

George Orwell

George Orwell was the pen-name of British author Eric Arthur Blair. Noted as a political and cultural commentator, Orwell is among the most widely admired English-language writers of the twentieth century, though he is best known for two novels he wrote in the late 1940s, the political allegory *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*. The latter described a totalitarian dystopia so vividly that the adjective "Orwellian" is now commonly used to describe totalitarian mechanisms of thought-control.

Eric Blair was born in 1904 in Mottingham, Bengal, in the then British colony of India, where his father, Richard, worked for the Indian Department of the Civil Service. His mother, Ida, brought him to England at the age of one. He did not see his father again until 1907, when Richard visited England for three months before leaving again until 1912. Eric had an older sister named Margaret and a younger sister named Joan. With his characteristic honesty, he would later describe his family's background as "lower-upper-middle class."¹

During most of his career Orwell worked various jobs for his generation, both in the British press and in books of reportage such as *Burmese Days* in Ceylon (describing his experiences during the Spanish Civil War), *Down and Out in Paris and London* (describing a period of poverty in those cities), and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (which described the living conditions of poor miners in northern England).

Contemporary critics are more often introduced to Orwell as a novelist, particularly through his enormously successful novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The focus is an allegory of the corruption of the socialist ideals of the Russian Revolution by Stalinism, and the latter is Orwell's prophetic vision of the results of totalitarianism. Orwell had returned from Catalonia a staunch anti-Stalinist and anti-Communist, but he remained to the end a man of the left and, in his own words, a "democratic socialist".

Orwell is also known for his insights about the political implications of the use of language. In the essay "Politics and the English Language", he describes the effects of cliché, bureaucratic euphemism, and academic jargon on literary style, and ultimately on thought itself. Orwell's concern about the power of language to shape reality is also reflected in his invention of Newspeak, the official language of the imaginary country of Oceania in his novel 1984. Newspeak is a variant of English in which vocabulary is strictly limited by government fiat. The goal is to make it increasingly difficult to express ideas that contradict the official line - with the final aim of making it impossible even to conceive such ideas. A number of words and phrases that Orwell coined in 1984 have entered the standard vocabulary, such as "memory hole," "Big Brother," and "Newspeak."