

Chapter & Verse

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SPEAKING OUT BEFORE YOU GO: GEORGE ORWELL (1903 - 1950)

As with the verse of other great writers of prose such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, the poetry of George Orwell tends to be overlooked. And yet Orwell as a young man displayed, in the words of his biographer, D.J. Taylor *an enthusiasm for poetry that in his formative years seems to have been at least as strong as any desire to write fiction*. He published a number of deeply felt poems in his lifetime and his poetry displays similar concerns to those of his prose as revealed in the following extract from a poem entitled, *On A Ruined Farm Near The 'His Master's Voice' Gramophone Factory*.

As I stand at the lichened gate
With warring worlds on either hand;
To left the black and budless trees,
The empty sties, the barns that stand

Like tumbling skeletons; and to right
The factory-towers, white and clear
Like distant, glittering cities seen
From a ship's rail; as I stand here,

I feel, and with a sharper pang,
My mortal sickness; how I give
My heart to weak and stuffless ghosts,
And with the living cannot live.

The acid smoke has soured the fields,
And browned the few and windworn flowers;
But there, where steel and concrete soar
In dizzy, geometric towers.

There, where the tapering cranes sweep round,
And great wheels turn, and trains roar by
Like strong, low-headed brutes of steel.
There is my world, my home; yet why

So alien still? For I can neither
Dwell in that world, nor turn again
To scythe and spade, but only loiter
Among the trees the smoke has slain.

Those *warring worlds* and his *master's voice* were to return in his most famous novel, *1984* which was written in a place far removed from the *alien* world of factories.

In 1945, Orwell while working abroad, was shocked to be told that his wife had died during what should have been a routine operation. He was left a single parent to bring up his adopted son, Richard while living a hand to mouth existence in lodgings in Islington. He worked incessantly, churning out reviews for *The Observer* in order to make a living and to try to ease his feelings of grief and remorse. In a letter to friend, he complained that he was *smothered under journalism* and that he had *become more and more like a sucked orange*. The editor of *The Observer*, David Astor who owned a remote house called Barnhill, on the Hebridean island of Jura, offered Orwell use of this house. Orwell leapt at this chance, partly to escape war ravaged London but also so he could have the time and peace to work on the novel which was germinating in his mind.

So in 1946, Orwell undertook the long and arduous journey to the wildest and emptiest of all the large Hebridean islands, Jura which is separated by a narrow strip of sea from the much more fertile and populous island of Islay. It was a risky undertaking to live alone in such an isolated dwelling in the far north of this island, down a four mile track after the tarred road runs out, twenty-five miles from the island's only shop. To compound his problems, he was already showing symptoms of the tuberculosis which was to kill him just four years later. It would be no exaggeration to say that Orwell gave his life to complete *1984* - originally entitled *The Last Man In Europe*. However, he felt that some mysterious force was compelling him to write this book. In his essay, *Why I Write* he stated that he would not write unless he was *driven by some demon*. It's rather ironic that he should conceive the idea of *Big Brother* on Jura whose landscape is dominated by the smoothed mountain peaks of the Paps, meaning breasts. Earlier settlers on the island believe that those Paps were the physical attributes of some Goddess who benignly watched over them.

Orwell endured a harsh and lonely first winter on Jura. Islanders recall a sad, gaunt man, only known to them as Eric Blair. However, when spring came, he came to love the extraordinary beauty of his environment. The house had no electricity, he heated water on a small calor gas stove, he burned peat in the evenings. He turned again *to scythe and spade* and grew potatoes. Later he was joined by his adopted son and his sister Avril who greatly

enhanced his domestic arrangements. He took his son fishing on the island's innumerable lochs and on boat trips they were almost drowned on the famous sea whirlpool, the Corryvreckan.

As his illness worsened, he took to writing in bed, the window of his bedroom looking out across a sublime view of the sea. Orwell worked at a furious pace; it was as if he sensed he had little time left. Visitors to Barnhill recalled hearing the rattle of the typewriter coming from upstairs. He sustained himself with gallons of strong coffee and tea and kept himself warm through the gales of another winter with a paraffin stove. He never talked about the content of his book even to his closest friends.

His health deteriorating rapidly through overwork, he had to leave the island he had grown to love and was admitted to a hospital in London. *1984* was published in the spring of 1949. The proceeds from its large sales came too late to ease

the long struggle he had endured to earn a living. While still in hospital, Orwell married Sonia Bromwell. His marriage and his happiness were short-lived as he died in January 1950.

He had lived his life between two social worlds: the aristocratic and the outcast, not feeling at home in either. In death, it is no different; he lies in a small churchyard in Oxfordshire between Lord Asquith and a local family of gypsies.

In a poem called *Sometimes In the Middle Autumn Days*, he writes of the importance of speaking out about matters of deep concern before it is too late:

*So shall we in the rout of life
Some thought, some faith,
some meaning save,
And speak it once before we go
In silence to the silent grave...*



I'm considering leading a writers' retreat for members of the SPS next June in this remote and beautiful place surrounded by a wonderful array of wildlife including golden eagles. I've been in touch with Mrs. Fletcher who owns the house and she would welcome a small group of poets (the house sleeps up to 8 people) to stay in the house in which the most famous book of the 20th century was written. Anyone interested in this unique opportunity should email me: president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk