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## BACKGROUND



## CHECK THE BOOK

Many biographers have produced detailed accounts of Orwell's life, including Bernard Crick, Michael Sheldon, Peter Davison, D. J. Taylor and Gordon Bowker.



## CHECK THE BOOK

Anthony West's essay 'George Orwell', in his *Principles and Persuasions: The Literary Essays of Anthony West* (1958), suggests boarding school may have influenced Orwell negatively and formed the ultimate basis for the world of Big Brother.

## GEORGE ORWELL

The man who is remembered today as 'George Orwell' began life as Eric Blair on 25 June 1903 in Bengal, where his father was an official in the Opium Department of the Indian Civil Service. After being taken to England in 1904, he lived for many years in Henley-on-Thames with his mother and older sister Marjorie. Eric's father joined them on his retirement in 1912, only to go away again in 1917 until 1919 as an officer in the Great War.

Eric, after attending a local school, was sent to St Cyprian's, a private boarding school in Eastbourne, about which he later wrote a scathing essay, 'Such, Such were the Joys'. It has been suggested that his experiences of punishment and emotional manipulation here as a child between 1911 and 1916 supplied an early model for Winston's 're-education' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. After a term at Wellington College, Eric won a scholarship to Eton. He was there from 1917 to 1921 but, although he was an intelligent pupil who enjoyed writing for college magazines, he made little academic effort. He seems to have already developed his lifelong dislike of succeeding on conventional terms. He did not go to university, but instead joined the Indian Imperial Police in 1922 and served as an Assistant Superintendent in Burma. While in England on sick leave in 1927, he resigned from the service, partly due to the chest illness which dogged him all his life, but also because he was disillusioned with imperialism and wished to try his hand at becoming a writer.

Apparently seeking to quench feelings of guilt about his privileged position in society, as well as to find material for stories and articles, he lived among the poor and posed as a tramp both in France and England (he lived in Paris from 1928 to 1929), before moving on to a series of temporary jobs such as teaching and bookselling. In order to avoid embarrassment to his parents, he adopted the pen name George Orwell for his first book, an account of some of his experiences called *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933).

## Background

Despite continuing ill health, he worked hard at his writing, producing three novels in as many years, each concerning a rebel against conventional society whose experiences to some degree paralleled his own.

In 1936 he was commissioned to write a book about the economically depressed industrial areas of northern England. The result, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), was a vivid, thought-provoking account, but was also highly controversial in its presentation of working people (anticipating similar controversy over the proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) and in its abusive criticisms of progressive intellectuals. During the writing of the book, Orwell (he now used the names Blair and Orwell almost interchangeably) married Eileen O'Shaughnessy, whom he had met while she was studying for an MA in psychology.

By the time the book appeared, the couple had gone to Spain to support the republican side in the Spanish Civil War. Orwell served with an anarchist militia on the Aragon front until, in May 1937, he was shot through the throat by a Fascist sniper. However, his life proved to be under threat from the left as well as the right, for the Spanish Communists were now turning on some of their former allies, dishonestly branding them Fascist collaborators and executing many of them. The Blairs were lucky to escape across the border to safety. Because most of the British magazines which supported the republican side accepted the Communists' version of events in the name of solidarity, they refused to publish Orwell's eyewitness accounts, a suppression which undoubtedly influenced his conception of the rewriting of history in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell's normal publisher, Gollancz, declined even to consider his book on the Spanish Civil War. *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) eventually appeared through another publisher.

With his ill health badly aggravated by the bullet wound, Orwell went to Morocco to recuperate in a hot climate, the trip funded by an anonymous donation from a friend, and there worked on his fourth novel, *Coming Up for Air* (1939), generally regarded as his best piece of conventional fiction. Returning to England in 1939, he wrote a book of essays called *Inside the Whale* (1940). As well as the



## CHECK THE BOOK

Orwell gives a vivid account of his experiences in the Spanish Civil War in his book *Homage to Catalonia* (1938).

World events

**1901** Death of Queen Victoria

**1914** Outbreak of First World War

**1917** Russian Revolution  
**1918** First World War ends; votes for women  
**1919** Amritsar Massacre in Punjab

**1922** Mussolini comes to power in Italy; inauguration of USSR  
**1924** Labour Party takes office in Britain for the first time; Lenin dies  
**1926** General Strike in the UK

**1932** British Union of Fascists launched  
**1933** Over 2,500,000 unemployed men in Britain; Hitler appointed chancellor in Germany

George Orwell's life

**1903** Eric Blair born on 25 June in Bengal  
**1904** Moves to England

**1911–16** Attends St Cyprian's

**1917–21** Attends Eton

**1922** Joins Indian Imperial Police

**1927** Resigns from police

**1928–9** Lives in Paris

**1933** *Down and Out in Paris and London*

**1934** *Burmese Days*

Literary events

**1896** H. G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*  
**1899** H. G. Wells, *When the Sleeper Wakes*

**1902** Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

**1908** Jack London, *The Iron Heel*

**1913** D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*  
**1914** James Joyce, *Dubliners*  
**1916** Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*

**1920** Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*  
**1922** T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*; James Joyce, *Ulysses*

**1927** Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*  
**1928** D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*  
**1932** Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

World events

**1936–9** Spanish Civil War

**1939** Russia and Germany sign a non-aggression pact

**1940** Battle of Britain

**1941** Germany invades Russia; USA joins Allies

**1943** Tehran Conference

**1945** Labour government in Britain

**1945–89** Cold War  
**1946** Winston Churchill coins the term 'Iron Curtain'

George Orwell's life

**1935** *A Clergyman's Daughter*  
**1936** *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*  
**1936–7** Orwell and his new wife, Eileen O'Shaughnessy, move to Spain and support the Republicans  
**1937** *The Road to Wigan Pier*; goes to Morocco  
**1938** *Homage to Catalonia*  
**1939** *Coming Up for Air*; returns to England; joins the Home Guard

**1940** *Inside the Whale*

**1941** *The Lion and the Unicorn*; becomes producer and writer for BBC

**1943** Leaves BBC and Home Guard; becomes editor of *Tribune*  
**1944** Adopts a son  
**1945** *Animal Farm*; Eileen dies suddenly

**1946** Moves to Jura; *Critical Essays*  
**1948** *Nineteen Eighty-Four* completed; Orwell ill with tuberculosis  
**1949** *Nineteen Eighty-Four* published; marries Sonia Brownell  
**1950** Dies 21 January

Literary events

**1939** James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*; John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*  
**1940** Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*

**1953** Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*  
**1985** Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*