



NEW LIGHT ON ORWELL'S LOST YOUTH

July – September 2010

William Hunt

The most dramatic revelation in Peter Davison's new edition of Orwell's correspondence is a recently discovered letter from Jacintha Buddicom, Eric Blair's childhood friend and, as we have lately learned, his adolescent sweetheart.¹ As readers of this Forum know, her memoir, *Eric & Us: A Remembrance of George Orwell* was republished in 2006 with a postscript by her cousin Dione Venables. The Venables Postscript, based on conversations with Jacintha in later life, disclosed that she had severely censored her own story. She had concealed both Eric's offer of marriage on the eve of his departure for Burma, and her reason for rejecting him: in the late summer of 1921, Eric had tried to force himself sexually upon her.



This new letter, written to Jacintha's cousin June Finlay, and dated May 4, 1972, confirms and amplifies the account given by Mrs. Venables. The tone of the letter enhances its credibility: Jacintha was attempting to console her cousin, despondent over a broken love affair, by confiding her own sense of loss. The letter is more explicit than anything Jacintha told Dione Venables. Jacintha had just begun work on *Eric & Us*. She was writing her memoir, as she explained to her cousin, in the hope of ridding myself of a lifetime of ghosts and regret at turning away the only man who ever really appealed on all levels...How I wish I had been ready for betrothal when Eric asked me to marry him on his return from Burma. He had ruined what had been such a close and fulfilling relationship by trying to take us the whole way before I was anywhere near ready for that. It had taken her "literally years," the letter continues, to realize that we are all imperfect creatures but that Eric was less imperfect than anyone else I ever met...Memories of the joys and fun that Eric and I shared, knowing each other's minds so totally, assured that I would never marry unless that 'oneness' could be found again.

It never was, and she never did. Yet in *Eric & Us* she wrote, "Sex for us was like the seacoast of Bohemia: there wasn't any." In public interviews she repeatedly insisted that she had had no romantic feelings for Eric whatever. "He never made any attempt to seduce me!" she assured Steven Wadhams of the CBC, with a chuckle. "He probably hadn't developed in that way at all."² Only once did she let any hint of her "ghosts and regret" emerge in public. During this same interview, she broke — very briefly -- into tears, while admitting "I never did seem to treat Eric as perhaps I might have done." She swiftly recovered her composure, however, and Wadhams omitted the outburst from the published transcript.

In a previous essay for the Forum I discussed the implications of the Venables Postscript for our understanding of how Eric Blair became George Orwell. I argued that Eric's attempted assault on September 4, 1921—at Rickmansworth, in Hertfordshire, where the Blair and Buddicom

families were sharing a holiday home—caused him to abandon whatever hopes he had entertained of going to Oxford. It would probably be unfair to accuse Eric of an attempted rape. Consider the circumstances: they were alone in the countryside; Eric was well over six feet tall, Jacintha barely five. A determined assault would have succeeded. But, as Jacintha testified to June Finlay, it “ruined” their “close and fulfilling relationship”, and thus destroyed Eric’s strongest motive for wishing to remain in England. He resigned himself to the prospect of spending at least the minimum three year tour of duty in Burma, although he asked Jacintha to marry him on his return. The June Finlay letter strengthens my case; I invite readers to revisit my essay with the new evidence in mind.

We cannot know for certain when Eric made his final proposal, but the June Finlay letter implies that this occurred *after* the assault at Rickmansworth. (Jacintha declares that she refused him because that “he *had* [i.e., already] ruined” their relationship.) Placing the final proposal after September 4, 1921, enables us to decode a cryptic reference in *Eric & Us*. In December, the Buddicom family had rented a house called Oldfields in the town of Harrow. “Looking back,” Jacintha wrote, “I think Eric must have come to stay at least twice on short visits to Oldfield House.” During one of those visits there occurred the only private encounter that Jacintha describes after the Rickmansworth disaster. From internal evidence this can be dated between mid-May and the end of June 1922. She remembered walking with Eric past a particularly attractive house called The Orchard. It was a long walk, and we had a long conversation through the walking. A long walk was about the only way you could have any sort of private conversation at Oldfield House, which was always full of people.³

She gives no inkling of the subject of this long, private conversation, but it is not hard to guess. Shortly thereafter, probably in early July, the Buddicom family retired to Ticklerton for seven weeks, taking with them “a rather nice French boy named André” who was staying with them to learn English. Eric was not invited to accompany them, as he had so often done in the past.⁴

Eric gradually fades from Jacintha’s narrative after the summer of 1921; her recollections of him become hazy and insignificant. In 1971 Jacintha told her local newspaper that Eric “spent his last Christmas with our family in 1921, before he went, very reluctantly, to Burma.” This was an interesting lapse of memory. Eric did not spend Christmas with the Buddicom family in 1921.

The only time he did so was in 1918, when he wrote a love poem to her entitled “Our Minds Are Married”, envisioning a serenely conjugal old age.⁵ Jacintha seems to have subconsciously transposed her memory of Christmas 1918 to the end of their relationship, thereby eclipsing the episode at Rickmansworth. She corrected the mistake in *Eric & Us*. She now claimed to have forgotten the occasion when she saw him last, though she vividly remembered their first encounter in early September, 1914.⁶

We can sketch the following tentative scenario. Sometime in the late spring or early summer of 1922, probably at Oldfield House in Harrow, Eric formally asked Jacintha to marry him when he came back from Burma. Eric presumably intended to return as soon as legally feasible: he could not have expected Jacintha to wait for him into middle age. He cannot, therefore, have been intending to make a career in the Burma Police. She turned him down, however, and she had hammered home the rejection by excluding him from their forthcoming stay at Ticklerton, supplanting him—or so it must have seemed—with a “rather nice French boy.” This cascade of humiliations may explain why Eric, at precisely this moment, sent a dead rat to a local official who had annoyed him.

The story came to light in 1972, in a letter written by one R. G. Sharp to Orwell’s biographer, Bernard Crick. Sharp had been a fellow student at Craighurst, the coaching school or “crammers” in Southwold that Eric Blair attended in the first half of 1922 to prepare for the

Indian Office examinations. Sharp wrote that “Towards the end of summer term of 1922,” [i.e. just as the Buddicombs were packing to go to Ticklerton without him],

Blair and a rather wild young man who had, I think, been expelled from Malvern, somehow fell foul of the Borough Surveyor, Mr. Hurst by name, and, I don't know how, found out the date of his birthday. By way of a present they sent him a dead rat with birthday greetings and signing their names.

In consequence, both Eric and the “wild young man” were expelled from Craighurst. But according to Sharp “this didn't worry Blair at all: he was living at home, had passed his exam, and was just ‘ticking over; till term ended.’”⁷ It was strange behavior for a young man about to join the Imperial Police, and surely indicates something about Eric's state of mind in the summer of 1922. One wonders how much of the malice directed toward Mr. Hurst had been displaced from Jacintha. Eric's mode of vengeance is ominous. Many years later, at the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston's horror of rats would drive him to betray his lover—and that episode, as we shall see, would distress Jacintha severely.

Orwell began the autobiographical section of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, by observing that “The road from Mandalay to Wigan is long one, and the reasons for taking it are not immediately clear.”⁸ The same might be said of the road from Lower Shiplake, Eric's boyhood home, to Mandalay. Eric Blair sailed for Burma in October 1922, probably still hoping that after a few years in exile Jacintha might take him back. He became yet another young gentlemen seeking to expiate his disgrace through service in the colonies: it was a long tradition.

In 1936, reviewing a reprint of E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*, Orwell wrote, “It is only by some improbable accident that anyone capable of writing a decent novel can be got to stay in India long enough to absorb the atmosphere.”⁹ He gave no clue as to what “improbable accident” had empowered Orwell himself to write *Burmese Days*. In later years, Orwell's friends often asked him why he had gone East rather than to university. He gave various answers, none of them persuasive. He once told Tosco Fyvel, one of his closest friends during the 1940s, that it was because he had not wanted to be “among people richer than himself.” But Fyvel thought “this sounded not very convincing.”¹⁰ Eric would have known that there were many scholarship students at Oxbridge poorer than himself.

Orwell gave a more credible, if inconclusive response to Sonia, his beautiful and much younger second wife. Shortly before his death she asked him, “George, why not Oxbridge? Why the Burma Police?” Orwell answered that it was “a long and complicated story and he would tell her some time. But he never got around to it.”¹¹ One can guess why Eric wrote Jacintha from Burma complaining that he hated the place. She answered the first of his letters, but then broke off the correspondence, which may explain why Eric remained in Burma for five years, two years longer than he had probably intended. Eric must have concluded from her silence that Jacintha had drifted up and away from him socially, into the orbit of her brother's friends at Oxford—as in fact she had. One of Prosper's college friends deflowered and impregnated her, and when her condition became evident, fled abroad with a homosexual lover.

Eric had not, however, given up on Jacintha. On his return from Burma, he went immediately to the Buddicom estate at Ticklerton in Shropshire in hopes of seeing her. There he found Prosper and Guinever, along with their Aunt Lillian, but no Jacintha, and no excuse for her absence. When it became evident that she would not appear, Eric became sullen and withdrawn. Aunt Lillian told her that Eric was “not at all what he used to be, and I don't think you'd like him much now.”¹²

It was not lingering anger that kept Jacintha from meeting Eric, however. Two months earlier, she had given birth to an illegitimate daughter. She was giving the infant up for adoption, in an agony of guilt, to her aunt and uncle, who would pose to the child as her biological parents. She had no strength for more turmoil.¹³ Eric never learned the truth. He wrote Jacintha a bitter and melodramatic letter, in care of Prosper, complaining that he “couldn’t get her out of his system.” Apparently, he made some histrionic declarations, which distressed her. Aunt Lillian’s diary mentions her own dismay at this “terrible situation.” When Jacintha did not reply, Eric went off to Cornwall on holiday with his family, telling them that he never wanted to hear the name Buddicom again, a request that his family honored.¹⁴

There is a further bit of evidence—inconclusive but tantalizing—relating to Eric’s visit to Ticklerton. Among Orwell’s books at UCL is a volume of Charles Dickens’s *Christmas Stories*, published in 1927. This was a collection of lesser-known works, excluding classics like *A Christmas Carol* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*, which Eric and Jacintha had read together as children. Since this edition was new and the stories relatively unfamiliar, it was the kind of book Eric Blair might have bought on his return to London, to present to Jacintha at Ticklerton. The upper right corner of the first page has been diagonally scissored off, as if a dedication had been sliced away.

There is plenty of evidence in Orwell’s fiction, however, that he never succeeded in getting Jacintha “out of his system.” The novels are littered with encrypted allusions to their relationship which only she could have grasped. I shall confine myself here to those allusions Orwell acknowledged and Jacintha herself perceived. In 1949, when Jacintha briefly re-established contact with him in the Cranham Sanitorium, Orwell admitted to Jacintha that he had used “different aspects of how he remembered her” in his novels.¹⁵ “Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is clearly Jacintha, of that I feel certain,” she wrote June Finlay. It was an over-simplification, but it was not unfounded. With needless and irrelevant precision, Orwell specifies that Winston’s first tryst with Julia takes place on the second of May. Orwell told Jacintha that he had chosen this date because he thought it was her birthday, and was “quite put out” to learn that her birthday was actually May tenth.¹⁶

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (though not in 1984) May second falls on a Sunday, and in England the first Sunday in May is known as Bluebell Sunday. The bluebell was Jacintha’s favorite flower, and since “Jacintha” derives from “hyacinth”, the species to which bluebells belong, it was her name flower as well. While waiting for Julia, Winston gathers a bouquet of bluebells for her, which they later crush beneath them while making love. Jacintha, as she explained to June Finlay, recognized the setting:

We always wandered off to our special place when we were at Ticklerton which was full of bluebells. They die so quickly if you pick them so we never did but lay amongst them and adored their heavy pungent scent. That very bluebell dell is described in his book.

Orwell, as she must have realized, was consummating their affair in fantasy. At Tickleton, however, Eric and Jacintha had refrained from picking the bluebells because “they die so quickly.” Winston’s violation of this taboo, and his intercourse with Julia “among the fallen bluebells” are portents of doom, although only Jacintha would have recognized them as such.¹⁷ Whereas Eric and Jacintha had adored the “heavy pungent scent” of the bluebells, Winston, awaiting Julia, in contrast, finds them “faint and sickly.”¹⁸ Again, no-one but Eric and Jacintha would grasp the ominous implications of these details Jacintha was horrified by the denouement of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. She interpreted Julia’s fate as an act of vengeance directed at herself. “In the end,” she complained to June Finlay, he absolutely destroys me, like a man in hobnailed boots stamping on a spider. It hurt my mother so much when she read that book that we always

thought it brought on her final heart attack a few days later. Be glad that you have not been torn limb from limb in public.¹⁹

One wonders what cold comfort this thought afforded the distraught June Finlay. Jacintha seems here to suffer from what psychiatrists call a delusion of reference. No one except her closest relatives could have connected her with Julia at all. Nor is it clear why she felt so wounded. Most women, one assumes, would be flattered to recognize themselves in the heroine of a famous novel, even one as insipid as Julia. (Julia, to be sure, is fervidly promiscuous before meeting Winston, but thereafter becomes implausibly monogamous.) In any case, Julia is not “torn limb from limb.” Nor is she fed to the rats, despite Winston's pleas for O'Brien to “do it to Julia!” The only purpose of the final torture scene is the moral annihilation of Winston himself.

The clue to Jacintha's grievance may lie in her reference to “a lifetime of ghosts and regret at turning away the only man who ever really appealed on all levels.” Her claim that Orwell had destroyed her “in the end” suggests that what bothered her most was Winston's ultimate betrayal of Julia. Winston, of course, is insane with terror when he screams for O'Brien to “Do it to Julia...Tear her face off, strip her to the bones!”²⁰ But Orwell was not, presumably, insane with terror when he imagined this scene.

Jacintha knew all about Eric's obsession with rats. She knew that he loathed and feared them as a child, and that in adolescence he found them morbidly fascinating. She was appalled by the sadistic delight he took in killing them.²¹ When she scolded Eric for the relish with which he and Prosper slaughtered rats, he reportedly replied, “It's either them or me.” He told her how as a baby in India, according to his mother, he had been menaced by rats in his cradle.²² Jacintha presumably never learned of the dead rat sent to the Borough Surveyor of Southwold-- but knowing Eric's dark side as she did, she might not have been surprised.

In Winston's betrayal of Julia, Jacintha may have suspected a subliminal fantasy of revenge against herself. She may have wondered whether Winston's nightmare, like his earlier “beautiful vivid hallucination” of slitting Julia's throat “at the moment of climax,” was inspired by Eric's sadistic dreams.²³ Had she really wounded him that deeply?

Probably not. Nothing in Orwell's letters or phone calls to Jacintha in 1949 suggests resentment, let alone rage. Winston's misery is caused by guilt, rather than grievance, and Orwell no doubt felt guiltier toward his dead wife than towards Jacintha. But Jacintha may have grasped something that most readers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seem to have missed: there is far more anguish in Winston's world than can fairly be blamed on Big Brother.

EPILOGUE:

Since the publication of *Orwell: A Life in Letters*, another letter from Jacintha Buddicom has come to light in which she reminisces—albeit obliquely—about Eric Blair. In a letter written in 1970 to her cousin, she wrote, without revealing his identity, of “someone I knew a long time ago” who delivered casual quips with a “serious innocent face” while his eyes were “dancing with suppressed humor.” Those “long ago dancing blue eyes,” she admitted, “would make me catch my breath.”

D. J. Taylor reviewing *Orwell: A Life in Letters* for the *Saturday Times* (17 April 2010), acknowledged that the newly discovered letter to June Finlay “redefines his relationship with his adolescent sweetheart, Jacintha Buddicom, now revealed as a very serious business indeed.” Taylor provides the “essentially tragic” explanation of Jacintha's refusal to see Eric on his return

from Burma (she had just given birth out of wedlock), but unfortunately fails to credit his source—Dione Venables's Postscript to the second edition of *Eric & Us*, published in 2006.

The question is not whether Julia "is" Jacintha. Characters on the page never "are" flesh and blood people, not even in non-fiction. At issue is whether Orwell was thinking about Jacintha when writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And the answer looks obvious. Orwell surely had her in mind when imagining Winston and Julia among the bluebells.

Footnotes

1. Peter Davison, *Orwell: A Life in Letters* (London: Harvill Secker, 2010).
2. Jacintha Buddicom, *Eric & Us: Postscript Edition* (Chichester, England: Finlay Publisher, 2006), 130; Stephen Wadhams, ed. *Remembering Orwell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 15.
3. Buddicom, 144.
4. Buddicom, 145.
5. *Eric & Us* makes this clear: the Buddicom family were not together at Christmas in 1919 or 1921, and that Eric was not with them in 1920. See Buddicom, 97, 110, 141-2.
6. Buddicom, 11. Jacintha and her siblings saw Eric doing a headstand in the neighboring field. When asked why he was doing so, he replied "You are noticed more if you stand on your head than if you are right way up." It is one of the most charming anecdotes in *Eric & Us*, and she recalled it in minute detail.
7. Coppard and Crick, 61.
8. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1958), 121.
9. Orwell, *CW*, X, 499.
10. T.R. Fyvel, *George Orwell: A Personal Memoir* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 36.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Wadhams, 25.
13. Jacintha Buddicom, letter to June Finlay, 4 May 1972.
14. Personal communication from Dione Venables, diary of Lillian Buddicom in possession of Lady Jennifer Brown. I am grateful to Lady Brown for permission to examine it.
15. Personal communication from Dione Venables, based on her diary.
16. Dione Venables, unpublished diary entry, 22 May 1982. Orwell's remark no doubt strengthened Jacintha's implausibly egocentric belief she alone had been the model for Julia. See below.
17. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 125, 132.
18. *Ibid.*, 124.
19. Jacintha Buddicom, letter to June Finlay, 4 May 1972.
20. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 300.
21. Once again, I am grateful to Dione Venables for this information
22. Communication from Dione Venables, based on conversation with Jacintha Buddicom. It is a great pity this anecdote did not appear in *Eric & Us*.
23. *Ibid.*, 17. My thanks again to Dione Venables for some suggestions on this point, in an e-mail of 1 February, 2010.

To view more essays please visit us at www.finlay-publisher.com and **don't forget** to visit the forum to share your views on this and other articles!