

The genius of George Orwell

By [Jeremy Paxman](#)

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Next week marks the 60th anniversary of the publication of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. Jeremy Paxman pays tribute to one of England's greatest writers.

If you want to learn how to write non-fiction, Orwell is your man. He may be known worldwide for his last two novels, Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four. But, for me, his best work is his essays.

Who would have imagined that sixteen hundred words in praise of the Common Toad, knocked out to fill a newspaper column in April 1946, would be worth reprinting sixty years later? But here it is, with many of the characteristic Orwell delights, the unglamorous subject matter, the unnoticed detail ("a toad has about the most beautiful eye of any living creature") the baleful glare, the profound belief in humanity. Because what the piece is really about, of course, is not the toad itself, but the thrill of that most promising time of year, the spring, even as seen from Orwell's dingy Islington flat.

When he produced articles like this, hair-shirted fellow socialists got cross. Why wasn't he spending his time promoting discontent, denouncing the establishment, glorifying the machine-driven future? It is a mark of his greatness that Orwell didn't care. They - whoever they might be - cannot stop you enjoying spring. The essay ends: "The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it."

It all reads so effortlessly. And yet it cannot have been produced without toil. He tells us in Why I Write that he found writing a book "a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness" and even the shorter pieces, knocked out for magazines or newspapers, must often have been a chore. There is the research, for one thing. His generous, insightful analysis of Charles Dickens shows not merely a close familiarity with 13 of his novels, but also with those of Trollope, Thackeray and a host of long-forgotten writers, too. For his caustic piece on Boys' Weeklies he evidently immersed himself in mountains of the things.

The result is a piece so deft and witty that it has you laughing out loud. Here, for example, is his list of the national characteristics of the foreigners who make occasional appearances in this bizarre genre:

Frenchman: Excitable. Wears beard, gesticulates wildly.

Spaniard, Mexican, etc.: Sinister, treacherous.

Arab, Afghan, etc.: Sinister, treacherous.

Chinese: Sinister, treacherous. Wears pigtail.

Italian: Excitable. Grinds barrel-organ or carries stiletto.

Swede, Dane, etc.: Kind-hearted, stupid.

Negro: Comic, very faithful.

How one longs for him to have lived long enough to be let loose on the lads' mags culture of the early twenty-first century.

Because something paradoxical has happened to us. The abundance of the mass media offers a greater choice than ever. We are adrift in a sea of newspapers, magazines, radio, television and limitless cyberspace. It is not merely that the more there is, the less any individual part of it matters. It is that so little seems intended to have any meaning.

You will find nothing much here about fashion, Westminster politics, gossip, relationships, must-have gadgets and holidays, not a mention of the hints dropped by payroll propagandists, nor a word from anonymous "sources close to" some soon-to-be forgotten minister, and nothing about television, pop music, or most of the other subjects which enable our increasingly feeble newspapers to trail their ink across page after page.

What you will find, instead, is an abundance of everything from the life of a book reviewer to how it is to watch a man hanged. The impeccable style is one thing. But if I had to sum up what makes Orwell's essays so remarkable it is that they always surprise you. Sometimes it is the choice of subject matter: how many journalists can write with any authority on what is like to queue to be let into an overnight shelter for the homeless?

More often, it's the unexpected insight. He can write a 60-page essay on Charles Dickens which frequently seems to be tending to a conclusion that he was a sentimental old fool, but then come to an unexpectedly affectionate final judgment. You have travelled with him on his journey and are rather startled, and pleased, to discover where you have ended up.

The Dickens essay was an attempt to worry away at why he was such a successful writer and is the longest in this collection. But it is infused with the same spirit of personal engagement as everything else. It is that amazing ability to make you believe that you would have felt as he felt that is his genius.

Take Shooting an Elephant, which recounts an incident during his time as a policeman in Burma. It is a remarkable piece. There is, firstly, the language. When he first sees the elephant, which is said to have run amok, it is standing, beating a bunch of grass against its knees, "with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have". In the seconds after pulling the trigger the beast remains standing, but "a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant... every line of his body altered... He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old". Then the elephant sags to its knees, its mouth slobbering. And, the utterly perfect sentence: "An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him."

Being Orwell, of course, the event is put to political purpose, demonstrating the futility of the imperial project. He has already told us that "every white man's life in the East was one long struggle not to be laughed at". Then he reveals in the last sentence that he had killed the elephant "solely to avoid looking a fool". Yes, you think, that makes perfect sense.

It is hard to imagine many people less suited to the job of an imperial policeman than Orwell. Yet, while he hated imperialism, he could still remark that the British empire was "a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it". In another essay, *My Country Right or Left*, he admits to finding it childish that he feels it faintly sacrilegious not to stand to attention during "God Save the King", but that he would sooner have that instinct "than be like the left-wing intellectuals who are so 'enlightened' that they cannot understand the most ordinary emotions".

There is something very striking about his patriotism. It was laid out most obviously in his manifesto for a post-war revolution, *The Lion and The Unicorn*, but his love of England informs just about everything he wrote. It is there like a defiant bugle call rallying us to appreciate kippers, crumpets, marmalade and stilton cheese in *In Defence of English Cooking*. It is there like a comforting cup of tea in *Decline of the English Murder*. Both belong to a time when – seen from this distance – English life appears to have been more settled, less commercial, more neighbourly and less racked by uncertainty of purpose. You cannot read a piece like *Bookshop Memories* without immediately conjuring up the bad suits and rank smell of dead cigarettes. They could not have been written about any other country on earth.

It is, of course, as a "political" writer that he is now best-known. Sixty years after publication, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remains the greatest fictional demolition of totalitarianism, and any decently educated 12-year-old can explain what *Animal Farm* is about. But, in truth, there is almost none of his successful work, either fiction or non-fiction, that is not political. His work is always about that basic question – why do we live like this?

What marks it out from other political writing is not merely the quality of the prose, but its moral authority. Where does this come from? Would he have produced such luminescent work had he not had his first unsuitable job? If he had not suffered at the hands of oafs at his ghastly prep school? If he had not had the years of failure? I think the answer to all these questions is "no".

But he also had the paradoxical good fortune to live in evil times. There could be no accommodation with fascism – it was either resistance or capitulation, and everything he wrote from the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War until his death was infused with the same urgent imperative to resist totalitarianism. Of course, some of it is absurdly overstated. Can he really have believed that "only revolution can save England, that has been obvious for years... I dare say the London gutters will have to run with blood," in 1940? But evil times force harsh judgments.

Orwell could toss off sentences like that with greater authority than most because of the quality not merely of his writing but of his experience. When he spoke of life at the bottom of the heap he did so as someone who had lived as a scullion and a tramp. When he talked of war and death he did so as someone who had fought in war and seen people die. The experiences had translated a natural hatred of authority into a political manifesto of sorts.

What Orwell's experiences – both as figure of authority and as scullion – had given him was a lived understanding of the human condition. It was this grounding in reality that bestowed a more profound political instinct than would be available to some sloganeering zealot. He had acquired a capacity to empathise with the foot-soldiers of history, the put-upon people generally taken for granted, ignored or squashed by the great isms of one sort or another. It conferred upon him the remarkable ability to achieve what every journalist and essayist

seeks.

He could tell the truth.

Shooting an Elephant by George Orwell with a new introduction by Jeremy Paxman, Penguin Classics, £9.99

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