Orwell and Empire
Douglas Kerr
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Reviewed by Robert Gavin Hampson

In his new novel, *Burma Sahib* (2024), Paul Theroux revisits the young Eric Blair's years in the Indian imperial police-service in Burma. Blair's experiences during these years (or, at least, a version of them) are familiar to readers of Orwell's work through his novel *Burmese Days* (1934) and his essays, "Shooting An Elephant" and "A Hanging," both written long after he returned. Theroux presents the very young Blair (nineteen and just out of Eton) for comparison with the older, more experienced protagonist of *Burmese Days*, the teak merchant John Flory. Theroux takes as his epigraph a statement from *Burmese Days* that "There is a short period in everyone's life when his character is fixed for ever," and he presents this period of Blair's early adult life as just such a period. However, in *Burmese Days*, this statement is part of the negative portrayal of Elizabeth Lackersteen. It continues: "with Elizabeth, it was those two terms during which she rubbed shoulders with the rich" in her "very expensive boarding school" (78-79). In *Burma Sahib*, similarly, the formative effect of those years at Eton on Orwell cannot be discounted.

Douglas Kerr's critical monograph, *Orwell and Empire*, starts from the same period of imperial service, but focuses on Orwell's writings rather than his experiences in Burma. Like Theroux, Kerr demonstrates how this experience of colonial life shaped the writer that Eric Blair became (and the part played by his education in that transformation). In particular, Kerr shows how many of the themes of Orwell's later political works "had made their first appearance in his Oriental writings" (Kerr, 145). Kerr begins, however, with contemporary Britain's forgetfulness of how empire has shaped the nation. From the quintessentially English custom of tea-drinking through such botanical immigrants as rhododendrons, camellias and peonies to Christianity, as Kerr points out, things 'oriental' are both ubiquitous and weirdly invisible parts of everyday British life. In addition, as he notes, nineteenth-century British foreign policy was largely determined by the need to protect the possessions acquired by the British East India Company and to consolidate "British India," and many British families became enormously wealthy through processing materials extracted from the East. The Blair family had made its money through slave-owning, and Blair's father had worked in the drug-trafficking branch of the Indian Civil Service, the Opium Department. Blair himself, although he attended Eton and maintained a very useful network of old school friends, was "a lifelong immigrant" (Kerr, 8): he was born in India, and his experience in Burma left an indelible mark on his character.

While Blair's family were deeply involved in the "dirty work of empire," including Blair's own police-work guarding the Burmah Oil refinery, there was growing Burmese nationalism which culminated, after Blair had left, in the peasant uprising of 1930. As both Theroux and Kerr show, Blair's experiences in Burma turned him into "a convinced anti-imperialist" (Kerr, 14) – though, as Kerr notes, with a limited sense of the colonized people's agency and a minimising of their organized resistance to oppression. As early as 1929, as Kerr observes, Blair had worked out the terms of his critique in the article, "How a Nation is Exploited: The British Empire in Burma," on resource extraction (timber, metals, gems, oil and rice). However, despite his anti-imperialism, Kerr convincingly argues, Blair struggled all his life with his Anglo-Indian patrimony and with the prejudices of his class and education.

This struggle is evident in the opening chapter on "Animals." Kerr notes the problematic association of people with animals in *Burmese Days* and Orwell's use of an animal plot to explore issues in the human world (most obviously in "Shooting An Elephant"). One strength of this chapter is Kerr's fine close readings of passages where animals are used to "make visible" the indigenous human. He notes, for example, a passage in the 1939 essay "Marrakech," where "Orwell is struggling to make a point against racism and empire, but the moment is saturated in racist assumptions" (Kerr, 24). Orwell reads the look directed at him by a Senegalese soldier as the "Negro look" of "profound respect," both essentializing the individual and projecting this meaning onto the other's glance. The column of African soldiers is then compared to "a flock of cattle," where the odd use of "flock," instead of the expected "herd," is precisely the reduction of the human that Kerr observes. And, as Kerr then says, there is a similar association of animals and the poor. This is implicit in *Animal Farm*, where the animals' supposed inability to think is transposed to the humans, and culminates in the animality of the proles in *1984*, but it is also behind one of the most shocking moments in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the old Etonian's epiphany in relation to the young working-class woman: "what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal." Kerr provides a subtle reading of this passage, alert to Orwell's awkward and patronizing attempt to express a sense of kinship. He concludes with similarly nuanced readings of "Shooting An Elephant;" and "A Hanging," showing how, in each case, the story judges its narrator through a distancing of the reader (a reading practice very different from the current cult of "relatability").

Kerr aims to 'rehistoricize' Orwell by re-placing Orwell in "the Orient," and he does this through a series of effectively free-standing chapters that consider, in turn, animals, environment, class, empire, geography, women, race, police, the law, and literature. In his chapter on "Class," for example, Kerr brings his own sharp discrimination to Orwell's complex class-consciousness. He starts from Orwell's ignorance of how people lived in England and the crude simplicity of his analysis of English poverty. Kerr notes the reduced status of the returned colonial officials, the class to which the Blairs belonged, and

their resulting acute class-consciousness with its combination of snobbishness and insecurity. Kerr is perceptive about Blair's own twist on this, where his need to "mortify his privilege" leads to a distorted take on class relations: in Paris and London, he was associating "not with the workers but with people who had actually fallen out of the class system" (Kerr, 54); in Wigan, he chose to stay at a particularly dirty lodging house (which scandalized his working-class hosts) and ignored organized labor to focus on squalor and abjection. As Kerr observes, *The Road to Wigan Pier* shows how Orwell was "trying to shake off" the prejudices of his class, but it also evidences how difficult that was (Kerr, 61).

In the chapter on "Race," Kerr notes how notions of racial difference and racial hierarchy were imported into Burma from British India, and how Orwell's understanding of Hitler in 1940 was shaped by his experiences there in terms of the continuity between imperialism and Nazism. In this context, Kerr provides a very interesting discussion of "the face" in Orwell's writings: Orwell's haunting by the remembered faces of Burmese prisoners (and other mistreated Burmese) becomes the face of the victim in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As Kerr observes, for Orwell, "[t]he racial victim and the ideological victim are on the same side, faced with the same enemy" (Kerr, 120). In contrast, in the chapter on "Police," Kerr shows the transition from a middle-class view of the trustworthiness of the police in Orwell's books about England in the 1930s – a friendly Metropolitan policeman finds Dorothy Hare a bed for the night in *A Clergyman's Daughter* – to a very different view of police activities in *Homage to Catalonia*, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Kerr also includes a useful account of Orwell's own experience of policing in Burma and a reading of the essays that came out of it in terms of both a dwelling on the vulnerable body of the victim and the self-regarding transfer of violence, "in the form of guilt, to the person who inflicts and observes it" (Kerr, 130). The chapter ends with a tantalizing glimpse of the role of "secret police forces" – a suggestion that could perhaps have been developed further.

Through attention to Orwell's writing about "the East," Kerr shows how the empire was central to Orwell's cultural identity and how his quarrel with empire was "the basis of his quarrel with capitalism" (Kerr, 69). This is an accessible, well-informed and wide-ranging reading of Orwell's work. One disadvantage of the free-standing chapters is some slight, local repetition of information, but Kerr is a perceptive guide and the volume as a whole offers numerous insights into Orwell, empire and Orwell's fictional and non-fictional writing.

Works Cited

Orwell, George. *Burmese Days*, New American Library, 1963
Theroux, Paul. *Burma Sahib*, Hamish Hamilton, 2024.