



## NO ROOM AT THE HYPOCRITES' CLUB

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I took an immediate interest in George Orwell around fifteen years ago after reading his first book *Down and Out in Paris and London*. I believed at the time that my enjoyment of the book was somehow fortified by the novelty of an educated man describing a squalid existence. Sometime afterwards, when I read *The Road to Wigan Pier*, I had the peculiar sensation of shared experience with a man explaining things with an assuming tone of familiarity. I sought to find



out more about Orwell; and remember feeling mystified on discovering a King's Scholar who would write of 'a once-gaudy carpet ringed by the slop-pails of years,' and 'those small threepenny steak puddings that are sold ready-made in tins.'<sup>[1]</sup> I was not surprised to discover that Orwell possessed no university degree and even less so to learn from the following extracts that his biographers thought it significant in the making of the writer that he never went to university:

*He emerged [from Eton] with all the 'wrong attitudes,' precisely those that were so good for a social critic to have; and his peculiar genius as a writer might well have been damaged by going on to university – certainly to Oxford or Cambridge.*

**Bernard Crick George Orwell A Life p137**

*If Blair had gone on to Oxford or Cambridge, it is quite possible that afterwards, in the approved literary stereotype, he would have climbed aboard the literary express to London, have done his approved stint for the weeklies, have written – who can say? – the unwritten books of Eric Blair. But it is permissible to suggest that then there would not have been George Orwell. Not going to university was a decisive part in the making of the writer.*

### **Peter Stansky & William Abrahams The Unknown Orwell P120**

Over time, I have become less satisfied with the claim that Orwell might have been 'damaged' by going to university and now believe that he is more likely to have emerged as a more potent version of the radical-outsider that we strive to understand. We know that from an early age Blair/Orwell wanted to write – his childhood friend Jacintha Buddicom highlighted his wanting to be a FAMOUS AUTHOR in capitals.<sup>[2]</sup> So would the Oxbridge educated Orwell have taken a different path in life and consequently been a different sort of writer? Would the boy who simply idled his time away at Eton have made a better fist of things at university and found a comfortable berth aboard Stansky and Abrahams' 'literary express to London?'

Biographers point to Orwell's decision to join the Imperial Police in Burma rather than progression to Oxford as being of key significance. In particular, they illuminate the indelible mark that Orwell claimed the Burma experience left upon him in the form of a conscience and his subsequent desire to escape from 'every form of man's dominion over man' and – 'to get right down amongst the oppressed.' Orwell also implied that the true significance of Burma was his transposition of the harsh treatment of the Burmese onto the English working-class as the symbolic victims of injustice.<sup>[3]</sup> This transference of guilt identifies the link between the psychological detritus of Burma and the tramping escapades of his first book *Down and Out in Paris and London*. For me, the idea that he went to Burma indifferent to 'the machinery of despotism' of which he was about to become a part, and then, having witnessed the tyranny, he 'chucks-up' his job because of a conscience is problematical. If Blair/Orwell was so deeply

affected by what he saw, he never betrayed his feelings to his colleagues; one of whom remembers Blair/Orwell as 'easygoing, keen about his job and the life and soul of the party.'<sup>[4]</sup> His own writings, and the accounts of his former schoolfriends disclose enough evidence to argue that hatred of authority, rejection of imperialism and even his standing as a radical-outsider was apparent long before he boarded the *SS Herefordshire* to Rangoon.

'The greatest cruelty one can inflict on a child is to send it to school among children much richer than itself' claimed Orwell in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.<sup>[5]</sup> He remembered St Cyprian's, his first boarding school, as a place where the fact that he had been admitted at reduced fees was continually thrown in his teeth; a place where no boy whose father's income was above £2,000 a year was ever caned and a place where, the phrase 'your parents wouldn't be able to afford it,' pursued him throughout.<sup>[6]</sup> A hard-won scholarship to Eton only served to reinforce an awareness of his inferior financial position; King's Scholars were branded as 'Tugs' by fee-paying Oppidans on account of their having to wear a gown, and could be further distinguished by trousers that continued to be worn long after they were shiny and flapping above the ankle.<sup>[7]</sup> In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell concedes that by the time he left Eton, not only did he feel resentment against boys whose parents were richer than his, but that he was also swept along in the wave of anti-militarism and revolt against orthodoxy and authority that had extended to those too young to fight in the Great War. One can reasonably assume that by the time Blair/Orwell had left Eton for the 'cramming-school' en-route to Burma he was already a radical, left-wing subversive. The photograph of Orwell (right) pictured on the steps of Eton College serves to reinforce my opinion. I can't help but see Orwell the rebel, Orwell the sceptic, Orwell the first Eton boy to be heard running down his own parents. I also see the Orwell who, in the words of V.S.Pritchett, 'belongs to no group', or 'joins no side,' the Orwell who 'is rashly, almost bleakly, almost colourlessly and uncomfortably on his own.'<sup>[8]</sup> Orwell/Blair was one of only three from his election of fourteen who did not progress to university – the other two were ensconced into family businesses. Blair went to Burma where he received copies of a literary magazine

called *The Adelphi*, containing articles by his former literary friends from Eton. He later conceded that he often used the 'scurrilous rag' for target practice.<sup>[9]</sup>

Those literary men who were at Eton at the same time as Orwell; Christopher Hollis, Harold Acton, Anthony Powell, Cyril Connolly and Brian Howard, were all fee-paying Oppidans, except for Connolly who was also at prep-school with Orwell and won his scholarship in the year after Orwell had won his. Both were rebels, although Connolly later conceded that whereas he had been a stage rebel, Orwell had been a true one. His memories of Orwell at prep-school are very revealing for our purpose:

'The remarkable thing about Orwell was that he alone among the boys was an intellectual and not a parrot, for he thought for himself, read Shaw and Butler and rejected not only St Cyprian's but the war, the Empire, Kipling, Sussex and Character.'<sup>[10]</sup>

The suggestion that 'Orwell the intellectual', 'Orwell the left-wing radical' or 'Orwell the aggrieved' would have been 'damaged' by going up to university becomes less credible when one considers the world, into which he is likely to have entered. Eton contemporaries - Powell, Acton, Hollis and Howard all progressed to Balliol College, Oxford along with Connolly, and were all soon indoctrinated into the Hypocrites' Club. The Hypocrites' began as a discussion group, then evolved into a late night illegal drinking den for well-off students occupying two rooms above a bicycle shop at St Aldate's. Inside this establishment they soon fell under the influence of a notorious young hell-raiser called Evelyn Waugh and his bright young buddies. Waugh had immediately set about throwing himself into the vigorous social scene at Oxford, and many aristocratic and well-off students found his penchant for late-night fun and frolics infectious. Anthony Powell's first sight of Waugh was at the Hypocrites' sitting on Christopher Hollis's knee.<sup>[11]</sup> Like many others, Powell became seduced by this lifestyle and conceded that he suffered a loss of intellectual vitality rather than stimulation at Oxford and also felt that the level of snobbishness was far more prominent than at Eton.<sup>[12]</sup> The dark humour of Waugh's

early satirical novels, *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*, reflect this period of 'jolly-japes,' both at Oxford and then among the 'bright young things' of twenties Mayfair. 'His satire was derived from his ignorance of life' wrote Cyril Connolly, 'he found cruel things funny because he did not understand them and was able to communicate that fun.'<sup>[13]</sup> Powell made good use of his recollections of Eton, Oxford and Mayfair for *A Dance to the Music of Time* - a superb twelve-novel sequence involving over 300 mostly, upper-class characters, particularly memorable for the fascinating character, Kenneth Widmerpool, who gets hit in the face with a banana and has sugar poured over his head! In the words of Waugh's biographer Selina Hastings:

'The universities, and Oxford in particular, were a kind of deregulated nursery where bread and milk was replaced by Plovers' eggs and Champagne, and nobody said anything about going to bed early.'<sup>[14]</sup>

It is impossible to imagine Orwell settling in with this company, even if he had the means, which is extremely unlikely. This group comprised Oxford's literary elite and he would almost certainly have continued to feel alienated by his meagre allowance and the resultant feelings of resentment and unhappiness lead one to doubt whether he would have achieved any more at Oxford than he had done at Eton. Additionally, one cannot imagine Stansky and Abrahams' unwritten books of George Orwell incorporating the 'bright young things' of *Vile Bodies* whose drunken lifestyles no doubt originated from the Hypocrites' Club.

Both Waugh and Powell struck up a friendship with Orwell in later life and, for our purpose here, it is Waugh who is the most interesting. During World War II, Waugh produced what is, arguably, one of the great masterpieces of English Literature in *Brideshead Revisited*. Although, again, we see Waugh parodying his own acquaintances and experiences up at Oxford, there is a marked change from the tone of his earlier novels. Since World War I, the pre-war England that Waugh knew and loved had long been on borrowed time without him realising it and the second great conflict now in process would extinguish it for ever. Waugh's world had been

turned upside down – social institutions and hierarchies were dissolving before his eyes. As a man without stability, this realisation had hit Waugh hard, whereas Orwell had known all along, long before he had even left Eton that the hegemonic dominance of the upper classes was finished and that England's position as a major world power was doomed; "whoever wins this war" he had told Connolly as early as 1916, "we shall emerge from it a second rate nation."<sup>[15]</sup>

For me, it is not so much the impact that going up to university might have had on his writing that is significant; rather it is the resultant prejudices of publishers and the literary world in general that he encountered which is critical when considering the impact of opting for Burma over Oxford. After Burma, while struggling-up as a writer, he was very much an outcast among young writers and poets of the left in the thirties – Auden, Isherwood, Day-Lewis, Spender, MacNiece. For John Rodden, it is mainly due to the Burma experience that Orwell is sometimes viewed as being 'one step behind this generation and therefore forever playing intellectual catch-up.' Rodden makes the crucial point that it is not so much that his experience came later, moreover, it was that his experience was *different* – the Imperial Police- life among the dispossessed- the Aragon front in Spain; events had not merely been 'visited,' rather they had been lived. Rodden concludes that 'this participant-witness stance, as an outsider able to feelingly describe what he has seen "from the inside" gave Orwell valuable psychological distance,' and also, he asserts, 'the high credibility and immense authority which most intellectuals of his generation did not possess.'<sup>[16]</sup> Rodden's focus provides a powerful argument for the positive impact of Orwell's having missed-out on university, although the fact remains that the Auden Set of the thirties, with the exception of Cecil Day-Lewis, were between four and six years younger than the already deeply radicalised Orwell and shared more modern literary tastes. His not having a degree did not in itself alienate him from this group; both Spender and Isherwood ultimately left Oxford and Cambridge respectively without taking their degrees and absconded with Auden to Weimar Germany in search of adventure. Orwell merely flirted with,

but would never have joined this movement, just as he would never have joined the Carlton or the Grid clubs up at Oxford or, for that matter, the Hypocrites' Club.

For a more personal view of the impact of his not having gone up to university, one need look no further than Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and the character of Gordon Comstock venting his spleen at another rejection slip for one of his poems:

'The bloody sods! 'The Editor regrets' Why be so bloody mealy-mouthed about it? Why not say outright 'We don't want your bloody poems. We only take poems from chaps we were at Cambridge with. You proletarians keep your distance'? The bloody, hypocritical sods!'<sup>[17]</sup>

If we subscribe to the Raymond Williams view of Orwell's writing prior to 1937 as a 'series of sketches towards the creation of his most successful character, "Orwell"', then we can view the above scene as a scenario intensely and painfully lived by its author.<sup>[18]</sup> Offers to translate popular French novels were rejected, an idea for a biography of Mark Twain was rejected – projects that Orwell would no doubt have excelled at, for lacking a university degree did not make him a less accomplished translator or literary critic. One need look no further than *Charles Dickens*, probably Orwell's best literary essay, highly commended in the aftermath of its publication in March 1940.<sup>[19]</sup>

Whether or not Orwell *wanted* to go to university is a long-standing debate. Jacintha Buddicom insisted he *did* want to go, Old-Etonian Sir Steven Runciman insisted he always said that he saw his future 'out East.'<sup>[20]</sup> It is likely that Blair/Orwell knew that Oxford would be unaffordable and sought to disguise this unpalatable fact. Had he continued in the same work-shy vain he had followed at Eton it is likely he would have ultimately conformed to his Father's wishes and still gone East at a later date. Although these considerations have some relevance for our purpose, my own view is that whichever version of events we believe makes little difference. By the time Blair/Orwell left Eton, the rebel, the sceptic and the radical had already evolved and up

at Oxford such traits would have flourished further to his detriment. Crucial is his sensitivity to the financial limitations of his status and his learned experience of the way in which the world treats those who fall short on the ladder of *real* privilege; he could envisage a life spent existing forever on the back foot because of this. Although it remains my least favourite Orwell novel, the amusing thing about *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is how much the author manages to extract from the dilemmas facing a man living on 'two pounds a week,' a man who can't abide the thought of making love to a woman 'when you have only eightpence in your pocket.'<sup>[21]</sup> In a world where it seemed 'everything comes down to money' Orwell would always retreat towards the world of the have-nots rather than the haves. I don't have to look far for a comparison. My own father attended a school on reduced fees and was the only pupil among hundreds to qualify for free school meals. He never gained his scholarship, yet aspired to the position of Development Manager at a large multi-national corporation, this despite possessing no other qualification except a certificate for ballroom dancing! He always preferred the company of ordinary working men above the opulent academics around him and, more significantly, he championed practical ability above qualification. Orwell always took great delight in practical work – particularly carpentry and gardening, accounts of which, are contained in his diaries and in photographs.

To conclude, Orwell's genius as a writer would not have been 'damaged' had he gone to university. He had left Eton, a youth of eighteen filled with resentment and 'wrong attitudes' and I believe that the pronounced class-distinctions and general snobbery he would have discovered up at Oxford would merely have sharpened his radicalism just as the Burma experience had done. He had followed his father's wishes to Burma and then ultimately dismissed it as 'five wasted years.' He re-emerged determined to follow his 'true vocation' to write and through embedding himself among the dispossessed and impoverished he utilised their world as a vehicle for his development as a social critic. As an established writer, he shunned the chummy, back-scratching literary parties, preferring instead to hang-out in pubs, drinking pints of bitter

with labourers and chatting with street girls. I think he liked the idea of conforming to the Ernest Everhard character from one of his favourite novels, Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, - the idea of a man in a frayed jacket on a soap-box telling the higher-ups things they don't want to hear. He viewed the intelligentsia as being like the Philomaths of London's dystopian world - succumbing to the idea that a little learning can be a dangerous thing among a working-class viewed as being awash with madcap theories.<sup>[22]</sup> Viewing Orwell's effectiveness in this way became an inspiration to me in a professional life, largely dedicated to protecting the interests and conditions of ordinary working men and women. Although I do possess a university degree, it would never occur to me to incorporate letters after my name in the field of industrial relations. Orwell would have understood this; it was one of his great strengths that he understood exactly where the lines of demarcation were drawn from an early age. Neither Oxford, nor Cambridge, would have led him to re-draw those lines and neither would have blunted his particular genius as a writer.

**Ron Bateman 2009**

### Notes and References

1. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Penguin ed. London 1962. pp3, pp12
2. Jacintha Buddicom, *Eric & Us*. 2006 ed, Finlay Publisher, Chichester. pp38
3. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. pp138
4. In *Collected Works Vol X A Kind of Compulsion*, pp88, Peter Davison includes reminiscences contained in the *Orwell Archive* by Burma Railwayman George Stuart. His account was referred to by Sir Bernard Crick who described Stuart as a thoroughly reliable witness.
5. George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Penguin Complete Novels ed, London 1983 pp601
6. George Orwell, *Such such were the Joys*. Complete Works, vol XIX, Secker & Warburg, London. 1998. pp360, pp363
7. P. Stansky & W. Abrahams, *The Unknown Orwell*. Constable, London 1972. pp76
8. V.S. Pritchett, *Living Writers*. Sylvan Press, London 1947. pp166
9. P. Stansky & W. Abrahams, *The Unknown Orwell*. pp172
10. Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*, Penguin ed, London 1961. pp179
11. Selina Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh a Biography*, Minerva, London 1995. pp91
12. D.J.Taylor, *Orwell, The Life*, Chatto & Windus, London 2003. pp53
13. Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*. pp140
14. Selina Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh a Biography*. pp88
15. Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*. pp179
16. John Rodden, *On the Political Sociology of Intellectuals: George Orwell and the London Left Intelligentsia*. Reproduced in *George Orwell – Contemporary Critical Essays*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998. pp166
17. George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. pp624/625
18. Raymond Williams, *Orwell*. Fontana, London 1971. pp52

19. On 1 September 1940, The Dickensian published a report on the thirty-fourth annual conference of the Dickens fellowship in which Compton Mackenzie introduced Orwell as 'one of the younger literary men who had recognised the greatness of Dickens.'
  20. Sir Bernard Crick interview with Sir Steven Runciman (reproduced in A. Coppard, B. Crick, Orwell Remembered, Ariel Books/BBC, London 1984 pp52) A full account by Jacintha Buddicom on discussions in the Blair household re Oxford/Burma can be found in Jacintha Buddicom, Eric & Us. 2006 ed, Finlay Publisher, Chichester. Pp116-119, pp160 Interestingly, Jacintha's brother Prosper, also EBs childhood friend went up to Oxford and states that he used the precious time 'frivolling around, chasing after girls and crawling after pubs and nightclubs without even achieving a degree.' Pp147.
  21. George Orwell, Keep the Aspidistra Flying. pp670
  22. In Jack London's The Iron Heel, Ernest Everhard's oration in support of the revolutionists sends the members of the exclusive Philomath club into uproar, inciting Colonel Van Gilbert to proclaim 'It has truly been said that a little learning is a dangerous thing and you have exemplified it tonight with your madcap theories.' (Journeyman, London 1990 Pp58)
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