



Searching for Orwell: A Reminiscence

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Growing up in New York, I was four and a half when the Spanish Civil War broke out. I'm sure I wasn't aware of it then, although just possibly I knew about it before it ended. I do vividly remember how some time later I loved listening to a record of the songs of the International Brigade. "So left, two, three, so left two three, you are a worker too..." While an undergraduate at Yale, no doubt influenced by the anglophilia of that University, I became increasingly intrigued by English history and society. I put these interests together by writing a senior essay on four Englishmen who had participated in the war. Two of them were killed in Spain—John Cornford and Julian Bell. One, Stephen Spender, had gone there and supported the cause and in a sense fought by proxy through his lover, Tony Hyndman, but then also reflecting disillusion devoted himself to getting Tony out of Spain. The fourth was George Orwell. This was in the early 1950s. By that time Orwell had become a famous writer through *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I may have read them on publication, as my family would have acquired them through the Book-of-the-Month Club. I can't remember what exactly led me to Orwell (And I must emphasize that these are unsystematic reminiscences based on faulty memory.) Perhaps I was inspired by the republication in 1952 of Orwell's up until then largely lost masterpiece, *Homage to Catalonia*, about his experiences in the War. When originally published it had received mixed reviews in large part because of its criticism of Communist activities in Spain, and much of the printing had been destroyed in the Blitz. Orwell was in the 1930s a moderately well-known writer but he hardly had the reputation that would come to him later. The new edition was graced by a brilliant but to my mind misguided introduction by Lionel Trilling, then at the height of his fame. That essay has always provided for me a crucial point of disagreement in Orwell studies. It is a



powerful argument for the school of thought that sees Orwell as the man of virtue and the truth teller rather than what I see as his greater claim to fame, a writer and an artist.

Trying to find out more about Orwell in the early 1950s was a great adventure. I will always be grateful to the open stack policy of the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale where I had the fun and the challenge to find the then fugitive essays--not yet collected together--in the various periodicals in which they had originally been published. Writing that senior essay, juvenile effort that it was, was a wonderful experience. But I then put it aside as I went to Cambridge University to pursue a second B.A. but not at all sure what I would do next: lawyer or academic. In the Spring of 1954 my freshman college roommate, a Rhodes scholar, the late Don Erickson, and I did make a trip to Spain and explored the ruins of University City on the outskirts of Madrid where John Cornford had fought, but did not particularly pursue the question of Orwell in Spain. After some hesitations, I did commit myself to the study of history and acquired my Ph.D. with a dissertation on late 19th century British politics in 1961. In the course of my research on that I had some splendid material on the question of who should be the next poet laureate on the death of Tennyson which I hadn't used in the dissertation. In December 1960 I had met the novelist, editor and poet William Abrahams and we wrote together an article for *History Today* on the topic, my first publication other than a few book reviews. That was, we thought, a success and when Billy raised the question of what we might do next, I showed him my senior essay on the four Englishmen and the Spanish Civil War. In the early 1960s, we secured a contract with the Atlantic Monthly Press for the book and made plans to spend time in Britain and Spain to do research on Cornford, Bell, Spender and Orwell. In Spain we tried as best we could to trace the places they had been in the course of the war. Most vivid were two Orwellian locations in Barcelona, the hotel where he stayed with Eileen, and the movie theater where he mounted guard during the May Days. In all four cases our intention was to deal with them only through the Spanish Civil War, to explore and to attempt to explain their involvement. Cornford and Bell were far less well known as, tragically, they had lost their lives as young men in the war. Orwell had survived and Spender was still very much alive, and in fact Billy had previously met him on one or more of his many trips to the United States.

To begin with, we dedicated ourselves to pursuing all four figures and the most helpful individuals were the two brothers, Quentin Bell and Christopher Cornford, Spender himself, and Orwell's widow, Sonia. Fairly soon it became evident that it would not be appropriate to put all four subjects in one book. We decided to devote one book to Cornford and Bell which became *Journey to the Frontier*, published in 1966. For various reasons, most importantly that Spender wished us to be discreet (and this was pre-Wolfenden when homosexuality was still illegal in

Britain) we abandoned Spender as one of the figures. And Orwell we thought should have a different approach. Our discussion of Cornford and Bell was going to be largely biographical. Orwell clearly could be discussed as a writer who had had an important career even before his greater fame and we were mindful that in his Will (a copy of which we secured at Somerset House) he had requested that there not be a biography. (Sir Richard Rees who knew Orwell well urged us not to take this stipulation too seriously.)

Nevertheless before we had come to the firm decision to write about Orwell in a second book we were in touch with quite a few who had known him. We had had a wonderful bilious lunch in London with Sonia Orwell at the White Tower near her tiny flat on Percy Street and she had been very encouraging. She actually did not appear to be that involved with Orwell at that point, although she was connected with the Orwell archive at University College and perhaps was already the co-editor with Ian Angus of the eventual four volumes of Orwell writings that would appear in 1968. She was happy to give us leads on people we should speak to, most notably Orwell's sister Avril with whom we had a splendid visit in Scotland. We did research in the Archive which at that point had comparatively little manuscript material but was tremendously useful as a gathering place of much he had written for a miscellany of publications. Following a lead supplied by Ian Angus, we had tracked down, and been given the Archive copies of the poems that Orwell had published as a school boy. And then some time later when we visited Frank Jellinek in Switzerland we were responsible, if I remember correctly, for the very important letter that Orwell had written to him about Spain (surprisingly friendly considering that Jellinek was a Communist apologist) which may be the only known time that Orwell signed a letter both Eric Blair and George Orwell. These signatures were stamped on the bindings of the four volumes. The father of a friend of mine had worked for Burmah Oil and was a member of the leading club in Rangoon when Orwell was in Burma. Writing to those who were officers in the police and were members of the Club, care of the India Office, we received helpful letters from police colleagues. I can't remember whether it was through this method or another that we were in touch with Roger Beadon who was an exact contemporary of Orwell's as a police trainee and I visited him several times in Bristol—and subsequently he gave one or more broadcasts about Orwell. We were also in touch with those who were part of Orwell's election as King's Scholars at Eton and had some helpful letters as well as spending time with Denys King-Farlow and most splendidly with Sir Steven Runciman at his small border castle in Scotland. We went down to the Sussex Coast and had a deeply memorable interview with Mrs Vaughan-Wilkes who had, in effect, prevented the publication of "Such, such were the Joys" in Britain but not in the United States. Nearby we spent time with Cyril Connolly who when we asked him whether he had seen Mrs Vaughan-Wilkes said he was too terrified to do so but it was he that

insisted that we go to see her. We had one or more visits with Ruth Pitter who later told Bernard Crick that we had got things wrong. That well may be true but neither she nor Bernard Crick in that case seemed to realize that authors need to decide, based on other research and their own assessment, whether they accept the accuracy or interpretation of what they are told. We had quite a few terrific visits with Mabel Fierz and her son. We spoke to friends of Orwell's first wife Eileen: Elizaveta Fen and Lettice Cooper. We had wonderful times with an early lover, Kay Ekeval, an unreconstructed radical who deeply disapproved of Orwell's politics and adored that Billy Abrahams was Lillian Hellman's editor. We visited Rayner Heppenstall. And Frederic Warburg. And no doubt there were others. The records of our research, in rather fragmentary form, I've deposited in the Stanford University Library. And these interviews would have taken place over a range of years as our first Orwell volume, *The Unknown Orwell*, was not published until 1972 and the second, *Orwell: The Transformation*, in 1979.

The situation dramatically changed in the late 1960s. (Of course this is my interpretation of events with which others may disagree.) Billy Abrahams was very fond of Sonia; he was a very loyal friend. But when she turned on us, he was a devoted enemy; he rarely if ever reconciled with those who for whatever reason had chosen to pick a fight with him. I liked her less initially and disliked her less eventually than he did. Although she had suggested that we see Avril I think she resented that we actually did so, and Avril and particularly her husband Bill Dunn were not fond of Sonia. Our friends, Robert Treuhart and his wife Jessica Mitford, also close friends of Sonia's, told us that she was now much more interested in Orwell's estate, particularly as, I believe, the copyrights of his two best-selling works, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, under the then system, had reached their first expiry date, were renegotiated and had become much more valuable. When we originally met Sonia didn't seem to care much about the biographical prohibition. She had commissioned Malcolm Muggeridge to write a life but allegedly she knew he never would do it and hence that would serve as a block of other biographical efforts. She claimed that *Journey to the Frontier* demonstrated that our interests were biographical. We pointed out that as we were now doing a separate book about Orwell it needn't be biographical and in any case we had no intention of going beyond the Spanish Civil War. We took her out to what turned out to be a confrontational dinner in Paris. The Archive was closed to us (but we had seen what was there) and quotation could not be beyond fair usage. I now gather that Sonia wrote to various people in the Orwell world telling what blackguards we were. She did say that perhaps good relations could be restored if we would show her the manuscript and give her total power about what might be included or excluded. That of course was unacceptable. When *The Unknown Orwell* was published in 1972 she promised a list of its many errors (no doubt there were errors as there are, alas, in all such works) but such a list

never appeared. In her fury, she appointed Bernard Crick as Orwell's official biographer, a decision she came to regret. Her life ended sadly, cheated by her accountant. It might have been otherwise. As we had broken with her, we felt we could write as we wished, with the manuscripts read by lawyers to prevent us being sued. We were reprimanded by Orwell's agent, Mark Hamilton, for having quoted in full the early poem we had discovered, but he took no action.

Searching for Orwell was a great adventure. It would appear that readers still enjoy reading the two studies which now are rather ancient texts in Orwell studies. From time to time, as here, I write about Orwell. I admire him immensely, as a writer of extraordinary artistry. As we all are, he was a flawed human being, something of a philanderer, and something of a Red baiter. But a figure of ever lasting fascination and a compelling thinker and writer. Having begun searching for him so many years ago, Billy Abrahams and I were fortunate in being able to speak to many, probably now all gone, who had known him and were able to tell us what, in their views, he was like and provide insights on his greatness.

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