



**WHY ORWELL WENT TO BURMA:
Re-visiting the Buddicom Thesis**

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Jacintha Buddicom was a close childhood friend of the future George Orwell, whom she knew as Eric Blair. They first met in 1914, when Jacintha was thirteen and Eric eleven. Over the next eight years Jacintha and her siblings Prosper and Guinever saw a lot of Eric during their school holidays in Shiplake-on-Thames, near Henley, and at the Buddicom estate in Ticklerton, Shropshire. Her memoir, *Eric & Us*, first published in 1974, describes their youthful pastimes and enthusiasms.¹ Eric seems to have divided his holidays about equally between fishing and shooting with Prosper and Guinever—both avidly outdoorsy children—and discussing life and literature with the more sedate Jacintha. She nurtured Eric's dream of becoming a "FAMOUS AUTHOR" (always written in capitals, she tells us). Eric read her his stories, plays, and poems, and wrote her letters full of literary and philosophical observations.



Eric and Jacintha lost touch after Eric's departure for Burma in 1922. Not until February 8, 1949 did Jacintha discover that George Orwell, the author of *Animal Farm*, which she greatly admired, had been her childhood friend Eric Blair. Orwell's publisher, Frederic Warburg, gave her Orwell's address at the sanatorium in Gloucestershire where he was slowly dying of tuberculosis. They exchanged a few letters, spoke a few times on the telephone, but never met again.

On January 10, 1971, Jacintha saw a BBC documentary about Orwell entitled *The Road to the Left*, comprised of interviews with various friends, acquaintances, and critics. As she later wrote to Bernard Crick, Jacintha was "so astonished at the completely erroneous picture of his early life" that she decided "in desperation and disgust" to try to set the record straight. Her brief memoir, "The Young Eric" (which became the nucleus of *Eric & Us*) appeared a few months

later in an anthology entitled *The World of George Orwell*. In an unpublished “appendix” to her essay, Jacintha explained that

the reason for my contribution to this book was the sudden discovery that apparently nobody knew anything about Eric Blair’s out-of-school childhood, or the true solution to the problem of his life: Why did he go to Burma? As I was there at the time, I can give an authentic first-hand account of what happened.ⁱⁱ

Jacintha Buddicom was concerned to refute what she considered the myth of Eric Blair’s unhappy childhood—a myth largely based, of course, on Orwell’s own writings, especially the late essay “Such Such Were the Joys”. Eric Blair, she insisted, had been a “philosophical” and “practical” boy, with “a great sense of humor: “and among all the boys we knew, Eric was one of the most interesting, the best-informed, the kindest, the *niciest*.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In *Eric & Us*, Jacintha acknowledged that Eric had become infatuated with her at the age of about fifteen, and she printed several love poems that he had written her. But she insisted that she had felt nothing of the sort in return. “He was a perfect companion,” she wrote, “and I was very fond of him—as literary guide-philosopher-and-friend. But I had no romantic emotion for him.” And Eric himself suffered only from puppy love: “I think he was very fond of me,” she told one interviewer, “but in a romantic and idealistic way. I don’t think he ever had the slightest idea of any possibility of doing anything about it.”^{iv}

Orwell’s biographers have found *Eric & Us* credible enough to cite about minor matters, but in general the book had little impact. Jacintha’s reminiscences were often trivial and sometimes maddeningly digressive. There were no dramatic disclosures, no portents of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Her picture of the young Eric Blair was impossible to square with Orwell’s own self-portraiture. She was an honest but impercipient witness.

For her part, Jacintha was troubled by the kind of writer her young friend had become. She found his work bleak, sordid, and (apart from *Animal Farm*) utterly unlike the books she would have expected of him. And why had Orwell erased *her* so completely from his autobiography?

Jacintha blamed it all on Burma. “The gloom and *nostalgie de la boue* developed much later,” she explained to Bernard Crick. “They were not inherent when he was young. But the first seeds seem to have been sown in Burma.” So why had he gone? What was “the true solution to the

problem of his life?” Jacintha believed that Eric went to Burma against his will, for the pedestrian reason that his father made him.

“Eric,” she insisted, was “a born scholar—a boy who lived for books,” and he “had his heart set on going to Oxford.” It was during the summer holidays of 1921, she wrote, that the final decision on Eric’s future had to be made; and old Mr. Blair insisted on Eric’s following him into the “Indian Civil” against Eric’s pleas (supported by Mrs. Blair and our own mother) that he should be allowed to try for some sort of scholarship or exhibition to Oxford. ^v

Colonial service “was the last thing Eric wanted, but the tramlines were laid down.” ^{vi}

Nothing in *Eric & Us* has been more decisively rejected than this thesis about Eric’s aspirations for Oxford. Bernard Crick set the tone in his magisterial *George Orwell: A Life*. The idea of Eric going to Oxford, Crick argued, had been solely Jacintha’s. “Eric almost certainly did not, in later years certainly did not, share Jacintha’s enthusiasm.” ^{vii}

In his 1984 interview with Jacintha, Bernard Crick fed her a leading question in the evident hope of eliciting a retraction. “He definitely didn’t want to go to university, did he?” he asked, as though unaware that she had written precisely the opposite on two occasions. ^{viii} When a scholar of Crick’s caliber starts tampering with a witness, it is a sure sign that preconceptions are darkening counsel.

Orwell’s biographers have discounted Jacintha’s testimony on several grounds: Eric’s poor performance at Eton had put a scholarship to Oxford out of his reach, and his family was too poor to send him without one; he never expressed any interest in the idea to anyone else; and in later life he often spoke with contempt of the Oxbridge literati. Above all, the image of Eric Blair at Oxford seems flatly un-Orwellian.

George Orwell did not yet exist, however. Against these objections we must set the confidentiality that obtained between Eric and Jacintha during these years—the first two years after World War I when, according to Jacintha herself, they were “inseparable.” ^{ix} At fifteen, Eric wrote her a poem that begins “Our minds are married,” and three years later he wrote another declaring “My heart belongs to your befriending mind.” Jacintha had reason to think that she understood his feelings.

Eric thought it unfair, she wrote, that her feckless brother Prosper should be sent to Oxford on full fees, “whereas Eric himself, who would have so appreciated the opportunity and would have worked so hard to gain an almost-certain scholarship, was forbidden it by his father.” During the decisive summer of 1921, Eric “talked to me a good deal on the subject. We were rather in the habit of taking long country walks.”^x

Such testimony deserves more serious consideration. Here I can present only a skeletal argument, and space compels thrift with the evidence. (There is plenty more—available on demand—which I intend to deploy elsewhere.)

Jacintha’s story looks flimsy, I suggest, because she suppressed its essential features, features that we can now restore. In 2006, Jacintha’s younger cousin Mrs. Dione Venables reprinted *Eric & Us* with her own Postscript, based on conversations with Jacintha during their later years. Thanks to Mrs. Venables we now know much more about Eric and Jacintha, and there are at least three bits of news with which future students must reckon.

First, the relationship was considerably more erotic than Jacintha, (conceived, after all, under Queen Victoria) could confess in print. Second, Eric proposed marriage to Jacintha before leaving for Burma, and was wounded by her rejection. Third, in September 1921, Eric tried at least half-heartedly to rape her, which naturally drove a wedge between them. We need to reevaluate her “solution to the problem of his life” in the light of this new intelligence.

In *Eric & Us* Jacintha described an especially beautiful sunset she and Eric had experienced in 1918, which they both vowed never to forget. She reprinted the poem, entitled “The Pagan”, that he had written to her about it. At the age of eighty-one she disclosed to Dione Venables that this had been the occasion of their first kiss.

Complete trust, complete joy, complete peace. We seemed to be wrapped round in golden light. It was quite strange... You never forget those amber moments. ^{xii}

She admitted that she and Eric had later engaged in what used to be called “heavy petting” (“some intimacy but not full intercourse” was how she put it). Jacintha also wrote Eric at least two erotically suggestive poems, one imagining herself as his vampire lover, the other envisioning the two of them reincarnated — Eric as Sarasate, the virtuoso gipsy violinist, and

herself as his violin.^{xiii} It can probably be assumed that Jacintha was sending Eric some confusingly mixed messages.

In 1971 Jacintha told Bernard Crick that Eric “wanted me to be engaged to him before he went to Burma.” She made a similar statement to Stephen Wadhams of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. This proposal is not mentioned in *Eric & Us*. But it can be deduced from the text, though only Gordon Bowker, Orwell’s most recent biographer, has done so. Jacintha printed Orwell’s letter of February 14, 1949, in which he accused her of having “abandoned me to Burma with all hope denied.” Near the end of the book she inserted her own poem, beginning “Dear Ghost, forgive—I can’t explain/ Rejected vow, neglected pen...”, which can only refer to Eric’s proposal.

The crisis occurred on September 4, in Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire, where the Buddicoms and the Blairs were sharing a house for the summer. The story only came to light in 1993, after Jacintha’s death. As her sister Guinever and Dione Venables were going through Jacintha’s effects, Guinever discovered the draft of a letter Jacintha had written to Eric on the day of the disaster, rebuking him for the assault. According to Guinever (who destroyed the letter in disgust), Eric

had obviously done his best to remove her pants and insert himself...She was so angry with him and really mortified. He had torn her skirt and knickers and hurt her hip and shoulder. Jacintha had had to scream for him to stop before he reluctantly did...^{xiv}

Jacintha refused to see Eric again for the rest of the holidays. Some version of the incident reached the two mothers, and Mrs. Venables believes that it produced a lasting breach between the two families.

Jacintha wrote nothing (except by innuendo) about his proposal, nothing about his assault, and nothing about any possible incitation on her own part. Jacintha’s inhibitions thus fatally undermined her credibility. The unexpurgated story would have been much more convincing, as well as more compelling. If we accept, as I think we must, that Eric really did hope to marry Jacintha, then he had a very strong incentive indeed to prefer Oxford over Burma. Whatever his feelings about the University per se, he must have known that an Oxford man would have far better luck with her than an Assistant Superintendent in the Burmese police.

Gordon Bowker, who deserves credit for detecting Eric's proposal, is surely mistaken to assume that Eric was "asking her to go with him to Burma."^{xv} Jacintha Buddicom was not the sort of girl one takes to Rangoon, let alone to the Burmese hill country. Her own dream of attending Oxford had been frustrated: their mother had decided that the family could afford to fund only her brother Prosper. But she still hoped to immerse herself in the social ambience of Oxford, on some presentable Oxonian's arm. Eric's best bet to win her, as he must surely have known, was to shine intellectually at Oxford and embellish his social credentials with a First or two. But did he have any prospect of doing so? Most biographers have accepted the statement of Andrew Gow, Eric's tutor at Eton: Eric had no hope of winning a scholarship, or of entering Oxford without one. In 2000, however, this assumption was persuasively challenged by Jeffrey Meyers, who concluded that "Eric *could* have gone to university without a scholarship," and he had, in any case, a reasonable shot at one.^{xvi}

Certainly the situation did not seem hopeless in the summer of 1921. To be sure, Eric would have had to cram furiously to win a scholarship, and his father's opposition would have to be overcome. But Eric had the necessary talent, and, according to Jacintha, he was mustering the requisite will. Meanwhile both mothers were besieging Richard Blair on Eric's behalf:

During the Rickmansworth holiday there were interminable conversations between our mother and Mrs. Blair, united in deploring old Mr. Blair's obstinate attitude with regard to Eric's future...Our mother was very fond of Eric, and far more understanding of his wish to be an author than was his father. So when Mrs. Blair sided with Eric in a desperate last-minute stand for a final last-minute chance of Oxford, our mother backed them up in some vigorous correspondence with old Mr. Blair, strongly advocating that that Oxford was 'the proper thing' for a boy. She told him that 'at whatever sacrifice' she was determined Prosper should be given the opportunity.^{xvii}

Eric's father may have been "obstinate," but he does not strike one as an especially forceful character, or indeed as the dominant partner in his own marriage. The persuasive powers of two strong and intelligent women, reinforced by stiffer resistance from Eric himself, might well have worn him down, if the effort had been sustained.

But Eric's offense on September 4 would have scuttled this campaign on his behalf. Oxford anyway meant nothing now to Eric, having lost Jacintha. After the incident, Jacintha would no longer speak to him, and the two mothers were not speaking to each other. Deserted by his

female allies, and rebuffed by Jacintha herself, Eric was left with neither means nor motive for bucking his father's will. And so in October 1922, as Jacintha puts it, "he was exiled to the Burma police."

Gordon Bowker has gotten closer to the truth than his predecessors, but veers wildly off course, I think, when he describes Eric as a "passionate adventurer heading off into the heart of darkness."^{xviii} Bowker has picked the wrong author: Eric Blair was not thinking of Joseph Conrad as he sailed away from England. As he later complained to Jacintha, he had been "abandoned to Burma, all hope denied." The tone is light, but the reference to Dante is telling. It suggests that Eric Blair left England feeling like a damned soul.

- i. Jacintha Buddicom, *Eric & Us*, 2nd.ed. (Chichester: Finaly Publisher, 2006).
- ii. The manuscript is now in Orwell Archive in University College London. Jacintha Buddicom sent it to Ian Angus on 9 May 1971.
- iii. Buddicom, 145.
- iv. Interview with Stephen Wadhams of the CBC, summer 1983, in preparation for "George Orwell: A Radio Biography", broadcast January 1, 1984. Transcript of original CBC tape sent to Dione Venables by Gordon Bowker.
- v. Unpublished annotation to Prosper Buddicom's Diary for 1920-1, Orwell Archive, UCL
- vi. Buddicom, in Gross, 4.
- vii. Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (London: Penguin, 1982), 135.
- viii. BBC transcript of unused interview for Arena program, *Orwell Remembered*, broadcast January 1984. Orwell Archive, UCL.
- ix. Buddicom, 186 (Venables Postscript).
- x. Buddicom, in Gross, 4-5.
- xi. Buddicom, 119.
- xii. Buddicom, 70-2, 180 (Venables Postscript), Dione Venables, ms. diary entry, 24 October 1982.
- xiii. Jacintha Buddicom, "Dracula's Daughter" and "Henley at Henley: Romantic Regatta", ms. poetry collection, property of Dione Venables.
- xiv. Dione Venables, ms. diary entry, 15 December, 1993.
- xv. Bowker, , 71.
- xvi. Meyers, Orwell: *Wintry Conscience of a Generation* (New York: Norton, 2000), 43.
- xvii. Buddicom, 118-119.
- xviii. Bowker, 71

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