

# George Orwell's Loft

The author's own collection of pamphlets.

By Andy Simons, Collections, The British Library

More comprehensive than *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks*, *Francis Bacon's Studio*, or *John Lennon's Jukebox*<sup>1</sup>, Eric Blair's collection of mostly political ephemera was an important barometer of the social changes of the 1930s and 1940s, and a measure of his influences during those decades. While the millions of words of the writers in the Mass Observation project were equally important, they were not, back then, contemporary disseminators of their own thoughts. But pamphleteers were the trumpeters of text; they competed in the Public Opinion Stakes, each hoping to occupy the throne of the Broadsheet King.

George Orwell was not a writer of 'bestselling' books until the end of his life, after the Second World War. During those horrific years he became known as a journalist, a critic of other people's writings and a word-portraitist of the landscape of politics. And while his two years with the BBC's overseas broadcasting branch gave him no real profile at home, it ballooned his sphere of personal contacts.

As he was mainly interested in the serious and practical issues of economics and the Governmental policies of power, both domestic and Imperialist, it is likely he never passed up the opportunity to acquire pamphlets of any persuasion. Reading Orwell's journalism and fiction, one assumes that he fancied enlightenment, argument and irony in equal measure, and was a keen collector of other people's angst. He wryly observed in *The Tribune* that the pamphleteer's road was paved by a "complete disregard for fairness or accuracy" (8 December 1944). Perhaps the most appealing aspect of his pamphlets collection is that he wasn't Hoovering them up to form a George Orwell Archive; he considered them as a spectrum of thought that was deserving of preserving.

While his personal papers went to University College London and the National Archives, this avid collector's miscellaneous materials went to the Library of the British Museum, as the British Library was known then. This was an afterthought, in 1955, five years after his death and there are details of the original schematic of the collection, the arrangement and provenance, by author and Orwell scholar Peter Davison, who edited the definitive, twenty-volume compendium, *The Complete Works of George Orwell* (Secker & Warburg, 1998), which somehow overcame repeated corporate takeovers and misplacement/mistreatment of proofs. Professor Davison's unpublished assessment of the pamphlets is bound as the last volume in the range (British Library shelfmark : 1899.ss.49).

Totalling over 2700 items, this mountain that Orwell made was in fact too large to be usefully engaged by researchers, who could order only about 5% of the materials at a time, with an imprecise notion of what to expect.

If you made of pile of this trove of over 2,700 titles, the resulting tower would be over 20ft (615cm). In the Peter Davison era, The British Museum had done an inventory of about 60% of these treasures. This was non-investigative, typewriter-written and hand-annotated. But the collection has now been re-inventoried and is available, with much more detail, to the BL's readership, via the British Library's website.

The updated inventory then is not only a finding aid to the physical matter, it is also a guide to George Orwell's personal research sources, whether he agreed with them or not. A most fulsome analysis would embrace this, along with the last two descriptive volumes in the series (1899.ss.48 and 1899.ss.49) for they provide more insight into Orwell's arrangement.

The Library's latest assessment has been topically forensic, providing considerable detail of each item's contents, the many authors within a booklet or magazine, and explanations of the importance these writers happened to have back in the day. For instance, Canon Stuart Morris is further qualified as 'Canon Stuart Morris [Birmingham, General Secretary of the Peace Pledge Union]'; José Rodríguez Vega is described as 'José Rodríguez Vega, Secretary of the Spanish General Union of Labour.' An MP such as James Walker is noted as 'James Walker, JP, Labour MP for Motherwell', his position during the year of publication of his pamphlet for the Fight for Freedom organisation.

Of course Orwell could not acquire and preserve the thoughts of *every* political entity, but those caught in his net were numerous. Obviously, he documented the major political parties and the better known minor ones that didn't figure much electorally, such as The Communist Party of Great Britain, The Socialist Party, The Scottish Socialist Party, The Independent Labour Party and The Fabian Society think-tank.

Orwell was especially strong in acquiring the ephemera of the fringe Left, but any non-mainstream organisation was worthy of attention: "The Workers' Friend" Association, Freedom Press, The Leninist League, The Russia Today Society, The Polish Labour Underground Press, The Central Board for Conscientious Objectors, The Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, Vera Brittain's Bomb Restriction Committee, The League for a People's Parliament, and even The Society of Individualists.

Eric Blair shed his younger anti-Jewish prejudice during the Allies' war against the Nazis, and, as he became more cosmopolitan, made Jewish friends. One of his closest mates was the writer 'TR' Tosco Fyvel, who had analysed Zionist colonisation of Palestine in the 1930s and who had become a supporter of that effort since. Although he himself didn't support Zionism, he documented the Jewish Agency's propagandising during and after the war. At the same time, he sought and preserved the Arab League's position as well.

One would almost think that Orwell joined London's Home Guard in order to collect the many pamphlets published by Central Government. In theory (not), he'd become an expert in shooting, grenade firing, the handling of mortars, map reading, navigating low wire fences, improvising pole charges, preparing surprise attacks, the laying of anti-tank mines, and general street fighting.

The future best-seller was keen on understanding the generation of wealth, for he filed away a great many tracts about how the trick may be done and how to keep all the balls in the air afterwards. Aside from Westminster's usual electoral contenders, he documented Common Wealth, the Social Credit movement, and how the international exchange rate actors jockeyed for pole position during the months of 'appeasement.'

And if you want foreign publications, he was keen on them too: Groupe Syndical Français, The People's National Party (Kingston, Jamaica), The Meerut Trade Union Defence Committee, The Victory Club (Cairo), the Ministerio de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes (Madrid), The Government of Burma, the Comté International Pour La Fédération Européenne (Paris), The All India Congress Socialist Party (Bombay), and much from Moscow.

The author's interest in non-human animals is revealed in his reading matter, pamphlets and articles by the Scientific Poultry Breeders' Association, the Royal Society for the Prevention

of Cruelty to Animals, and in particular articles from issues of *The Smallholder* and *The Farmer and Stock-Breeder*. His wife Eileen worked for the Ministry of Food and so they retained a range of 'war cookery' guides. And, given his pulmonary problems from tuberculosis, one shouldn't be surprised that he read *Smokeless Air : The Smoke Abatement Journal*. We take this for granted today, but it was no joke in the era of 'pea souper' smog.

While our subject didn't seemingly care for the pop music of the day, trends in women's issues, or gay and lesbian subcultures, he was an unusual fan of popular culture, always ready to debunk what he thought were fraudulent promises made to a gullible public. He had a go at the British Institute of Fiction-Writing Science Ltd., run by one Martin Walter. Orwell's scorching criticisms of the BIFWS' pamphlets were published in magazines and newspapers of the 1940s, and of course he retained them too, along with the Institute's sales brochures.

**FIRST PRESENTATION IN EUROPE!**

---

No 29078

**The WAR  
IN WAX**

THE WORLD'S  
MOST MODERN  
WAXWORKS

**60, Oxford St.  
W.1**

(On same side as and near Frascati's and almost  
opposite Tottenham Court Road Tube Station.)

... *PRESENTING* ...  
*Life size and lifelike figures of*  
CHURCHILL, ROOSEVELT, STALIN  
THE ALLIED GENERALS  
HITLER, MUSSOLINI, QUISLINGS, Etc.

*Historic Episodes—*  
**CASABLANCA CONFERENCE**  
**DESERT VICTORY :: BURMA ROAD**  
WOMEN AT WAR  
THE FALL OF KHARKOV, Etc.

*The horrors of the*  
**GERMAN CONCENTRATION CAMP**  
*and*  
A Fascinating & Delightful Children's Section  
of mechanical moving figures including  
CINDERELLA, SNOW WHITE, Etc.

**Open weekdays - 10.30 a.m. to Blackout**  
**Sundays - 2.30 p.m. to Blackout**

**PRICE 1d.**

Perhaps the oddest item is a January 1945, four-page pamphlet, *The War in Wax*, an attempt to get shoppers in London's Oxford Street to buy tickets to a twisted version of Madame Tussauds. This promised paying customers an experience of "The horrors of the German Concentration Camp," "Tree-Hangings," "Stamping to death," and, on the last page, a children's section of mechanical moving figures including Cinderella, Laurel & Hardy, Disney characters, Bing Crosby, and even Mae West. This so-called attraction was too absurd not to share, so Orwell gave it legs, with the concept having a walk-on role as Ingsoc propaganda in 1984.

A bonus in this collection is that, as the author became better known, he subscribed to what was known as a newspaper 'clippings service.' So he kept up his payments to Durrants Press Cuttings and they sent articles *about* him from British papers. In addition, he had Romeike Press Clippings Bureau, from the USA, keep him up to date with his critics further afield.

The point of Eric Blair's heaps of pamphlets is that they informed his writing, fiction and non, in books and elsewhere. While he retained just one pamphlet authored by himself, *James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution*, published by the Socialist Book Centre in 1946, the rest of the collection were generated by others.

As he wrote in his 'As I Please' column for *The Tribune*, he took pride in his squirrelling-away of pamphlets, "political, religious and what-not" (3 December 1943). In 1949, he estimated that this hoard numbered 1200-2000, but even the higher figure was an underestimation. He wrote that "a few of them must be great rarities" and they were "bound to be of historical interest in 50 years time." In line with most of his considerations, he wasn't wrong. As the astute Peter Davison wrote understatedly in assessing this collection, "The pamphlets might repay more attention than they have so far received."

<sup>1</sup> John Curran : *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks : Fifty Years of Mysteries in the Making* (HarperCollins, 2009; YK.2010.a.29476); Perry Ogden, photographer : *Francis Bacon's Studio* (Thames & Hudson, 2001; YK.2001.a.9443); *John Lennon's Jukebox* (Virgin VTDCD 608, 2004; 1CD0228348& 2CD0062885).