of his own country and am not dismayed by a British victory. But just for the same reason I failed to form a true picture of political developments. I hate to see England either humiliated or humiliating anyone else. .

..

In *Tribune* on 2 February 1945, Orwell was taken to task by the Conservative MP, Quintin Hogg, later Lord Hailsham and a Lord Chancellor. In 'As I Please' 45, 19 January 1945, Orwell had quoted from Hogg's pamphlet, *The Times We Live In*, that 'To-day there are only eighty people in the United Kingdom

with net incomes of over six thousand pounds a year'. Hogg wrote that he was 'curious that your commentator [Orwell] did not attribute the statement to its correct source'. It was, he said an official statement made by Sir Kingsley Wood, as Chancellor of the Exchequer on 30 September 1942. He asked whether Orwell had overlooked that information and he went on 'that information, in spite of his rude noises, is true'. Hogg's characteristic pontificating hid the fact that, as Orwell was quick to point out, it was Hogg himself who had not revealed the source of this statement in his pamphlet. And he went on, given the number of people who seem able to live in expensive hotels and large country houses in 1945, there must be many more people whose net expenditure must be more than £6,000 a year. He asked the crucial question, 'By what method [do] they evade taxation?'. Today, when £6,000 is roughly one third of the average income, that sum as the income of a mere eighty people in the United Kingdom is astonishing, but Orwell's question is still pertinent: how do the very, very wealthy, evade the taxes levied on most of us? (XVII, pp. 24-5).

In the light of warnings that our population might reach 70,000,000, Orwell's interest in birth-rates and population growth sixty years ago are of particular interest. Orwell discussed these on at least three occasions. In 'As I Please', 20, for 14 April 1944, he states that 'The experts are proving now that our population will be only a few millions by the end of this [20th] century'. Rather reassuringly he goes on, 'but they were also proving that by 1940 it would be 100 millions' (XVI, p. 151). A correspondent who signed himself 'Statistician' analysed all Orwell's figures and argued that by the end of the century the population of England and Wales would be, according to one expert, 28.5 million and according to another 17.7 millions. Neither figure, the Statistician remarked, could be called 'only a few millions' – to which Orwell responded that he regarded '18 or even 29 millions as "only a few millions" relative to our present population' (p. 154). Two years later, on 22 March 1946, he was even more alarmist in 'In Front of Your Nose'. In about seventy years – that is, in about seven years' time from now – the population was expected to be only about 11,000,000, over half of whom would be Old Age Pensioners (XVIII, p. 162). He returned to the topic yet again just one year later in 'As I Please', 78, on 21 March 1947. Here he discussed two publications, *The Population of Great Britain* by Mark Abrams (1945) and a Mass Observation survey, *Britain and Her Birth-rate*. Orwell gives no figures from the latter, nor its date, but both forecast population decline. Abrams suggests that by 1970 the number of people over 55 'may well be 14 millions' (XIX, p. 81). Clearly the experts were having difficulty 'getting it right'. Interestingly Orwell does not refer back to the earlier prognostication. What seems clear is that Statistical Experts can now join Military and Economic Experts. So what for our seventy millions?

Orwell and the experts discussing population numbers are relying on interpretations of what should be facts. In the fierce discussions that arose following the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 and the Soviet armies unwillingness to participate or even allow landing facilities for Allied relief planes, he makes a telling comment on how Soviet policy might be represented. The Soviet attitude depended, to some extent, upon recognition of the rival Polish governments in exile in Moscow and in London.

If tomorrow Stalin were to drop the Committee of Liberation and recognise the London Government, the whole British intelligentsia would flock after him like a troop of parrots. Their attitude towards Russian policy is not 'Is this policy right or wrong?' but 'This is Russian policy: how can we make it appear right?' (XVI, p. 365).

Orwell had, of course, to weave a delicate path in *Tribune* between serious discussion and his more light-hearted paragraphs. Early on, in 'As I Please', 8 (21 January 1944), he said he had been reproached by a correspondent with always being 'negative' and 'always attacking things'. He responded that he did like giving praise if he could find anything to praise and he offered two paragraphs looking back to 'the good days' when rose bushes could be bought for sixpence (2½p) at Woolworth's. He had bought an Albertine before the War and, in 1943, he had seen it, a 'huge vigorous bush', still flourishing. (Indeed, it was reported to be still flourishing in 1988!). Alas, this was too much for Eileen E. Purber who wrote, under the heading, 'Sentimentality', complaining of the uneven character of Orwell's 'desultory paragraphs'. Orwell was behaving like the sentimental journalist, Godfrey Winn. His passage on roses was 'instinct' with 'bourgeois nostalgia'. Orwell (unsurprisingly) was having none of it. 'One of the outstanding characteristics of the working class of this country', he responded, 'is their love of flowers'. Or, he asked, 'is "bourgeois" meant to apply to the extravagance of spending sixpence on a rosebush – this in a country where few working men spend less than a shilling a day on cigarettes?' (XVI, pp. 78-9).

One thing that Orwell had great trouble 'getting put right' was the claim made that he had said the working classes 'smell'. Although he had said no such thing, when *The Road to Wigan Pier* was published he was accused, especially by those on the left, of so attacking the working class. Orwell was angered by this and wrote to Victor Gollancz on 20 August 1937 regarding such attacks in the *Daily Worker* asking him to get in touch 'with anyone in authority on the Worker staff' to persuade them to stop such accusations. Gollancz told Orwell he would pass on his letter 'to the proper quarter'. That turned out to be Harry Pollitt, who had been General Secretary of the Communist Party since 1929. For the moment that put a stop to such misinterpretations of what Orwell had actually written – for example, 'That was what we were taught – the lower classes smell.' He then quoted Somerset Maugham discussing this issue, 'without humbug', in *On a Chinese Screen* (1922; V, pp. 119-22). Maugham was by no means the first novelist to raise this matter. For example, Arnold Bennett a dozen years before Maugham, wrote of the 'steamy whiff of humanity' arising from a Sunday School procession in *Clayhanger* (1910; Bk 2, ch. 10, section 2) and to the 'nauseating' smell arising from those attending a union meeting (Bk 2, ch 20, section 3). However, it is Orwell who is (falsely) pilloried. The issue boiled up again in June 1945 with the publication of an article by J.E. Miller in the short-lived magazine, *Million*. There followed a correspondence in *Tribune* headed 'Orwell and the Stinkers', from 29 June 1945 (XVII, pp. 201-205; and see Orwell's letter to the Editor of *Million*, 21 June 1945, *The Lost Orwell*, pp. 107-8).

Apart from this last paragraph I have concentrated on Orwell's journalism – an area of writing where, because of pressures of time it is particularly easy to make mistakes. I should like to conclude by

reference to three of Orwell's books, first by referring to Orwell's attempts to get *Homage to Catalonia* right.

In *Homage to Catalonia* Orwell makes it plain that he 'only saw what was happening in my immediate neighbourhood' (p. 131) and 'I myself have little data beyond what I saw with my own eyes and what I have learned from other eyewitnesses whom I believe to be reliable' (p. 216). When Geoffrey Gorer enthusiastically reviewed *Homage to Catalonia in Time & Tide*, he pointed to an error: Orwell had said that the fighting in Barcelona was started by the Civil Guards whereas Gorer claimed it was the Assault Guards. Orwell wrote to Gorer from hospital on 18 April 1938 (XI, pp. 133-4) to thank him for his generous review and to point out what he took to be Gorer's error. But it was Orwell who had made the mistake and when he realised that, he was anxious to have it rectified in subsequent editions, but none appeared in Orwell's lifetime. The correction is made in *The Complete Works* edition (VI, pp. 253 and 257; note 102/15).

More controversial has been the re-ordering of the chapters of *Homage to Catalonia*. Writing to Yvonne Davet about her French translation on 29 July 1946 from Barnhill, he said,

When the book is reprinted in England, I plan to take out one or two chapters and put them at the end of the book as an appendix. It especially concerns the chapter giving a detailed picture of the May fighting, with quotations from the newspaper etc. It has historic value, but it would be tedious for a reader with no special interest in the Spanish Civil War, and it could go at the end without damaging the text (XVIII, pp. 360-3).

In the second half of 1949 Orwell wrote notes on his books (XX, pp. 223-31). He again specified that chapters V and XI of the original edition should be placed at the end as appendixes and he wrote out a fairly long list of corrections (including that relating to the Assault/Civil Guards). These changes I took into *The Complete Works* edition, inevitably making some very slight consequential changes. It was understandable that those familiar with the first edition (especially those who had read it before the Second World War) preferred the book as it had first appeared, but there were also scholarly objections.² I take comfort from the approval given to the changes I made when my edition was translated into Spanish by Antonio Prometo Moya with a Prologue by Professor Miquel Berga, as *Homenaje a Cataluña*, (Barcelona, 2003) and, when reviewed in *El País* on 21 June 2003, it was described as 'definitiva: la edición canónica de uno de los libros canónicos sobre nuestra guerra civil'.

Here the task of the editor in getting the text right seemed to me determined by Orwell's express instructions. However, sometimes things are not always so clear. At least twice I have not made the changes which, years after, I still wonder whether I ought to have been emboldened to make. These are discussed fully in *The Lost Orwell*, pp. 158-9 for *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and on p. 161 for *Animal Farm*. In the former novel, Gordon, attempting to seduce Rosemary, quotes four lines in French from a poem attributed to Villon. Rosemary asks what they mean. Although Gordon translates for her Orwell

does not do so for the reader. Her response is direct: 'I can't, Gordon. I just can't' (p. 123). There is nothing about the lines indicating why they should not be translated but I guess that there was a cut about here insisted upon by Gollancz's libel lawyer. From a reference Orwell makes in *Down and Out in Paris and London* it is possible to trace the edition Orwell owned, *Oeuvres complètes de François Villon*, ed. Pierre Jannet (Paris, 1876), where this poem appears on p. 134. The whole poem gives reason for Rosemary's 'I just can't' and Rubinstein's cut. I was tempted to include all four verses of the poem, but thought that such an attempt to 'get it right' was an editorial step too far. But I still wonder about if I was right.

In the same vein, but more positively, I wish I had restored four lines to *Animal Farm* which Orwell added, not to the novel but to his broadcast version, to make plain a crucial moment in the story when the pigs appropriate the apples to themselves. Combining novel and play-text seemed a step too far so I contented myself with giving them in the introduction to the Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics edition (1989), pp. xix-xx. At least I have doubtless saved pages of newsprint in the TLS.

Even after twenty-eight years of pretty close attention to the writings of George Orwell he still has the capacity to surprise me. Of course, as he was the first to admit, he didn't always get it right – do any of us? By chance I came across this in his letter to John Middleton Murry, written from Hairmyres Hospital of 5 March 1948: 'it is rash to assume that most orientals, or indeed any except a few westernised ones, would prefer democracy to totalitarianism' (XIX, p. 279) on the day *The Independent* claimed in large type that the recent Afghan Presidential election had been 'deeply flawed' and a 'victory of a crooked, corrupt, and discredited government'. Did that reinforce Orwell's statement? But, pondering on our MPs' expenses and the number of occasions we have been deceived by our governments in recent years, I wondered who were we to criticise 'flawed' governments. On 10 November 2009, Sir John Major expressed his dismay to the Commons Public Administration Committee at the malfunctioning of our democracy and on Armistice Day we learn that for the fifteenth successive year the European Union's auditors have found themselves unable to sign off its accounts. Would Orwell have changed his assessment of orientals in the light of our own sad experience?

Notes and References

- Page references are to Orwell's Diaries (2009).
- See especially Professor Patrick Parrinder in his 'From Catalonia to England: Orwell's Crisis-Moments' in *George Orwell : A Centenary Celebration*, Heidelberg, 2005), and our exchange of letters in the TLS, June 2003.

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