

GEORGE ORWELL

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THE DISAPPEARANCES OF GEORGE ORWELL

*All writers are vain, selfish and lazy,
and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery.
Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle,
like a long bout of some painful illness.
One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on
by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.*

--George Orwell

George Orwell's life is a story of leave-takings and disappearances, some forced, some chosen. He put it a bit differently once, saying that "any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats"; but since he saw every one of his journeys as ending in some form of defeat, perhaps my sentence and his amount to the same thing.

George Orwell was born in 1903 in Bengal. His father was what we would now call a dope dealer and what was then called a British civil servant in the then-legal opium trade. It's never been clear why his mother, the flamboyant, intelligent Ida, married the rigid, unimaginative Richard, a man 18 years older than she. They had what seems to pass for love in middle-class English marriages, a careful consideration of each other, and an even more carefully kept distance. ("They had separate rooms and separate interests but got along quite amiably," according to Bernard Crick in *George Orwell: A Life* [1980].) When Orwell was a year old, his mother moved with him and his sister to England. He didn't see his father again for years. It was Orwell's first important leave-taking.

What had disappeared from his early years was any male influence whatsoever. Those years were spent in a female household – Ida, his sisters and Ida’s friends – in which men were usually and playfully referred to as “brutes,” as in, “Do you know what those brutes have done?” You don’t need much psychology to see that there was no model in Orwell’s childhood for what the therapists call “a healthy relationship,” nor was there any way that he could think well of himself as a man. On the one hand he was his mother’s protégé, on the other he was one of “those brutes.” When his father arrived back in his life Orwell was about 7, and his father was an old retiree who didn’t want to be bothered with children -- so the solitude of Orwell’s inner life was made complete.

How terrible was that feeling? How did Orwell perceive the inner lives of those around him? His novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is structured around the dreams of his alter ego, the character Winston. They are dreams about Winston’s mother: “His mother was sitting in some place deep down beneath him, with his young sister in her arms... He was out in the light and air while they were being sucked down to death, and they were down there *because* he was up here. He knew it and they knew it and he could see the knowledge on their faces.”

In fact, just two pages before the end of the novel and the final squashing of Orwell’s spirit, his last feeling of *life* is a fleeting childhood memory of the few afternoons when he and his mother were ever happy together. The memory floods him with well-being, but he has been tortured beyond a place where he can endure well-being. He pushes the memory of his mother from his mind, and it is that act that prepares him, one page later, for his final downfall: a sudden outpouring of love for Big Brother. The structure of Orwell’s greatest work (a novel in which, he is careful to emphasize, people are afraid of their children) shows a staggering depth of family pain.

Orwell’s day-to-day life with his family ended at the age of 8 when, like most little middle-class English boys of his day, he was sent off to boarding school. When Orwell was 1 his father and the environment of his birth had disappeared; when he was 8, his mother and all the trappings of home disappeared. He hated the boarding school as few people have ever been given to hate anything. In a sense he learned how to hate there – again, very much like Winston, showing as many outward signs as he could of going

along with the program but not hiding his feelings well. It's not surprising that early on, at this boarding school, Orwell became a bed-wetter.

"Boyhood is the age of disgust," he would write of those years. During the time he wet the bed he was shamed, yelled at and beaten. (In those days, beatings were considered a cure for bed-wetting.) It's significant that these memories came back to him most vividly when he was writing *Nineteen Eight-Four*, in the period directly after his wife's death. He took time off from writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to write a long autobiographical essay on his boarding school days, "Such, Such Were the Days." His biographers like to quibble about whether or not the essay is factually true, or what's true and what isn't; what's reasonably certain is that the essay expresses the truth of his *experience* of the facts. To be beaten for bed-wetting gave him "a sense of desolate loneliness and helplessness, of being locked up not only in a hostile world but in a world of good and evil where the rules were such that it was actually not possible for me to keep them. I knew that bed-wetting was a) wicked and b) outside my control... It was possible, therefore, to commit a sin without knowing that you committed it, without wanting to commit it, and without being able to avoid it. Sin was not necessarily something that you did; it might be something that happened to you."

These feelings and thoughts, inarticulate in his boyhood but steadily more clear as he grew older, finally caused Orwell to identify with the causes of the poor and the helpless. I am more than suspicious about all the therapeutic jargon floating around these days about "inner children," for many boys had experiences like Orwell's but only one of them grew up to be George Orwell; but in his case it is at least clear that his passion for fighting the strong in the name of the weak came not only from an intellectual conviction but from the marrow of his experience, for he knew what it was to depend for mercy on people and a system that didn't know the meaning of the word.

From a boarding school for little boys he earned a partial scholarship to a boarding school for boys in their adolescence, probably the most famous high school in the world: Eton. Here he became a George Orwell we can recognize. In a time when it was automatic to speak of one's parents with respect, a schoolmate remembered him as "the first person I personally had ever herd running down his own father and mother." (The man added, "Even more outrageous [were] jeering comments that he would

cheerfully offer in public on the appearance and get-up of the parents of other boys when they visited the school.”) He impressed another mate by coldly killing a bird with a slingshot. “He was the only person I knew who might have done such a shocking thing.” On one vacation, his major amusement was the slaughter of rats. In the waning days of the First World War he insisted loudly that the war would make England a second-rate power, and from the moment he got to Eton he studied only enough to pass. (This being Eton, the minimum for passing was a fairly complete knowledge of Greek, Latin and French, to begin with.) It was at Eton that he also began the habit of describing himself to himself as he went through his day in a kind of running mental narrative – a mild form of schizophrenia, a severe form of distancing, or the beginning of his discipline as a writer, take your pick. (It’s worth noting that virtually all this material is left out of Michael Sheldon’s new *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*; you can read it in Bernard Crick’s far superior book, *Orwell: A Life*.)

What I’ve described is a young man whom an alert parent would nowadays cart off to the nearest therapist, perhaps drug, and even, if the parents are especially frightened, commit to a hospital. Orwell was left entirely to his own devices and, in fact, looked back on this time as his happiest.

Upon his graduation from Eton in his 18th year, he was considered by himself, his family and his society, a man. From now on, *he* would decide when and how to disappear. As he would for the rest of his life, he went about it in a rather dramatic way. He joined the British Imperial Police and spent the next five years as a cop in Burma.

It was, in every way, an extraordinary move. Schoolmates at Eton say Orwell had often spoken of returning to the East. He had no conscious memories of his one year there, but something deep in him wanted to return to where his first leave-taking had been impelled on him. On another level, the boy who had always been powerless, and had raged at his powerlessness, would now become a white cop possessing immeasurable authority over a colored population. In his early 20s he was suddenly in the position of being the highest police authority in provinces where the population numbered in the tens of thousands. Given his upbringing and training, all the psychological and circumstantial elements were in place for the creation of a vicious fascist monster. At the very least he

was ripe for the fate of most cops: developing an unfeeling tolerance for the brutality of others. It was the test of his life.

More than his novels, more than his essays, George Orwell's greatest achievement was that a situation designed to bring out the worst in anyone instead inspired in him a mature social conscience, the beginnings of political rage, and an absolute and unrelenting determination to be a writer. Surely he could fight so hard and effectively against totalitarianism in his work because he was made of the stuff totalitarians are made of and he'd transcended that fate. There would be terrible flaws in the man, and many blind spots, but the integrity he crated in himself through his experience in Burma would become the bedrock of some of the most potent writing of our century.

At what price, and to whom? What really happened to him Burma? No one knows for sure. The contribution of Michael Sheldon (an otherwise lax and negligent biographer) is a great deal of new information on Orwell's postings and duties. From the ages of 19 to 23, he investigated many murders and robberies, made many arrests, and administered the comings and goings of many people.

He also conducted many interrogations and some of them apparently involved beatings, though whether he oversaw or administered torture is not known. (It's unlikely. As what we would call a "senior" at Eton he had the right to beat underclassmen for infractions; it was more than a right, in fact; it was expected of him as a common practice; but there's no record or memory that he ever thrashed anyone.)

All we know of how Orwell felt in Burma is his dark, angry novel against imperialism, *Burmese Days* (1934), and two of the greatest essays in our language, "A Hanging" (1931) and "Shooting an Elephant" (1934). They tell a great deal about injustice but they give no clue as to Orwell's more intimate changes. For instance, the 19-year-old Etonian who went to Burma had never displayed any overtly self-destructive behavior. The 24-year-old writer who returned from Burma in the summer of 1927 would be – well, "self-destructive" is a mild term for it. He would die in 1950 at the age of 46 (and looking at least 15 years older) because of his unrelenting attack on his own health.

The Orwell who returned from Burma had suffered from serious lung trouble since infancy, but would now chain-smoke the harshest tobacco even when coughing up blood. Catching colds, bronchitis and pneumonia so regularly that his friends came to take it for granted, he would expose himself to the chilliest, dampest weather in just a thin coat (sometimes no coat), not only for hours but for days. In Spain, as a volunteer against fascism in 1937, some of his comrades were afraid to go on patrol with him because he took wild chances. (Several of them, independently of each other, described him with the same word in interviews decades later: “fearless.”) In fact, in Spain he was shot through the throat by making a reckless, rookie’s mistake: sticking his head above the barricade when he was backlit by the rising sun – a perfect target. There’s no record of him exhibiting any such behavior as a boy and adolescent, when you’d expect it; it’s only after he comes back from Burma. No one knows why. On his return he began compulsively both to write and to kill himself. One project was conscious, the other seemingly unconscious, but he succeeded at both.

The remainder of his life can be told as a progression of disappearances. Not long after his return he began wearing tramps’ clothes and going out among the destitute and the hoboes for days and weeks at a time – disappearing from his family, his friends, his environment. Out of this came his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). With it, he even left the name he’d been born with: Eric Arthur Blair became George Orwell. Writing a book a year, and many reviews, he had all the makings of a loose, intellectually active, slightly bohemian writer’s life in London, but he soon disappeared from that and rented a cottage in the village of Wallington (a house that could not give him the warmth and facilities his health needed). Now that he was starting to be recognized as a writer, he opened a village store and tried to become a storekeeper, though he never stopped writing.

His fondness for disappearing seemed to infect the woman with whom he fell in love virtually at first sight and to whom he proposed marriage on their first date. Eileen O’Shaughnessy was about to get a degree in educational psychology, but left just before exams to disappear with him into Wallington. Just six months later, Orwell disappeared from her too, by going to Spain, but she didn’t let him get away with it; she followed

within weeks. Only in his writing did Orwell become more and more present, more and more grounded.

His declining health, his difficult marriage and the strictures of life during the war kept George Orwell pretty much in place until 1945. That year he became world famous with the publication of *Animal Farm*, a book in which he shows how the statement “All men are created equal” can be twisted into “All men are created equal, but some are more equal than others” – and shows this so clearly and simply that even children understand. 1945 was also the year his wife died. So Orwell tried to disappear from both his memories and his fame by moving north to a desolate place called Jura. Even on his deathbed he attempted a final disappearance, asking in his will that no one write his biography.

Toward the end of *The Road to Wagon Pier* (1937), a journalistic book about the plight of English miners and socialism, there’s a passage that I think best gives a sense of what it might have been like to sit across from George Orwell and hear him speak as a friend:

I am a degenerate modern semi-intellectual who would die if I did not get my early morning cup of tea and my *New Statesman* every Friday. Clearly I do not, in a sense, ‘want’ to return to a simpler, harder, probably agricultural way of life [as he thought might be necessary for society to survive]. In the same sense, I don’t ‘want’ to cut down my drinking, to pay my debts, to take enough exercise, to be faithful to my wife, etc., etc. But in another and more permanent sense I do want these things, and perhaps in the same sense I want a civilization in which ‘progress’ is not definable as making the world safe for little fat men.

It is the voice of George Orwell, the voice on the page, that does not disappear.

LOST SOUL

“I thought of a rather cruel trick I once played on a wasp. He was sucking jam on my plate, and I cut him in half. He paid no attention, merely went on with his meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of his severed esophagus. Only when he tried to fly away did he grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to him.” George Orwell wrote that in

1940, while reviewing some now forgotten book for some long defunct magazine. The passage is pure Orwell: candor, humor, a dash of sadism, and then the turning of memory into metaphor when he adds: “It is the same with modern man. The thing that has been cut away is his soul...”

Orwell loved justice with a kind of aesthetic passion, and was harder on himself than on anyone else, so he might have appreciated knowing that after half a century the wasp has played his cruel trick back in the form of the new “authorized” biography by Michael Shelden. There is something, well, *Orwellian* about the way Shelden has cut the soul from Orwell.

Orwell may have anticipated such treatment when he requested, in his will, that no one write his biography. A futile hope. To date there’ve been three: a two-volume set by Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *The Unknown Orwell* (1974) and *Orwell: The Transformation* (1979); *George Orwell: A Life* (1980), by Bernard Crick; and now Michael Shelden’s *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*. Both Stansky and Abrahams and Crick had to struggle against Orwell’s defensive second wife, Sonia, whose ideas about what should and should not be revealed were as quirky as they were fierce. She denied Stansky and Abrahams access to the Orwell Archive and permission to quote his work, though they wrote about him warmly, even generously. Sonia chose Crick herself, then tried to stop publication of his book and managed to suppress most information about the sexual life of both Orwell and his first wife, Eileen.

Sonia Orwell died in 1980, and now the Orwell estate has given Michael Shelden complete access and a free hand. As you’d expect, Shelden’s come up with a lot of new information, especially about Orwell’s years in Burma; and he’s the first to be able to say directly what Crick implied so clearly, that during the Spanish Civil War Eileen had a romantic attachment (Shelden never comes out and calls it an affair) with Orwell’s friend and battalion commander, the mysterious Georges Kopp.

But much of Shelden’s new information is merely supplemental detail about what’s already known. The surprises in his book aren’t what he reveals but what he leaves out. Inexplicably, Shelden refuses to discuss many crucial aspects of Orwell’s life that have already been broached by Stansky and Abrahams and by Crick. In this he bears

a creepy resemblance to the ministry of Information in Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where history is altered by the simple subtraction of facts.

For instance, look how Shelden treats the most tragic and shameful event of Orwell's life, the death of his wife Eileen in 1945. She was only 39 years old, but had been in noticeably fragile health for some time. In *George Orwell: A Life*, Bernard Crick spends eight pages documenting that Eileen had been suffering gynecological problems for several years; that she'd known about tumors in her uterus for at least a year; that she put off getting a hysterectomy because she didn't want her health problems to interfere with the adoption of the son Orwell so badly wanted; that she'd become so dispirited she felt guilty spending the money ("What worries me is that I really don't think I'm worth the money"); *and* that she'd put off the operation for so long because Orwell didn't *approve* of hysterectomies.

Orwell's feelings were so strong on the subject that his wife waited till he was away in Europe reporting on the last stages of the war so she could have her hysterectomy in relative peace. Only at the last minute did she write to inform him. "Yesterday I had a phase of thinking that it was really outrageous to spend your money on an operation of which I know you do not approve," she wrote. But she had waited too long, gotten too weak, and, in her guilt about the money, had chosen a cheaper hospital where she couldn't get the skills available in London. While the anesthesia was being administered she had a heart attack and died on the table.

Michael Shelden, in *Orwell: The Authorized Biography*, never indicates there was any conflict. He never quotes or refers to the pitiful sentence in which Eileen testifies that the hysterectomy had become what we would now call "an issue" between them. It is an incredible omission, both in itself, and because it makes it impossible to understand the erratic behavior of the remaining five years of Orwell's life – his pathetic proposals of marriage to women he hardly knew, his insistence on smoking even when coughing up blood, and his move (though he needed a drier climate for his health) north to the colder and wetter wilds of Jura, days away from medical attention and even farther away from any reminder of his 10 years with Eileen.

In the light of this sad, gruesome episode, it's tempting to dismiss Orwell with a one-sided word like "sexist," but it doesn't fit. The women he chose in his life, both as

lovers and friends, were intelligent, forceful and independent – Eileen certainly was, before her illness and other tragedies wore her down. So were most of the women he wrote, or tried to write, as characters in his fiction. Julia, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is a fierce, smart sexual rebel... now she might be recognized as England's first punk. And Orwell's 1935 novel *A Clergyman's Daughter* is an attempt to reveal how the strictures of English life stifled the spirits of women. To my knowledge, no other male author of the era anywhere in the world devoted an entire novel to such an issue. Orwell wasn't so much sexist as emotionally, even morally paralyzed – unable to face himself or anyone else in the labyrinths of gender, or of *anything* really, outside his direct concerns.

Which brings up another failing in Michael Sheldon's book: he gives little sense of George Orwell's personal style. Stansky and Abrahams, Crick, and dozens of memoirs by Orwell's circle attest to the man's inability to carry on what most people would consider a conversation. Orwell would enter a room, begin to talk, and that was that. In different periods of his life he had pet peeves about which he ranted endlessly – in the early 1930s much of his talk consisted of a tirade against the Catholic Church and against (a lifelong peeve) vegetarians. If you went with him to a pub he would order you a dark beer no matter how many times you told him you preferred lager, simply because he couldn't accept the fact that any of *his* friends could prefer lager.

Almost all George Orwell's friends were more psychologically sophisticated than he (Eileen was studying for her master's in educational psychology when she met him), and they saw that what we would all his control-freak ways masked an unbearably shy self-consciousness. After he wrote *Animal Farm* some took to calling him "Donkey George," and he seems to have enjoyed the nickname and recognized its aptness. It's clear that those who weren't infuriated by Orwell found him endearing, what with his Eton accent, his eccentric dress (old clothes that never fit his enormous frame), and the way he carried himself with a bearing that was somehow both military and monkish. Everyone saw, too, how ill he was (in fragile health from his mid-20s, always looking a decade or more older than his age), and they put up with much from him that they might have objected to in an obviously healthy person. It was all amusing, touching, and more or less harmless until the onset of Eileen's illness, when his inability to go beyond himself contributed so directly to her death.

The matter of Eileen's death is only the most shocking omission in Sheldon's biography. There are many, many others – so many that at times it seems that Bernard Crick and Michael Sheldon wrote books about two completely different people.

For instance, the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* climaxed his novel with one of the most terrifying scenes in the literature of our terrifying century: Winston's head is put into a cage; in front of his face there is a partition; behind that partition are hungry rats; Winston's torturers threaten to raise the partition and let the rats eat off his face. This is the final threat that (understandably) finally breaks him. Given the importance of that scene in the book, and the importance of that book in our century, it's amazing that Michael Sheldon makes no reference to an episode from Orwell's childhood documented by Bernard Crick:

It seems that at the age of 17, while on holiday, Orwell wrote a letter to a friend in which he described buying 'one of those big rat-traps.'

“It is rather good sport to catch a rat and then let it out and shoot it as it runs. If he gets away I think one ought to let it go and not chase it... It is also rather sport [sic] to go at nights to a cornstack with an acetylene bicycle lamp and you can dazzle the rats that are running along the side and whack at them.”

Later in life Orwell would be horrified by rats. While fighting against the fascists in the Spanish Civil War, he would even shoot one in the confines of his dugout where the reverberation sounded like an explosion and startled both sides of the line to make an unplanned attack – another incident Crick reports and Sheldon leaves out.

In fact, the chapter on the Spanish Civil War (an experience that Orwell identified as the turning point of his life) is Sheldon's weakest. Later in the book he devotes three pages to a conflict between Orwell's sister and his housekeeper, but in the chapter on Spain he gives only one page (as opposed to the five more detailed pages in Crick's book) to the most dramatic event Orwell was ever involved in, the “May Days” in Barcelona in 1937 – and on his one page, Sheldon gets his facts wrong. He writes that “Communists fired on anarchists, who fired back, and all sides seemed to be taking shots at POUM members” (the POUM was Orwell's outfit). In fact the anarchists and the POUM were allies in the street fighting and never fired on each other intentionally, as Sheldon implies.

The May Days are critical in Orwell's life because this was the event that convinced him that communism, at least as practiced in Russia, was really just totalitarian. That view seems commonplace now, but in 1937 leftists all over the world had an almost religious belief in Stalin's brand of Marxism. In that day, to be radical *and* to be against Stalin was to be isolated from both the left and the right – a brave move for a writer who had to depend on one side or the other to stay in print.

The George Orwell of Michael Sheldon's biography is a tall, bemused, stubborn eccentric who seeks out odd adventures, writes books, gets ill, and happens to leave an indelible imprint on the ideas and imagery of the 20th Century. By consistently neglecting the darker, weirder, even sinister aspects of the man's nature, Sheldon misses the drama of Orwell's life. The drama wasn't that he was a policeman in Burma, a hobo in England, and a volunteer in Spain; it wasn't even that he forged one of the great prose styles not only of the century but of the history of our language. Orwell's drama was that of a very frightened person [psychologically] who learned to write bravely; an elitist who made himself face the realities of the poor, and then used his gift to become a voice for their cause; a cruel, judgmental man who taught himself to be kind, or as kind as he could be; a man not good at loving who put himself in love's way and gave himself to it though he knew the price, for himself and others. In the last important essay of his life, written a year before he died, he said:

The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one *is* sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, that one does not push asceticism to the point where it makes friendly intercourse impossible, and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals.

Michael Sheldon discovered some new facts, but lost the man.

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