



The Biographical Review Orwell Never Wrote

March – May 2010

Professor John Rodden

Gordon Bowker has speculated about "the biography that Orwell never wrote." A measure of Gordon's stimulating essay is that it provokes numerous conjectures on the part of the reader. I second Peter Davison's observation about Gordon's contribution: "What is more important than dreaming up what might have been is whether an essay prompts the reader to think and so leads him or her forward."



In that spirit, on finishing Gordon Bowker's essay, I immediately posed the following thought experiment: Let us assume that Orwell never would have written his autobiography. His onetime housekeeper Susan Watson claims that Orwell told her that only he could write his life story accurately — and that he would never do it. If we grant this proposition, then the related question — which places Orwell in his familiar position of book reviewer — might arise: What might Orwell have said about the lives of him written by his biographers?

Drawing on the valuable insights and choice Orwell quotations in Gordon Bowker's essay, let me in turn venture to speculate about "the biographical review Orwell never wrote."

First it must be acknowledged that Orwell had a low opinion of biography as a genre. Gordon believes that Orwell was "certainly not antagonistic to the genre, as some have suggested." Antagonistic? No. But he was quite wary about the potential abuse of the genre. As I have noted elsewhere, Richard Rees, who served as Orwell's literary executor along with Sonia Orwell, told biographer Peter Stansky that Orwell's request reflected a fear that he might be written up as "extravagantly or luridly." In part, Orwell was reacting against the rise of muckraking, tendentious "biografiction." Lytton Strachey's anti-heroic *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and the popularity of Freud among intellectuals had given rise in the 1920s and '30s to what Virginia Woolf initially heralded as "The New Biography" and what detractors soon termed "Stracheyism." Less gifted followers of Strachey soon gave biography a bad name among many serious writers.

Back to my thought experiment. As Bowker points out, Orwell once wrote that "the qualities needed for a biographer are piety and wit." Probably D.J. Taylor's *Orwell: The Life* (2003) is the wittiest. It is certainly the quirkiest and most amusing, with excurses devoted to idiosyncratic topics ranging from Orwell's distinctive facial and vocal features to his obsession with rats and alleged paranoia. Taylor's biography may be a bit short on piety, but it is so in all the ways that Orwell is likely to have approved. Orwell never advocated "piety" before the biographical subject. Rather, he insisted on respect for the biographer's craft, which demands that the writer maintain literary and intellectual integrity when narrating and evaluating a life. These tasks should be guided by the available historical evidence and imbued with a balance of the sympathetic and critical imaginations.

Above all, as Bowker notes, Orwell preferred "the analytical, interpretative method" of biography, which he praised in Lewis Mumford's *Herman Melville*, published in 1934. Orwell also valued what Bowker refers to as the "empirical method" yet did not "believe in all circumstances" that it "alone should be relied upon." Given these commitments, Orwell would have been gratified by the pioneering first complete biography of him written by Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (1980), which includes a lengthy introduction by Crick defending what Crick called his "biography of externality," a quasi-Brechtian approach governed by respect for the factual, the quotidian, the datum.

Yet I suspect that Orwell would have wished that Crick — a political scientist who has always sought to integrate social science, political philosophy, and cultural criticism — had written a biography that had risked more of the "analytical" and "interpretative." As Bowker notes, Orwell remarked about Leon Trotsky's biography of Stalin that some "inherently probable" historical claims (such as Trotsky's view that Stalin ordered the murder of Lenin) were permissible to advance even if near-impossible to prove conclusively. On that view, Orwell might have preferred that Crick had ventured a bit further beyond the available historical evidence and advanced some conclusions, however tentative, about Orwell's own personal history — even if Crick lacked sufficient evidence to prove them definitively (such as the long-standing scholarly ruminations about whether or not Orwell ever shot an elephant, attended a hanging, and so on).

By the same criteria, I believe, Orwell would have admired the work of Michael Shelden's *Orwell: The Authorized Biography* (1991) for its judicious exercise of sympathetic imagination combined with the "analytical, interpretative method." But here, I think, Orwell might have wished for a larger measure of factual detail, precisely the kind of empirical approach that Crick's biography outstandingly represents — and perhaps a bit less speculation without firmer evidence to support it.

What about the other Orwell biographies? Bowker goes on to observe that Orwell's view of biography was "refreshingly free of theoretical dogma," and Bowker notes that it is rather unlikely that Orwell would have had much patience with what might be termed "Marxist biography." Undoubtedly true. So it seems likely that he would have found the Marxist — some invidious critics have called it "neo-Stalinist" — biography

of him by Scott Lucas, *Orwell* (2003), objectionable (even apart from the fact that Lucas displays virtually unremitting hostility, bereft of any human sympathy, for his biographical subject).

Last but not least, Orwell would have probably disapproved of "psychobiography," as Bowker observes, whether approached via Freud, Jung, Adler, or any more contemporary school of psychotherapy. Would he have therefore harbored reservations about the otherwise excellent biography written by Bowker himself, *Inside George Orwell* (2003), which exhibits a sensitive balance between the "empirical method" and the "analytical, interpretative method"? Might he also have voiced similar concerns about Jeffrey Meyers' *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of His Generation* (2003), which relentlessly probes Orwell's psychology, drawing heavily on psychoanalytic concepts that undergird judgments about Orwell's "masochism" and "death wish"?

Such assessments — and such language — would have probably elicited a sharp (if defensive) response from Orwell. Or perhaps just his sardonic, deep-throated (tubercular?) laughter. Both responses are conceivable from him.

And yet: One pauses here, because it is also the case that Orwell was always very interested in the psychology of creativity and authorship. Furthermore, his first wife, Eileen Blair, studied Jungian psychology at London University and obtained a Master's degree in the field. Bowker and Meyers are not the kind of "biografiends" that Orwell castigated (the coinage owes to James Joyce) who engage in "psycho-autopsies."

So it's also possible that Orwell would have regarded the scholarly snooping into his private life by Bowker and Meyers, if at times excessive or too intrusive, nonetheless justified and illuminating in the main. If that is correct, then he might have wished that the two-volume biography by Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *The Unknown Orwell* (1972) and *Orwell: The Transformation* (1979), possessed a deeper psychological understanding of the development of Blair into Orwell. Both volumes of their biography skillfully integrate the empirical, analytical, and interpretative methods. But they lack much psychological depth. Of course, Stansky and Abrahams labored under two large difficulties. They were the first scholars to attempt a biography of Orwell. Moreover, they were hobbled by the decision of Orwell's widow, Sonia, to refuse all rights to quote from his published or unpublished work. His insistence on no biography in his will notwithstanding, Orwell himself might have granted them such permission. After all, his literary executor, Richard Rees, had suggested to young Peter Stansky that the Americans undertake the biography. Stansky and Abrahams had originally planned merely to write about the involvement of Orwell and other British writers in the Spanish Civil War. I have discussed the history of Orwell biography in my first book, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of "St. George" Orwell* (1989), which takes the story of his "afterlife" up until the close of the 1980s — that is, before the appearance of the biographies by Sheldon, Meyers, Bowker, D.J. Taylor, and Lucas (and before the second, revised 1992 edition of Bernard Crick's biography). Let me close by alluding to my 1989 study in response to Douglas Kerr's thoughtful reply to Bowker's essay. Kerr writes: "Gordon

Bowker's enjoyable essay reminds us of Orwell's request that his biography should not be written. Are such requests ever heeded, I wonder?"

In a word: No. My answer today is no different from my conclusion of two decades ago about the lessons of Orwell biography. Fame makes biographical treatment inevitable. The only question is when, not if.

The history of Orwell biography points to important issues beyond Orwell's own case, raising not only legal but also cultural, ethical, and professional questions about the writing of biography in the post-Stracheyan age. Probably the legal right to personal privacy (and personal property) should have prior claim when disputes between author/executor and scholar/biographer arise....The case of Orwell suggests why and how, when a figure achieves a certain stature, the writing of his or her biography can only be delayed by restrictive measures, not prevented. Biographical treatment reflects, not just builds, reputation; a "FAMOUS WRITER" will eventually receive either a good or poor biography, not avoid one.

*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!*