



ORWELL AND SPORT

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'I had to be jolly quick to pick them up [shots at goal] and kick them, because most of the chaps [on] the other side were in aufel [sic] rats and they were runing [sic] at me like angry dogs'. So Eric Blair, aged eight, writing to his mother on 3 March 1912 (CW, X, 13-14). He had, he told her, lost his place in the six-a-side team to a much older boy but had played goal in 'ordinary football' his side winning 5-1. Orwell's excitement shines through but one could not gauge from this whether he would become internationally famous as a goalkeeper or a writer. Orwell's letters from St Cyprian's Preparatory School show how much he enjoyed football and cricket – and nature walks. Despite making no claim to sporting ability it is clear from his time at Eton that he was not without talent. Between September 1918 and December 1920 he played in the Wall Game on eighteen occasions, sixty times 'in the field', and in three unspecified games; he missed thirteen games. Goals are very rarely scored in the Wall Game but *The Annals of Lower College Foot-Ball*, vol. 13, 1916-1921, states that for the Wall Game on 6 October 1920 the 'feature of the first half was a superb goal neatly shot by Blair from the halfway line'. His prowess culminated in the St Andrew's Day game (the annual needle match between King's Scholars – of which Orwell was one – and fee-paying boys) on 4 December when the report states, 'Blair kept and kicked very competently under considerable difficulties' (see CW, X, p. 57). Orwell and Denys King-Farlow inherited the periodical *College Days* and are said to have made handsome profits from its sale (£86 in 1920 and £128 at Lord's in 1921). Contributions were unsigned but it is probable that among the contributions made by Orwell was a parody of Kipling's 'If' on the Wall Game, and two cricket items, a parody of Walt Whitman, 'The Wounded Cricketer', and quite a neat short story, 'The Cricket Enthusiast'. (See CW, X, 53-4 for



attributions, and 56 and 70-2 for these three items.) Of course, writing a *jeu d'esprit* does not entail participation in its subject.

Orwell's sporting recreations were not limited to football and cricket though some today might not regard his skill at shooting and in firing a catapult as 'sport'. However, despite his frequent protestations that he was not a good shot, he certainly seems to have had a good eye and a steady aim. In his letters to Prosper Buddicom in 1921 he describes catching a rat, putting it into 'one of those big cage-rat traps' (a foreshadowing of *Nineteen Eighty-Four?*), letting it out and trying to 'shoot at it as it runs'. Then a sign of his sense of fair play: 'If it gets away I think one ought to let it go & not chase it' (X, p. 78). Orwell's friend, Roger Mynors (later Sir Roger and Professor of Latin at, successively, Cambridge and Oxford Universities), who shared a great passion for biology with him, described Orwell's prowess with a catapult when they were at Eton. 'One day Eric Blair killed a jackdaw with a catapult on the roof of the college chapel, which was entirely illegal, and we took it round to the biology lab and dissected it. . . . the bird met a messy and rather smelly end because we did it all wrong. We made the great mistake of slitting the gall bladder and therefore flooding the place with, er . . . Well, it was an awful mess' (Stephen Wadhams, *Remembering Orwell*, pp. 18-19). His fascination with catapults continued when he was in Morocco. He records in his diary on 2nd December 1938: 'Find that the weaker of the two catapults will throw a stone (less satisfactory than buckshot) 90 yards at most. So a powerful catapult ought to throw a buckshot about 150 yards'. In *The Lost Orwell* there is an illustration of Orwell aiming a catapult when at Marrakech (plate 10). We can also gather from a later diary entry (11 January 1940) that he evidently enjoyed ice skating. The church pond at Wallington had frozen sufficiently to bear skaters but, alas, he had no skates with him.

Undoubtedly one of the best-known incidents in Orwell's life is his shooting of an elephant in Burma, described in an important essay (often said to foreshadow the fall of the Raj) published in 1936 (X, 501-6). It is worth repeating the start of this essay: in Moulmein he 'was hated by a large number of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me'. He goes on to describe how, as a police officer, he was an obvious target on the football field – so football still played a part of his life – and 'When some nimble Burman tripped me up . . . the referee (another Burman) looked the other way [and] the crowd yelled with hideous laughter'. Although shooting tigers and elephants could then be regarded as sport, Orwell's shooting an elephant was not sport. It is unnecessary to repeat the account given by his colleague, George Stuart, of how Orwell came to be called upon to deal with a rampaging elephant which had killed a man. However, it might be worth contrasting what happened to Orwell and the much less well-known account of the treatment of a fellow officer who had shot

an elephant a few months earlier. Orwell's superior, Colonel Welbourne was furious with Orwell and he was despatched on 23 December 1926 to Katha (the Kyauktada of *Burmese Days*; see X, 506, n. 2). Major E. C. Kenny, the subdivisional officer of Yamethin was treated very differently. According to the *Rangoon Gazette* for 22 March 1926 Kenny was on tour in the Takton township and came across an elephant that had killed a villager and caused great havoc to the plantations. He 'brought it down to the delight of the villagers' (contrast Orwell's 'I heard the devilish glee that went up from the crowd', X, p. 505). Unlike Orwell, Kenny was not punished but on 13 December 1926 promoted to Deputy Commissioner (see *The Lost Orwell*, p. 166). Had this news item in the *Rangoon Gazette* been known much earlier it is interesting to ponder how 'Shooting an Elephant' might have been interpreted. One line in the essay that needs to be taken with a pinch of salt is Orwell's statement, 'I was a poor shot with a rifle'. He may have mistaken the elephant's most vulnerable point, but he was not a poor shot: this is an example of Orwell's creativity and self-deprecation.

Orwell never lost his interest in rifles. In *Homage to Catalonia* he offers a mini-disquisition on the variety of rifles used on the front line in his section of Spain (VI, pp. 33-4). In 'As I Please', 7, he discusses the formation of volunteer rifle clubs in the 1860s to face French armies if they invaded, so that 'peaceful citizens cowered in ditches while bullets of the Rifle Clubs (the then equivalent of the Home Guard) ricocheted in all directions' (XVI, p. 60). In 'Bare Christmas for the Children', 1 December 1945, he talks of 'One of the advantages of being a child 30 years ago was the lighter-hearted attitude that then prevailed towards firearms' and he describes his purchase for 7s 6d (37½d in today's currency, the equivalent of about £12) of 'a fairly lethal weapon known as a Saloon Rifle. I bought my first Saloon Rifle at the age of 10, with no questions asked' (XVII, p. 411). Given the damage he could wreak on his comrades in the Home Guard with a Spigot Mortar (see XII, p. 328), one hopes he was safer with a rifle.

The use of a rifle to shoot an elephant and as a weapon of war is anything but sport but Orwell's *not* pulling the trigger to shoot a man when in the front line in Catalonia says much about Orwell and is perhaps worth quoting in full even in the context of Orwell and sport:

Early one morning another man and I had gone out to snipe at the Fascists in the trenches outside Huesca. . . . Some of our aeroplanes were coming over. At this moment a man, presumably carrying a message to an officer, jumped out of the trench and ran along the top of the parapet in full view. He was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran. I refrained from shooting at him. It is true that I am a poor shot [again!] and unlikely to hit a running man at a hundred yards, and also that I was thinking chiefly about getting back to

our trench while the Fascists had their attention fixed on the aeroplanes. Still, I did not shoot partly because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at “Fascists”; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn’t a “Fascist”, he is visibly a fellow creature, similar to yourself, and you don’t feel like shooting at him. [‘Looking Back on the Spanish War’, 1942?, XIII, p. 501]

Water had two attractions for Orwell: pre-eminently fishing but also, at least at school, swimming. There are two well-known pictures showing Orwell at Eton, one in swimming trunks with four friends (one of whom is Steven Runciman) posing in pre-Goodies’ silly postures and another showing Orwell, cigarette in mouth, wearing a floppy white hat and carrying under one arm a rolled-up towel with, perhaps inside it, swimming trunks (see Sir Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, plates 7 and 8). Sir Bernard correctly identifies the first of these illustrations as taking place at a favourite Eton swimming hole on the Thames half a mile up-stream from Windsor called ‘Athens’. The second he descriptively captions, ‘Asking for trouble’. This second picture is reproduced in Simon Schama’s *A History of Britain*, vol. 3 (BBC, 2002) on p. 458. Here the caption – not written by Simon Schama – states ‘Eric Blair on vacation in Athens, 1919’. Orwell, of course, never got to Greece.

Though a novel, *Coming Up for Air* clearly demonstrates Orwell’s passion for fishing. It is not only George Bowling who is confessing to ‘that peculiar feeling for fishing’ and who so delights in the pool at Binfield House, ‘swarming with bream’ and with an enormous fish – ‘the biggest fish I’d ever seen, dead or alive’. As both Georges put it so evocatively, ‘There’s a kind of peacefulness even in the names of English coarse fish. Roach, rudd, dace, bleak, barbel, bream, gudgeon, pike, chub, carp, tench. They’re solid kind of names. The people who made them up hadn’t heard of machine guns . . .’ (VII, pp. 76-81). Orwell had very little time away from the BBC when working for its Eastern Service, but he was able to spend a few days fishing at Callow End, Worcestershire, at the beginning of July, 1942. The local pubs, the Blue Bell and the Red Lion, either ran out of beer or kept it back for locals, and the fishing was hardly exciting. Orwell recorded his catch for his 14 days at the farm: 18 dace (though one might have been a roach), 1 perch and 2 eels. On five days he caught nothing (XIII, 384-5). When he died, his fishing rods stood in the corner of his room at University College Hospital in the hope that, if he recovered, he might be able to take them with him to Switzerland where it was hoped he could recuperate.

It might be useful to interject here something about the way sport and attitudes to sport have changed over the past hundred-plus years. Recently the President of Fifa, Herr Sepp Blatter,

referring to Cristiano Ronaldo's wish to break his freely-entered-into contract and move to Real Madrid from Manchester United, said that there was 'too much modern slavery in transferring players'. It was quickly pointed out that Herr Blatter, though a lawyer, seemed to have a tenuous grasp of the terrible things inherent in 'slavery' and Ronaldo was damned in language I shall not repeat here for agreeing with Herr Blatter about his 'slavery' (Brian Moore, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 July 2008).

I do not have space, nor competence, to outline the history of sport since say, the Powderhall New Year Sprint Handicap at Jedbergh in 1870 which offered monetary prizes (won by D. Wright in that year with a 12-yard handicap over 160 yards). Two fine recent books sketch changes between then and contemporary 'football slavery'. The professional foul is now *de rigeur* (so much so that it became the title of Tom Stoppard's TV play of 1977 which brilliantly simultaneously dramatises the worlds of politics and soccer). Orwell's biographer, D.J. Taylor, gives an excellent account of how this has come about in *On the Corinthian Spirit: The Decline of Amateurism in Sport* (2006). It is refreshing to read how the Corinthian's goalkeeper would vacate the space between the goalposts rather than attempt to save a penalty on the assumption that his team was at fault and should not benefit therefrom. In 1901 footballers' pay was limited to £4 a week; two years after Orwell wrote 'The Sporting Spirit' (14 December 1945, XVII, pp. 440-3 with follow-up letters, pp. 443-6, one of which based its argument by claiming that 'It is obvious . . . George has never played football for the love of it'), the maximum was raised to £12 and later to £20; a maximum was abolished in 1961. Now the average wage of a Premier League footballer is £1,100,000 *per week* (*Daily Telegraph*, 12 July, 2008). The ratio between what a footballer and the average spectator earned in 1901 was about double; it is now roughly 2,800 times. Who is the slave, one might ask?

The second book is a stunning account of a stunning occasion: Janie Hampton's *The Austerity Olympics: When the Games came to London in 1948* (2008), an Olympics totally different in spirit despite (because of?) austere times from the Nazi-inspired Games of 1936. As Laura Thompson in her review in the *Telegraph* wrote, 'It is hard not to feel that there is a vast gulf between 2012 and 1948 . . . This book made me envy anyone who attended them' in 1948. My wife and I, who visited Wembley and saw Fanny Blankers-Koen, Emil Zátopek, and the hockey (in which Great Britain took the silver medal – games we both played) would heartily concur. In 1948 there seem to have been no drugs – though one could chew Horlicks tablets, which were not rationed. Three extracts will succinctly sum up the difference between the time when Orwell wrote about sport and today. Dennis Watts, the AAA champion in long jump and hop-step-and-jump was selected for the British team – until it was discovered he had *applied* for a job as a

sports teacher: he had yet to be interviewed. He was immediately dropped because he was considered to be a professional (p. 43). The New Zealand wrestling champion, Charlie 'Croga' Adams, was caught cycling on a public footpath and fined five shillings (25p). The NZ Olympic Committee decided that made him a convicted criminal and he was dropped (p. 213). My favourite example relates to the Olympic Bond signed by the seven members of the New Zealand team in which they agreed to 'win without swank and lose without grousing' (pp. 46-7). The cost in 1948 for the whole Games was £732,268 (equivalent to about £20,000,000 today). There was a profit of £29,420 (having deducted the Argentine cheque for £280 which bounced, p. 7), and the Labour Government, which had played no part in organising the Games (doubtless ensuring their success), took a tax cut of £9,000 from that profit (p. 322).

Orwell was prompted to write 'The Sporting Spirit' following the ill-starred visit of Moscow Dynamos in late 1945. As he makes plain, he didn't see any of the games and I am not sure that I would agree with whoever informed him that the match between the Russians and Glasgow Rangers 'was simply a free-for-all from the start'. By a lucky chance a friend of mine and I managed to obtain tickets (costing 1s 9d, about 9p) by looking like real sailors just ashore. That is not how we recall the game nor do the two minutes of extracts from the Pathé newsreel which can be seen on the web (go to 'Glasgow Rangers v. Moscow Dynamos, 3 December 1945'), but that is hardly the point. Where Orwell's analysis is correct is that as international sport has developed, 'the most savage combative instincts are aroused . . . At the international level sport is frankly mimic warfare' (p. 441). The 1948 Games showed the better, more Corinthian, style of sport for its own sake, but, in general, Orwell correctly divined the future. The very idea of 'play' in 'The Great Game' was past. I am inclined to think that booting a football to initiate 'The Great European Cup Final' at the Battle of the Somme saw more than a tragic loss of life: it marked, bloodily and finally, the end of innocence, of sport for fun by 'muddied oafs', amateur or professional.¹

What of Orwell and cricket? Orwell played cricket at St Cyprian's and seems to have had an abiding affection for the Eton v Harrow annual fixtures at Lord's (see X, pp. 53; XI, 175-6, 372-3; XII, 183, 379; XIII, 154). If one was slightly cynical one might suggest that was because they reminded him of the killing he and Denys King-Farlow made selling *College Days* but cricket went deeper. His review of Edmund Blunden's *Cricket Country* (XVI, 161-3) shows a real affection for the game and he is able to correct and amplify Blunden's 'team' of poets and writers (headed by Byron, who played for Harrow). He quotes his line, 'And I have seen the righteous man forsaken' from 'Report on Experience', which refers to the 1914-18 War, since, 'as he sadly perceives, cricket has never been quite the same since' (XVI, p. 162). Orwell also

refers to Sir Henry Newbolt's 'Vitaī Lampada' (as relay runners passing on 'the torch of life' – Lucretius) with its evocative lines, 'There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night - / Ten to make and the match to win', and especially its 'Play up! play up! And play the game!'. Despite being cut in stone by Gilbert Bayes on the wall of Lord's facing Wellington Road in 1934, these lines are today easily mocked. Orwell seems to do that for Newbolt when he has a fellow Old Cliftonian taking inspiration from such a game to the North-West Frontier (XIX, p. 69). Nevertheless, he tellingly suggests that the sentiment be compared with 'Full Moon at Tierz: Before the Storming of Huesca' by the Communist poet, John Cornford: the 'emotional content of the two poems is almost exactly the same'. He concludes this essay ('My Country Right or Left', Autumn 1940) by pointing to 'the spiritual need for patriotism and the military virtue, for which, however little the boiled rabbits of the Left may like them, no substitute has yet been found' (XII, p. 272). Cornford was killed at Córdoba.

It is, however, a short reference to an incident at a village cricket match recalled in 'As I Please', 20 (14 April 1944), with which I should like to conclude because it links the sporting and the political to perfection. A batsman had been given out and as he walked back, the squire's face 'turned several shades redder'; furiously he shouted to the umpire, 'Hi, what did you give that man out for? He wasn't out at all!' The umpire dutifully recalled the batsman and the game continued. Orwell, only a boy at the time, says it struck him as 'about the most shocking thing I had even seen. Now, so much do we coarsen with the passage of time, my reaction would merely be to inquire whether the umpire was the squire's tenant as well'. But it is what reminded Orwell of this boyhood occasion that links old-fashioned sport, politics, and right behaviour for Orwell. He likens this incident to 'the goings-on in the House of Commons the week before last' (XVI, p. 152). And what were those? On 28 March 1944 MPs voted 117 to 116 against Government advice for equal pay for women teachers. The next day, Churchill furiously demanded a vote of confidence on his conduct of the war and that he won. That coincidentally had the effect of nullifying the vote for equal pay. Churchill explained, 'We had to show the government is in control. The German wireless was scoffing at us'. It would not be until 4 March 1955 that the Burnham Committee decided that equal pay for women teachers should be introduced – by stages. To Orwell, Churchill's action was as shocking as that squire's. Alas, I doubt if there is such a thing as a 'Corinthian Spirit' in any field of life nowadays, not sport and certainly not politics, so much have we coarsened with the passage of time.

1. Captain W.P. Nevill of the 8th Surreys bought four footballs, one for each of his platoons, to kick across No-Man's-Land on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916. One platoon painted on its ball: 'The Great European Cup / The Final / East Surreys v Bavarians / Kick Off at Zero'. They did valiantly kick off but were slaughtered. Two footballs survive (they are in Army museums) but Captain Nevill, who kicked off first,

did not. He is buried at Carnoy Cemetery (Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day of the Somme* (1971), pp. 87, 124, 254, 335, and 340).

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