



## The Trail That Never Ends: Reflections of a Biografiend October – December 2010

**Gordon Bowker 2010**

There's a story behind every book – sometimes more than one story. As a boy I was captivated by portraits of authors — Kipling gazing into the far-beyond, Dickens frowning pensively, Wodehouse brimming with joviality. Photographs and mini-biographies on the covers of Penguin books held the same fascination. Who were these literary magicians? Exactly how had they conjured up their characters, plots and contrivances? Writers seemed to me just as intriguing as their creations — Doyle as unfathomable as Holmes, Pasternak as engaging as Zhivago.

For a long time this seemed a lonely obsession (books about writers were rarely bestsellers)<sup>1</sup>, but then along came Richard Ellmann's lives of Joyce and Wilde heralding a new age of literary biography with a new and burgeoning readership. Throughout the 80s and 90s the art-form flourished, with the likes of Michael Holroyd, Peter Ackroyd, Richard Holmes and Clare Tomalin producing great biographies, detailed, elegant and insightful. Today there is no shortage of fine examples of the genre for the would-be biographer to emulate.

But how to proceed? Peter Ackroyd, about to embark on his mammoth biography of Dickens, declared in an interview that his first step would be to read everything written *by* Dickens and everything written *about* Dickens. Everything? Well, if you care enough, the answer must be 'Yes.' As Julian Barnes wrote in *Flaubert's Parrot*, 'If you love a writer, if you depend upon the drip-feed of his intelligence, if you want to pursue him and find him — despite edicts to the contrary — then it's impossible to know too much.' Unfortunately, publishers place limits on the length of books (two volume biographies are rare nowadays), so long first-drafts have to be whittled down to size and what is published is all too often a fraction of what might have been. As the great Hermann Melville put it in his little-read masterpiece, *Pierre* — 'Two books are being writ, of which the world shall see only one, and that the bungled one. The larger book, and the infinitely better, is for Pierre's own private shelf. That it is whose unfathomable cravings drink his blood.' But those excluded details, aspects and incidents of a life are only one part of the larger book known only to its author. There is yet another unseen part — the biography of the biography itself.

In my youth there were still first editions of Orwell on the shelves of public libraries. I first discovered those stylish Gollancz and Warburg editions in the fiction section of a small West-Country library, sitting quietly between Baroness Orczy and Ouida. Around the same time, in the sixpenny-box outside a Torquay bookshop, I found a secondhand copy of the Penguin *Burmese Days* (the 1941 reprint) which today stands happily next to a recently-acquired first edition of

*Inside the Whale*. Later as a student journalist I was able to write about Orwell and later still review books about him for the *TES* and *London Magazine*.

Once in the late sixties the shade of Orwell brushed close to me at the Islington home of my friend B.S. Johnson. The other guest, a pale, balding man, was introduced to me as Rayner Heppenstall. 'Rayner used to share a flat with George Orwell,' said Brian. I was spellbound and desperate to know more. Unfortunately, Heppenstall, who had just been fired from the BBC, was in no mood to humour an eager young fan of the man who had once attacked him with a shooting-stick. Although they had made it up, Heppenstall was never one to enthuse about Orwell as most of his other friends were. 'Orwell was fake,' he told me. 'He never went down that mine in Wigan. It was all a stunt. He was in London all the time'. I was completely taken in and felt suitably crushed, as Heppenstall fully intended I should be. Later I realized that as well as feeling resentful about his sacking that day, he had been deeply embittered ever since his career as a novelist had been fatally disrupted by the war, while his old flat-mate Orwell, whose work he had considered desperately old-fashioned, had achieved the success and distinction which had eluded him. His teasing lie about *Wigan Pier* was, I imagine, his way of getting back at the angry man with the shooting-stick.

In 1980, Crick's biography appeared, and in 1984 a grand Orwell jamboree was held at the London Barbican, at which many of his friends and critics foregathered to celebrate him and his great last novel. Among those present I remember Michael Foot, Stephen Spender, David Astor, Raymond Williams, Bernard Crick, and (a surprise this) Salman Rushdie who had just published *Shame*, his most political novel to date. Crick's celebrity as Orwell's biographer was then at its height, his account of Orwell's life unchallengeable.

After completing a life of Malcolm Lowry in 1993, I wanted to tackle Orwell, but Michael Sheldon's 'authorized' biography of the previous year seemed to preclude another for some time ahead. I therefore opted for Lawrence Durrell who happened to feature in the PhD thesis I was just completing.

The approach of Orwell's centenary then offered another chance to take him on. I began spending time at London's University College, noting letters and anything else that caught my eye in the Orwell Archive. I consulted Bill Hamilton, Orwell's agent, about undertaking another biography and found him encouraging. However, he suggested I wait until Peter Davison published his *Complete Works of George Orwell* of which I had not previously heard. Meanwhile, I decided to keep going at the Archive.

With the Durrell book out and the *Complete Works* imminent, my next step was to find a publisher. My proposal was twice torpedoed after editors had expressed enthusiasm. The second one, a charming young man, at first eager to commission the book, wrote a few days after our meeting to say that he doubted there was anything new to be discovered about Orwell in the wake of Crick. 'Great heavens!' I thought. Didn't he know that there's *always* something new to be discovered about *any* subject in the wake of *anybody*? So, pessimistic opinions about what might or might not be discovered could, I thought, quite happily be ignored and old-fashioned sleuthing should serve just as well with this author as with any other. There was also the elusive inner man to explore through interpretation — the approach to biography rejected by Crick but favoured by Orwell.

Rejection often has the opposite effect to that intended, and, more determined than ever, I ploughed on through the Archive, knowing that handling original letters, diaries and notebooks was infinitely preferable to studying them in print. In an original letter one can 'read' the handwriting, the inserted afterthoughts, the marginal scribbles and teacup stains, and, importantly, replies to letters which have gone missing. Any of these scribbles and hieroglyphics could provide clues to the hidden story. To have depended excessively on the *Complete Works* (grateful though one was finally to have it) would have been the lazy and less exciting way to proceed.

When Crick set out on the Orwell trail in 1972, today's accumulated archive did not exist, though much had been collected through the efforts of Ian Angus, then Assistant Librarian at UC. Crick acknowledged Ian's help, especially in making available his notes of interviews with Orwell acquaintances, many by then deceased. (He was kind enough to do the same for me.) Even so, Crick must have had to put in a good deal of legwork before he could even start thinking of writing his book — further caches of letters and photographs to be unearthed, school records, newspaper reports to be scanned, uncollected journalism to be dug out of newspaper libraries, and a large number of witnesses to be interviewed. His sense of adventure at embarking on such a project must have been considerable. To me it seemed best to imagine that little or nothing was known about the subject, go over the ground again, and see what emerged.

Digging into Orwell's noble past was not difficult. In *Burkes Peerage and Landed Gentry* it was easy to find Lady Mary Fane, youngest daughter of the Earl of Westmorland, who married Charles Blair, Eric's great grandfather, in 1765. Like most landed gentry, the Fanes were keen field sportsmen — their ranks included Masters of Hounds, army cavalrymen and even, curiously enough, a one-time Commander of the British Army in Burma. Clearly Blair's enthusiasm for hunting and the East were long-entrenched family traditions.

A short visit to the Dorset village of Milborne St Andrew, where Eric's paternal grandfather was once vicar, produced at least one interesting further piece to the jigsaw. According to the parish magazine, Thomas Blair was, like his grandson, an eccentric figure quite prepared to risk public hostility — in his case by rebuilding his vicarage at great expense to the parish in the teeth of much local opposition. Orwell's Anglican heritage, which the Milborne visit highlighted, made Orwell's attachment to the Church (despite his unbelief) that much more comprehensible.

Other Blair ancestors also left their marks on him. He cherished the memory of Great-Uncle Horatio Blair, a naval captain, whose travelling library he inherited (his niece still has it). And yet another had clearly lodged himself in his creative imagination. According to a press cutting in the Archives, on 13 January 1911 Captain Richard Charles Blair of the 6th Gurkha Rifles, one of Eric's father's cousins, sailing home from India through the Red Sea and suffering from depression, walked up on deck one night and quietly jumped overboard — an incident Orwell looks to have considered incorporating into his unfinished novel, *A Smoking Room Story*.

As to the Limouzins, documents in the India Office Records section of the British Library indicated roughly when they had arrived in Burma, where they lived, whom they married, what children they had and when and how they had died. The Limouzin history proved especially revealing — numerous deaths from lung conditions and several offspring from interracial liaisons. One great uncle, William, had married an Indian woman, Sooma; another, Frank, had

fathered a child by a Burmese woman, Ma Hlim — a name not so far removed from Ma Hla May, the name of the Burmese mistress of John Flory in *Burmese Days*. Had Uncle Frank's story found an echo there? Knowing that Eric had mixed-race cousins also gives heightened significance to the novel's portrayal of Eurasians (Francis, Samuel and Rosa McFee), marginalized by both the *sahib-log* and the Burmese.

Thacker's Indian Directory indicates that Ida Limouzin, Orwell's mother, left Burma to become a mistress in the girls' department of a boys' school in Naini Tal, a hill station over six thousand feet above sea-level in India's North West Province. It was one of those resorts at which men of the empire spent their leave. There, it seems, she met Richard Walmsley Blair, an uncovenanted (and therefore not particularly high-status) civil servant from Gaya, and there in June 1897, she married him. The records indicate that they were married at the Church of St John in the Wilderness on 15 June 1897, with a lawyer from Gaya and Ida's sister Blanche as witnesses. Thacker's also shows that Richard had not languished at the very bottom of the promotion ladder, as some have claimed, but had risen from Sub-Opium Agent Class 6 to Sub-Opium Agent Class 1 at his retirement.

The Blairs' first child, Marjorie, was born in April 1898. In February 1903, Richard transferred to Motihari where Eric, his second child, was born on 25 June 1903. During Ida's pregnancy, Gaya, I found, was suffering the aftermath of an outbreak of the plague — a good enough reason (plus possibly a desire to avoid further pregnancies) for her to flee to England with her young daughter Marjorie and her new baby. The date of Eric's baptism is recorded as 30 October, so it seems likely that he left India at around four months of age.

Entries in Ida's diary for 1905 (held in the Archive) mention walks to a convent at Henley-on-Thames where she had settled — the first clue I had to where she might have sent her children to school. Jane Morgan, Eric's niece, confirmed the hunch. Her mother, Marjorie, had been educated by French Catholic nuns at a convent in Henley. Earlier biographers claimed that Eric had attended an Anglican convent called Sunnylands. The French nuns, who were thus airbrushed from history, had, according to Jane, eventually returned to France taking Marjorie along as an assistant. A visit to the local history section of the Henley Public Library was called for.

Public library local history sections are a rich source of biographical data, overlooked by many biographers. Henley library kept pre-1914 Kelly's Street Directories. There I did indeed find an advertisement for a nursery school called Sunnylands, but with no religious affiliation indicated. I then discovered what I was looking for — a Convent des Ursulines, a private boarding school for girls at 23 Station Road. To authenticate this, I rang the Church House Library in London and asked if they had any knowledge of an Anglican convent in Henley during the years in question. After checking, the Librarian reported having found no such record. A call to the Catholic Church's Central Library quickly produced the information that the Ursuline convent listed in Kelly's had in fact been registered with them. The nuns, I was told, had moved to London after religious education was banned in France. If young Eric had been taught at a convent, as he said he had, it was to this Catholic convent run by French Ursulines, which could well explain his overt hostility towards Catholicism. (He recalled as a child helping to make up stories about nuns being raped and murdered.)

Next stop Eastbourne Library, where the local history section did not disappoint. It held reports of the Eastbourne Workhouse (not far from St Cyprian's) showing Mrs Wilkes (the formidable 'Flip'), the school's part-owner and head, listed as a Guardian. From memoirs kept in a bulging

file on the school, I saw that a boy said to have bullied young Blair was called Burton (the name Orwell often used when tramping around spikes) and that a bad-tempered Maths teacher at the school was called Ellis (the name he gave to an equally unstable character in *Burmese Days*). The use of these particular names for a vagrant and a racist villain exemplifies one of Orwell's declared 'great motives for writing' — revenge!

Living at Notting Hill Gate, I often pass Mall Chambers and No 22 Portobello Road. Now I wanted to locate the home of Aunt Nellie Limousin who had also lived in the neighbourhood. Ida Blair's address book (also in the Orwell Archive) locates Nellie at 195 Ladbroke Grove. At the local history section of Kensington Central Library, combing through old street directories, electoral rolls and rate records, I finally discovered that Nellie had lived there from 1911.

> Nellie Limousin and the Pankhursts enjoying themselves after a demonstration  
*Lydnell*



In her top-floor flat she is supposed to have held a literary salon at which Humphrey Dakin, Eric's brother-in-law, claimed to have met G.K. Chesterton, and where Jacintha Buddicom reported Eric saying he had met the socialist and children's author E. Nesbit. An Esperantist contact sent me a photograph of Nellie posing with Sylvia Pankhurst and friends on the Sphinx which stood on the Thames Embankment between 1900 and 1909. (Sadly, Nellie's face is obscured by her hat and the picture was considered too poor to go into my book. But it offers further proof that she moved in radical circles.) I then found that Conrad Noel (a good friend of Eric's, according to one of his ILP friends) was at that time curate of nearby St Mary's, Paddington Green, and certainly himself knew Sylvia Pankhurst. What is more, he spent his spare time visiting spikes and workhouses dressed as a tramp, which opened the fascinating possibility that Eric had picked up the idea of roughing it around the doss-houses from Noel. Later, as the revolutionary vicar of Thaxted, Noel flew the red flag above his church, a story incorporated into Robert Shaw's absorbing novel, *The Flag*.

The records challenge the 'established' version of Orwell's contacts with Nellie and his leaving London for Paris. The previously unquestioned story was that Eric, returning from Burma, had disembarked at Marseilles and visited Nellie who was then living in Paris. Then in the spring of 1928 he had returned to stay with her there. The Kensington records tell a different story — that Nellie was paying rates on her 195 Ladbroke Grove until 1 April 1928, so was still living there when Eric went to lodge in Portobello Road from the beginning of that year. Furthermore, Ruth Pitter remembered being taken by Eric to Nellie's flat to have dinner with her and what she called 'some old Anarchist', presumably the Esperantist Eugene Adam.

So from the records we know that Nellie was living in London when Eric returned from Burma and that he followed her to Paris shortly after she departed to work there for Adam. The only

witness we have who knew Adam and Nellie in Paris (Louis Bannier, interviewed by Steve Wadhams), stressed that Nellie, an enthusiastic Esperantist, went to Paris to work for Adam, not to marry him as had previously been claimed. Adam did marry her later but only before embarking on a hazardous world tour and wanting to insure she inherited his pension in the event of his death — which did in fact occur during his travels. Eric, as we know, stayed briefly with Nellie and Eugene before moving to the Rue du Pot de Fer. Nellie was to become his closest female relation after his mother. She also gave her second name, Kate, to the goat the Blairs kept at Wallington.

Eric always claimed that Eton had no influence on him whatsoever. But in *Burmese Days* he has John Flory reflecting that ‘The chief virtue of the great public schools (with their traditions of High Anglicanism, cricket and Latin verses)...[is]...their atmosphere of literary scholarship...and...masters...the kind from whom one absorbs wisdom unawares.’ This suggested to me that probably much that made Eric tick was to be found at Eton. More in hope than in expectation I wrote asking to visit the College.

Fortunately I was referred to Michael Meredith, the Eton Librarian, who invited me to see what records the College held on one of its famous alumni. Meredith is a most unusual man who brings an immense enthusiasm to whatever he does. He placed in front of me every conceivable record in which Blair is named – College Annals, the *Eton Chronicle*, ASF Gow’s mark-books, and various ephemeral publications to which he contributed. It was all uncannily revealing. For example, articles in the *Eton Chronicle* strongly suggest the sometimes quirky essays he later contributed to *Tribune*, and the satirical cast of his ephemeral contributions and the rebellious attitude he and Cyril Connolly adopted towards the College Officer Training Corps, foreshadow his later skeptical attitude towards policing in Burma. The ‘Tory Anarchist’ may have been born at St Cyprian’s, as Connolly hints, but was certainly fully-fledged by the time he reached Eton. After visiting the College daily for around three months I was convinced that Blair’s time there was an important key to understanding a good many aspects of the man Orwell.

Sir Steven Runciman had spoken to me in London about Lawrence Durrell whom he had known in 1945. This time we met at his ‘castle’ near Lockerbie. There, aged 97 and still the epitome of Eton charm, he kindly gave me tea, and afterwards, during a longish interview, told me that the ‘received’ story of him and Blair making an image of a boy out of soap, was inaccurate. Because the perpetrator of this false account (Christopher Hollis) had failed to correct it, as he had promised to do, it had remained in circulation. Runciman’s ‘corrected’ version was that after a boy had insulted him, Blair suggested making a wax effigy and spearing it with pins. Runciman thought that too drastic so they broke off the leg. Later, to their horror, the boy broke his leg, and shortly after that he died. At first reluctant to name the boy, he wrote later to inform me that it was Philip Yorke. Both he and Blair were convinced they had killed Yorke and even at his advanced age Runciman told me that he still felt extremely guilty about what they had done. With his heightened sense of guilt, one can easily imagine how Orwell would have felt, something hinted at in his subsequent writings.\*

In 2000, through Michael Meredith, I also met Robbie Watkins, the young contemporary of Blair’s mentioned in his scurrilous mock-advertisement in the Eton ephemeral *College Days* as the subject of ‘overfond’ attentions of John Crace, the Master-in-College. Watkins was 95, a

gentle 'Mr Chips' who had spent his working life teaching at Harrow. Like Runciman, he was happy to talk, and from him I discovered that Blair's tyrannical 'fagmaster' at Eton was Godfrey Verrall, and I was told more about Marjoribanks, the sadistic School Captain. (An unpleasantly snobbish 'Verrall' shows up in *Burmese Days*, and the debauched Old Etonian 'M' in *Down and Out* strongly suggests the cruel School Captain.) Watkins recalled Blair making cheese in his room, and spoke revealingly about the atmosphere of the College and the masters who taught them — Crace, Alington, Macnaghton, Gow and Huxley, and not least the great 'Monty' James.

During Blair's Eton years the Great War rumbled on. Another 'old fact' needing re-examination was the story (which Richard Rees told Stansky & Abrahams came to him from Orwell) that his father had spent his soldiering years tending mules in Marseilles. Richard Blair's army service record (held at the National Archive at Kew) told a different story. The first interesting point was that prior to volunteering for France he had been a member of the Territorial Army in Henley. Secondly, he did not spend the war in Marseilles. He volunteered for the 51st (Ranchi) Indian Labour Company and for six months (from November 1917 to May 1918) served 'in the field' on the Western Front, meaning 'within the sound of guns'. On 2 June 1918, he joined the Indian Royal Artillery at the Advanced Base Depot in Rouen. It was only at the end of July (three and a half months before the war's end) that he had been transferred to the Royal Artillery at its Marseilles Base Camp, and then on 30 July 1919 to the 20th Army Auxiliary Horse Company at Rouen, preparing for demobilization. So Arthur's war service had been rather more active and dignified than was previously supposed. The 'mules' story may have been Eric's way of mocking his old man out of a sense of frustration that his elderly father had been to war while he sat at home, too young to fight.

Scanning the biography of Somerset Maugham I noticed that he had passed through Mandalay in 1922 where Blair, by then a probationary policeman there, can hardly have missed him, probably when he visited the Gymkhana Club. From *The Road to Wigan Pier* we know that he had read *On a Chinese Screen* (1922) which includes a story of an execution, of which his essay 'A Hanging' carries distinct echoes. Maugham's influence, as we know, was something Orwell was perfectly happy to admit.

Blair's Burmese days look somewhat different when you realize that there he found mixed-race cousins, and uncles who had enjoyed liaisons with local women. His amusing verse about the Burmese prostitute added to his comments about the loveliness of Burmese women, and the behaviour of John Flory in *Burmese Days*, seem to offer persuasive evidence that he paid for sex, frequented brothels and kept a Burmese mistress, as his great uncle Frank had done before him. He was, after all, declared 'a disgrace to Eton College' by one of his superiors.

**Paris:** Crick dismissed Barbusse's *Monde* as 'short-lived' but, copies at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* show that it ran for seven years — a lively, highly respectable and stylish left-wing weekly, whose contributors included Dos Passos, Herman Mann, Roger Martin Du Gard, Ortega y Gasset, Diego Rivera and Madame Sun Yat Sen. Young Blair should have been honoured to appear in such company. From Louis Bannier's interview and from Esperantist informants, I discovered more about Eugene Adam, his run-in with the Stalinists and his impassioned arguments with Blair who, in 1928 at least, sounds to have been distinctly pro-Communist.

The Hôpital Cochin is no longer the wretched place it was in Blair's day. The authorities there kindly provided me with his medical record which bears his hospital number — 3058. This otherwise trifling scrap of information acquires new and sinister significance on rereading the scene in 'How the Poor Die' in which a grim fellow-patient pronounces 'Numero 57' as Blair ('Numero 58') sees that the emaciated man in the bed opposite has finally expired. A 1920s map of Paris shows the hospital backing onto the mental asylum of St Anne's and La Santé Prison, the Paris home of the guillotine. The hideousness of the old institution is further intensified by Camus' description of it as 'the barracks of poverty and illness...its walls drip with the filthy humidity that belongs to misfortune.' Its soulless ambience, as captured by Orwell, clearly foreshadows that of the Ministry of Truth, and the little operating room from which 'dreadful screams were said to issue' sounds uncannily like Room 101 in embryo.

**Southwold:** The Peters brothers, Richard and Maurice, whom Blair supervised in Southwold in the early 30s, had both been interviewed by Crick but were very happy to talk again about their old 'tutor'. Richard, who, strangely enough, had once been my philosophy professor, came up with one story not recorded by Crick. During his father's absence (he was a policeman in India) old Richard Blair came chasing after his mother, and whenever they saw him approaching their cottage, the boys and their mother hid behind the sofa till he went away. Eric and his father, it seems, were not so very unlike. Maurice, a retired Naval Intelligence officer, thought Crick (who failed to use his testimony) had a left-wing axe to grind, and ignored what he had to say because he regarded Orwell as an anti-Communist rather than a socialist. He told me that in 1935 he had visited Booklover's Corner to consult Eric about joining the Navy, and the 'pacifist' Eric told him it was a very good idea. Perhaps it was the spirit of the good Captain Horatio Blair speaking through him.

**Frays College:** I visited Uxbridge to find the school where Blair taught in 1933 and met one of his ex-Frays College pupils who told me how he had later met 'Mr Blair' onboard a ship bound for Morocco and gave me a copy of the passenger list. He mentioned that one of Blair's colleagues at Frays, Henry Stapley, was still alive and living in Chesterfield. I travelled north to see him. Henry, who was 86 and blind, had taught Maths and Geography at the College and had some wonderful stories to tell about his 'Bolshy' colleague Blair — how the man who appointed him was a Mosley Fascist called Donovan, and how, openly flouting the rules, he had smoked his pungent tobacco at the refectory high table. Once, Stapley and his wife invited him to dinner and were presented with a book called *Down and Out in Paris and London* which he was pleased to announce he had written. 'But this is by George Orwell,' said Henry. Blair smiled and said, 'That's me.'

**New York:** Michael Sayers, who had managed to evade all previous biographers, I found on an old membership list of the Writers' Guild. In 1935, Sayers, as most Orwelleans know, shared the same flat as Heppenstall and Blair at the time of the shooting-stick incident. I was amused to find him referring to his friend 'Eric Orwell', reflecting the fact that the transformation from Blair to Orwell was still at an early stage. I had to fly to New York to get his story — a complicated journey and a difficult interview, but well worth the effort. Sayers told me how he found Orwell reading Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden*, trying to memorize them then copying passages from memory, attempting to create a new and simpler style, a wonderful vignette which also brings the partially-evolved Eric Orwell wonderfully alive.

**A Spanish Mystery:** My understanding of Orwell's time in Spain was illuminated by three discoveries. One was a letter I chanced upon in the Archive, sent from the ILP office in Barcelona by Ethel MacDonald to Eileen Blair, after she and Eric had escaped back to Wallington in July 1937. In that letter I was struck to see the name 'David Crook'. In 1986, visiting China for the *Observer*, I interviewed a number of Western communists who had chosen to live there. Among these was a David Crook who taught at Beijing University and who told me that he had gone to China after fighting in Spain, inspired by Edgar Snow's book *Red Star Over China*. During the Cultural Revolution Crook had been held in solitary confinement for over five years but was entirely without rancour, saying more or less that the Chinese leadership knew best. He was obviously a deeply committed Party man. Could this be the David Crook mentioned in the letter to Eileen? I called one of Crook's sons who worked for the BBC World Service. When his father was in Spain, I asked, had he known Orwell? 'Oh yes,' he said, 'He spied on him for the Comintern.' I had, it seemed, stumbled across a major Orwell story. In *Homage to Catalonia* he had written about the atmosphere of deep suspicion he had found on his return from the front to Barcelona, where no one could tell exactly who was spying on whom. Now, here, it seemed, was the very man who had had Orwell in his sights. Crook's son referred me to a woman in California who had been ghosting his father's autobiography. Generously she emailed me the story as Crook had told it to her on tape — his recruitment to the NKVD, his training by, among others, Trotsky's assassin Raimon Mercador, his being sent to Barcelona to spy on John McNair (the ILP's man there) and the Blairs.

Next I wanted to see Eric's elusive KGB file, rumoured to be somewhere in Moscow. In his book *In the Heart of the Fire: The British in the Spanish Civil War*, James K. Hopkins mentions having seen Orwell's file. He had no detailed notes on it, he told me, but referred me to the New York's Tamiment Library which held a number of KGB files on Westerners. I contacted them. Sadly the library only had files on Americans who had served in Spain with the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. But to my delight they had the file on David Crook who, although born in London's East End, had been recruited to the Party as a student at New York's Columbia University. Since he had held an American visa, his file was there among the Americans. A copy duly arrived and there were Crook's reports to his handlers in Barcelona after being arrested on a trumped-up charge to preserve his cover as a Trotskyist sympathizer. He had, he said, got to know the Blairs and McNair after meeting Eileen Blair at a café. While the ILP offices were deserted at lunchtime he had photographed their documents and taken the film to the Russia embassy. He spied separately on Eileen at her hotel and reported that he was 95% sure that she and George Kopp, Eric's commander, were intimately involved. Astonishingly, I discovered that the Party contact to whom he passed information was code-named 'O'Brien'! When the Blairs later visited Kopp in prison they found Crook in the same cell, and Eileen promised to forward his mail and keep him supplied with cigarettes. (Crook, his file revealed, had in fact been imprisoned with Kopp in order to spy on him.)

Tamiment also sent the file of another shady figure, David Wickes. He, too, had spied on the Blairs for Communist spymasters in Albacete. His file contained a letter to Eileen revealing that he had made overtures to her and pleading with her to understand him. And there was more. Looking for back-numbers of the *Daily Worker* at the Marx Memorial Library in Clerkenwell I dug out a report by the British Communist commissar Walter Tapsell about meetings with British POUMists on leave in Barcelona, indicating that some, including Blair, were willing to defect to the Communist-led International Brigade. Only when the Communists turned on the POUM did they change their minds. None of this had found its way into the Orwell story previously, but it does demonstrate that if Orwell was paranoid, as some claim, he had good reason to be. It also

throws light on the indictment of the Blairs and McNair for treason, unearthed in 1988, which evidently drew on reports from both Wickes and Crook.

**BBC Archives:** In his 2001 biography, Jeffrey Meyers lamented that no one had yet seen the reports on Orwell by his BBC superiors. The first day I visited the Corporation's Written Archives at Caversham, the Archivist seemed quite excited to see me. 'You're in luck,' he said. 'The Orwell files have been released to us only today.' They were brought to me and I spent the day gorging myself on what is there. He was not, I discover, first choice for the post — Stephen Spender and two others had already been considered. On his application form he mentioned having 'lately done one or two odd jobs for the Ministry of Information', and there in a separate file were all those glowing annual reports from his Head of Department as well as reports of others trying either to get him fired or brought to heel. (So, ten years before the files were officially unveiled with a flourish of trumpets, they had been there for anyone to see and make use of.)

**Cambridge:** Celia Paget/Kirwan/Goodman happened to be a good friend of Cecily Mackworth, an elderly friend of mine in Paris, and mentioning her to Celia brought an invitation to tea. I visited her in Cambridge on three occasions. On my second visit she kindly agreed to let me see the diary of her cousin, Inez Holden, also a friend of Cecily. It was particularly revealing. In one entry she described how, after 'a charming day' at the zoo, 'I went back and had tea at his [Orwell's] flat, and then just as he was dressed up in his Home Guard uniform and ready to go off to his Parade he more or less "pounced" (White's Club phrase). I was surprised by this, by the intensity and urgency.' Next day, he invited her to tea and 'explained the situation at home', which she found 'helpful and clarifying'. It speaks volumes about Orwell's attitude to casual sex and to the attitude of upper-crust women like Inez to being 'pounced on'.

**Callow End:** Following clues and picking up associations are all part of the thrill of biographical research. Writers after all pick up names and places and incidents wherever they can find them. During the war Blair took a fishing holiday at Callow End in Worcestershire. I had noticed that one of Blair's Eton contemporaries was William Lygon, the 8th Lord Beauchamp, who lived at Madresfield, the grand riverside manor at Callow End which stands at the confluence of the Rivers Teme and Severn — excellent for fishing. In his wartime diary Orwell mentions drinking at the Blue Bell Inn (often closed due to a beer shortage) and staying at Beauchamp Court Farm, itself part of the Beauchamp Estate. Furthermore the Beauchamps were childhood friends of the Yorkes, and July 1942 was the twenty-fifth anniversary of Philip Yorke's untimely death. Perhaps for Eric this was a pilgrimage of atonement.

I sat in the Blue Bell trying to conjure up the ghost of the 39 year-old Orwell, joining the locals for a pint. They had never heard of Orwell or his novels, but they talked about fishing, about Madresfield and Beauchamp Court Farm. One told me that the ex-Mayor of Malvern, Rachel Clapton, had worked at the farm as a wartime land-girl and had written an article about it for the local paper. When I contacted her she told me about the farmer, William Phillips, his wife Florence, and the farmhouse, and how well they had treated their workers. I drove from the pub down a lane to Madresfeld but found no one at home and the front door open. I ventured inside shouting 'Hullo'. No answer, but along the river a group of youngsters were playing loud music, laughing and chattering — probably young Lygons. I didn't invite myself to their party but retreated to the car. Driving back along the lane to Callow End I noticed an ancient brick barn with the date of its building inset in dark bricks in a red brick wall — 1894!

**Polemics and Pistols:** Another figure hidden in the biographical shadows was Rodney Phillips who funded *Polemic*, the magazine to which Orwell contributed between 1945 and 1947, and for whom Celia Kirwan once worked. While talking to Celia's friend, Janetta Parladé, Phillips's name came up and she told me that he lived in Spain and gave me his phone number. Back home, I called him and found him surprisingly ready to answer questions. Crick had claimed that, becoming bored with *Polemic*, he had abandoned it to invest his money into 'revues with showgirls in them'. Phillips resented this and very nearly sued Crick for defamation. He had pulled out of *Polemic*, he told me, after becoming exasperated over having to settle the huge lunch-bills run up by the magazine's editor Humphrey Slater. Then, as an afterthought, he said, 'Oh, by the way, I sold Orwell a pistol — a Luger I'd brought back from the war. I think I sold it to him for £5.' I was taken aback. This extraordinary piece of information fitted neatly together with several other facts about Orwell — his fear of being targeted by the Communists, especially following the assassination of Trotsky; Anthony Powell having found him during the war armed with what he called 'a Bowie knife'; and Hemingway's claim that on his journalistic visit to Paris in 1945 Orwell had begged the loan of a pistol. Then, while on Jura, he had asked his friend Michael Meyers to obtain ammunition for him in London, and Susan Watson mentioned him keeping a gun behind the door at Barnhill. All this made more intelligible his suspicion of David Holbrook, then Watson's boyfriend, when he learned he was a Party member. After all, Trotsky's assassin had got into his house through a friendship with his daughter.

**Last Chapter:** David Astor told me how Orwell was refused burial by the vicar at Cliveden (his family seat), and how he had then approached the vicar at his local church at Sutton Courtenay, Gordon Dunstan. I visited Dunstan (elderly and blind, the Emeritus Professor in Theology at Exeter University), who told me how he persuaded one reluctant member of his churchwardens' committee, a farmer, to agree to the burial by showing him a copy of *Animal Farm*. He also pointed out that a family of gypsies lies buried close to Orwell. Since the old Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith is also a near churchyard neighbour of his, the setting seemed a suitably appropriate one for such a man.

**End Note:** There were other serendipitous moments: stumbling across Eric's revealing letters to Brenda Salkeld; finding the children's author Mary Treadgold, who had worked in the next cubicle to Orwell for the BBC at 200 Oxford Street; being shown Roger Senhouse's diary with its vivid description of Orwell in a state of collapse after climbing the stairs to his office at Secker and Warburg in 1945, and getting a glimpse of the dying Orwell in his hospital room through the eyes of Dr Howard Nicholson, the junior to consultant Andrew Morland. So I hope that future biographers of Orwell are not put off by the tired old question, 'Can there be anything more to be discovered about a much written-about character such as this?' There jolly well is, as even my limited experience demonstrates. New material continues to emerge, as Orwell's recently-released MI5 files, Dione Venables' revelations about Jacintha Buddicom and the youthful Eric, and recent discoveries by Peter Davison, demonstrate.

Biographies are on-going debates; none is definitive. Think of the many forms life-stories can take and the many mysteries remaining. For example, does a recording of Orwell's voice exist anywhere in the world? What did Eric write in his letters from Burma? What precisely did he do for the Ministry of Information between 1940 and 1941? What did Eileen contribute to his last two novels? What exactly happened between Sonia and George at Cranham? How did an unbeliever get permission to marry a lapsed Catholic on his deathbed by special license in

accordance with the rites of the Church of England? Watch this space, and keep your eyes peeled for the next Orwell biography; it's bound to come along sometime.

### Footnotes

1. Boswell on Johnson and Max Brod on Kafka are among the rare exceptions. [See Dione Venables diary entry for 10 August 1991 re Henley Regatta incident.]

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