

ANIMAL FARM.

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Author: Pearce, Robert

Sixty Years On

A 'LITTLE SQUIB which might amuse you': so George Orwell dismissed the book he was completing in February 1944. 'There's a farm, and the animals get fed up with the way the farmer runs it,' he wrote, summarizing the plot, 'so they chuck him out and try to run it for themselves. But they run it just as badly as the farmer and become tyrants like him.' Seldom can an author have so misrepresented the passionate intensity invested in his work, or have made a novel seem such a poor publishing proposition.

Several publishers duly rejected the work, but not because it was banal. The little squib was an attack on Britain's wartime ally, the Soviet Union, and thus likely to be political dynamite.

The book appeared in August 1945, as *Animal Farm*. Frederic Warburg published it in the teeth of opposition from his sales manager, who couldn't bring himself to believe that Russia was not a socialist state, and from his wife, acutely aware of the immense suffering of the Russian people since the Nazi invasion in 1941. She threatened to leave Warburg ('Don't think I won't!') if he accepted it. Yet it was a decision he never regretted. A first edition of 4,500 copies sold out within a few days, and by 1973, when he wrote his memoirs, the book had sold around nine million copies.

It was a literary as well as a publishing landmark. Orwell wrote that *Animal Farm* 'was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole'. There were no authorial homilies here, as in his earlier work; instead the plot would point the moral of the book. Most critics have judged that he succeeded brilliantly, turning political writing into an art. Malcolm Bradbury has described *Animal Farm* as 'the first British postwar novel', embodying a fundamental turning point in 'world historical mood'.

Animal Farm has a pivotal place in a new era of Cold War literature. Politically incorrect in 1944 when the USSR was still an ally, it was soon eminently acceptable to the rightwing establishment, including the CIA, which financed and distributed the

1954 cartoon 'based on' the novel, made by the husband and wife film animators John Halas and Joy Batchelor. This was the most ambitious cartoon to be made in Britain of its day, with 750 scenes and 300,000 colour drawings.

The US Psychological Strategy Board purported to find Orwell's theme 'somewhat confusing', so the ending was changed. No longer did the communist pigs meet, and become indistinguishable from, the capitalist men; instead the animals rose up in a new revolution and secured their freedom. Clearly Animal Farm needs rescuing from the distortions of Cold War propaganda. To understand the book properly we must focus on its provenance, as well as its reception. Then we may understand more fully what Orwell hoped to achieve, and did achieve, with the novel he subtitled 'A Fairy Story'.

The key to the success of Animal Farm lies in the fact that it was not just a political novel. Nor was Orwell the politics-obsessed figure of legend. His childhood friend Cyril Connolly wrote that he was always incorrigibly political, so that he couldn't blow his nose without moralizing on the state of the linen industry. Yet such a view is partly exaggeration, partly anachronism. Orwell himself, in a poem of 1936, insisted that he 'wasn't born for an age like this', the era of mass propaganda, the bomber and rubber truncheons. Indeed even at his most politically committed he took delight in a Woolworth's rose ('ten years of pleasure for six-pence'), in seeing a kestrel flying over the Deptford gasworks and in hearing a 'first-rate performance by a blackbird in the Euston Road'. He was able to glory in the spring and to praise the common toad, whose eye was the most beautiful of any living creature's. The really important things in life, Orwell implied, are private not political. Man stayed human only by preserving 'large patches of simplicity in his life'. Most important of all was the need for something to believe in, despite the decay of traditional religious belief, for 'man cannot live by hedonism alone'.

So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information ...

Such non-political concerns undoubtedly contributed to Animal Farm's success. The book contains some of Orwell's finest writing. Warburg considered it a 'prose poem' written 'almost effortlessly'. He was wrong about the effort. Orwell admitted that it was the only one of his books 'I really sweated over'. It was also the only one he received help with, his wife Eileen commenting on the extracts he read to her every night. Generally a severe critic of his own work, Orwell was nevertheless pleased with the aesthetic aspects of Animal Farm. He castigated its reviewers as 'grudging swine ... not one of them said it's a beautiful book'. After many hard years of apprenticeship, he was now producing his ideal of window-pane prose. (Over-diligent critics have deplored that he used 'said' thirty-four times, out of sixty-four 'verbs of saying', but the simple word repeated only added to the mythic, fairy-tale quality Orwell was attempting to create.)

The book's gentle humour also contributed to its popularity. After the revolution, 'some hams hanging in the kitchen were taken out for burial', the book's most celebrated joke; but there are many others. Several commentators attribute this quality to Eileen's influence, but in fact humour had been a conspicuous part of Orwell's writing from earliest days, the obverse of his famous pessimism. Similarly, the book gained enormously from his expertise as a countryman. He had long equated the countryside with decency, and his knowledge of things rural went back to his childhood and to the joy of his initiation into natural history by R.L. Sillar at St Cyprian's prep school in Eastbourne. The result is that the routines of farming in the book are convincing - from the 'pop-holes' of the first sentence, to Old Major's uncut tushes, the Number 6 shot in Jones's gun, the potatoes that 'frosted in the clamps' and the coccidiosis from which hens were said to have died.

Adding authenticity is Orwell's knowledge of animals. Most of the good memories of his childhood, he once wrote, were in some way connected with animals. In Burma in the 1920s he recruited a motley collection of strays, and at Wallington from 1936 he kept a goat called Muriel. As a man, he had an acute eye for cruelty towards animals, though his sympathy stopped well short of vegetarianism. He could hardly look at the hindquarters of a gazelle 'without thinking of mint sauce'. Pigs, on the other hand, he told David Astor, 'are most annoying destructive animals ... They are hard to keep out of anywhere because they are so strong and cunning.'

Orwell had for some time been describing human beings as animals. A good example is his description of Lord Beaverbrook, who looked 'more like a monkey on a stick than you would think possible for anyone who was not doing it on purpose'. Hence role-reversal - endowing animals with human characteristics - must have seemed perfectly normal, especially to one so well read in beast-fables, beginning with Beatrix Potter's *Pigling Bland*, which he read twice to childhood friend Jacintha Buddicom and whose frontispiece showed two pigs walking on their hind legs.

The search for the literary origins of *Animal Farm* is endlessly fascinating. Among those authors identified as making a contribution are Swift, Hobbes, Aristophanes, Anatole France, Kenneth Grahame, Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot, the cartoonist E.H. Shepherd and H.G. Wells (whose *Island of Dr Moreau* contained mutant 'Swine Men'). Some of those proposed turn out to be red herrings - including surely *The Fox* (1941) by Ignazio Silone and Thurber's *The Very Proper Gander* (1940), and also Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, which was not translated into English until 1961. My own favourite candidates include Malcolm Muggeridge, in whose *Winter in Moscow* (1934) Stalin is called the 'home-bred Napoleon', the 'class-war Napoleon' and the 'pogrom Napoleon', and also Tolstoy. The Russian observed in *A Confession* (1879-82) that the essential precepts of the Sermon on the Mount became almost their opposites in the mouths of Russian

Orthodox clerics. The original 'Do not be angry' became 'Do not be angry without a cause'. In the same vein, in the 1864 edition of the Catechism each of the Ten Commandments was given a 'reservation which cancelled it'. 'Thou shalt not kill' became, for example, '... except in the fulfilment of one's duties'. In similar fashion, a coda reverses the meaning of the Seven Commandments in *Animal Farm*: 'No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets', 'No animal shall kill another animal without cause', etc. According to Jeffrey Meyers, the most famous of all [he perversions of Animalism - 'All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others' - combines Thomas Jefferson's 'All men are created equal' with Eve's musing in *Paradise Lost* that her actions may render her 'more equal, and perhaps/A thing not undesirable, sometime/Superior' to Adam. (My own suspicion is that Orwell was influenced by the famous logical contradictions the cartoonist David Low regularly placed in the mouth of Colonel Blimp.) In David Caute's novel *Dr Orwell and Mr Blair* (1994), Orwell hears the words, spoken ignorantly rather than satirically, from a school-boy.

Too many commentators assume that Orwell did not have the imaginative power to invent for himself, but it is easy to see why. It is almost as though his life's primary purpose was to supply copy for his writings. In *Animal Farm*, for instance, Simmonds, who drove Boxer to the slaughter-house, was the name of a Henley magistrate, painted on the brewers' drays he saw in his youth. Directly opposite The Stores in Wallington, where Orwell moved in April 1936, was 'Manor Farm', owned by John Innes, a name which, as Gordon Bowker tells us, is Jones 'disembowelled'. On the other hand, Callow End in Worcestershire, where Orwell spent a fortnight's fishing holiday in July 1942, also had a Manor Farm, complete with a Farmer Jones and Mr Pilkington.

Yet when all is said and done, political passion lies at the heart of *Animal Farm*. When Orwell lacked a political purpose, he wrote in 1946, he produced 'lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally'. His aim was to expose the 'Soviet myth' for British readers.

When he returned from Burma in 1927 Orwell may be described as leftwing, and John Newsinger believes he was soon flirting with Communism. Nevertheless he had no faith in Marxist theory: using Marxism to analyse the English class system, he once wrote, was rather like attempting to carve a duck with a chopper. In 1936, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he commended socialism because it equated with 'justice and common decency', but he referred scathingly to 'the stupid cult of Russia'. On Christmas Day 1936 he left Britain to fight for the republican side in the Spanish civil war, as part of an Independent Labour Party contingent which served with the anarchist POUM militia. The effects of this were to heighten his beliefs. Having seen a classless society in Barcelona, he now believed in socialism more than ever before. But after witnessing the Soviet attempt to destroy the social revolution in Spain, and rivet fascism on the Spanish workers under the

pretext of resisting fascism, he became adamantly anti-Stalinist. The main sin of the Left in Britain, he insisted, was that while it was anti-fascist it was not anti-totalitarian. For a time during the Second World War, Orwell considered it necessary to praise Stalin ('I never thought I should live to say "Good luck to Comrade Stalin" but I do'), but by November 1943 he decided it was time to bury him. He would say exactly what he thought about the betrayal of the Russian revolution in order to help revivify a realistic democratic socialist movement at home.

Many parallels between Russian history and the revolution at Manor Farm are unmistakable. Clearly Old Major represents Marx, Napoleon is Stalin, Snowball is Trotsky, Pilkington is Britain, Frederick Germany, the dogs are the OGPU/NKVD. The battle of the cowshed represents the Allied invasion of 1918, the battle of the windmill is the Nazi invasion of 1941, while the windmill itself represents the Five Year Plans. Orwell had merely changed the chronological order of events, to meet the needs of symmetry of plot. There are far more parallels than most readers realise, and another score could be specified. When in chapter eight Orwell wrote that, during the battle of the windmill, 'all the animals, except Napoleon, flung themselves flat on their bellies' he had changed an earlier proof version ('all the animals including Napoleon') because he had received reliable information, from Joseph Czapaski, ironically a Polish survivor of the Gulag, that Stalin bravely stayed in Moscow during the German advance.

Yet, in fact, the parallels are problematical. Some commentators have judged that Lenin was part of the Old Major character, some that he was part of Napoleon or Snowball, but in reality Lenin was omitted. Orwell believed that Lenin 'would have come to resemble Stalin if he had happened to survive' (though he changed his mind later), and therefore was a disposable figure. But this renders Animal Farm almost Hamlet without the prince. Nor is there an equivalent of the First World War in the book. Farmer Jones does not suffer a catastrophe that shook Manor Farm to its foundations, he simply gets drunk once too often. Also, many of Orwell's details have been misunderstood. It has been suggested that Napoleon's upright stance at the battle of the windmill probably indicated collusion with the invaders. Snowball's insistence on literacy classes has been taken to indicate that Orwell was a Trotskyite, which he expressly denied. Squealer has been wrongly identified with Vladimir Mayakovsky, the Stalinist versifier who in fact is represented by Minimus in the book. So who is Squealer? There was certainly no equivalent in Soviet history - and anyone as prominent and powerful would surely not have survived the purges. (Was he Pravda personified? Or perhaps he was based on Dr Goebbels?) The re-admission of Moses to Animal Farm has been said to represent Stalin's meeting with US parish priest Father Stanislaw Orlemanski, though this took place on April 28th, 1944, several months after Orwell had finished the book. Similarly, the final scene is sometimes anachronistically equated with the Yalta rather than the Teheran conference.

Most difficult of all is the issue of whether in *Animal Farm* Orwell was explaining why one particular revolution failed or implying that all revolutions fail. There is no didactic voice, and therefore there is room for doubt. Does any author, pace Orwell, ever have 'full consciousness of what he is doing'? Reading - even of Orwell's pellucid prose - is a sort of rewriting, and no authors have control over what others make of their works.

There is little reason to suppose that Orwell was critical of Old Major's call for revolution (though some claim that he was, pointing to rhetorical ploys and an authoritarian edge in his speech). Certainly there is no reason to doubt Orwell's praise of the immediate post-revolution period, when 'everyone worked according to his capacity', no one stole and the animals were 'happy as they had never conceived it possible to be'. This was a period of true socialism, paralleled by the 'wonderful things' Orwell had observed in Barcelona. But what went wrong? Was the tyranny of the pigs inevitable? What exactly was the moral of *Animal Farm*?

Orwell explained in 1946 that he intended the book:

primarily as a satire on the Russian revolution. But I did mean it to have a wider application in so much as I meant that that kind of revolution (violent conspiratorial revolution, led by unconsciously power-hungry people) can only lead to a change of masters. I meant the moral to be that revolutions only effect a radical improvement when the masses are alert and know how to chuck out their leaders as soon as the latter have done their job. The turning point of the story was supposed to be when the pigs kept the milk and apples for themselves ... If the other animals had had the sense to put their foot down, it would have been all right.

The problem here is simply that Orwell had to spell out the moral, for, as he wrote in the introduction to the Ukrainian edition, if the book 'does not speak for itself, it is a failure'. The overwhelming majority of readers carry away from *Animal Farm* the conviction that the animals, except the pigs, are innocent dupes. The corruption of the revolution is so gradual and insidious that it seems inevitable. In particular Boxer, the Stakhanovite carthorse, is universally regarded as the book's hero, a character whose pathos has led him to be seen as an equine Little Nell. Are we supposed to condemn him for failing to stand up to Napoleon? The fact is that he simply does not have the brains to do so. Orwell pointed to his unintelligence many times, and even gave him a 'somewhat stupid appearance'. In the play he adapted from the book, broadcast in January 1947, Orwell made this prosaically clear. 'I am not good at thinking things out for myself,' states the hapless Boxer; 'The pigs are cleverest ... My brain is not good.' If the intellectually inferior animals were supposed to control the self-evidently superior pigs, then surely there was no hope for a successful socialist revolution.

When T.S. Eliot read the manuscript of *Animal Farm* for Faber & Faber, he commented that the novel's effect seemed to him 'one of negation'. The pigs were far more intelligent than the other animals and the best qualified to run the farm, so what was really needed 'was not more communism but more public-spirited pigs'. No writer has done other than lambast Eliot's point of view, and with some reason, since Orwell aimed primarily to destroy the myth of the USSR as a socialist country. Yet Orwell had not intended to be entirely negative, and there is logic in Eliot's viewpoint. Since the pigs were the most intelligent animals, and the decent, loyal Boxer could never manage to master more than four letters of the alphabet, then if there was hope it lay with the porkers.

Orwell's description of the worker-animals owed a good deal to his understanding -- or misunderstanding -- of British workers. He wrote in 1936, very candidly, that he was brought up in the sort of middleclass family that regarded workers as 'almost sub-human'. He added that every middle-class person 'has a dormant class-prejudice'. This seems true of Orwell himself. He often praised the working class for their stoicism and hard work - but never for their intelligence or leadership. To his mind, workers were not just ordinary people whose education had often limited their intellectual horizons, they were inherently mentally inferior. He had never known a working man, he wrote, 'who grasps the deeper implications of socialism', and he habitually depicted the proletariat as passive. 'There is no mob any more,' he said, after spending two months in the north of England in 1936, 'only a flock'. In 1942 he wrote that the English workers were like a plant, 'blind and stupid but it knows enough to keep pushing towards the light' -- a doublethink that tells us much about Orwell's ambivalence towards the working class. So does his habit of mocking their pronunciation -- their 'romance' and 'sez', though the latter is the dictionary-correct way of pronouncing 'says'.

Raymond Williams was incorrect to assert that Orwell was no longer a socialist when he wrote *Animal Farm*. But he was surely right to insist that the book was a simplification, with the faults and virtues that flow there-from. Orwell undoubtedly hit the Soviet target with his simple farmyard story, but there was collateral damage. It became all too easy for the Right to use his work as propaganda that all revolutions degenerate into despotism.

When Orwell described *Animal Farm* as a 'little squib' he was being self-deprecatory, but he wasn't wholly satisfied with it. In the same paragraph in which he revealed that he'd tried to fuse political and artistic purposes into a whole, he admitted that 'every book is a failure'. He wasn't trying to attack the whole concept of revolution, far from it. But his simple, moving account of revolutionary failure in the USSR contained the flaw that, for many readers, it made all revolutions seem doomed.

No doubt Orwell could have written an unambiguous propagandist pamphlet. Yet we should be grateful that instead he wrote a work of art, something which by its very nature is open to divergent interpretations. *Animal Farm* is a superb but ambiguous satire on a particular revolution. It is also a more general allegory, into which human imagination will continue to breathe life in unexpected ways. In present-day Asia, for instance, *Animal Farm* is considered one of Orwell's 'Burmese books'. In 2001 a serialization by an opposition newspaper in Zimbabwe, the *Daily News*, had illustrations of Napoleon wearing Robert Mugabe's unmistakable black spectacles.

All books are failures, it is true, but not all failures are equal. Some indeed are brilliant if flawed successes, and some little squibs are in fact quite remarkable rockets.

Gordon Bowker, *George Orwell* (Little, Brown, 2003); Peter Davison, *George Orwell: A Literary Life* (Palgrave, 1996); Christopher Hitchens, *Orwell's Victory* (Penguin, 2002); Lynette Hunter, *George Orwell: The Search for a Voice* (Open University Press, 1984); Stephen Ingle, *George Orwell: a Political Life* (Manchester University Press, 1993); Jeffrey Meyers, *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation* (Norton, 2002); John Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* (Palgrave, 1999); Frances Stoner Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural ColdWar* (Granta, 1999); Frederic Warburg, *All Authors Are Equal* (Hutchinson, 1973).

Peter Stansky, 'Utopia and Anti-Utopia: William Morris and George Orwell' (February 1983); Robert Pearce, 'Orwell Now' (October 1997); Gordon Marsden, 'Orwell and Burke: Strange Bedfellows?' (July 2003); Richard Cavendish, 'Publication of 1984' (June 1999); Richard Weight, 'Return to Albion: Intellectuals in Wartime Britain' (December 1994); Ian S. Wood 'The Mood of Britain' (June 1984).

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Robert Pearce gives a historian's-eye view of George Orwell's classic novel.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Quoted on the back of this first edition of *Animal Farm* is a remark by Peter Quennell, founder editor of *History Today*, who said that 'as an essay in satire it is uncommonly well done'. Main photo of Orwell by Vernon Richards.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Orwell as a boy (far left), with friends in a farmyard in Church Stretton, 1917.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): In an earlier political satire of the farmyard, of May 23rd, 1934, Punch mocks British Union of Fascists leader Oswald Mosley for targeting British farmers. Orwell's Animal Farm was more than just political satire, however.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Communist leaders saluting in the street during the Russian Revolution of 1917 (Trotsky is on the left, Stalin near right). Below: the animals turn against Jones the farmer, from Halas and Batchelor's 1954 animated film of Animal Farm.

PHOTO (COLOR): Part of T.S. Eliot's letter to Orwell outlining his reasons for rejecting Animal Farm for publication by Faber and Faber, July 13th, 1944.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Orwell's first wife, Eileen, whom he married in 1936. She encouraged him in his writing, but died during an operation in 1945, before Animal Farm was published.

PHOTO (COLOR): Napoleon rules: from the 1954 animation.

PHOTO (COLOR): Secker and Warburg's sales ledger, showing the first print run of 4,500 copies of Animal Farm in July 1945, increased in November to 10,000 for the second run.

PHOTO (COLOR): The producers Halas (centre) and Batchelor discuss their cartoon Animal Farm with the animation team.

PHOTO (COLOR): An actor dressed as 'Napoleon the Pig' in rehearsal for a production of Animal Farm in a Beijing theatre in 2002.

By Robert Pearce

Robert Pearce is Reader in History at St Martin's College, Lancaster, and editor of History Review. He is the editor of The Sayings of George Orwell (Duckworth, 1998).