

CHAPTER IV

THE ROAD TO WIGAN PIER

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When I came home on leave in 1927 I was already half-determined to throw up my job, and one sniff of English air decided me. I was not going back to be part of that evil despotism. ... For five years I had been part of an oppressive system, and it had left me with a bad conscience. Innumerable remembered faces - faces of prisoners in the dock, of men waiting in the condemned cells, of subordinates I had bullied and aged peasants I had snubbed, of servants and coolies I had hit with my fist in moments of rage - haunted me intolerably. I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate. ... I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man. I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants.

Hence to expiate his guilt of participation in inhuman imperialism in Burma and India, Orwell desired to submerge himself into the downtrodden to be one of them and fight for their justice. Hence he set on the pilgrimage of the underworld of social outcasts, tramps, beggars, criminals, prostitutes of London and Paris. And the outcome is the book Down And Out in Paris And London. In the same way he made the de tour of working classes and the result

is the reportage The Road to Wigan Pier.

Orwell tried to achieve a renewal of contact with the social underworld in 1936, which is the subject of his second book of autobiography, The Road to Wigan Pier published in 1937.

In January 1936 Orwell was commissioned by Victor Gollancz to make a study of unemployment in the depressed areas of north of England and to write about what he had seen for the Left Book Club. Orwell accepted the commission at once and embarked on a tour of the Black country, Lancashire and Yorkshire, which occupied the period 31 January to 25 March 1936. Orwell's journey took him to Coventry, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, the Patteries, Macclesfield, Manchester, Wigan, Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds and Barnsley. Throughout this time he met miners, trade union officials, officials of National Unemployment Workers' Movement and others in an attempt to study housing conditions and to see for himself the effects of poverty, malnutrition and unemployment on the lives of ordinary people. He recorded his impressions in a diary which was published after his death in the 'Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters'. This diary - unselfconscious, vivid and moving in its sincerity - formed the basis of the book which became The Road to Wigan Pier. Orwell transformed his immediate day-to-day impressions into a social document of enduring worth: a piece of reportage which is now acknowledged as a classic of the genre and as one of the seminal works of the inter-war years. It is the work of a man who was seeing a landscape and

a people from a completely fresh standpoint, without inside knowledge and without prejudices. Hence the result is a work of passionate, almost painful honesty.

It can be said that the title of Orwell's book is a variation of Kipling's The Road to Mandalay. The title is suggestive and the Road to Wigan is the road back from Mandalay with the full implications of guilt and penitence. It is a re-writing of personal history in such a way as to confirm both the release from existential nausea and the possibility of restoring emotional balance and integrity. This book not only bespeaks the general economic condition of the 1930's, it also brings into focus a moral urgency and a seriousness that is rare among Orwell's contemporaries.

In form the book is a collection of disparate essays, divided into two parts almost equal in length. The first part is a series of essays describing social conditions amongst miners and the unemployed of Lancashire and Yorkshire. The second part is a long autobiographical statement of Orwell's approach to socialism, his attitudes to the socialist movement, and his views on the vexed question of class. The contentious nature of these chapters is such that Victor Gollancz - the publisher - felt obliged to preface the Left Book Club edition with a lengthy introduction in which he dissented from many of Orwell's conclusions. However, he recognized at once that the book as a whole was a work of impressive power. Hence he wrote: "It is a long time, since I have read so living a book, or one

so full of burning indignation against poverty and oppression".²

He sensed that the first part in its entirety was a document of quite exceptional interest, and indeed decided later to issue Part One as a separate pamphlet, at a price of one shilling. In this form it had a very wide circulation and earned for Orwell a considerable reputation as a writer on social questions.

The opening chapter is written in a very different style from the remainder of the book. In tone it resembles the opening section of a novel. There is no preface or introductory statement explaining the origins of the book. Instead, the reader is plunged immediately into a northern industrial milieu:

*The first sound in the morning was the clumping of mill-girls close down cobbled street. Earlier than that, I suppose, there were factory whistles which I was never awake to hear.*³

At once one is struck by Orwell's extraordinary reticence. There is no attempt on the part of the narrator to introduce himself or to explain how he came to be in this environment; he is simply 'I', the anonymous lodger in an overcrowded bedroom, describing with pitiless clarity the sordidness of his surroundings. This detailed description of his lodgings on Darlington Road, Wigan is remarkable for its accumulation of details and for the extraordinary vividness of its impressions. Here, for example, is the description of the

kitchen table at which the family and the lodgers ate their meals:

*I never saw this table completely uncovered, but I saw its various wrappings at different times. At the bottom there was a layer of old newspaper stained by Worcester Sauce; above that a sheet of sticky white oil-cloth; above that a green serge cloth; above that a coarse linen cloth, never changed and seldom taken off. Generally the crumbs from breakfast were still on the table at supper. I used to get to know individual crumbs by sight and watch their progress up and down the table from day to day.*⁴

After reading this chapter no one can ever forget the Brookers and their dreary lodging-house above the tripe-shop. What affronts Orwell is not so much the squalor of his surroundings, the mean food and the unsavoury smells, but the feeling of stagnant meaningless decay, of having got down into some subterranean place where people go creeping round and round, just like black-beetles, in an endless muddle of solved jobs and mean grievances. He adds characteristically: "It is a kind of duty to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist".⁵

The word duty in this context is interesting and 'serves to illustrate once again an aspect of Orwell to have close intimacy with the dirt and squalor of the socially downtrodden. It would have been entirely possible for him to have found more comfortable

lodgings elsewhere in Wigan, but had he done so, he would have failed to make contact with people like the Brookers who gave the feeling that 'they are not real people at all, but a kind of ghost for ever rehearsing the same futile rigmarole'. He could not have got the chance to mix with such lodgers as Mr Reilly, Joe, etc. to observe their wretched life. He felt it was his duty to mix with such people, even live with them, in order to understand their way of life. *Wigan Pier* is such a vital and memorable book because one has a sense of participation after its reading. Orwell did not merely visit miners' homes, he actually lived in them, he did not merely gain information concerning housing and nutrition, he experienced these things at first hand. It is this quality which illuminates the *Wigan* chapters with such a strong sense of immediacy.

The style of this chapter is strongly reminiscent of Paris chapters in Down and Out. What is noticeable is that in the remaining six sections of Part One the tone is much more serious. The chapters are still cast in the first-person but are much more 'documentary' in approach. It is as if he intended this first chapter to stand on its own as a backcloth to the sections which follow: a prose picture which, in a series of memorable vignettes, sets the scene for his exploration of the 'two nations'. This exploration, whilst documentary in form, is nowhere clinical or dispassionate. Whilst superficially it has the appearance of a series of fragmented essays, the book as a whole has a unity by virtue of Orwell's distinctive voice. He is not merely studying working class life in a northern industrial

town but is describing his own reactions to it: the reactions of an acutely sympathetic observer who was still feeling his way towards a political faith and a medium of writing he could make his own.

The second chapter, describing a descent into a coal mine, has become justly famous in its own right and was later reprinted as an essay under the title 'Down the Mine'.⁶ It is a remarkable piece of writing, executed with a kind of unemotional honesty which he rarely equalled and which conveys vividly to the reader the physical experience involved: this, one feels, is what a coal mine is like. Orwell's aim is to describe as simply and matter-of-factly as possibly the experience of journeying into the mine as it happened to him, and to do so with a detachment which belies the deep emotion he must have felt and yet seems entirely appropriate to his subject. In a series of striking images he evokes the descent in the cage, the painful walking to the coal face, the heat and the noise, the sheer physical drudgery in cramped and dangerous conditions. Here he describes the world of miners:

*Watching coal-miners at work, you realize momentarily what different universes different people inhabit. Down there where coal is dug it is a sort of world apart which one can quite easily go through life without hearing about. Probably a majority of people would even prefer not to hear about it.*⁷

In a way it is even humiliating to watch coal-miners working. It raises in you a momentary

*doubt about your own status as an 'intellectual' and a superior person generally. ... all of us really owe the comparative decency of our lives to poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of coal dust, driving their shovels forward with arms and belly muscles of steel.*⁸

What makes this chapter such an impressive literary achievement is the forcefulness and vigour of the writing: the manner in which the feel of the mine is ineradicably communicated. It is this quality which infuses so much of his writing with a clarity and animation that are quite unforgettable and which makes the reading of his work both an emotional and a literary experience. All these passages are written with an unusual intensity, an intensity achieved not by the use of mannered or ~~exaggerated~~^{exaggerated} language but through prose of compelling honesty and power.

To these Orwell has added an impressive range of scenes which testify not only to his descriptive powers but to his increasing mastery of words and his evident determination to achieve a prose style combining the utmost simplicity and precision with an ability to inform and arouse his readers. A few who have read the work can ever erase the description of work:

*All these times the place is like hell, or at any rate like my own mental picture of hell. Most of things one imagines in hell are there - heat, noise, confusion, darkness, foul air, and above all, unbearably cramped space.*⁹

It is even impossible for one to erase the real sense of humility with which he regards the miners and their immense physical stamina.

Then there follows a series of chapters concerning housing, malnutrition and social conditions in the depressed areas. Throughout these chapters Orwell is not content merely to describe poverty, mining and the social consequences of unemployment and poor housing, but seeks at each stage of his exposition to arouse the anger and engage the emotions of his readers.

There is the description of dangers that the miners have to face in the third chapter. Their superstitions, for example, it is bad luck to see a woman before going to work on the morning shift, is described, their nature of work, their working hours, their diseases such as rheumatism, and disease of the eye, nystagmus, their servile behaviour before the superiors and the dangers to their life due to falling of the roofs, due to explosions of gas, due to stones falling from 'pot-holes', is vividly described. He states every year one miner in about nine hundred is killed and one in about six is injured. No other trade approaches this in dangerousness.

Orwell's approach throughout is one of compassion and a deep sense of outrage at the affront to human decency represented by squalid housing, poverty, and malnutrition. Here is the evidence of housing problems and overcrowding from chapter four.

Words are such feeble things. What is the use of a brief phrase like 'roof leaks' or 'four beds for eight people'? It is the kind of thing your eye slides over, registering nothing. And yet what a wealth of misery it can cover! Take the question of overcrowding, for instance. Quite often you have eight or ten people living in a three-roomed house.

The awareness of this misery is communicated to the reader through an adroit combination of statistics and texts, handled throughout with a penetrating eye for detail and a dexterity in the presentation of unpalatable facts. In ^{the} chapter on housing conditions there is an unforgettable description of the caravan dwellings inhabited by many thousands of families in the northern towns during the years of the depression. He remarks at one point that one caravan he inspected had seven people in it:

Seven people in about 450 cubic feet of space; which is to say that each person had for his entire dwelling a space a good deal smaller than one compartment of a public lavatory.¹¹

The effect of the amplification is to heighten immeasurably the readers' sense of the squalor and overcrowding. The wretched caravan dwellings are depicted in prose of almost unbearable clarity; it is almost as if the reader is there, sharing with his revulsion at such unendurable conditions.

While describing the deadening, debilitating effect of unemployment

upon everybody - married or single, literate or illiterate - Orwell writes in fifth chapter:

*Because to write books you need not only comfort and solitude - and solitude is never easy to obtain in a working class home - you also need peace of mind. You can't settle to anything, you can't command the spirit of hope in which anything has got to be created, with that dull evil cloud of unemployment hanging over you.*¹²

Physical degeneracy is caused due to malnutrition which is described in the sixth chapter. It results in lowering the physical average which Orwell saw in the industrial towns. The under-nourishment also affects the badness of teeth. Orwell comments that in the industrial towns the death rate and infant mortality of the poorest quarters are always about double those of the well-to-do residential quarters.

The social and psychological effects of industrialization are described in seventh chapter. While commenting on the evils of industrialization, Orwell observes:

*Its real evil lies far deeper and is quite uneradicable. It is important to remember this, because there is always a temptation to think that industrialism is harmless so long as it is clean and orderly.*¹³

Industrialism takes us to materialism by which the status of the

person and the integration of the society are decided.

The first part of the book is notable for its literary qualities. Always it is the unusual detail which is noted, the vivid smile, the telling phrase: 'chew their grievances like a cud', 'sinister magnificance', 'serrated flames like circular saws', 'fiery serpents of iron', 'the lock gates wore beards of ice'. At his best Orwell had an eye for detail and a gift of expression almost worthy of Dickens. He possessed the ability to convey striking and intense mental images which linger in the mind long after the book has been laid aside. The Road to Wigan Pier could so easily have been a mere catalogue of facts and statistics, an indictment of local and national government for its apparent indifference in the face of such widespread squalor. Instead, whilst skilful use is made of statistics in their place, the whole of Part One is an extraordinarily human document. Orwell's approach is documentary, empirical and pragmatic. Filled with statistics, essential information and useful suggestions, and his view is, as far as possible, an 'insider's' view. He has a deep loathing of the ugliness, emptiness of what he sees, but he is not merely content to describe it - he wants to make people feel morally responsible so that they will radically change it. Orwell alleviates our fears and engages our sympathy, by making us care about the workers, he pricks our social conscience and awakens our sense of justice. The great strength of Wigan Pier is that the economic injustices are always described in human terms. His moving theme is a fervent plea for human dignity and compassion.

The second part, a series of highly idiosyncratic essays on socialism and social class, is far less successful than Part One. These final six chapters lack the intrinsic interest of the descriptive essays and are marred moreover by innumerable contentious statements, e.g., 'A generation ago every intelligent person was in some sense a revolutionary'. It is the polemical nature of Part Two, the hardness of so many of Orwell's statements, his apparent unwillingness to concede the existence of other points of view, which has antagonised so many readers. What is of enduring value in these chapters is the essential decency and morality of his conception of socialism and the patent honesty of his attempts to understand his opponents.

For Orwell, socialism was not an economic creed but a philosophy of life which meant that poverty, injustice and deprivation must be replaced by a fuller and richer way of living. Throughout his exposition of socialism words such as 'justice', 'liberty', and 'decency' abound. His conception of socialism was clearly a deeply humanitarian vision, undocrinaire and compassionate. His essential thesis was that socialists were alienating large numbers of potential adherents by their apparent advocacy of machine-civilization, by their remoteness from the world of manual workers, and by their failure to present an attractive vision of socialism in practice. Unless the socialist movement could remedy these deficiencies, he argued, the struggle with fascism would be lost and large numbers of the intelligentsia would defect to totalitarian ideologies.

Nowhere in The Road to Wigan Pier is there definition of socialism per se, nor any attempt to define how socialism could be achieved, which can be clearly pointed. Instead, Orwell devotes considerable attention to discussion of the image of socialism from the standpoint of non-socialists, and to a resume of the aspects of the movement. What impresses the reader when returning to these essays today is Orwell's salutary frankness in facing issues such as class and snobbery, and his willingness to discuss them even when his admissions place himself in an unfavourable light.

The issue of class distinction and sham bourgeois socialists who for hours tirade against their own class is described. The most fascinating section of Part Two, and an essay which stands on its own merits as an intriguing exercise in autobiography, is the ninth chapter. In this chapter he describes with frankness and an engaging modesty his transition from 'an odious little snob' as a public schoolboy to his involvement with tramps and beggars after his return to England from Burma in 1927. It is ^a literary re-creation of events which in practice cannot have taken such an orderly form as is here described. What he is doing is imposing a rationalization upon events which had occurred ten years earlier.

This point can be illustrated by the passage in which he describes his motives in descending into the abyss of poverty:

When I thought of poverty I thought of it in terms of brute starvation. Therefore my mind turned immediately towards the extreme cases,

*the social outcasts, tramps, beggars, criminals, prostitutes. These were the 'the lowest of the low', and these were the people with whom I wanted to get in contact ... at least I could go among these people, see what their lives were like and feel myself temporarily part of their world. Once I had been among them and accepted them, I should have touched bottom, and ... this is what I felt: I was aware even then that it was irrational - part of my guilt would drop from me.*¹⁴

Thus to expiate his guilt of participation in imperialism in Burma, Orwell desired to immerse himself into the social outcasts and the working class.

He attacks the imperialism and the capitalism with bold and open frankness in tenth chapter.

*For, apart from any other consideration, the high standard of life we enjoy in England depends upon our keeping a tight hold on the Empire, particularly the tropical portions of it such as India and Africa. Under the capitalist system, in order that England may live in comparative comfort, a hundred million Indians must live on the verge of starvation - an evil state of affairs.*¹⁵

In fact Orwell was championing the cause of Indian freedom like the Indian radicals and revolutionaries, at the face of his own countrymen. To abolish the class-distinctions, he states that one

has to change one's attitude towards the man of lower class, then the harmony is possible.

He discusses the state of socialism then present at his time in eleventh chapter. He feels it a theory confined entirely to the middle classes. Socialism means justice and common decency. The fact is that socialism, in the form in which was presented then, observes Orwell, appealed chiefly to unsatisfactory or even inhuman types. Orwell has indignation even against the socialist writers:

The real socialist writers, the propogandist writers, have always been dull, empty wind boys - Shaw, Barbusse, Upton Sinclair, William Morris, Walds^o Frank, etc., etc.,¹⁶ such views are bound to be criticised, hence there are attacks on Orwell's pondering over socialism.

He attacks the socialist trend of machine worship in twelfth chapter, which he feels has become a kind of religion:

*Therefore the logical end of mechanical progress is to reduce the human being to something resembling a brain in a bottle. That is the goal towards which we are already moving, though, of course, we have no intention of getting there.*¹⁷

The aims of socialism according to Orwell are justice and liberty. If these aims are not fulfilled, it is possible, Orwell feels, that fascism would soon engulf the world. He not only attacks the machine worship but also the stupid cult of Russia.

By presenting his views on 'socialism' and 'fascism' Orwell clearly sides with socialism which means the overthrow of tyranny; which means the acceptance of the philosophic side of Marxism. These views are stated in the last chapter of the book.

Thus the whole force of Orwell's argument for the ideal of socialism, justice and liberty testifies to his desire to prepare for the future, 'to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.

Despite its unevenness and its intensely idiosyncratic approach to the problems it addresses, the book has taken its place as one of the most significant social documents of the 1930's and as one of those works of reportage which is destined to outlive the immediate economic conditions which are its theme. It has certain intrinsic qualities, qualities which infuse it with a richness and life that compel one to return to it as one of the key works of its time.

There is, first, the distinctive voice which speaks directly to the reader throughout, anonymously in Part One and more obtrusively in Part Two. It is the voice of a man who is acutely interested in all he sees and hears, is witnessing for the first time in his life the living and working conditions of manual workers and describing what he sees with penetrating honesty. It is this voice, at once shrewd and naive, which speaks through all his writings, fiction and reportage alike, and which reaches its height in the works

of his maturity.

Secondly, the work is notable for the evidence it affords of Orwell's growing mastery of language. It is the work of a writer who is seeking to convey as vividly and straightforwardly as possible a series of shocking truths. He achieves his effects by deliberately adopting a simple and direct style. 'Good prose is like a window pane',¹⁸ he wrote in one of his most celebrated essays. Certainly, in his account of his odyssey to the north of England at the height of the depression he achieved such prose which moves the reader by its cumulative force.

In the end, the book is of crucial importance to the development of Orwell as a politically conscious writer. There is a world of difference between the apolitical inwardness of Keep the Aspidistra Flying and the compassionage anger of The Road to Wigan Pier. He became politically aware by witnessing poverty, malnutrition and squalor for himself. The 'I' of 'Down and Out' is a different person from the 'I' of Wigan Pier: in both the narrator, the shaping presence, is a deeply idiosyncratic personality, but from 1936 onwards the personality becomes much and more overtly political.

For these reasons The Road to Wigan Pier marks a watershed in Orwell's intellectual and emotional pilgrimage.

Robert Hatch observes in respect with Wigan Pier in Nation of 30 August 1958:

This was a brilliant assessment: Orwell wrote a report that entirely transcends its economic data and becomes an elegy on the spirit of poverty. ¹⁹

Philip Toynbee also observes in this respect in Encounter of August 1959:

*What is most interesting about the tone of Orwell's investigation is that it reads like a report brought back by some humane anthropologist who has just returned from studying the conditions of an oppressed tribe in Borneo. ... Yet it is true that Orwell's tone is largely justified by the circumstances of the time.*²⁰

Ian Hamilton praises Orwell's journey of north: "Orwell's sojourn in the north is often spoken as if it were a heroic act of self-sacrifice, as if, even, Orwell's suffering were as significant as the suffering he went to study".²¹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 3 George Orwell: The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 5.
- 4 Ibid., p. 7.
- 5 Ibid., p. 16.

- 6 In Inside the Whale and Other Essays, p. 51.
- 7 George Orwell: The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 29.
- 8 Ibid., p. 31.
- 9 Ibid., p. 19.
- 10 Ibid., p. 50.
- 11 Ibid., p. 55.
- 12 Ibid., p. 73.
- 13 Ibid., p. 98.
- 14 Ibid., p. 131.
- 15 Ibid., p. 140.
- 16 Ibid., p. 161.
- 17 Ibid., p. 176.
- 18 George Orwell: Why I Write The Collected Essays, Journalism
And Letters of George Orwell, Volume I, ed. by Sonia Orwell
and Ian Angus, p. 30.
- 19 Jeffrey Meyers: The Critical Heritage, p. 114.
- 20 Ibid., p. 116.
- 21 Ian Hamilton Along the Road to Wigan Pier The World of
George Orwell ed. by Miriam Gross, p. 55.