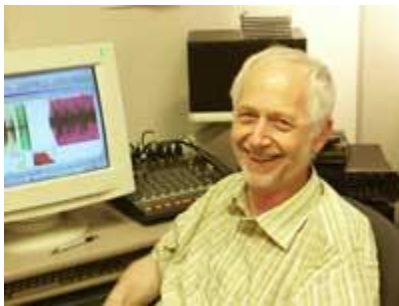


Orwell's Crystal Chandelier

May – July 2010

Steve Wadhams



I began the Preface to my book "Remembering Orwell" by noting "with some discomfort that I am an exact contemporary – thirty-nine years old in 1984 – of Winston Smith" and that "I am writing this book on April 4th, the very day on which Smith began his rebellion against Big Brother". Winston Smith's job at the Ministry of Truth was to rewrite history. "Remembering Orwell" was an attempt to preserve it, by presenting more or less verbatim the thoughts and memories of 80 people who knew either George Orwell or Eric Blair – conversations I recorded for my five hour radio documentary; "George Orwell: A radio biography", which aired across Canada and the USA, on January 1st 1984.

Well, twenty five years later I'm still alive and well and still a full time radio producer at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. However, most of the people who kindly agreed to be interviewed all those years ago have now passed on. But if I want to bring any one of them back to life and power and thought, restored to their 1983 selves all I have to do is pull out the box that's been sitting under my desk all this time, pick any one of the 60 or so cassette tapes which hold the original unedited conversations, put it into the machine and press 'play'.

Of course I don't have a recording of Orwell himself because there aren't any, but I see his face every day. The poster which publicised the radio series, a photo collage with Orwell's face front and centre, is on the wall, just above the computer I use to edit my radio documentaries. Orwell stares down, a welcome but tough taskmaster, encouraging me, no, commanding me, to think and write and edit with as much clarity and integrity as I can muster.

Recording those interviews in the summer of 1983 was a whirlwind of work, eight weeks of criss-crossing England plus side trips to Scotland and Spain. I see in my diary that my first appointment was for 2.30 p.m. on June 9th with Susan Watson at her London flat. Susan was happy to talk about being Orwell's housekeeper, but not about any deeper feelings she may have had for him. Did I press her on this? Alas,

no. The last interview was on August 6th, with the expatriate Canadian poet, Paul Potts who had been extremely hard to track down. Finally I found him, dishevelled and down at heel in his stuffy and frankly rather squalid London bedsit, claiming to be “happier now than I’ve ever been”. Afterwards we went to a nearby pub. I bought him a pint and took a photo of him, glass in hand. Looking at it now, I see a large weather beaten but almost noble face. It’s possible Paul Potts was the last person to see Orwell alive and I find his account as poignant now as I did at the time. He described going to visit Orwell at University College Hospital only to find him asleep. So he didn’t wake him and left his gift, a packet of tea, at the door. “He died soon after that, and I often wonder who got the tea”.

Paul Potts and Susan Watson had their stories about Orwell ready for me; stories they’d probably told many times – but neither was willing to leave the safe and well beaten path. And really I have to admit it was much the same with almost all the others. Partly it was sheer logistics. My schedule was two interviews a day and there was a lot of driving in between. Also most of the people I met were well into their seventies or eighties. An hour or so of intense talk was usually as much as I could ask of them. “Job number one” was to settle them in and get them to say what I knew from my research they had already said to others, and to say it in the clearest and most visual way possible. Radio after all is all about pictures. If there was time and energy or if I felt the chemistry of the moment was promising, I would try to coax them off the beaten track. But most people need much more than an hour before they’ll reveal to a stranger their more private, perhaps even painful memories and the more personal moments they hold in their memory banks, especially if the stranger is holding a microphone.

That English summer of 1983 stands out for me not just because of those two fast and furious months on the Orwell hunt. It was more than that. I’d left England and my job as a BBC producer about ten years earlier for a new life in Canada. Driving though the English back roads, towns and villages, and staying in the modest, comfy two star hotels that seemed to be on every high street, at times I actually felt euphoric, consciously in love for the first time with the country where I was born and raised. Maybe it was the bright sunny summer weather which made the fields look so green, the brick houses so warm and the sky so blue. Maybe it was all that conversation about Orwell’s deep love of England and the English countryside. Maybe it was something that came out of a bottle at the end of a hard day! I really don’t know, but it was a powerful and enjoyable feeling and it caught me by surprise.

Another of the early interviews was with the very ‘English’ and very gracious Sir John Grotrian. He’d been at St. Cyprian’s with the young Eric Blair who he found “deadly dull”. Sir John told me he’d never read a word Orwell wrote, which made his comments especially interesting because his memories of St. Cyprian’s were his own and not influenced by Orwell’s. As we said our goodbyes I was stunned when Sir John gave me his green, hard covered, ink stained and signed St. Cyprian’s year book for 1916. Actually it’s more a prospectus, a collection of photos, with titles like “shooting at the rifle range”, “a classroom”, “a dormitory”, and of course “the swimming bath” where the boys had to take their early morning cold water plunge. It looks tiny, more like a splash pool, nowhere near big enough for swimming. When I wrote to Sir

John for permission to include our interview in “Remembering Orwell” I was sad to hear that not long after we met, he had died.

Then there was Jack Denny, the Southwold tailor, another old style Englishman. Jack Denny kitted out Eric Blair to go to Burma. “He was a thirty seven chest man and thirty four inside leg”. When Mr. Denny told me with a wink, “most people unburden themselves while fitting” I thought I’d stuck gold! Now surely he would go on to unburden himself by revealing long held secrets about the young Eric Blair, maybe something about his love life, or his fears and hopes as he set out to be a colonial policeman. But no, all Mr. Denny offered after that was that Eric was keen on fishing, occasionally hung out like a wallflower at the local dances and wasn’t much of a drinker! Jack Denny may have been close to the Blairs in his fitting room, but on Sundays, walking along Southwold’s promenade, if they encountered each other, Eric’s father, the old colonial civil servant, would walk straight past the tradesman with not a gesture of recognition.

Back from Burma, and having quit his job, Eric Blair obviously didn’t fit in at Southwold. In their “strawberries and cream” accents Joan Mullock and Nancy Fox were delightfully candid; they liked Avril and the ice cream she served at the Copper Kettle tearooms, but Eric? “He was rather difficult Eric, wasn’t he? Well he had socialist ideas, I suppose, hadn’t he”.

Eric Blair’s best friend in Southwold was Dennis Collings who told me he would often get letters from Eric when he was out tramping. Collings didn’t take his friend’s search for poverty very seriously, “it could only have been self punishment” he said, “probably because of the guilt he felt when he came back from Burma”.

At another seaside resort, Bognor, I met a lovely lady called Jacintha Buddicom. She had been a childhood friend of Eric Blair, lost touch with him when he went to Burma and then rediscovered him much later as George Orwell, the “Famous Writer” he always told her he wanted to be. When I asked her why she hadn’t gone to see Orwell when he was dying of TB, I’m afraid I made her cry; “I never did seem to treat Eric as perhaps as I might have.” I didn’t know then what was later revealed in the revised version of her book “Eric and Us”.

At Ruislip station I met Stafford Cottman, who was in Spain with Orwell, and who escaped with him on the morning of June 23rd. 1937 on a train out of Barcelona.

In Bromley Kay Ekevall received me with some suspicion but warmed up as the interview went along. Orwell met Kay at Booklovers’ Corner in Hampstead where they disagreed over almost every author.

Jon Kimche also met Orwell in that bookshop. He worked mornings, and Orwell worked afternoons. Kimche remembers Orwell “standing there, slightly forbidding, probably resenting having to sell anything”.

There was Julian Symons who told hilarious stories about the inedible food he, Orwell and Anthony Powell suffered in wartime London restaurants; “revolting stuff which George would eat with great relish”. Anthony Powell was the only person on my list who refused to be interviewed. I’m not sure if he refused as such, but when I phoned him one day between my morning and my afternoon appointments I got a frosty reception, something along the lines of “how dare you call me at lunchtime”! I phoned again later but got no reply and then got fed up trying.

Seventeen of the eighty interviews were done on what I called my first ‘southern swing’ – people who lived in or within striking distance of London. Seventeen done, sixty-three to go!

After the first southern swing came Scotland. I left London around 8 a.m. on June 22nd and hurtled up the motorway for a lunch appointment near the Scottish border with Sir Steven Runciman who had been a close friend of Eric Blair at Eton. “No, I don’t think he was this embittered boy at school, I knew him as a sardonically cheerful sort of boy.” When we’d finished recording, Sir John took me on a tour of his old fortified Scottish border house which had a tower, a belfry and, he assured me, a resident ghost! After the tour he sat me down for a gourmet lunch he’d cooked himself especially for my visit.

On Jura, I was taken under the very welcoming wing of Margaret Nelson who put me up for the night. She had done the same for Orwell when he showed up “looking very thin and gaunt and worn” in May 1946. The next day, as with Orwell, she drove me in her Landrover up the bumpy seven mile track to Barnhill. We lurched over the potholes and I tried to imagine what Orwell must have been thinking. Jura was his dream island, the place of peace and beauty he yearned for, but his mission was to write one of the most pessimistic books in the English language. It was easier to imagine what Orwell’s many visitors must have thought as they walked the same track carrying a suitcase or two. I didn’t see any of the stags which scared the daylights out of poor David Holbrooke who came to visit Susan Watson and to talk politics with his hero Orwell, but left disappointed and angry after Orwell, who knew Holbrook was a member of the Communist party, gave him the cold shoulder, probably suspecting he was on a spying mission.

Margaret Nelson opened up Barnhill and gave me the tour. There we were in the very room where Orwell had written “1984” in a race against failing health. For me this was where I felt sure I’d come as close to Orwell as it was possible to be. I wanted to hear his clacking typewriter, smell his cigarette smoke which must have wafted all through the house, hear him coughing, hear him talk to Susan or Avril or Richard or one of his Scottish crofter neighbours. Above all I wanted to be a fly on the wall observing him writing and re-writing his masterpiece. In my office in Toronto I have, together with the publicity poster and the box of cassettes, a photo of the facsimile of the first two pages of “1984”. I love looking at all the handwritten changes he made to his typed draft. They begin immediately, with the opening sentence. Orwell typed; “It was a cold, blowy day in April and a million radios were striking thirteen”. Then he took his pen and changed it to; “It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen”. The first two pages of “1984” are a mess of blue ink over black type.

When people die and take their secrets with them, we're left to guess and infer, to impose our ideas on theirs if we want to make sense of their life and the work they create. What would I give to be able to travel back in time, meet Orwell ask him why he changed this for that, and how each revision brought him nearer what he was trying to say.

I'd like to tell him a couple of things too. I'd tell him how important and inspiring I find his account of crawling close to the enemy trenches in Spain, getting a Fascist soldier in his sights but not being able to pull the trigger because the soldier was holding up his trousers as he ran, which Orwell said turned him instantly from 'enemy' into 'fellow creature'. The art of storytelling, and radio documentary making, not to mention life itself, is all about empathy; putting yourself in another person's shoes, bridging the gap between yourself and 'the other', resisting prejudging and worse, demonising people you don't know but if you did you might like.

I'd also want to tell Orwell how much his definition of truth in storytelling has helped me over the years. I also take 'real' material, in my case raw interviews, and then select, edit, rearrange and craft it, I hope creatively, into what we call a story. In the famous example in "The road to Wigan Pier", Orwell describes seeing from the train window, "a young woman... kneeling... poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe ... which I suppose was blocked". The literal truth of this scene has been questioned. Did he really see this woman from a train window? Did he see a woman in another part of the north of England poking a stick up a blocked drain-pipe? Did he even make the whole thing up? I believe Orwell, when pressed on this, said that if what he wrote was "essentially true", then it was fine with him. And it's fine with me too! Thanks to Orwell, "essentially true" has been my touchstone of truth during nearly forty years making radio programmes.

I spent about an hour at Barnhill with Margaret Nelson, walking around the four bedrooms, the three downstairs rooms and the kitchen. When we left I had what I wanted for my programme, but to be honest the visit was a disappointment. Orwell's spirit had eluded me.

On the journey back from Jura there were other places where I'd hoped to find some kind of communion with Orwell. In Wigan perhaps where Sydney Smith took me on the "Orwell tour". He'd met Orwell in 1936 when he ran a bookstall in Wigan market. But even Mr. Smith had trouble finding where the famous tripe shop had once stood on Sovereign Road. Only a small triangle of grass marked the spot at the intersection of two busy roads. Wigan pier was better. It was a calm day and the water of the canal was glassy smooth, giving sharp reflections of the huge old abandoned brick buildings that crowded the wharfs. Somehow I could imagine Orwell better here. And it was better still when Carlton Melling, who worked in the Wigan library in 1936, described watching Orwell stoop to sign the visitors' book, a man he saw to be clearly out of place in this working class town. For me that was a true glimpse of Orwell's 'ghost'.

I tried to imagine Orwell in Wallington too, in the tiny cottage where he and Eileen were, briefly, village grocers. Esther Brookes owned the cottage when I visited in 1983. When she'd moved there in 1948, she'd found Orwell's bacon slicer. She told me she'd also found a lot of letters and other correspondence "lying on the floor among his boots and scraps". Did she examine it? Had she kept any of it? No. "It wasn't in good shape so I just had to burn it", she said, casually. I wanted to scream out "HOW COULD YOU?" Leaving the village, I paid my respects to the small stone church where Orwell married Eileen in June 1936, and the village green where Orwell kept his goat. I admired and smelled the flourishing Albertine rose he bought for sixpence in Woolworths and planted in front of his cottage. Then it was time to set off and prepare for my next interview.

When I was planning the two months of field work it was a tough call to decide if it was worth the time and money to include a side trip to Spain. After all, so much of what Orwell experienced in Barcelona and at the front could be captured in England, through talking to people who fought alongside him, such as Stafford Cottman, Bob Edwards, Frank Frankford, Jack Branthwaite and Douglas Moyle, or with people such as Trotskyist Harry Milton who thought Orwell was "politically virginal" and Sam Lesser, a Communist and a member of the International Brigade; Lesser met Orwell in Barcelona and "didn't feel very comradely towards him." Even the man who helped Orwell with credentials to get to Spain in December 1936, the splendid 95 year old Lord Fenner Brockway, was very much alive and happy to be interviewed.

In the end I decided to go because a programme on Orwell would be missing something vital without Spanish voices and Spanish sounds to give a flavour of the place which had been the crucible which forged Orwell's belief in Socialism and his hatred of Communism.

When he arrived in Barcelona a Catalan journalist, young and full of revolutionary enthusiasm, was assigned to show him around and give him a political orientation. Victor Alba told me how disappointed he was to see Orwell so silent and introverted, "not expressive in the face, which is a shocking thing for a Spaniard. I had the feeling he was bored." But later, when he read "Homage to Catalonia", he completely changed his assessment; "I would have liked to have written Orwell's book. Even Arthur Koestler's book on Spain and the war is much less perceptive."

Before I left Spain my translator and his wife showed me how to drink Catalan style, holding up the glass 'porron' at arms length and directing the little jet of wine expertly into their open mouths. The 'porron' must have been about the only thing Orwell didn't like about revolutionary Barcelona! He refused point blank to drink from one, because it was "altogether too like bed-bottles, especially when they were filled with white wine."

I still find it remarkable that Orwell would set out on a risky and dangerous journey to the Spanish war, when he was so newly married. Eileen O'Shaughnessy was an Oxford grad, tall and thin with dark hair and blue eyes. She'd met Orwell at a party in 1935. One of Eileen's best friends, Lydia Jackson, watched

them chatting and was very doubtful that she married for love; “I think it was his outspokenness that attracted her. I was always sorry that Orwell married Eileen.”

We know so much about Orwell's ideas, opinions and beliefs, the rational side of him, and yet so little about his emotional world. Did Eileen love him? Did he love Eileen? What was it that brought them together? When Eileen died unexpectedly during surgery in March 1945, Orwell rushed back from Germany where he was on assignment for the Observer, but even then we get only odd and stilted sounding glimpses of his feelings for Eileen. When Stephen Spender told Orwell how sorry he was, Orwell replied, “yes, she was a good old stick”. But Paul Potts saw Orwell openly grieving and believed there was real warmth and love between them; “he told me the last time he saw her that he wanted to tell her that he loved her much more now that they'd had Richard, and he didn't tell her and he regretted it immensely.”

Whatever Orwell's emotional state after Eileen died, he needed help to bring up his adopted baby. His first move was to hire a young housekeeper, Susan Watson who was recently separated from her husband. Susan didn't notice “any grief in him” but watched him being “very tender” with Richard. She also watched Orwell's bizarre behaviour as he proposed to one attractive young woman after another. The first was Sonia Brownell who a few years later in a death bed ceremony would become his second wife. But in the winter of 1945, she turned him down. Another was Celia Goodman, whose sister was married to Arthur Koestler. Koestler invited Orwell to spend Christmas 1945 at a farmhouse in Wales and Celia and Orwell travelled there together on the train. She took an instant liking to Orwell but she didn't want to marry him. Orwell's response was a complete surprise; “he said if I wouldn't agree to marry him would I have an affair with him”. She said no. The third proposal was to Anne Popham who lived in the flat below Orwell in Canonbury square. Out of the blue one day a note plopped onto her mat. It was Orwell inviting her to tea. Orwell “dismissed Susan and Richard”, then sat Anne down on the bed in the corner and put his arms round her. Anne was shocked and quickly left. Orwell's proposal came later in a letter which contained an open and pessimistic assessment of his future; “what I'm really asking you is whether you would like to be the widow of a literary man.”

When Orwell died, Richard was only five and he was raised by Orwell's sister Avril and her husband Bill Dunn. When I met Richard in 1983 he was an agricultural engineer and a married man with a family of his own. After so many interviews with people in their 70's and 80's it was a bit of a shock to find myself talking to someone my own age! What interested me wasn't so much his memories of events such as the near drowning at Corryvreckan, or the rudimentary wooden toys Orwell made for him, because I couldn't be sure how much detail was his and how much had been told to him later by adults. What I really wanted to know was something much more personal; did Richard feel in his heart that Orwell was truly his father? Richard's reply was clear and moving; “It's a strange feeling having George Orwell for a father. I can be on the outside looking in, seeing George Orwell simply as a well-known figure. But I also feel that I was

his son and part of him. He was my father, no question about it, although I'd been adopted by him. He was my father."

By September of 1983 my travels were over. The 80 interviews would obviously be the prime ingredient, the backbone of the radio programme. But other ingredients were vital if the 'confection' was going to rise and shine!

One was sound, the sounds that I planned to use to underscore parts of the interviews and give atmosphere and a sense of place to the storytelling. When I crouched down with my microphone at the water's edge on Southwold beach, I didn't know exactly how I would use the lovely strong sucking sound the pebbles made as the waves ebbed and flowed, but they did find a home in the end. In Weymouth, visiting my mother, I recorded the rare and very "English" sound of a real Punch and Judy show, complete with the delighted squeals of the children as they squatted down on the sand. But this was the easy stuff. How do you find authentic sounds of the Eton Wall game?! Well, I phoned the school, hoping they would put one on especially for me, and yes, they were only too happy to oblige!

Then there was the music. I couldn't believe my luck when my CBC manager told me there was money to commission a composer for an original score and have a twenty-five piece orchestra record it. I picked a young Toronto composer, John Mills-Cockell. He invited me to his house for a preview, played the "Orwell theme" on his piano and it moved me to tears with its sad nobility and yearning. He asked me what instrument I wanted for the studio recordings. I said it had to be the cornet, the mainstay of the brass band whose soft toned voice is so much part of the fabric of the mining and factory towns of the north of England. But there weren't any professional cornet players in Toronto and it was a trumpeter who was given the job. He played on a cornet, but I was dismayed to hear how something of the aristocratic, heraldic trumpet tone had filtered in. Then I thought; "no, this is even better." Orwell was a kind of hybrid too; born into the 'lower upper middle class' but whose heart was with the underdog.

A key decision was who would 'play' Orwell? Who would animate the many excerpts from his books, essays and letters? I auditioned several people but one man stood out; Barry Morse, born to a Cockney family, a high school dropout, and a rising star in British theatre before emigrating to Canada. He made his name in America in the 1960's, starring on Broadway and in the TV action series "The Fugitive" and countless other stage, TV and radio productions in north America and around the world. Given his fame and reputation I was surprised how keen Barry Morse was to be my "Orwell". I should have known there were other reasons. Perhaps I could guessed that, for a self made man from the east end of London, Orwell might be one of his heroes. But as we got to know each other I discovered there was much more to it than that. As a young man Barry Morse had been turned down for the British army when doctors found a spot of tuberculosis on one of his lungs and he'd wondered all his life what it would feel like to be dying of it, and even more to the point for a radio programme, what would a man who was dying of tuberculosis *sound* like? When we reached the last episode, which dealt with "1984" and Orwell's losing

battle against TB, Barry Morse shocked me by frequently leaving the studio, going into the corridor and making himself bring up phlegm.

Beyond an actor's commitment and craft, there was the question; how did Orwell speak and should Barry Morse try to imitate it? I asked many of my interviewees what Orwell sounded like and they all described it in much the same way - a flat, gritty, rather boring voice, maybe exacerbated by that bullet to the neck in the trenches in Spain. But flat and boring does not make good radio! In a way it was fortunately that there were no recordings of Orwell to listen to because it freed Barry Morse to find his own Orwell voice and persona, without any interfering comparison with the real thing.

Barry Morse died in 2008 at the age of 89 and reading his obituary, I saw to my surprise, that he, like Orwell, died in University College Hospital, London.

Finally and crucially there was the 'glue' which would bind everything together, the narrator of this five hour series. Right from the beginning there had been no question that it would be George Woodcock. As a young Canadian writer living in London during the second world war Woodcock – a life long pacifist - had attacked Orwell in print, taking him to task for his opinion that in a war against fascism, being a pacifist was "objectively pro-Fascist". Later they patched it up and Woodcock became one of Orwell's staunchest friends and admirers.

George Woodcock moved back to Canada after the war and when I met him in 1983, he was living in Vancouver. Earlier that year I went there to meet him, to find out if we would get along and also to check out how he would sound on air. I recorded him describing his reconciliation with Orwell when the two of them met by chance on the top deck of a London bus and Orwell tossed out an olive branch, telling Woodcock that a clash of opinions didn't mean they couldn't be friends. It was a moving story and he told it beautifully. Over the years George Woodcock had written and recorded many short pieces for CBC Radio and when I pulled a few of them from the archives I realized to my horror that although he was a wonderful storyteller he was a terrible reader of his own scripts! With a radio series of this length a flat and lifeless narration would have been the kiss of death. But how does a relatively young radio producer break that kind of news to a proud and professional writer!?

Actually I did need George Woodcock to write scripts because there had to be a concise and cogent narrative to connect the hundred or so clips that had been edited from the interviews I'd recorded over the summer. I just couldn't afford to have him read them! So the trick would be to find a way for this scripted material to be given to the listener in a way which married writerly precision with the informality and liveliness I knew George could only deliver when he was talking, not reading.

My solution was to try something I'd never done before, but have done many times since!

I asked George if we could use his carefully composed scripts as the basis of the narration but not the narration itself. To my great relief, he gracefully accepted, and agreed to a plan where I would "interview" him using his scripts as the basic text. My job now was, with my questions, to knock him off the path as it were just enough to make him think, so it would sound as if he were discovering the thought for the first time, but not derail him to the point where he would get confused or forget what he needed to say.

It was a gamble. We didn't have unlimited studio time to get it done, just five sessions of four hours each.

So night after night, George Woodcock and I faced each other across the microphone and again and again, I asked him to look at what he'd written, memorise the basic idea, turn the script over face down on the studio table and then talk to me as if he were telling me the story for the first time. It was exhausting but it worked! When we got the very last script, George's grand finale, his final summation, he asked me, "can I read it?" I said, "go ahead George". He put everything he had into it but from the very first second I knew it was a lost cause. When he'd finished I lied; "that was great George, but just for insurance, can we do another take with you talking it through with me like we've done with all the others?" We did, and it was like night and day. Suddenly his voice found a way to his heart and soul. He talked of the love and admiration he had for Orwell and how he had tried to adopt Orwell's style of prose as his own and he finished with Orwell's famous portrait of Dickens, which he always believed captured the essence of Orwell as much as it did his subject. "He is laughing, with a touch of anger to his laughter. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls."

When he'd finished, it wasn't just my associate producer and my technician on the other side of the glass who were struggling to control tears. But George Woodcock just grinned and pulled out the gin bottle that had helped him through the twenty grueling hours of studio.

*But the thing that I saw in your face
No power can disinherit;
No bomb that ever burst
Shatters the crystal spirit.*

In Orwell's poem, the 'crystal spirit' was something that he saw for a fleeting but inspiring moment in the eyes of an Italian militiaman he met in Barcelona before going to the front to face Franco's men.

In George Woodcock's eyes the crystal spirit is Orwell himself. And for me who neither knew George Orwell nor has fought in a war? It may sound odd, but the phrase always conjures up the image of a large, beautiful glass chandelier suspended from the high ceiling of an elegant room, and slowly revolving in brilliant light. I think it goes back to all those interviews, all the people I met who offered their memories of the man they may have admired or loved but who only knew a part of, one facet of the bigger picture.

So, as my chandelier turns, each small piece of mirrored glass gives off its flash of insight into the person who is at the heart of it all.

On the afternoon of June 30th, 1983, I took the train from London to Reading to meet the man who conducted Orwell's funeral. The Reverend Gordon Dunstan drove us to the tiny medieval church in the village of Sutton Courtenay where as a young man he'd been the vicar. I wanted as far as possible to recreate for the radio the actual funeral service, and Rev. Dunstan didn't balk when I asked him to do exactly what he had done that cold day in January 1950 when he had stood in the sanctuary looking out at the coffin that contained Orwell, the coffin bearers, Sonia and David Astor, and "a gentleman-whom by his demeanor and dress I guessed to be the family solicitor."

There had been, he told me, "no music, no homily, no intrusive words". He had simply read the burial service from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. I asked him if he would stand where he had stood all those years before and read the same words. I stepped back, stood still, held my microphone out, pressed "record" and stopped when he'd finished speaking.

Then we went out into the sunshine, to Orwell's grave. Over the grave, near the headstone, was a spindly rose bush. Rev. Dunstan became a little apologetic; "he asked in fact that it might be left untrimmed, untended, but you know how roses grow, and they become straggly and a nuisance".

So Orwell wanted his rose to spread and grow freely and others decided it should be cut back and controlled. As I stood there in silence for a moment with Rev. Dunstan I thought, "Well that's how it goes George! Once you're gone they can do what they like! Everyone wants a piece of you, their own little bit of 'Orwell'". But that's what I mean about pictures made up of lots of smaller parts like a jigsaw puzzle. My book was called "Remembering Orwell". It wasn't an attempt at a biography, it was just a collection of memories, and memory is selective, fallible and often self serving. I just hope that the sum of all those little personal "Orwell's" I recorded in that summer of 1983, adds up to a portrait that Orwell himself would judge to be "essentially true".

Steve Wadhams October 20th 2009

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