

CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **ANIMAL FARM**

George Orwell

Son and Student

George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair on June 25, 1903, in Bengal, India, where his father, Richard Walmesley Blair, was an official in the Opium Department. Like many middle-to-upper-class men of his time, Richard Blair served the British Empire in its most prized and lucrative colony. In 1896, he met Ida Amble Limouzin, a British governess 20 years his junior, also living in India. After their marriage, the couple lived in Bengal for eight years, where they had two children: Marjorie (born 1898) and Eric. One year after Eric's birth, Ida moved back to England. For the next eight years, Eric would see his father for only three months in 1907, during one of his leaves. A third child, Avril, was born in 1908. Richard did not see his youngest child until his return to England when he retired from the Opium Department in 1912.

Eric spent his early boyhood in Henley, Oxfordshire, where he was an admittedly "chubby boy" who enjoyed walks in the Oxfordshire countryside. During this time, he began to vaguely understand his family's need to spend money to "keep up appearances" and the differences between members of different social classes: A friendship with a plumber's daughter was broken by his mother because she found the girl "too common." Not surprisingly, Eric was enthralled with books, notably Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* — a novel whose political satire would find its way into the books of George Orwell.

In the summer of 1911, Eric entered into the defining phase of his childhood when he was admitted to St. Cyprian's, a preparatory school in Eastbourne with a reputation for readying boys for notable "public" (that is, private) schools. He began his first term there in 1912 and, until he left it five years later, almost wholly dreaded and hated the experience. He was humiliated as a bed wetter, forced to memorize streams of dates and names, mocked by the wealthier boys, and led to believe that (in his own words), "[l]ife was more terrible, and I was more wicked, than I had imagined." The headmaster and his wife routinely reminded Eric that he was attending their school on a partial scholarship in order to shame him into behaving as they wished — this was another lesson to young Eric about the importance of social class and money. His years at St. Cyprian's are described at length in his essay, "Such, Such, Were the Joys . . ." (1952), and a reader of the essay can see that it was at St. Cyprian's that Orwell began to truly recognize the ways in which the strong belittle, control, and terrorize the weak — an idea that would later inform his political views and two most renowned novels, *Animal Farm* and *1984*. Although Orwell did enjoy some of his time at St. Cyprians (collecting butterflies, for example), he yearned for the escape he finally achieved when his impressive grades earned him a scholarship at Wellington College, where he went in 1916.

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After spending only nine weeks at Wellington, however, Eric learned that he had been accepted to Eton — one of the nation's most prestigious schools — as a King's Scholar, whose education was almost entirely paid for by a scholarship. Eric's grades at Eton were unimpressive, although he did read a great deal, especially modern writers like Jack London, H. G. Wells, and George Bernard Shaw, who undoubtedly helped Eric shape his growing social consciousness. Eton was also the place where Eric began to write seriously, although what remains from this period is largely juvenilia. In December of 1921, Eric graduated from Eton, and although many Eton boys continued their studies at Oxford or Cambridge, Eric's marks were too low for him to receive a scholarship. His father (understandably) refused to pay for more schooling if Eric was not prepared to perform. Facing an undecided future, the 18-year-old Eric Blair made a decision that would heighten his awareness of politics and the abuses of power done in the name of goodness and moral virtue.

Officer and Tramp

If Eric could not become a scholar, he knew that he had a good chance at becoming a servant of the Empire which had employed his father for 30 years. He announced to his parents that he wanted to become a police officer in India, and they approved. Inspired by the status of the position, the good wages he would earn, and perhaps by a desire to see remote parts of the world, Orwell took and passed the admission test for the Imperial Police. When asked to name the Indian province to which he would most like to be assigned, Eric requested Burma — a shocking answer for a man his age, since Burma was an often lawless place, high on crime but low on comforts. He had little experience as a soldier (save for the Officer Training Corps at Eton) and none in a police force. There was also a great amount of tension in Burma between the British and Indian populations. Despite these apparent deterrents, in November, 1922, Eric arrived in Mandalay, Burma, to begin his new career as an Assistant Superintendent of Police in the Indian Imperial Police Force.

While in Burma, Eric developed a great distaste for the British rule of India and for imperialism altogether. As a police officer, he was expected to maintain order in a population that detested him. In turn, he also sometimes hated those he was being paid to protect. As he describes in "Shooting an Elephant" (1936), imperialism destroys both the rulers and the ruled: "I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible." His experiences in Burma would find their way into his essay "A Hanging" (1931) and his first novel, *Burmese Days* (1934). He resigned from the Indian Imperial Police Force in 1928 and returned to England, a 25-five year-old determined to become a writer able to comment on his ever-growing political consciousness.

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To find material for his writing and learn about the lives of the lower classes, Eric began “tramping” through London and Paris. Fascinated by the lives of the poor and by the fact that a nation as powerful as England could fail to address such shocking poverty, Eric lived among the lower classes, although he could have stayed in his parents’ comfortable home. Dressed in shoddy clothes, Eric would sit on street corners, converse with tramps, and spend time in the various “spikes” (men’s shelters provided by factories) around London. In Paris, he took a job as a plongeur (a dishwasher) and learned more about the suffering of the poor in another European capital. While in Paris, he contracted pneumonia and spent three weeks in the public ward of the Hôpital Cochin — a depressing but enlightening experience that he later recorded in the essay, “How the Poor Die.” (Problems with his lungs plagued him his entire life.)

His experiences were shaped into his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, a work of non-fiction that Orwell asked a friend to destroy (convinced that it had no merit) but which the same friend took to an agent, who in turn took it to a publisher. *Down and Out* was published in 1933 to good reviews — reviews that spoke of the author not as “Eric Blair,” but as “George Orwell,” a pseudonym Eric chose in case the book was a total failure. For the remainder of his career, he remained Orwell to his readers but Eric to his family and friends.

Novelist and Soldier

During the early and mid-1930s, Orwell dabbled in teaching while trying to sustain himself as a writer. His novels *Burmese Days* (1934), *A Clergyman’s Daughter* (1935), and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) all met with decent reviews but modest sales. In 1936, Orwell employed the same method he had used to write *Down and Out* and visited Wigan, a mining town in Northern England, to see how the miners and their families lived. The result was *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), a non-fictional account of the miners’ struggles that was chosen by the Left Book Club and sold over 44,000 copies. Orwell was now regarded as an important political writer, much more so than as a novelist. This same year also saw Orwell become a husband: On June 9, 1936, he married Eileen O’Shaughnessy.

Orwell and his new wife did not begin a peaceful married life; rather, they both traveled to Spain to serve in the fight against fascism which would become the Spanish Civil War. Orwell left England in December of 1936 and served in the P. O. U. M. (The Worker’s Party of Marxist Unification) — a socialist party allied with England’s Independent Labour Party (I. L. P.). Orwell was responsible for training a band of Catalonian soldiers fighting General Franco on the Aragon front. Eileen arrived in Barcelona in February of 1937 to serve as a typist for the I. L. P.’s Spanish offices. That May, Orwell was hit by a sniper in the throat but miraculously lived and only lost the use of his voice for a few weeks. Eventually, the P. O. U. M. was outlawed by the more

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powerful communist forces that arose as a result of the conflict, and Orwell escaped (with Eileen) to France after serving more than three months in combat. *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), another non-fiction work, describes Orwell's time on the front and his disillusionment with the very revolution he thought would win freedom for Spain. This idea of a revolution betraying its supposed aims is a chief issue of *Animal Farm*.

Napoleon and Big Brother

After returning from France, Orwell's lungs began troubling him again; he was showing signs of tuberculosis and was admitted to a sanatorium in Kent, where he convalesced for four months before leaving for Marrakech, Morocco — a spot chosen because of the supposed recuperative effects of its climate. In Marrakech, he wrote another novel, *Coming Up for Air* (1939) and then returned, in 1939, to London. World War II erupted and Orwell continued writing reviews, essays, and broadcasts to India from the BBC. Non-fiction works from this period include *Inside the Whale* (1940) and *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941).

In 1943, Orwell finished writing the book that would seal his reputation as an insightful and cautious political thinker: *Animal Farm*. Dubbed "A Fairy Story," Orwell's short but powerful novel examines the ways in which a farm of oppressed and exploited animals rebel against their human master, only to eventually replace the system they initially wanted to supplant. The book is also a thinly disguised retelling of the 1917 Russian Revolution from Orwell's point-of-view. Because of this, the book was rejected by several publishers on the grounds that it was too controversial to publish at a time when the Soviets were at war with Germany — the wartime enemy of England. While negotiations on *Animal Farm* were still pending, Orwell and Eileen adopted a son, Richard Horatio, in 1944. *Animal Farm* was finally published on August 17, 1945, sold more than 250,000 copies, and received tremendously flattering reviews. However, with this great success came sorrow, when Eileen died during a hysterectomy this same year.

In 1947, Orwell moved to Jura, an island off the coast of Scotland. Here he composed the novel which proved to be his most enduring work: *1984*. Published in 1949, the novel evokes a nightmarish future where the citizens of "Oceania" are totally controlled by the Party, a political machine symbolized by the mythical figure Big Brother. Orwell's lungs, however, were getting worse. Just before his death, he married the young editorial assistant Sonia Brownwell in a University Hospital bedside ceremony on October 13, 1949. Orwell died of tuberculosis on January 21, 1950, but his contributions to political literature — best seen in the fact that the adjective "Orwellian" has come into the language — remain.