

Rob Colls, *George Orwell: English Rebel*
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FOREVER ORWELL

Eric Blair began by taking the name of England's patron saint and ended up assuming his role. 1984, when it finally arrived, was the year of St George. This way of putting it risks understating the sheer scale of Orwell's celebrity, the worldwide currency and talismanic power of his name since his death in 1950, at the age of 46. But it recalls attention to what many have said about him over the years, usually in sympathetic or admiring tones: that in him Englishness was not merely one provenance among others but a touchstone, a matter of moral constitution. Thus, Rob Colls's intellectual portrait *George Orwell: English Rebel* joins an already substantial body of commentary—his introduction lists some twenty predecessors, who themselves are only a sub-set of the much larger corpus of writing devoted to the man, the works and their afterlife. Where he differs from these is in his particular interest in Englishness, which has been his speciality as a historian over the past thirty-odd years. That too has been a busy field, and the result is a book of conspicuous learning, more than a quarter of its length given over to the scholarly apparatus. It is also, within its simple chronological scheme, a digressive book, here taking off to explore some aspect of a general situation, there pausing over some circumstance or consideration, as if wanting to find room for everything. In this, Colls is faithful to his general understanding of Englishness as a historical formation: the title of his principal work on the topic, a loose-limbed discussion ranging from the Middle Ages to the present, is an awkward, telling epitome of his position. *Identity*

of *England* (2002) finds its form by negation of the more obvious and fluent phrasings to hand in the book itself. (Omit the essentializing or stipulative *The . . .* while avoiding an easy, evasive plural or the deceptive calm of *English Identity*: national character is a singular not a plural, yet indeterminate and changeful.) Colls's understanding of Orwell is of a piece with this. 'I am not saying that Englishness is the key to Orwell . . . There is no "key" to Orwell', he writes in his Introduction, 'any more than he is a "box" to open.' But then, in a parting sentence whose placing and manner are worth noting for later consideration: 'His Englishness, though, is worth following through.'

This is the optic through which Colls reviews the familiar course of Orwell's life: private schooling and service in the Imperial Indian Police (1922–28); the rejection of Empire and return to England with the aim of becoming a writer; living hand to mouth in Paris, hop-picking and tramping in the South of England, a self-styled Tory anarchist discovers the poor (1928–31); the early novels and the decisive encounter with the North of England working class (1932–36); a socialist fighting in Spain, fighting at home, against fascism, Stalinism and war (1937–39); the herald of revolutionary patriotism (1940–43); the fabulist of political betrayal (1943–50). The turning-point in the sequence comes in 1936, and its significance, as Colls reads it, is that during his two months of fieldwork for the publishing commission that became *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell 'for the first time in his life found an England he could believe in', a popular, proletarian Englishness that would serve him as a political stimulus and test from then onwards, inspiring his wartime advocacy of revolutionary patriotism.

The test applied in two ways. It served to justify Orwell's unrelenting campaign against the left intelligentsia, whom he portrayed as a menagerie of grotesques, rootless eccentrics with a fatal weakness for abstraction and hard-wired doctrine, gullible in the face of Soviet boosterism and nihilistic in their attitude towards English institutions. Colls relays these themes in a kindred spirit, as contemptuous as Orwell if not so inventively abusive in his treatment of abstractions, systems, 'set-squares and equations', dogmas asserted in disregard of personal experience and what is 'reasonably assumed to be the case'—everything that is suggested to him by the word 'ideology'. However, he goes further and applies the test to Orwell himself. The 'ludicrous' anti-intellectualism, as he sees it, was at least in part a projection of the feelings of deracination that Orwell recognized and feared in himself. The Gordon Comstock figure in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, from 1935, the year before the journey north, can be read as George Orwell's mocking appraisal of Eric Blair the writer. The powerful appeal of the Englishness that he found in working-class Lancashire and Yorkshire lay in its promise of belonging. But this Englishness was itself sustained and made articulate by the organizational form and culture of the labour movement, its unions

and their party—which, until late in the 1930s, seemed not to feature in Orwell's political perception and reasoning.

Colls's political meridian is 1945. He concedes the ineffectuality of Labour in the later 1920s and 1930s, dismisses its purely gestural policy towards the Spanish war, and has bitter words to say about the party of recent times; but the upward path from the promulgation of the Immediate Programme in 1937, across the popular radicalization of wartime to the landslide victory in the first summer of the European peace, is numinous. Orwell's outlook was quite different. Colls chooses to make nothing of it, but *The Road to Wigan Pier* concludes with a call for the formation of a popular socialist movement based on an expanded conception of the working class (including non-manual occupations) and ready to resort to 'revolutionary' violence in the struggle against fascism, which Orwell saw as an inherent potential of industrial capitalism. His leading slogan, *Justice and Liberty!*, echoed, perhaps not accidentally, the name of the Italian resistance organization led by Carlo Rosselli, the theorist of 'liberal socialism' and soon a volunteer in the anarchist militias in Spain. It was an eclectic scheme, coming after Orwell's philippic against left intellectuals and owing much to his experience of the *marxisant* circles of the Independent Labour Party, in which he had moved for several years. Certainly there were better-judged assessments of impending probabilities. But it stands as a vivid indication of Orwell's imaginative distance from the official thought-world of the Labour Party.

Colls is correspondingly qualified in his attitude towards Orwell's Spanish period, both the fighting itself and the polemical episode that followed back in London, including *Homenaje a Cataluña*. He hates Stalin's Comintern quite as much as Orwell came to hate it, but has no positive political sympathy with the revolutionary militiamen of the POUM. He applauds the achievements of Rojo's centralized army and, resisting Orwell's claim that the Republic was turning 'fascist' in its slanderous, brutal assault on the revolutionary left, defends the Negrín government for its realism and competence in desperate circumstances. Orwell eventually reconsidered the POUM's thesis that defence of the Spanish revolution was a condition of winning the war, but only after a period of years during which, in starker contrast, he held on to it as a truth of wider application—in Colls's words, seeing 'Spanish lessons as English lessons'. That is to say, rather, that errors abroad gave rise to errors at home, as Orwell the anti-fascist persisted in his belief that the European war now threatening, like the one twenty years past, would be a strictly inter-imperialist conflict, which the left should oppose on principle.

War came; Orwell resigned from the ILP and volunteered for active service, eventually finding roles in the Home Guard and the BBC Empire Service India Section. Now the incompatible urges of the past two years

were resolved, Colls tells us; 'Orwell's great reconciliation with England, his England', begun in Wigan in 1936, would soon be complete. The defining work of this period was *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, which reinvented the strategy of the POUM on the terrain of the national war effort, arguing that only a socialist revolution could make good the failings of capitalism and Britain's political elite, creating the psychological and material conditions of success in the struggle against fascism. The great difference in this case was the centrality of the idea and imagery of nationality. The English were a family, but one 'with the wrong members in control', Orwell wrote. The revolution would be 'fundamental', pressing far beyond what he called the 'timid reformism' of the Labour Party, but not less English in its means and outcomes because of that. For England—it is always England, not Britain—is, in Orwell's own words, 'an everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past, and like all living things, having the power to change out of recognition and yet remain the same.' Colls expresses his warm admiration for Orwell's statement of the national theme but is quick to lodge a claim on behalf of the Westminster parliament for its role in forwarding the revolutionary programme, and likewise to claim him as a supporter of the Attlee government for the rest of his life.

The culminating moment was short-lived. By the later 1940s, and arguably sooner, Orwell's English preoccupations had been overlaid by international politics, above all the geopolitics of the new Cold War. In this rather more than in other respects, Orwell was indeed at one with the Labour government, seconding Bevin's foreign policy and going so far as to grant the Foreign Office's propaganda unit—in secret—the benefit of his political assessment of fellow writers. Anti-Communism had been a constant in Orwell's political thinking since 1935 (the dating is his own) and now it was assuming a new and inescapable objective significance. This, whatever Orwell may have intended and however dismaying to him the upshot, was the conjuncture into which *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) were released. The earlier of the two novels, in Colls's reading, offers a radically pessimistic assessment of both the traditional working class and the new middle class, the teachers, technicians, journalists and other non-manual workers who had long been central to Orwell's vision of a popular socialist bloc. His beast fable does not say why the animals allow themselves to be robbed of their gains or why the pigs act as they do. It all unfolds as if to show that nature will out. This satire on the Russian Revolution, as Orwell described it in one of his several statements of purpose, is also, in Colls's estimate, 'against revolutions in general'. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it might be said, projects the outcome of one revolution in particular: the one announced in *The Lion and the Unicorn*. The novel 'envisages the end of England', the name, the history, the identity and the language. What survives

of Englishness is to be found among the proles, from whom, however, the Party has now abstracted itself entirely, creating a parallel reality. The O'Brien figure is intellectuality taken to its anti-English extreme of 'idealist solipsistic nonsense'. Colls does not quite say as much, but the inference to be drawn is that, in the end, the fundamental opposition in Orwell's political imagination was England versus Communism. Speculating on the futures that the novelist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* did not live to define for himself, he writes: 'the signs are he would have been a Cold Warrior'. By 1949, the signs were he already was.

Orwell is a difficult critical study. The familiar problems of accuracy and balance are rendered acute in his case in part because of his own debatable critical habits, including a deep contrarian reflex that should not be idealized, and his many changes of mind; in equal part because of the historic gravity of the situations in which he found himself at decisive turns in his life, and the fateful character of the causes he upheld or resisted. Viewed in a certain light, 'George Orwell' has long been a bundle of conventional topics, a repertory of period pieces awaiting their next performance. Robert Colls acknowledges such difficulties and makes them a principle of his historical procedure. 'Almost all general statements about who or what [Orwell] was can be matched by equal and opposite statements', he writes. 'For all his gifts of clarity and precision, and for all his seriousness, [he] is difficult to pin down—a writer who held many points of view, some twice over.' The critical imperative, then, is not to reduce or totalize but to assume Orwell whole, in all his self-contradictoriness, and to take him 'a step at a time'. Thus, Colls reviews all that Orwell, 'a literature and liberty man at heart', had in common with the traditions of liberalism while being 'not really a liberal'. He considers the tastes and reflexes of the young man who introduced himself to the *Adelphi* magazine as a 'Tory anarchist' and who, in the opinion of many of his friends and acquaintances, never wholly became anything else. He traces the paradoxes of the intellectual who wrote phobically about the intelligentsia, the self-exiled son of the upper middle class who 'never really left Eton', the 'godless Protestant' who pondered the significance of a general loss of belief in personal immortality, and, above all, the socialist who discharged so much of his polemical fire against the left. Orwell was all of these things, Colls insists. There is no consistent politics to be found in his work, only one of 'time and place and conviction'.

Colls's discussion teems with judgements, his own and Orwell's, and is certainly not hospitable to familiar resolutions of the tensions it restages. On the contrary, his procedure seems designed to create difficulty in reading and critical engagement. A book that moves one step at a time, in a kind of parataxis, risks losing in overall proportioning and consistency what it gains in local effect, and there are times in *George Orwell: English Rebel* when it

seems that its claims are short-life, as context-bound as their author takes Orwell's politics to be. The results of the discussion are uneven. Colls is hugely knowledgeable and informative about Orwell's writing, but at critical points open to challenge in his reports of it. ('Where would I be without my prejudices?' he asks, in a self-indulgent moment, and the unsought answer is, 'Somewhere else.') His undoubted pleasure in his own eloquence leads too often to turns in which clarity and balance of judgement, and even sense, play second fiddle to a showily balanced phrase. (One example among numerous: 'The old left could never forgive Orwell for being so wrong, and the new left could never forgive him for being so right.') The standard he urges in reading Orwell is suspended when he turns to Marxist theory, in passages that are simply unworthy of his book at its best. (And surely someone—if not the author then a friendly reader or editor—should have known that the revolutionary Victor Serge was not a 'dissident conservative', that Ignazio Silone was Italian, not East European, that Maurice Merleau-Ponty was not a Stalinist, and that Jürgen Habermas, born in 1929, was an unlikely mentor to the 'new Marxist sociology of the 1930s'.) Of greater significance for the book as a whole, however, is that Colls's preferred procedure is a substantive argument in itself, one whose purpose is not merely to acknowledge Orwell's self-contradictoriness but to valorize it. The procedure is the thesis, which in its turn calls forth a serviceable rhetoric. The closing sentence of the Introduction illustrates it, re-presenting the major claim of the book as a tentative, qualifying afterthought: again, 'his Englishness, though, is worth following through'. The opening sentences offer a second example: 'George Orwell was what they used to call a "Socialist". He shared also some of the attitudes to life that used to be called "Tory".' 'They' still do and still are, in truth, but in this droll overture a habit of naming and classifying is momentarily interrupted, as if challenged, and that is the point. Here is a rhetoric whose key purpose is to disarm.

Colls's manner may be thought of as cautionary, hesitant, dubitative, and certainly preferable to the 'ideological' style he so liberally castigates. 'On the other hand' is the wry sub-title that opens his final chapter. Alternatively, it may be thought of as methodically elusive, a work of purposeful evasion. Colls is protective of Orwell, in a specialized sense. He is quite free in his own criticisms of his subject, and not censorious, even though irritable and perfunctory in his concessions when faced with the strictures of others, notably feminists. But what he resists, as a matter of non-negotiable priority, is any attempt at classification, any critical gesture that would reach for conclusion, draw a line or indicate an order, and in so doing limit the play of 'the other hand'. Colls's Orwell cannot 'really' be any of the political or cultural beings he was or appeared to be. He must retain his indefinite variousness, or, as we might say, change while staying the same, rather like the

everlasting animal in *The Lion and the Unicorn*. This Orwell is not merely English: he is Englishness itself.

This Orwell had come to 'listen to England', to 'believe in the people', the working class, and Colls takes pains to moderate such differences of implication as there might have been between the character of this belief and that represented in the government of 1945. He makes little of Orwell's political disagreements and disappointments, preferring to emphasize his continuing critical support for the Labour government (a position he would have shared with most of the Marxist left); and tries to obscure the qualitative difference between his 1941 programme of action, which urged a general nationalization of capitalist property and a radical reduction in income differentials, and the limited measures of the Attlee years, which he talks up as 'Orwell's revolution made real'. The socialist who emerges from this controlled representation was, in Colls's echoing phrase, 'a Labour man' understanding at home and primed and vigilant abroad, in the face of an imagined Communist menace.

Indeed, this would have been a banal enough outcome, had it not been for the pathos of a slow, early death and the oracular status that came with the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. For it is easy to forget just how far Orwell was typical of English literary intellectuals in his time. Although never the stereotypical 1920s aesthete, his fervent, self-punishing admiration for James Joyce's *Ulysses* reveals someone keenly aware of the unmined potentials of literary form. His earliest political passion was his revulsion from Empire, in which he followed a path opened up by Leonard Woolf and E. M. Forster, whose novel *A Passage to India* appeared during his time in Burma. Social questions moved to the centre of his concerns as the capitalist economies slumped, inspiring the missions of discovery that informed *Down and Out in Paris in London* ('district-visiting' was Q. D. Leavis's scornful name for the genre). The legendary preoccupations of the literary 1930s, associated with the names of W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, among many others less well known, were poverty, unemployment, the threat of fascism and another European war, all making for a more or less pronounced turn leftwards and a spirit of resistance captured in the rally to the defence of republican Spain.

With the eventual outbreak of war and the military crisis of 1940 there began the work, variously intended, variously pursued, of creating a new, social-patriotic consensus in support of what was now hailed as a 'People's War' for a reconstructed Britain—an effort in which the writers now assembled in the BBC's talks department assumed the representative role once assigned to the Thirties Poets. The Second World War reached an end, or rather, 'ground to a halt right in the middle of Europe', Colls tells us, with 'no clear winner'—an extraordinary judgement on a conflict in which the

Axis had suffered 'clear' defeat, but, in its way, a verbal replay of what actually occurred as the clear winners turned to confront their Soviet allies, whose survival, Colls seems to say, was not among the desiderata of the victorious imperialist powers. Now began the struggle against 'totalitarian' Communism, and an intellectual mobilization without precedent, continuing over decades, as the CIA bankrolled so-called Non-Communist Lefts in the international Congress for Cultural Freedom and in journals such as the London-based *Encounter*. The leading intellectual patsy in that particular case, it would one day be revealed, was the emblematic poet of the Communist 1930s, Stephen Spender. But the hero of the hour was the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, who, indeed, had written the role years before, in his essay on Dickens:

To this day, to the average Englishman, the French Revolution means no more than a pyramid of severed heads. It is a strange thing that Dickens, much more in sympathy with the ideas of the Revolution than most Englishmen of his time, should have played a part in creating this impression.

Seen in the successive general politico-intellectual conjunctures of his career as a writer, framed in long or medium shot, Orwell was not quite the lonely voice of legend; close-ups can mislead. But although he was in his way typical, that way itself was not usual. His distinction was his extremism. Schooled for loyal public service, he signed up to police the farthest, least settled outposts of the Indian Empire. Back in England and concerned now to learn more about the social majority from whom he had been quarantined as a child, he 'went native in his own country' (in V. S. Pritchett's famous words), insisting on primary contact with the poorest and least secure, the invisible and the discarded. To him, opposition to fascism, which he shared with many thousands, intellectuals or not, meant leaving for Spain within days of finishing *Wigan Pier*, not to report but to fight and kill political enemies. Reflecting on the needs and potentials of a popular war against Hitler, he radicalized the canons of the Communist-inspired popular fronts to urge a programme fusing patriotic unity with the overthrow of a bankrupt ruling class and the system of property it defended. He had good reason to be impatient of official Marxism (over and above his romantic recoil from all abstraction except his own) and to reject the politics and culture of the Russian party dictatorship and its regimented International. He would come to have his personal reasons to loathe and fear Stalin's enforcers. But his last novel exceeded any of these in its vision of a bureaucratic-collectivist caste psychotically self-propelled towards the perfection of its own rule, in which, in Colls's words, 'the object of power is power and the object of murder is murder.'

This extremism had its accompanying thematic constants. One of these, perhaps surprising in someone capable of impulsive activism, was

an imaginative conviction of probable failure. Orwell could affirm the possibility of liberating transformation in his recollections of revolutionary Barcelona or his prospectus for a socialist England, but every one of his six novels narrates the failure of an attempt at fulfilment or release, be it private or public, individual or collective, temporary or long-term. Another, associated feature of the writing is a vein of sado-masochism. This is a delicate topic in Orwellian circles, and Colls's concessions in the matter are ambivalent. When he writes in a testy aside that his subject did not need Isaac Deutscher to tell him how to be 'a Trotskyite', he is presumably referring to an essay on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, dating from 1954, in which the Polish Marxist, a one-time colleague at the *Observer* newspaper, in fact said relatively little about Trotsky but rather more about Orwell's 'mystique of cruelty', the great abstraction of 'power-hunger' that served him as a pass-key to modern history. 'If you want a picture of the future,' Orwell wrote, 'imagine a boot stamping on a human face—for ever.' This cannot be written off as a statement internal to the invented world of Ingsoc. It had first been drafted a decade earlier, in the last of the novels of the 1930s, *Coming Up for Air*. The protagonist, another George, has been listening to a political talk:

I saw the vision that he was seeing . . . What he's *saying* is merely that Hitler's after us and we must all get together and have a good hate . . . But what he's *seeing* is something quite different. It's a picture of himself smashing people's faces in with a spanner. Fascist faces, of course. I *know* that's what he was seeing. It was what I saw myself for the second or two I was inside him. Smash! Right in the middle! The bones cave in like an eggshell and what was a face a minute ago is just a great big blob of strawberry jam. Smash! There goes another!

The event is not a Hateweek rally: it is a discussion of anti-fascism at a local meeting of the Left Book Club. The irruption of this fantasy of extreme violence is gratuitous and, arguably, symptomatic, suggesting a compulsion that was partly formative of Orwell's late political vision, with its radical abstraction of power from property relations.

The conviction of probable defeat was another shaping presence, in this case taking the form of the nearing extinction of Englishness, which had long—or perhaps always?—been Orwell's reserve currency of moral evaluation. Colls is right to give the question of national identity a crucial role in Orwell's constitution and it is precisely for that reason that the critical hesitation seems called for. Can it be that 'in the beginning Orwell did not have much of an Englishness to believe in'? It may be, on the contrary, that he had an excess of it. The young Blair was a child of colonialism on both sides, the family including a public administrator, a timber merchant and a clergyman in India, and a Caribbean slave-owner. He was himself born in

Bengal. At the age of eight he passed into the privileged English network of preparatory and public schools, where the regime included military training, and remained in it until he went to Burma, another Blair in the service of the Raj. This was indeed an upper-middle-class formation, involving strict forms of social segregation. But in colonial conditions its binding term, its master-signifier, would have been national: British, or more likely, invoking the ideal country that breathes life into the practical machinery of Britain, 'English'. That single word would say it all. However, the corollary was that once the colonial class relationship was rejected as unjust, the identification would be rendered incoherent. Englishness would be reduced to a meaning without a referent. Resigning while on leave at his parents' home, Blair would no longer be the Englishman he had been trained to be, but knew no other way of being what he could only be: that is, English. This was the crisis that he began to work through, with results that came some years before Wigan. 'A tramp is only an Englishman out of work', he declared in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, signalling that the privilege of normativity had been extended, if not wholly transferred, to the popular classes. With that shift, which was confirmed in the years following, the national identification regained its old fullness of social implication; Englishness was reconfirmed as the test of public virtue.

This condensation of values was Orwell's personal utopia, which he defended with a passionate single-mindedness in which he never recognized the fanaticism he was so quick to denounce in fellow socialists. His hyperbolic Englishness inspired his characteristically wrong-headed, simplistic excursions on behalf of 'plain' language, licensed an uncritical attachment to the good sense of the nation and a phobic anti-intellectualism to match. It was also the small miracle that founded his post-mortem cult, a community of observance embracing every intensity of adherence from missionary ardour to conventional good form, and a spectrum of political allegiance extending from right to far left. Colls brings his book to a close with a brief survey of some of this, rehearsing the litany of Orwell's attributes and the variety of his incarnations—'a Society, a Trust, a Fund, and a Memorial Prize . . . a National Treasure' and (nearly) a statue. The manner is ironic, sometimes playful, in the way readers will have come to expect after 300-plus pages, with a dusting of nostalgia for an England and a social democracy now past. But irony is all it is, and the memories are vicarious (Colls was born in 1949). This is Orwell for postmoderns, a particular mode of adherence to the cult.

Deep Labour, as it might be styled, has a hold on Colls's imagination as a phase in the political history of the working class and more fundamentally as the embodiment, in institutions and strategic bent, of a lasting disposition towards what is concrete, familiar, tested and shared, and a

corresponding distrust of abstraction and system. That historical formation, based on the northern industrial working class into which he was born, is past tense—though not the commitment to ‘local knowledge’, the habitus that, true to rhetorical form, he would probably decline to call ‘the English genius’. But what vectors might now be available for it, for a politics of the aftermath? The indications are ambiguous or worse. If Colls’s reflections have their beginning on the ground of the (non-Marxist) left, it is not at all clear that they will reach their conclusion in the same political quarter. His brief survey of Orwell’s successors closes on a tableau with two figures. One is Christopher Hitchens, who played the part of ‘a second Orwell’ more fully than he could have foreseen, ending his days estranged from the left. The other, ‘today the major exponent of prime Orwell political writing’, in Colls’s judgement, is another Tynesider of working-class origin, his schoolmate John Gray. A philosopher of the right committed to ideas of local knowledge, a liberal critic of liberal enlightenment, a canary in the cage of British political culture, deserting Labour for the Conservatives in the 1970s, then returning in the 1990s, it is Gray whom Colls ‘refrains’ from nominating as ‘an Orwell for our times’, another avatar of what changes but stays the same.