ORWELL THE REBEL AND ENGLISHNESS

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Robert Colls. *George Orwell: English Rebel*. Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2013. Pp. xii, 330. isbn: 978-0-19-968080-1. £25.00; us$34.95.

George Orwell died on 21 January 1950. The following June his unpublished notebooks appeared, collected with several personal appreciations and reminiscences, one of which was by Bertrand Russell. Robert Colls, author of *George Orwell: English Rebel*, cites this piece by Russell—and in particular Russell's view that "Orwell went through Buchenwald imaginatively so that other writers would not have to"[1]—to reinforce the sense that no matter what contradictory evidence has accumulated over the years, Orwell remains "Saint" George, a figure many readers still want to have on their side, and whose alli-

[1] P. 221. For Russell, see his "George Orwell" (1950), p. 6.

ance with the causes of justice, freedom and enlightenment is generally presumed.[2]

The point is not that "Saint" George is a fiction. Indeed, if Colls's book tells us anything it is that Orwell's reputation was well earned precisely because the man was complex and "two-handed" like the rest of us—that he could imbibe unthinkingly the prejudices of his time, act on them, and yet by force of his intellect and his unusual determination to live, not by ideology but simply responding "to the vagaries of an eventful life" (p. 6), arrive at a personal position more ethical and more humane than most.

Colls confronts directly the challenge of describing what Orwell believed—"this most quoted and referenced of writers is almost impossible to pin down … [and] held many points of view, some twice over"—with a pragmatic yet convincing hypothesis. The inference to be made is not "that he was fickle, or that he did not believe in anything or that he did not know what he believed", but rather that he took life (as his life must be taken by us, implicitly) "a step at a time" (p. 3). Being George Orwell was in that sense an unconscious project for Eric Blair, the Orwellian outlook being the sum of Blair's interactions with his turbulent time and for that reason inconsistent. Thus Colls: "Identities are never 'built' or 'constructed' so much as lived and breathed, day to day, until they run out of meaning and have to change." Finding a "trajectory" in Orwell's life is therefore difficult, because "it is more a series of intense reactions to peoples and places as he came upon them" (p. 9). Elsewhere Colls notes that Orwell tried "to put himself as far away from abstraction and as close to experience as he could.… He challenged the world by burrowing into it" (p. 11).

Colls is principally interested in Orwell's Englishness, not as something that is the key to the man but as "something that he thought *with* as well as about, and that … stayed with him from first to last" (p. 7). It is the strand in his thinking "which runs through all the others" and which brought him, for example, into alignment with Bertrand Russell in the cause of peace during the thirties, as well as on the necessity for war, beginning at the end of that decade. And although he was of a generation that "took their Englishness for granted" (p. 3), at a certain point in his life "he wanted to identify with his country, understand it, explain it, be convinced by it, and reconnect with it in its current and previous manifestations" (p. 7). And because such hopes as he had for the future relied upon the survival—indeed the perpetuation—of the best of the past, his work as satirist, journalist and political commentator is inseparable from this negotiation with his Englishness.

[2] Here see John Rodden in Rodden and Rossi, *Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell* (2012), p. 110; and in *George Orwell: the Politics of Literary Reputation* (1989), *passim*.

The task of explicating such a complex relationship is a challenging one, especially because "Orwell saw his identity as his own affair, Englishness as a backdrop, the British Empire in the wings, the state nowhere to be seen." Colls is thus "trying to prove an absence" (p. 6), because the personal importance to Orwell of his Englishness was something "he was not going to talk about". How to prove an absence: it is a challenge only the most dedicated dark-matter physicist would find inviting. *How to write about* that absence, how to describe it in a way that effectively makes the absent present: that is surely work for a dedicated dark-matter physicist with A. J. A. Symons's talent for experimental biography.

George Orwell: English Rebel is not *The Quest for Corvo*, but it is a very original and odd book in its own way. Erudite, thoughtful to a fault and replete with information about Orwell and his times, it is a major contribution to our knowledge and understanding of both subjects. One welcomes the depth and complexity of the book even as one also for different reasons could relish the polemical simplifications of Christopher Hitchens's *Why Orwell Matters* in 2008. At the same time, the task of rendering the absence that "is" Orwell leads Robert Colls into some very peculiar stylistic territory.

It is striking how much of this book is about what Orwell wasn't, what he didn't do, and whom he didn't meet. Thus, of Orwell's time in Spain, Colls writes that

> whatever Eric Blair was doing or thought he was doing … he was not trying to make friends or influence people back in England. He was not following … the rules for getting on as a public figure. He was not enjoying the warmth of a good club. He was not trying to make the right literary contacts.… Nor was he comfortably in chambers, or living off a private income, or worming his way onto an expense account, or petitioning for a fellowship.… Least of all was he carrying a rifle in Spain in order to solve … "the riddle of Englishness" in England. (Pp. 8–9)

"Whatever Eric Blair was doing …": the strategy of this book is to acknowledge that its subject is an enigma and yet, by elaborating on the manifestations of the enigma, paradoxically to resolve it—or at least to adumbrate the form resolution might take. The relevant rhetorical figure is *praeteritio*, in which one announces one is not going to say something but in the process says it; or perhaps it is *leitotes*, where the double negative acquires a positive semantic charge. Either way, there are times reading *George Orwell: English Rebel* when one is reminded—and can accept—that this is a conscious strategy arising from Colls's thoughtful engagement with his elusive subject; but there are also times when the attention being paid to people Orwell didn't know, books he hadn't read, and things he didn't do is at best a strange narrative tic, at worst scholarly ostentation.

For this reader the approach seems overall, though, an honest and at times brilliant essay in biography and intellectual history-writing, and the book really does offer a nuanced and fresh view of Englishness as a cultural formation during the early to mid-twentieth century.

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