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Editorial

ST. GEORGE FOR ENGLAND

England, Your England and Other Essays by the late George Orwell (Secker and Warburg, 1953, 12/6) contains eleven essays of varying lengths and interests, literary, descriptive and political, which appeared between 1937 and 1948 in magazines of small circulation and books now out of print or difficult of access. Their republication makes one realise as nothing else the extent of the loss to our understanding of the contemporary scene which resulted from Orwell's premature and untimely death. It was not so much the width of his experience (though this could have been equalled by few) as the vigor of his mind which made him so remarkable an observer and critic; and this gift was amply displayed by a clarity of writing which in its simplicity and directness reported facts without factiousness and guided opinion without guile. Orwell did not bludgeon his readers; nor did he deck out his subjects. When he argued, as he sometimes did, he was neither brazen or coy; and his conclusions, although often disturbing, were not forced. His view of the probable future of this world of ours was depressing. But it was not despairing since it was accompanied by the conviction that if we made an effort, remedial action was still possible. The inevitability of the historical process was never one of his heresies. His prophecies were warning, not prediction. For all the dull grey of the coming dawn which he anticipated, 'it did not follow' for him 'that no improvement is possible within our present framework'. After a vivid description of the pottery towns, he could still write: "When you contemplate such ugliness as this, there are two questions that strike you. First, is it inevitable? Secondly, does it matter?" And he goes on: "I do not believe that there is anything inherently

and unavoidably ugly about industrialism."

It is a particularisation of this and similar sturdy (and cheering) generalities which is offered in the present collection of essays. Their quality is best shown by illustrations. I offer one from an essay of 1945 on *Poetry and the Microphone*:

In broadcasting your audience is conjunctural, but it is an audience of *one*. Millions may be listening, but each is listening alone, or as a member of a small group, and each has (or ought to have) the feeling that you are speaking to him individually. More than this, it is reasonable to assume that your audience is sympathetic, or at least interested, for anyone who is bored can promptly switch you off by turning a knob. But though presumably sympathetic, the audience has *no power over you*. It is just here that a broadcast differs from a speech or a lecture. On the platform, as anyone used to public speaking knows, it is almost impossible not to take your tone from the audience. It is always obvious within a few minutes what they will respond to and what they will not; and in practice you are compelled to speak for the benefit of what you estimate as the stupidest person present, and also ingratiate yourself by means of the ballyhoo known as "personality". If you don't do so, the result is always an atmosphere of frigid embarrassment... On the air these conditions do not exist...

This is convincing; and admirably put. And the point is a new one arising out of a new situation and requiring for its appreciation a fresh mind. Few of us would have noted it, or, if we had, paused to consider its significance. Orwell did both and enriched our understanding; and he gives us new hope in a field which we had thought

exhausted.

Or take this on the boomerang effect of propaganda :

At this moment (1948) we see our government, in its desperate economic straits, fighting in effect against its own past propaganda. It was certain that, sooner or later, something would go wrong and we should be forced to make our exports balance our imports ; and when that happened the British standard of living, including the working class standard, was bound to fall, at least temporarily. Yet the left-wing parties, even when they were vociferously anti-imperialist, never made these facts clear. On occasion they were ready to admit that the British workers had benefited, to some extent, by the looting of Asia and Africa, but they always allowed it to appear that we could give up our loot and yet in some way contrive to remain prosperous. Quite largely, indeed, the workers were won over to socialism by being told that they were exploited, whereas the brute truth was that, in world terms, they were exploiters. Now, to all appearances, the point has been reached when the working-class living standard *cannot* be maintained, let alone raised. Even if we squeeze the rich out of existence, the mass of the people must either consume less or produce more. But . . . this question among people who are faithful to the left ideology, cannot be genuinely discussed. The lowering of wages and raising of working hours are felt to be inherently anti-socialist measures, and must therefore be dismissed in advance, whatever the economic situation may be . . .

Or this on the cramping orthodoxy of ideologies :

To accept an orthodoxy is always to inherit unresolved contradictions. Take for instance the fact that all sensitive people are revolted by industrialism and its products, and yet are aware that the conquest of poverty and the emancipation of the working class demand not less industrialisation, but more and more. Or take the fact that certain jobs are absolutely necessary and yet are never done except under some kind of coercion. Or take the fact that it is impossible to have a positive foreign policy without having powerful armed forces. One could multiply examples. In every such case there is a conclusion which is perfectly plain but which can only be drawn if one is privately disloyal to the official ideology. The normal response is to push the question, unanswered, into a corner of one's mind, and then continue repeating contradictory catchwords.

Again, it is not only admirably put. It says something which, when once said, is

seen to have required, and deserved, saying' and it says it so simply that it becomes at once part of the background of our minds.

A similar appositeness, and happiness of expression, comes out in the essay on a more domestic subject, the opposition between *North and South* (1937) :

When nationalism first became a religion, the English looked at the map, and noticing that their island lay very high in the Northern Hemisphere, evolved the pleasing theory that the further north you live the more virtuous you become . . . In the mythology of Carlyle, Creasey, etc., the Northerner ("Teutonic", later "Nordic") is pictured as a hefty, vigorous chap with blond moustaches and pure morals, while the Southerner is sly, cowardly and licentious. This theory was never pushed to its logical end, which would have meant assuming that the finest people in the world were the Eskimos, but it did involve admitting that the people who lived to the north of us were superior to ourselves. Hence, partly, the cult of Scotland and of Scotch things which has so deeply marked English life during the past fifty years. But it was the industrialisation of the North that gave the North-South antithesis its peculiar slant . . . The Northern business man, with his hateful "get on or get out" philosophy, was the dominant figure of the nineteenth century, and as a sort of tyrannical corpse he rules us still. This is the type deified by Arnold Bennett—the type who starts off with half a crown and ends up with fifty thousand pounds, and whose chief pride is to be an even greater boor after he has made his money than before . . .

This kind of cant is nowadays a pure anachronism, for the Northern business man is no longer prosperous. But traditions are not killed by facts . . .

The gem of the book is clearly the essay (1937) *Down the Mine*. It is almost autobiographical, not in the obvious sense that Orwell describes how he himself went down a mine and what he himself saw there of the miners and their labours, but rather because it reflects to our view Orwell's way of approach to the subjects he tackled. The mine is not only a fact and an unpleasant fact at that, but also, like Melville's whale, a symbol :

The place is like hell, or at any rate like my own mental picture of hell. Most of the things one imagines in hell are there—heat, noise, confusion, darkness, foul air, and, above all, unbearably cramped space . . . It is impossible to watch the "fillers" at work without feeling a pang of envy for their toughness. It is a dreadful job that they do, an almost superhuman job by the standards of an

ordinary person. For they are not only shifting monstrous quantities of coal, they are also doing it in a position that doubles or trebles the work . . . And the other conditions do not exactly make thing easier. There is the heat—it varies, but in some mines it is suffocating—and the coal dust that stuffs up your throat and nostrils and collects along your eyelids, and the unending rattle of the conveyor belt, which in that confined space is rather like the rattle of a machine gun. But the fillers look and work as though they were made of iron . . . It is only when you see miners down the mine and naked that you realise what splendid men they are.

And indeed they are splendid, and that brings me back to a postulate which shines out from all these essays and from all Orwell's books, even the most threatening and gloomy. Orwell, with his view of the miners as a type of suffering humanity, was neither ashamed of them nor fearful for them. On the contrary, he was proud of them—of men in general as well as of the miners—and proud to evince his pride :

More than anyone else, perhaps, the miner can stand as the type of the manual worker, not only because his work is so exaggeratedly awful, but also because it is so vitally necessary and yet so remote from our experience . . . In a way it is even humiliating to watch coal-miners working. It raises in you a momentary doubt about your own status as an "intellectual" and a superior person generally. For it is brought home to you, at least while you are watching, that it is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior. Poor comfort for the superior person ? Perhaps. But surely, too, a recognition of the high quality of the animal called man.

Orwell can, in fact, see decency even in his own country. The essay which gives its name to the book, *England, Your England* (1941), is a queer mixture of denunciation and pride :

Yes, there is something distinctive and recognisable in English civilisation. It is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Suncays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840 ? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece ? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person.

He then goes on to trace some of the

peculiarities of England. I quote one passage typical of many :

The reason why the English anti-militarism disgusts foreign observers is that it ignores the existence of the British Empire. It looks like sheer hypocrisy. After all, the English have absorbed a quarter of the earth and held on to it by means of a huge navy. How dare they then turn round and say that war is wicked ?

It is quite true that the English are hypocritical about their Empire. In the working class this hypocrisy takes the form of not knowing that the Empire exists. But their dislike of standing armies is a perfectly sound instinct. A navy employs comparatively few people, and it is an external weapon which cannot affect home politics directly. Military dictatorships exist everywhere, but there is no such thing as a naval dictatorship. What English people of nearly all classes loathe from the bottom of their hearts is the swaggering officer type, the jingle of spurs and the crash of boots . . .

One rapid but fairly sure guide to the social atmosphere of a country is the parade-step of its army. A military parade is really a kind of ritual dance, something like a ballet, expressing a certain philosophy of life. The goose-step, for instance, is one of the most horrible sights in the world, far more terrifying than a dive-bomber. It is simply an affirmation of naked power ; contained in it, quite consciously and intentionally, is the vision of a boot crashing down on a face . . . Why is the goose-step not used in England ? There are, heaven knows, plenty of army officers who would be only too glad to introduce some such thing. It is not used because the people in the street would laugh.

We have heard something of the kind before but is it not well put, and is it not (our breasts swell with pride) true ? And listen to the summing up :

In whatever shape England emerges from the war, it will be deeply tinged with the characteristics that I have spoken of earlier . . . The gentleness, the hypocrisy, the thoughtlessness, the reverence for law and the hatred of uniforms will remain, along with the suet puddings and the misty skies.

From the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* this is indeed a compliment not to be sneezed at and even indeed, after the comminations of most of our so-called friends a comfort. George Orwell will go down to history not as a nationalist (his *Notes on Nationalism* reprinted in this volume will be evidence enough for that) but at least as a patriot, if only an intelligent one.

A.B.F.