‘The Lesser Evil’: Orwell and America

John Newsinger

George Orwell is often assumed to have been uninterested in the United States with his thinking immune to any American influences. This neglects his interest in American literature, in particular his concern with the work of Mark Twain, Jack London and Henry Miller. During the Second World War, he came under the influence of the US magazine, Partisan Review, *for which he wrote his ‘London Letters’. Even though he considered the USA politically backward, in the post-war years he came to the reluctant conclusion that if the choice was between a world dominated by Soviet Union or the USA, he would prefer the USA, although he hoped for a Socialist revival as offering an alternative.*

Keywords: George Orwell, United States of America, American literature, American servicemen, *Partisan Review*, James Burnham

There has been so little written about George Orwell’s attitude towards and thinking about the United States of America that one may be forgiven for believing that he was pretty much oblivious to the country.[1] Admittedly, he never visited there (although he planned to before death cut him short) and he never wrote a *Homage to California*, a *Down and Out in New York and Chicago*, nor even an *Animal Ranch*.

Nevertheless, it will be argued here that the United States was in a number of ways an important influence on him. This influence can be usefully broken down into four categories: first, the literary and cultural influence; second, the impact of US servicemen in Britain during the War, what Orwell called the ‘Occupation’; third his relationship with the New York intellectuals and the journal *Partisan Review* during and immediately after the war; and lastly his post-war thinking regarding the ideas of James Burnham, conflict with the Soviet Union and the British Labour government’s alliance with, indeed dependence on, the United States.

‘Imaginary country’

In November 1946, Orwell published an article in *Tribune*, the leftwing Labour Party weekly journal, where he reminisced about the 'books one reads in childhood' and how they 'create in one's mind's eye a sort of false map of the world' (CWGO 18, 493).[2] One of the 'imaginary countries' that he 'acquired early in life was called America'. While some of the books that this 'imaginary' America derived from can still be taken seriously (he mentions *Tom Sawyer* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), the most important have been generally forgotten (among those he mentions is John Habberton's *Helen's Babies*, of 1876). While the English 'are accustomed to thinking of American society as more crude, adventurous and, in a cultural sense, democratic than our own', a view that derives from 'Mark Twain, Whitman and Brett Harte', this was not the only 'America' that was being imagined. There was also the literature portraying the society of 'the more populous eastern states' where, he argues, 'a society similar to Jane Austen's seems to have survived longer than it did in England'. In books such as *Helen's Babies* and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (of 1868-1869), we find people who are 'uncorrupted. They have something that is perhaps best described as integrity, or good morale'. While very different, Twain's memoir *Life on the Mississippi* (of 1883) and *Little Women*, do have one thing in common: 'an underlying confidence in the future, a sense of freedom and opportunity'. This literature was the product of a society that was, he insists, better than Europe. Indeed, he gets quite carried away, positively eulogising nineteenth century America as:

> … a rich, empty country which lay outside the mainstream of world events, and in which the twin nightmares that beset nearly every modern man, the nightmare of unemployment and the nightmare of state interference, had hardly come into being. There were social distinctions, more marked than those of today, and there was poverty … but there was not, as there is now, an all-pervading sense of helplessness … the civilisation of nineteenth-century America was capitalist civilisation at its best (CWGO 18,pp 495-497)

The situation began to change after the Civil War, but even so for some decades, at least, life in America 'was much better fun than life in Europe'. And he goes on to contrast this nineteenth century American literature read by people of his generation with what the United States offers children in 1946. No one today would claim 'that American books are the best ones for children', and he singled out for especial disdain the 'comics' where 'sinister

professors manufacture atomic bombs in underground laboratories while Superman whizzes through the clouds, the machine-gun bullets bouncing off his chest like peas, and platinum blondes are raped, or very nearly, by steel robots and fifty-foot dinosaurs' (CWGO 18, p 496). We shall return to Orwell's prejudice (not too strong a word) against American comic books later. What is clear, however, is his acknowledgement of the importance of this construction of an 'imaginary' America in what he describes as the at least partial 'Americanisation' of British children, including himself, that was once accomplished by books, but was now primarily accomplished by films. Now, of course, this recognition of American influence on the construction of English childhood was written at a time when British dependence on the United States was absolutely undeniable, a factor that may have shaped his reminiscence, but it is still of considerable interest.

One American writer whom Orwell remained attached to throughout his life was Mark Twain. Not only was Twain an early childhood influence, but in February 1934 Orwell was actually considering writing a short book on the man and his writings to coincide with his centenary the following year (CWGO 10: 335). This interest persisted so that, in June 1948, he was to write to Edmund Wilson in the States asking him to send a copy of Van Wyck's book, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, of 1920, which he could not get in Britain (CWGO 19: 252, 415). And in November 1943, once again in *Tribune*, he had discussed Twain's writings (GOCW 16: 5-7). The occasion was the publication by the Everyman Library of new editions of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn.* According to Orwell, Twain was born into 'the golden age of America, the period when the great plains were opened-up, when wealth and opportunity seemed limitless, and human beings felt free, indeed *were* free, as they had never been before and may not be again for centuries' (italics in the original). For him, Twain's 'best and most characteristic books', *The Innocents at Home* (1869), *Roughing It* (1872) and *Life on the Mississippi* showed how 'human beings behave when they are not frightened of the sack'. (CWGO 16: 5)

Unfortunately Twain's promise as a social critic was not realised. While he had 'in him an iconoclastic, even revolutionary vein which he obviously wanted to follow up', he never did, becoming instead 'that dubious thing a "public figure", flattered by passport-officials and entertained by royalty'. This decline, according to Orwell, 'reflects the deterioration in American life that set in after the Civil War'. This was 'the age of cheap immigrant labour

and the growth of Big Business'. The United States became a plutocracy. Twain even for a time gave up writing and went into business himself. He 'gave himself up to the prevailing fever, and made and lost vast sums of money'. For Orwell, Twain's flaw was 'his inability to despise success'. Nevertheless, at least several of Twain's books are 'bound to survive', not least because 'they contain invaluable social history', a somewhat ungenerous assessment, one might think, of a writer who clearly fascinated him. (CWGO 16: 5-7).

When Orwell wrote of people being really free in pre-Civil War America, he not only ignored the position of women but also somewhat more astonishingly the position of black slaves, both men and women. Twain's parents, as Orwell observes, did 'own one or perhaps two slaves', but the significance of slavery is nowhere acknowledged. Indeed, the Civil War is not seen as putting an end to slavery, but rather as inaugurating the reign of Big Business, which was undoubtedly true, but the conflict cannot be reduced to that. Orwell was never to get to grips with the reality of the oppression of African Americans. He opposed what he knew of it. In September 1944, for example, he wrote a review of D. W. Brogan's *The American Problem* where he criticises him for only giving 'a few pages to the Negroes and only mentioning in 'a couple of parentheses … that millions of Negroes are both half-starved and disenfranchised' (CWGO 16: 406-407). Nevertheless, a good case can be made that he never really understood the magnitude of the oppression of African Americans, its routine violence and occasional appalling savagery, nor its full significance for American society. It is a matter of some regret that Orwell never penned 'A Lynching' to accompany his 'A Hanging'. One can only speculate on how he would have responded to the lynching of Claude Neal in October 1934, for example. Neal was an African American accused of rape and murder and was lynched in Marianna, Florida. His lynching was widely advertised, attracting an audience of between 2-3,000 men, women and children. He was brutally beaten, castrated and fed his own genitals, branded all over with hot irons, had his fingers and toes cut off, before being hanged and shot to death. His corpse was taken down, dragged behind a vehicle, mutilated some more and then strung up outside the town courthouse. Neal's torment was accompanied by the burning down of the homes and businesses of many of the town's black inhabitants. Altogether that year, fifteen African Americans were lynched. This was how the 'Negro' was oppressed in the United States.[3]

'Loyalty to the exploited classes': Orwell and Jack London

The American writer who had the most influence on Orwell was arguably Jack London. On 3 March 1943, he broadcast a short talk on Jack London for the BBC. The programme was intended for an audience in India. Orwell singled out *The Iron Heel* for praise because even though it was 'a very poor book, much below Jack London's average', it showed that the capitalist class would not just let itself be expropriated, but 'would hit back. They wouldn't simply lie down'. This was a crucial insight which had been borne out by Hitler and the Nazis. As he put it, Who now will dare say that something like this hasn't happened over great areas of the world, and may not continue to happen unless the Axis is defeated' (GOCW 15: 6). He was to return to this theme a number of times. On 8 October 1945, Orwell broadcast a Forces Educational programme on the BBC on Jack London (GOCW 17: 297-305) and later was to write the Introduction to a new edition of London's *Love of Life and Other Stories*, that was published early in 1946 (GWOC 17: 351-357). In his radio broadcast, he emphasised London's Socialist politics, that 'above all things he was a Socialist' and that 'the basis of all his best work is a feeling of indignation against the cruel, sordid misery in which the modern world often forces people to live'. Orwell does not discuss London's 'animal books' but, instead, concentrates on his 'Socialistic books', singling out the dystopian novel, *The Iron Heel*, of 1908, in particular. In 1934, all over Europe there was 'a sudden search for copies of this book, which had become a rarity'. Now people wanted to get hold of the book because it was 'in some ways a surprisingly accurate forecast of Fascism'. Orwell particularly praised London for his recognition that 'the capitalist class would not just let itself be abolished … and would stop at nothing in defence of its possessions'. To protect its wealth and power the capitalist class would, if necessary, resort to an 'organised reign of terror'. Indeed, Orwell told his servicemen and women listeners that Chapter XXI of *The Iron Heel* was 'one of the best statements of the outlook of a ruling class … that has ever been written'. Nevertheless, as far as he was concerned, London's best books were those novels and short stories 'in which his Socialist convictions have been digested, so to speak, and are not on the surface'. He recommended *The Valley of the Moon, When God Laughs, The Road, The Jacket, The Iron Heel* and *Before Adam* 'if you can get hold of them. … If you read those six books, you've read the best of Jack London' (CWGO 17: 302-303, 305).

Orwell opens his Introduction to *Love of Life and Other Stories* (1905) by telling his readers that 'Love of Life' was one of the last stories that Nadezhda Krupskaya read to her husband Lenin when he was dying and that he greatly enjoyed it. He then goes on to praise *The Iron*

Heel as ‘not a good book’, but as one that ‘on several points … was right where nearly all other prophets were wrong’. London, he writes:

> … imagines a proletarian revolution breaking out in the United States and being crushed, or partially crushed, by a counter-offensive of the capitalist class; and, following on this, a long period during which society is ruled over by a small group of tyrants.… But the book is chiefly notable for maintaining that capitalist society would not perish of its ‘contradictions…’ (CWGO 17: 352).

Once again, he praised ‘London’s understanding of the nature of a ruling class’, and most especially the way that he knew ‘instinctively that the American business-men would fight when their possessions were menaced’. How does he explain that London had this insight whereas most on the left believed the capitalist class would surrender without a fight? London, he argues, could foresee Fascism because he had ‘a Fascist streak in himself, or at least a marked strain of brutality’ (CWGO 17: 353). This excursion into amateur psychology is not convincing. Rather than deriving from his own temperament, London’s insight came from his understanding of the US capitalist class of his own day and the violence that they were prepared to use to resist unionisation, let alone Socialism. While he was writing *The Iron Heel*, there was a determined attempt to judicially murder the leaders of the Western Federation of Miners, Bill Haywood and Charles Moyer. Indeed, London contributed to their defence fund and campaigned on their behalf.[4] Unionisation in the States was often resisted with lethal force and many employers maintained their own armed company police and spy networks as well as making use of notorious private detective agencies such as the Pinkertons. It was the brutal reality of class relations in the United States that informed *The Iron Heel*. One last important point with regard to *The Iron Heel* is that it was an important literary influence on Orwell’s own *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, portraying, as it does, the readiness of a ruling class to make use of a terrorist state in order to hold on to power. Certainly, Frederic Warburg in his publisher’s report on Nineteen Eighty Four argued that Orwell ‘must acknowledge a debt to Jack London’s “Iron Heel” although he felt that ‘in verisimilitude and horror he surpasses this not inconsiderable author’ (CWGO 19: 479).

Orwell insisted that despite his increasing success and wealth, London ‘never faltered in his loyalty to the exploited classes’ and that even when already ‘a successful and famous man he

could explore the worst depths of poverty in the London slums' and produce *The People of the Abyss* (1903), 'which still has sociological value'. He does acknowledge that there were occasions when London succumbed to 'race mysticism', but relates this to the dominant strain of Darwinism of the time, rather than to the racism of white America (CWGO 17: 354, 355).

'Unheroic': Orwell and Henry Miller

A dramatic contrast with Orwell's enthusiasm for Jack London was his enthusiasm for Henry Miller. In his essay, 'Inside the Whale' that was published in March 1940, Orwell praised Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *Black Spring* (1936) as novels 'about the man in the street' although he does regret 'that it should be a street full of brothels' (GOCW 12: 88). When *Tropic of Cancer* was first published in 1935, 'the Italians were marching into Abyssinia and Hitler's concentration camps were already bulging'. This did not seem 'to be a moment in which a novel of outstanding value was likely to be written about American deadbeats cadging drinks in the Latin Quarter', but this was Miller's achievement (GOCW 12:87).

In the essay, Orwell rehearses the view of US history that informs his understanding of Twain, celebrating the mid-nineteenth century when 'American men felt themselves free and equal, *were* free and equal, so far as that is possible outside a society of pure communism' (italics in the original) (GOCW 12: 90). Miller still sees himself as 'free and equal' but by means of 'a sort of mystical acceptance of the thing-as-it-is'. As he points out, today this means accepting world of concentration camps, putsches, torture, purges, machine guns, political murders, tinned meat and Hollywood films. But, nevertheless, Miller's passive acceptance actually enables him 'to get nearer to the ordinary man than is possible for more purposive writers'. As literature has become increasingly concerned with political issues, there has been less and less room 'for the ordinary man than at any time during the last two centuries'. Miller represents a turn away from politicised writing. He had recognised that there was no hope, that 'most certainly we are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships' and he responded by adopting a 'passive attitude', giving himself 'over to the world process'. Orwell goes a long way towards endorsing this stance (GOCW 12: 91).[5]

This very much represented Orwell's pessimism at this stage of the 'phoney war' and of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. He had earlier resisted Miller's *passivism* when he met him on his way to fight in Spain in 1936 and he was soon to throw himself into the fight for a 'People's War' and an English Revolution.[6] By December 1942, he published an article, 'The End of Henry Miller' in *Tribune* where he argued that 'the period of wars and revolutions' had reopened and Miler's response was to run away. What a book he could have written about life for the ordinary man in Paris under German occupation, but 'if the Germans were in Paris Miller would inevitably be somewhere else'. That somewhere else was Greece, where Miller made clear that he never wanted to set eyes on America again, but as soon as Greece was under threat, he 'left for America'. Miller's writing was determinedly about 'the unheroic', which Orwell considered one of his great strengths as a writer, but now 'we live in what is, however unwillingly, a heroic age'. For Orwell, Miller's brief moment had been and gone (CWGO 14: 217-218).

Orwell's interest in American literature continued right up until his death. We find him dismissing James Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) as 'an awful book' in February 1949 and recommending Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) as 'awfully good, the best book of the last war yet' in July of that same year (CWGO 20: 35, 146).

'Disgusting American comics'

Which leaves us with Orwell's quite ferocious hostility to American comics. On 3 January 1946, he wrote to Dwight Macdonald in the US, apologising for not delivering the article on this subject that he had promised for his journal, *Politics*. He had intended contrasting them with 'the American books and papers which I, like most people about my age, was partly brought up on'. He had sketched the piece out already, but unfortunately whatever work he had done has never been found (CWGO 18: 11). He had already made his position clear, however, in a short discussion that was published the previous May in the *Leader* magazine. He looked, in particular, at Marvel Comics that seemed 'mainly given over to "scientification" – that is, steel robots, invisible men, prehistoric monsters, death rays invasions from Mars, and such-like'. They were 'very disquieting', in his opinion, tending 'to stimulate fantasies of power' and really only concerned with 'magic and sadism'. It was all 'a riot of nonsensical sensationalism, with nothing of the genuine scientific interest of the H G

Wells stories'. It was all just so much 'poisonous rubbish' (CWGO 17: 221). He returned to the subject in his 'As I Please' column in *Tribune* on 27 December 1946 where he discussed a comic one of his readers had sent to him. On the front page there was 'either an ape-like lunatic, or an actual ape dressed up as a man, strangling a woman so realistically that her tongue is sticking four inches out of her mouth'. His reader asked whether this was suitable reading for children and Orwell makes clear that it should be kept out of their hands. He is against any ban, but somewhat dishonestly suggests as an alternative looking into the use of precious dollars 'to pay for this pernicious rubbish' with the clear intention of stopping their importation (CWGO 18: 523-524).

His cultural conservatism, on this particular occasion, seems to derive from his more general concern that the ethos of Jack the Giant Killer was being supplanted in popular literature by that of Jack the Dwarf Killer. While one cannot blame him personally for my generation of post-war children being deprived of Marvel comics until their teens and, instead, being subjected to Dan Dare and the *Eagle*, he was certainly in tune with the cultural prejudices that were responsible.[7]

It is also worth noticing here that Orwell was a consumer of Hollywood films and that for a time he worked, among other things, as a film reviewer for Time and Tide.in 1940-41. Of the 45 films that he reviewed, 37 were made in the US. As John Tulloch has pointed out, his attitude was 'mainly dismissive' and that even when 'he admits that an American film is powerful, his judgement is heavily qualified by contempt for what he presents as its materialist values'.[8]

'Occupied territory'

The American entry into the Second World War prompted Orwell into discussing British attitudes towards the United States in the 'London Letter', published in the American leftwing journal, *Partisan Review*. There had been no increase in 'pro-American sentiment – the contrary if anything'. Indeed, it had 'brought out the immense amount of anti-American feeling that exists in the ordinary low-brow middle class'. As far as the middle class were concerned, Americans were 'boastful, bad-mannered and worshippers of money, and are also suspected of plotting to inherit the British Empire'. He knew people who automatically switched the radio off when any American news came on. This was 'the jealousy of the ordinary patriotic middle class'. As for the working class, they had no 'cultural hostility' to

the Americans, indeed they were ‘being more and more Americanised in speech through the medium of the cinema’, but they ‘nearly always dislike Americans when in actual contact with them’ (CWGO 13: 108-109). Exploring the British response to the arrival of increasing numbers of American servicemen in Britain was to become one of Orwell’s regular concerns.

In his January 1943 ‘London Letter’, he told his leftwing readers in the States that since his previous Letter ‘there has been an obvious growth of animosity against America’ (CWGO 14: 293). Even the left intelligentsia were beginning to realise that ‘the USA is potentially imperialist and politically a long way behind Britain’. People were saying that ‘whereas Chamberlain appeased Germany, Churchill appeases America’. Indeed, he went on to insist that it was a fact that the British ruling class was being propped up by the United States, given ‘a new lease on life it would not otherwise have had’. People were blaming the US ‘for every reactionary move, more even than is justified’. As for British workers, there was widespread anti-American feeling’. This was, at least in part, because the common people ‘nearly everywhere are xenophobe’. Popular goodwill towards the Soviet Union depended on the fact that few British people had ever met any actual Russians! Even the British women seemed to have gone off the Americans who were only ever seen with ‘tarts or near tarts’ – an observation that my mother, her sisters and their friends would certainly have taken great exception to! Indeed, people ‘seem to prefer the Negroes to the white Americans’. What did he put this hostility down to? Essentially it was resentment about the pay and food that the American soldiers received. On ‘10 shillings a day and all found’, the whole US Army was a ‘middle class’ army and not lower middle class at that. And, he went on there was also ‘very bitter anti-British feeling’ among US servicemen. The Americans had ‘the profoundest contempt for England’, regarding the English as ‘no good at anything except running away’. On another occasion (*Tribune*, 20 May 1944), he was to observe that for many American soldiers, the ‘salient fact’ about Britain was that ‘the girls here walk out with niggers’ (CWGO 14: 293-294; CWGO 16: 230).

He thought this mutual dislike would only become politically significant if Germany was defeated and a protracted war in the Far East ensued. For most British people this would be a war for ‘the rubber companies and the Americans’. Now that the tide had turned in the War and the British ruling class felt secure and increasingly confident, ‘its real war aims’, hitherto ‘unmentionable’ would become apparent. Once the British people realised what a ‘dreary

world … the American millionaires and their British hangers-on intend to impose upon us', there would be growing opposition that would probably feed off anti-American sentiment. Most people, Orwell told his American readers, favoured 'some kind of United States of Europe, dominated by a close alliance between Britain and the USSR'. He still thought there was the possibility that 'radical change will again become possible', although at the moment, 'the reactionaries are tightening their grip everywhere'. As we shall see, he was eventually to acknowledge in the pages of *Partisan Review* that his hopes for radical social and political change, indeed for a revolution, in Britain were misjudged (CWGO 14: 295-296).

Orwell himself was not immune to anti-Americanism, although he made at least some effort to hide it from his *Partisan Review* readers. Even so, he complained in one of his 'London Letters' that 'some provincial towns have been almost taken over by the American troops' who walked around with 'a look of settled discontent' (CWGO 13: 522). Writing some eighteen months later in *Tribune*, on 3 December 1943, he actually complained that 'it is difficult to go anywhere in London without having the feeling that Britain is now Occupied Territory'. This somewhat extreme observation was prompted, at least in part, by an encounter with two drunken American soldiers in a tobacconists (CWGO 16: 12). He also writes, presumably from personal experience, that the claim made by some Americans that more American soldiers than British were killed in the First World War can, on occasion, 'cause a violent quarrel'. There was, he goes on, no popular anti-Americanism in Britain until American soldiers arrived in the country and the situation was not helped by their pay being five times that of a British soldier. As far as most British people were concerned, the only American soldiers with any manners 'are the Negroes'. A number of readers responded to this contribution by writing to the newspaper in defence of the Americans (CWGO 16:, 14-17).

His subsequent 'London Letter' comes across as somewhat apologetic in this respect, although whether in response to this criticism is impossible to say. A number of American soldiers, *Partisan Review* readers, have got in touch with him and he has let one of them spend the night at his flat. Orwell confesses, after discussing with this young man how he has been received in Britain, to a certain sadness at the lack of hospitality shown to the Americans by ordinary British people. He wants the magazine's readers to know that while British people at the best of times are not very hospitable to strangers, this is compounded by

‘the fact that rations are not easy to stretch and that after years of war people are ashamed of the shabby interiors of their houses’ (CWGO 16: 160).

Orwell continued the discussion of the impact of American soldiers in his ‘As I Please’ column in *Tribune* on 11 August 1944, warning that a creeping ‘colour bar’ was being introduced in dance halls, restaurants and hotels in deference to the prejudices white Americans. People had ‘to be vigilant against this kind of thing and to make as much public fuss as possible’ (CWGO 16: 328-329). Certainly, the racism of white Americans seems to have heightened his awareness of the oppression of African Americans. He wrote, once again in *Tribune* of how in the States, ‘Negroes are still pushed out of skilled jobs, segregated and insulted in the Army, assaulted by white policemen and discriminated against by white magistrates. In a number of Southern States they are disenfranchised by means of a poll tax’. This was, however, part of ‘a world-wide problem of colour’ that ‘simply cannot be solved inside the capitalist system’. The living standards of the ‘not white’ had to be bought up to that of the whites, even if this meant ‘temporarily lowering our own standards’. In the interim, the least the individual could do was ‘to avoid using insulting nicknames’ which was hardly adequate(CWGO 16: 23-24).

‘London Letter’

Orwell’s relationship with the US magazine *Partisan Review* is vital to any understanding of his political development in the 1940s. Elsewhere I have described it as his ‘American connection’ (Newsinger 1999: 90-100). The magazine had started in 1934 under the auspices of the US Communist Party, but had been re-launched in 1936 as a ‘literary Trotskyist’ magazine. In its new incarnation, it was fiercely hostile to Stalinism and showed a broad sympathy for Leon Trotsky’s ideas while rejecting any organisational affiliation with American Trotskyism. When war broke out in Europe in 1939, the magazine adopted a strong anti-war position with one particular editor, Dwight Macdonald, leading the way.

Despite Orwell’s strong support for the war, his campaigning for the conflict to be transformed into a revolutionary war, led to Orwell being invited to take over their ‘London Letter’ slot. He sent off his first contribution in January 1941 and it appeared in the March-April issue. Up until the summer of 1946, Orwell despatched another fourteen ‘London Letters’. The significance of these epistles should not be underestimated. Most critical and

biographical attention focuses on his relationship with and contributions to *Tribune*, but what his 'London Letters' and other contributions to *Partisan Review* show is that his political thinking cannot be reduced to a species of Labourism. This is not to deny the importance that the Labour Party came to have in his thinking, but rather that his Socialism was something more than Labourism and that he certainly never regarded the Labour Party, even when most supportive of it, as a vehicle for the Socialist transformation of Britain (see Newsinger 2017, forthcoming). One reason why this is not more widely acknowledged is precisely because *Partisan Review* was an American magazine. His contributions remained virtually unknown in Britain until the publication of the four-volume edition of his *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus and first published in 1968 (Orwell and Angus 1968). There was, in the 1940s, no British equivalent of *Partisan Review*, no British 'literary Trotskyist' magazine, and no London equivalent of the 'New York intellectuals'. If there had been, then Orwell would certainly have contributed to such a magazine and would have inevitably been part of such a circle of intellectuals, both fiercely anti-Stalinist and to the left of the Labour Party. Indeed, one can easily see him as more comfortable as the literary editor of such a magazine than as the literary editor of *Tribune.*

There is only space here to examine one of Orwell's 'London Letters' in any detail. His July-August 1942 contribution was entitled 'The British Crisis' by his editors (CWGO 13: 302-308). In it, he argued that the British people were, at last, ready for radical change. As he explained, he did not mean 'that people in significant numbers are crying out for the introduction of Socialism, merely that the mass of the nation wants certain things that aren't obtainable under a capitalist economy'. People wanted 'more social equality, a complete clean-out of the political leadership, an aggressive war strategy and a tighter alliance with the USSR'. What was required was some sort of 'war communism'. Since the fall of Singapore, Churchill's position has been 'shaky', indeed, 'I wouldn't give Churchill many more months of power'. Part of the problem, as far as he was concerned, was that for most people 'Socialism' was identified with the 'discredited Labour Party', a Labour Party that had no 'guts' and was led by a 'tame cat' like Attlee. He thought Stafford Cripps (Minister of Aircraft Production 1992-1995) might be the man to give leadership to the general desire for radical change, although he wisely qualified this with the fear that Cripps might, in fact, turn out to be just 'a second-rate figure … a sort of bubble blown by popular discontent'. At this point in time, he still argued that a revolutionary outcome was possible, that one 'can after all

discern the outlines of a revolutionary world war'. Defeats in the Far East had 'gone a long way towards killing the old conception of imperialism'. What had been missing in Britain so far was a 'revolutionary party' and 'able leftwing leadership'. He told his American readers that Cripps might provide the necessary leadership, but he still thought that 'a new political party will have to arise if anything is to be changed'.

By the time of his next 'Letter' that appeared in the March-April 1943 issue, he was already admitting that the crisis was over and the 'forces of reaction have won hands down' (CWGO 14: 292).

Orwell put a lot more into his 'London Letters' than just his, in retrospect, wildly over-optimistic judgements of the unfolding political situation. He discussed the conditions of life in wartime Britain, the problem of anti-semitism, the Home Guard, the impact of US servicemen, the activities of the Communist Party (it's 'anti-Trotskyist pamphlets … are barely distinguishable from those of the Spanish civil war period, but go somewhat further in mendacity'), rationing, popular attitudes towards the Soviet Union and, of course, the contribution the Poles have made 'towards solving our birth rate problems' (CWGO 13: 518, 522). And, in the 'London Letter', of winter 1944, he acknowledged that his hopes for revolution had clearly been wrong. His mistake derived from 'a political analysis which I had made in the desperate period of 1940 and continued to cling to long after it should have been clear that it was untenable'. He had also assumed that without a Socialist revolution of some kind in Britain, the war would be lost. 'There were', as he observes, 'excuses for this belief, but still it was a very great error. For after all, we have not lost the war, unless appearances are very deceiving, and we have not introduced Socialism'. In Britain, 'there has been no real shift of power and no increase in genuine democracy', while the United States was actually moving further 'away from Socialism'. As he acknowledged, 'I over-emphasized the ant-Fascist character of the war, exaggerated the social changes that were actually occurring, and under-rated the enormous strength of the forces of reaction' (CWGO 16: 412-414).

Two more points are worth making here regarding *Partisan Review*. First, as I have argued elsewhere (Newsinger 1999), the magazine, and one editor in particular, Dwight Macdonald,[9] had an important influence on the writing of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by introducing Orwell to the theory of bureaucratic collectivism. It is this that provided the basis for Goldstein's 'The

Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism' in the novel and, indeed, for the novel's portrayal of Oceania (ibid: 124-128). Second, when Orwell was asked by the editors to contribute to a series on 'The Future of Socialism', his contribution, 'Toward European Unity', that appeared in the July-August 1947 issue, did not celebrate the Labour government in London as showing the way towards Socialism in any respect whatsoever. He did support Attlee's government, but he did not see it as introducing Socialism. As he made clear, he thought the prospects for Socialism were extremely grim, which is hardly a resounding vote of confidence in the Socialist credentials of a Labour government with an overwhelming majority. Nevertheless, one had to work towards the establishment of 'democratic socialism … throughout some large area'. Socialism, Orwell acknowledged, 'cannot properly be said to be established until it is world-wide', but, in the interim, 'a socialist United States of Europe seems to me the only worth-while political objective today'. One of the obstacles to this was that Britain was 'almost a dependency of the USA' (CWGO 19: 164-165).

'Dishonesty is the best policy'

As the war came to an end, Orwell found himself intellectually grappling with the immense changes that were taking place in the world. Much of this concern took the form of a debate with the American political thinker James Burnham, a former Trotskyist, who was moving sharply to the right. Burnham and his *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) are often seen as one of the intellectual inspirations for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but this was not, in fact, the case. In his Marxist days, Burnham had been one of the advocates of the theory of bureaucratic collectivism which certainly was an influence, but Orwell was very critical of his later trajectory. He lambasted him in *Tribune* on 14 January 1944. Burnham's thesis in *The Managerial Revolution* was that capitalism was finished, Socialism was impossible and that what was taking place was the emergence of a new ruling class across the world, the Nazis in Germany, the Communists in Russia and 'the business executives' in the USA. This new ruling class 'expropriates the capitalists, crushes the working class movements and sets up a totalitarian society'. He forecast German victory over Britain and Russia and the division of the world into three super states, Germany, the USA and Japan, 'making ceaseless war upon one another' and keeping 'the working class in permanent subjection'. Now, Orwell acknowledged that 'collectivism is not inherently democratic' and that class rule was not ended merely 'by formally abolishing private property', but as he pointed out, Burnham's specific prophecies had all proven false soon after they were made: Germany and Japan were

both on the way to crushing defeat. His major criticism, however, was that Burnham was 'trying to spread the idea that totalitarianism is unavoidable, and that we must therefore do nothing to oppose it' (CWGO 16: 60-61).

He followed this assault up a few days later with a hostile review of Burnham's new book, *The Machiavellians* (1943), that appeared in the *Manchester Evening News* on 20 January 1944. Here Orwell was absolutely scathing about where Burnham was headed. He described him as having achieved a 'rather short-lived renown' with *The Managerial Revolution* 'by telling American business-men what they wanted to hear'. Now in his new book, Burnham argues that 'Democracy is impossible, though useful as a myth to deceive the masses' and that 'Society is inevitably ruled by oligarchies who hold their position by means of force and fraud'. He looks forward to 'the emergence of a new ruling class , who will rule "scientifically" by the conscious use of force and fraud, but who will to some small extent serve the common good because they will recognise that is to their own interest to do so'. Stripped of its intellectual apparatus, Burnham's argument is that 'Dishonesty is the best policy'. Orwell dismissed him as a false prophet (CWGO 16: 72-74).

How important Orwell thought it was to counter Burnham's influence was shown when he returned to the attack with his 'Second Thoughts on James Burnham', published in the third issue of the journal, *Polemic*, of May 1946. This essay was reprinted as a pamphlet, *James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution*, by the Socialist Book Centre later in the year. It was also published in Chicago in the United States the following year in the *University Observer: A Journal of Politics* (CWGO 18: 284). Here, Orwell once again accused Burnham of seeing all historical change as merely the replacement of one ruling class by another with the masses always 'thrust back into servitude'. He then proceeded to dissect Burnham's various prophecies, pointing out that 'when they were verifiable', they invariably 'turned out to be wrong'. In explaining Burnham's mistakes, he makes the point that 'one cannot leave out of account the fact that Burnham is an American' with the 'characteristic prejudices and patches of ignorance' that one would expect! Nevertheless, Orwell does acknowledge that throughout the world, for the last fifty years or so, 'the general drift has almost certainly been towards oligarchy'. He ends, however, by proclaiming that Burnham's supposed 'realism' amounts to nothing more than a dream of a 'huge, invincible, everlasting slave empire' and

that this is so much nonsense, ‘because slavery is no longer a stable basis for human society’.(CWGO 18: 269, 277, 279, 280, 283).

Orwell had not yet finished with Burnham. In March 1947, he wrote a review of his *The Struggle for the World* (1947) for the US magazine, *The New Leader*. Here he admitted that he might have got Burnham wrong. Rather than being some sort of apologist for an inevitable totalitarianism, Burnham was, in fact, the exponent of a US ’world empire’. The only alternatives were ‘domination by Communism or domination by the United States’ and Burnham was now emerging as the champion of American domination. He now had an ‘essentially a conservative program’, indeed, in important respects, a positively ‘reactionary … program’. It involved the ruthless suppression of dissent and possibly ‘a preventive war in the very near future, while the Americans have atomic bombs and the Russians have not’. As part of this new US imperial order, Burnham advocated ‘the fusion of Britain with the United States’. According to Orwell, given that Britain had been pretty much a dependency of the United States for some years already, this might actually take place ‘almost of its own accord’. If Burnham was right and the only alternatives were Russian or American domination, then ‘the European peoples may have to accept American domination’. Nevertheless, he hoped Burnham was being too pessimistic and while he recognised that the best alternative of a ‘Socialist United States of Europe has not as yet much magnetism’, he suggested other possibilities if war could be avoided in the short-term. ‘One is’, he suggested, ‘that the Russian regime may become more liberal and less dangerous a generation hence’ and another was that ‘the great powers will be simply too frightened of the effects of atomic weapons ever to make use of them’. One other point that Orwell made, in an important discussion, was that while the leadership of local Communist Parties throughout the world were undoubtedly ‘Quisling’ in their attitude towards the Soviet Union, this was not true of their broader memberships so that Burnham’s advocacy of domestic repression was a mistake. And indeed, Orwell was to oppose any importation of McCarthyism into Britain (CWOG 19: 98-99, 102-05).

‘We should choose America’

In the ‘London Letter’ that came out in the winter of 1944, Orwell wrote of the United States being ‘the most powerful country in the world and the most capitalistic’ (CWGO 16: 412). He regarded the USA as politically backward, even though he insisted that support for

capitalism on the part of Americans was not 'something unalterable, a sort of racial characteristic like the color of eyes or hair' and still hoped that one day 'a powerful Socialist movement might for the first time arise in the United States' (CWGO 19: 166). The United States was certainly not seen as offering any way forward for the world. But, in a world dominated by the United States it would be possible to continue the fight for a better future, whereas in a world dominated by the Soviet Union, this would be impossible. From this point of view, the USA was the 'lesser evil'. He was absolutely clear in his own mind that in the event of having to choose a side between even the politically backward USA and the totalitarian Soviet Union, he would take the American side. He argued in an unpublished article written for *Tribune* some time towards the end of the summer of 1947 that: 'In the end the choice may be forced on us. We are no longer strong enough to stand alone, and if we fail to bring a western European union into being, we shall be obliged, in the long run, to subordinate our policy to that of one Great Power or the other … everyone knows in his heart that we should choose America' (CWGO 19: 182).

Conclusions

In retrospect, Orwell's exaggerated fear of Soviet aggression and ambitions of world domination (although he in no way exaggerated the domestic horrors of Stalinism in either the Soviet Union or in its East European satellites), led him to not only make clear that he would support the Americans if it came to war, but also to involve himself in the fighting on the ideological front in the early stages of the Cold War.

This led to his involvement with the British secret state. His involvement was slight but nevertheless compromising. While his relationship with the Labour government's covert propaganda agency, the Information Research Department (IRD), is well-known, involving his handing over of the names of individuals he considered sympathetic to the Soviet Union and as such, not to be approached by the IRD, it is worth noting here that the lists of fellow-travellers he compiled included Americans. Among those listed were Louis Adamic, Walter Duranty, Scott Nearing, Paul Robeson, Upton Sinclair, Orson Welles, Anna Louise Strong, John Steinbeck and Edgar Snow (CWGO 20: 242-257).

His pessimism regarding the prospects for Socialism together with the ferocity of his anti-Stalinism towards the end of his life led to his involvement in a thoroughly disreputable

exercise. His actual conscription as a one-dimensional Cold Warrior, however, was only to be accomplished posthumously.[10]

Notes

[1] One exception is Christopher Hitchens' brief engagement with the question in his *Orwell's Victory* where he describes America in a typically overdone fashion as 'the grand exception to Orwell's prescience about the century in which he lived': Hitchens 2001, p 75

[2] CWGO refers throughout to the 20-volume *Collected Works of George Orwell*, edited by Peter Davison, London: Secker and Warburg, 1998

[3] Newsinger 2012, pp118-119

[4] Clymer 2003: 134-145

[5] Miller described 'Inside the Whale' as Orwell's 'left-handed attack on me' in a letter to Anaïs Nin that he sent from California in April 1944 (Stuhlmann 1975: 347)

[6] See Newsinger 1999: pp 61-86

[7] The Communist Party actually ran a campaign against the importation of American horror comics into Britain. See Barker 1983

[8] Tulloch 2012: p 97

[9] Macdonald resigned from *Partisan Review* when it became pro-war, but despite their disagreement over this issue, he remained the member of the editorial board who was closest to Orwell. See Newsinger 1999: 125-127, 147-150

[10] See, in particular, Shaw 2004 and Leab 2007

References

Barker, Martin (1983) *A Haunt of Fears*, London: Pluto

Clymer, Jeffory (2003) *America's Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism and the Written Word,* Chapel Hill

Leab, Daniel J. (2007) *Orwell Subverted: The CIA and the Filming of* Animal Farm, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press

Hitchens, Christopher (2002) *Orwell's Victory*: London Penguin Books

Newsinger, John (1999) *Orwell's Politics*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

Newsinger, John (2012) *Fighting Back: The American Working Class in the 1930s*, London: Bookmarks

Newsinger, John (2017, forthcoming) *'If there is hope': Orwell and the Left*, London: Pluto

Orwell, Sonia and Angus, Ian (1968) *George Orwell's Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Shaw, Tony (2004) Cinematic propaganda during the Cold War: A comparison of British and American movies, Connelly, Mark and Welch, David (eds) *War and the Media: Reportage and Propaganda 1900-2003*, London: I. B. Tauris pp 162-181

Stuhlmann, Gunther (ed.) (1975) *Henry Miller: Letters to Anaïs Nin*, London: Peter Owen

Tulloch, John (2012), 'sceptic in the Palace of Dreams: Orwell as film reviewer', Keeble, Richard Lance *Orwell Today*, Bury st Edmunds: Abramis