

[Orwell: A Life in Letters, Peter Davison, ed., Harvill Secker, 542 pages]

## The Unknown Orwell

By John Rodden and John Rossi

PETER DAVISON, the dean of Orwell scholars, has scored another triumph. After having compiled and superbly edited the 21-volume *Complete Works of George Orwell* in the 1980s and 1990s, he subsequently published three more invaluable books that readers of Orwell treasure: two edited volumes, *The Lost Writings* and *The Diaries of George Orwell*, and the single best short study of Orwell's literary career, *George Orwell: A Literary Life*.

Now Davison has collected Orwell's letters, along with a few heretofore unpublished items by the author or by others about him. Davison has organized the material chronologically and along with his footnotes provides a judicious overview of Orwell and his times. The result is a compelling collection that effectively serves as the autobiography that Orwell vowed he would never write.

Apart from everything else, the reader of this collection will be struck by the sheer volume of prose that Orwell penned. Throughout his 20s, he taught himself to write in a painful process during which he destroyed most of his work. Truly driven, there wasn't a time after—or possibly even before—his 1927 resignation from the Imperial Police in Burma when he wasn't writing something: a novel, essays, short stories, reviews, reportage. Reading through his letters, you will note not only the quantity but the impressive variety of what he wrote. Eric Blair, the man who became the writer "George Orwell," was a damn hard worker. For example, as Davison observes, during the two months that

he was writing *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he also published 12 reviews of 32 books. During the two years (1943-45) when he served as a literary editor at the left-wing weekly *Tribune* and composed *Animal Farm*, Orwell published more than 100 essays, short articles, book reviews, and pieces of occasional journalism—a remarkable output that had become typical for him.

Davison highlights an aspect of Orwell's work that is often overlooked: his humor, or in Orwell's phrase, quoting Mr. Micawber, "the hollow mask of mirth." Scattered throughout the letters are examples of Orwell's dry, wry wit. Dismissing the idea of an intelligent left-wing comic book for children because leftist ideologues are hopelessly earnest, Orwell noted that "Boys of the OGPU, or The Young Liquidators" would not do. Probably "nobody would read them," he said, and "it would be the worse if they did."

Among the discoveries in this volume is Jacintha Buddicom's 1972 letter to a cousin about her "lifetime of regrets at turning away" Eric Blair's marriage proposal and her conviction that "Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is really Jacintha." There are also several letters by Orwell's first wife, Eileen, that reveal a side of her—and him—not fully recognized. Thanks to Davison's inclusion of Eileen's letters to her

remarked to a friend before she married him that his family "all adore Eric and consider him quite impossible to live with."

Different as Eileen and Eric were, they got along well. Her letters to him in the weeks before she died in 1945 reveal the depth of her affection for him. They should prompt readers who are doubtful about the success of the marriage to reconsider their views.

Orwell's letters disclose another very human side of him—his deep love for his adopted son, Richard. Although some of his friends were skeptical about whether Orwell and Eileen would be good parents, they proved surprisingly responsible. Orwell's letters after Eileen's death show how much he enjoyed fatherhood. He wrote constantly about Richard's doings: his weight, what he was eating, his slowness to talk, his talent with things mechanical.

Orwell's joy about fatherhood appears in his references not only to his son but also to the children of friends. Sometimes his advice has Orwell's characteristic quirkiness. When Rayner Heppenstall's son was born, Orwell told him to make sure to give him a good name. "People always grow up like their names. It took me nearly thirty years to work off the effects of being called Eric."

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friend Norah Myles, she emerges as a real person. Although these letters appeared earlier in *The Lost Writings*, they fit comfortably within Davison's chronological approach, fleshing out the biographical aspect of this volume.

Eileen's own sense of humor is on display in this collection. She writes bemusedly about Orwell and his family, whom she characterizes as "on the shivering verge of gentility." She

When Julian Symons and his wife had a baby, Orwell wrote in a congratulatory note: "They're awful fun in spite of the nuisance & as they develop one has one's own childhood over again." And then, showing he had thought seriously about child-rearing, Orwell added, "I suppose one thing one has to guard against is imposing one's own childhood on the child."

A theme running through Orwell's

letters from the time of his participation in the Spanish Civil War is his growing hatred for Stalinism and disgust toward English intellectuals who served as apologists for communism. He saw them as power-worshippers who invested their need for a faith in Stalin's Russia.

Orwell told Victor Gollancz, his first publisher, that he wanted to show the duplicity of the communists in Spain. He wanted to write about what he had seen there because "the stuff appearing in the English papers is largely the most appalling lies." When Gollancz and other left-wing editors, such as Kingsley Martin at the *New Statesman*, refused to publish *Homage to Catalonia*, their devotion to Stalin began a process of alienating Orwell from many English socialist intellectuals.

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As World War II approached, Orwell told Heppenstall that he hoped not to become cynical, but he believed "the future is pretty grim." Russophilia was a major reason for this. When a petition was organized for the release of antifascist prisoners in Spain, Orwell was outraged because "all the leading English Socialists refused to sign."

The roots of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are traceable to Orwell's months in Spain. By the early 1940s he believed something had to be done to destroy the myth that the Soviet Union represented a revolutionary force. His letters after 1943 repeat a growing determination to expose what he called "the frightful harm to the left-wing movement in Britain and elsewhere" resulting from the white-washing of communism's reactionary character. By the last year of World War II, he believed the time was right for a satirical attack on Stalinism. "People are fed up with this Russian

nonsense," he told publisher Fred Warburg, "and it's just a question of who is the first to say 'the Emperor has no clothes on!'"

The success of *Animal Farm* freed Orwell from financial worries for the first time in his life. He could move to his island refuge on Jura in the Scottish Hebrides and begin work on the project that had percolated in his mind since the final years of the war: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell labored on the novel throughout 1947 and 1948. In a typical remark, he told Warburg that he was "not absolutely dissatisfied" with it. Warm praise indeed from him. Orwell believed its execution would have even been better "if I had not written it under the influence of TB." Doubtful about the popular reception of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he told Warburg not to expect a

big sale: "But I suppose one could be sure of 10,000 anyway." Not strong evidence for the frequently claimed status of the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a prophet: he was only off by 20-odd million copies.

Davison's annotations and notes are superb. Never obtrusive, they advance the story of Orwell's life without distracting from the letters themselves. *Orwell: A Life in Letters* should take its place beside the biographies by Sir Bernard Crick, Michael Shelden, Jeffrey Meyers, Gordon Bowker, and D.J. Taylor as an indispensable resource for understanding George Orwell and his times. ■

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[*Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*, Philip Jenkins, HarperOne, 328 pages]

## God and Man at Chalcedon

By Bruce Chilton

CONTROVERSY OVER JESUS has rippled in academic debates since 1979, the year that saw the beginning of what has been called "The Third Quest of the Historical Jesus." Each quest has produced considerable discussion—and often fierce opposition from believers. But the underlying concerns that make scholarship on Jesus contentious have not been adequately understood. Philip Jenkins's book helps to resolve some of the misunderstandings that have plagued both academic and public debate.

Typically, scholars and commentators treat the issue of Jesus as if it were an entirely historical question. Doing so ignores the basic orientation of Christianity in its classic forms from the Nicene Creed onward, an approach that treats which Jesus not as a historical figure but as divine reality. Jenkins deals with the conflict over the basic issue of Jesus' nature: was he God or was he man?

The Nicene Creed set the stage for this debate but did not settle it or even pose the crucial questions directly. The Emperor Constantine convened a council of the most important bishops of the Church—predominantly from the prosperous east of the Roman Empire—who met at Nicea in Asia Minor in 325. That council addressed the relationship between Jesus and God. Should Jesus be regarded as fully equal in divinity to his Father, the creator of the universe, or should he be seen as subordinate to the Father?

That fierce dispute combined in one argument two difficult areas of con-