

Orwell and Empire: A Conversation with Douglas Kerr

Douglas Kerr, Ivan Franceschini

Abstract: Contemporary readers are most familiar with George Orwell’s later works of political satire, such as *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Less known is the fact that the writer, who is often considered the epitome of ‘Englishness’, was born in India and as a young man served for five years in the Imperial Police in Burma—an experience that reverberated throughout his oeuvre. In *Orwell and Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2022), Douglas Kerr offers the first comprehensive study of Orwell’s writing about the East and of the East in his writing

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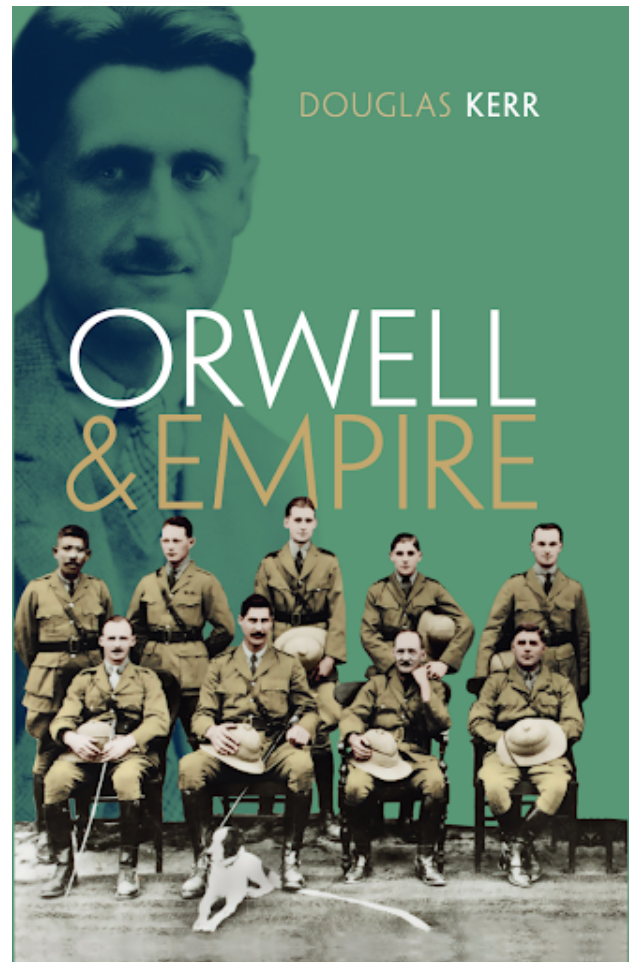


Figure 1: Cover of Douglas Kerr’s *Orwell and Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2022.

Contemporary readers are most familiar with George Orwell’s later works of political satire—in particular, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Less known is the fact that the writer, who is often considered the

epitome of ‘Englishness’, was born in India and as a young man served for five years in the Imperial Police in Burma—an experience that reverberated throughout his oeuvre. In *Orwell and Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2022), Douglas Kerr offers the first comprehensive study of Orwell’s writing about the East and of the East in his writing, arguing not only that empire was central to the writer’s cultural identity but also that his experience of colonial life was a crucial factor, in ways that have not been recognised, in shaping the artist he became.

Ivan Franceschini: Let’s start from the basics. George Orwell today is mostly known for his later works of scathing political satire, especially *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As these books have taken on a life of their own, they have overshadowed other aspects of the writer’s life and work, including that based on his experiences as a police officer in Burma in the 1920s, such as the novel *Burmese Days* (1934) and the short essays ‘A Hanging’ (1931) and ‘Shooting an Elephant’ (1936). Still, as you point out in your book, Orwell’s legacy cannot be properly assessed and comprehended without considering this side of his work. You write: ‘The five years spent in Burma would be a lifelong point of reference [for Orwell], and became the paradigm for his idea of political injustice. But the country haunted him in other ways too, and Burmese landscapes and faces continued to visit his dreams. Memories of the Orient are to be found in all his books ... but it is directly present in his writing only intermittently’ (pp. 13-14). Can you tell us a bit about how Orwell’s life came to be entangled with the Raj (that is, the British Empire in India) and ‘the dirty work of empire’? What makes his viewpoint so unique and important?

Douglas Kerr: Orwell belonged to a very specific and identifiable (but now almost extinct) segment of the British middle class—families whose members had served and lived in what was still called the Orient in the time of the British Empire. These people were known as Anglo-Indians. His father had worked for the Government of India as an officer in the department that oversaw the growing and sale of opium—a government monopoly. But, in fact, his family on both sides had links with imperial work and trade over generations. It was not surprising that the young Orwell decided to join the Indian Imperial Police and chose to go to Burma (which came under the administration of the Raj), where he still had relatives. He was there for five years. He said he soon came to hate being part of ‘the machinery of despotism’, and when he left the East in 1927, he never returned.

The argument of my book is that Burma was Orwell’s school of politics and power; it was his political formation. He came to sympathise with the Burmese and other colonised peoples, but he had seen the relationship from the other side, as an agent and inheritor of empire. He resigned from the police and became an anti-imperialist, but he couldn’t stop being an Anglo-Indian. This experience coloured all his later writing. You are right to say he’s best known for his late works, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which became talismanic Cold War texts. What I want to do in my book is to turn Orwell upside-down, as it were, and privilege the early experience and writing: ‘A Hanging’, *Burmese Days*, and the rest. To move the centre of gravity.

IF: In the book, you take significant issue with the approach that you call ‘Orwell our contemporary’. As you write: ‘Much of what Orwell wrote has startling applicability to issues and predicaments today, and a great deal of secondary

literature is devoted to elucidating this relevance. However, Orwell is not our contemporary. To approach him as such risks missing much that makes him most specifically himself. Like any other historical figure, to see him clearly involves judging his distance from where we now stand' (p. 5). When it comes to empire, what elements of Orwell's critique remain relevant today and which ones fail to live up to the expectations of contemporary readers? How is his case relevant to our present debates about the legacy of empire?

DK: Though he wrote eloquently against empire all through his career, he found it difficult to unlearn the cultural assumptions that came with his upbringing and his experience in the colonised East. From time to time, we can find in his writing casual descriptions of Burmese and Indian people which may strike a modern reader as patronising or disrespectful, or worse. And though he was perfectly clear that the empire was 'an old-fashioned and rather shaky despotism' that could not be justified and should be dismantled as soon as possible, he was not prepared to say either that it was all bad or that the nationalism which would inevitably succeed it would be, shall we say, unproblematic. All this is to say that to be anti-imperialist in the twenty-first century is a relatively simple matter, but for Orwell it was not so. And if we want to recruit him for our contemporary struggles, we should read him carefully first, and take account of the historical circumstances in which he wrote. My book tries to re-historicise Orwell in this way. He was born in 1903. He is not our contemporary.



Figure 2: George Orwell (back row, third from left) doing his police training in Burma in 1923. Photo source: [The Guardian](#).

IF: Throughout the book, you point out several issues that need to be unpacked in discussing Orwell's critique of empire. One problem is Orwell's seeming self-representation as a lone critical voice of empire (p. 69). Clearly that was not the case. Why do you think he chose to represent himself that way?

DK: I may have exaggerated this a bit! In 1938-39, he was briefly a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which was staunchly anti-imperial and worked closely with anticolonial activists such as C.L.R. James and Jomo Kenyatta. Across the world, much of the anti-imperial discourse, and activism, in Orwell's lifetime was coming from members of the Communist Party, and there were reasons, going back to his experience in Barcelona, why he was deeply suspicious of the communists. It's also the case that Orwell enjoyed thinking of himself as an isolated rebel, in the right, but doomed to failure. He was never good at joining things. After leaving the police, and apart from his year or so of membership of the ILP, the only organisation he belonged to was the anarchist militia in Catalonia—a doubly

ironic affiliation. He became an English socialist intellectual, but he writes at length in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) about how ghastly English socialist intellectuals are.

He was actually quite sociable, but he behaved like a loner, and he was uncomfortable belonging to groups, so he didn't pay much attention to others who were involved in the struggle against empire. You might say this is a bit egotistical and childish, but this anarchistic streak in him did ensure that he never thought or wrote to follow a party line. He went his own way. As for the anti-imperialist struggle, I'm not sure he really believed that the end of empire could be initiated in his lifetime. And though the British had delayed and delayed the inevitable, when independence came to the Indian Subcontinent, it came remarkably fast. There is surprisingly little reference in Orwell's writing to the negotiations after the war between the Attlee government in London and the Indian independence leaders, nor to the actual achievement of independence by India and Pakistan, and of course Burma shortly afterwards. But by that time Orwell was in very poor health, of course, and struggling to finish *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

IF: Another problem you highlight is Orwell's 'Eurocentrism'. In your book, you write that 'an argument could be made for Orwell as a postcolonial writer *avant la lettre*, except that his work lacks one element that plays a vital part in postcolonialism, the resistance of colonised people against their oppression' (p. 75). To support this point, you argue that *Burmese Days* is 'a novel of colonial life [that] rarely enters the private life or the consciousness of local people' (p. 39). Similarly, you point out how, in 'Shooting an Elephant', 'the local people are shown to be hopelessly incapable of mounting a real resistance to the masters, or of doing

anything with their resentment, except standing around and jeering at Europeans. Local people do not make things happen: Burmese history is colonial history, and the British are the people who do things, to and for the Burmese' (p. 32). What does this say about Orwell's anti-imperialism?

DK: Yes, this is related to the previous question. I refer to this as a fascinating blind-spot in his outlook, and of course we have to adduce his Burmese experience here. At a young age, the age when his friends were starting university, Orwell found himself a white police officer in what was in effect an occupied country. He was in authority over thousands of thoroughly disempowered people, and I think he never quite got over the impression of the colonised as powerless. He says it was common for Europeans in the East to punch and kick their servants with impunity: we see this happening in *Burmese Days*. Nobody punches back. Look at the people in 'Shooting an Elephant'—reduced to spectators of the white man's actions. Later he understood that the liberation of colonised people must be in their own hands, but he found it hard to imagine them actually accomplishing it.

There was anti-British feeling in Burma when Orwell was there in the 1920s, and this could make his life as a policeman difficult, but the resistance in his novel *Burmese Days* is pathetic. The only formidable Burmese character, the magistrate U Po Kyin, wants to enrich himself from the British, not overthrow them. Orwell has a problem here I think, and a good place to explore it is in his writing about Gandhi, which tends to be hostile and, in the end, only grudgingly respectful. He thought Gandhi's campaign of civil disobedience was unimpressive and Gandhi's pacifism ridiculous in wartime. He acknowledged, but I think he could never really understand, Gandhi's success in finally getting the British out of India.

IF: In your book, you argue that ‘Orwell’s quarrel with Empire was the basis of his quarrel with capitalism’ (p. 69). Can you tell us a bit more about this connection between empire and capitalism in Orwell’s work?

DK: Well, this is the classic Leninist line on empire as the last phase of capitalism. Perhaps a way to understand this is to see the fate of Gordon Comstock in the commercial world in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) as being essentially the same story as that of Winston Smith in the world of the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Both are eventually crushed by an ambient despotism: the Money-God and Big Brother. Orwell’s earliest writing about empire emphasises the economic motives of the nineteenth-century conquest of Burma, which was of no strategic value to the British, but was rich in natural resources. He always faulted Kipling for paying no attention to the fact that empire was a business. He’s quite consistent about this: ‘What we always forget is that the overwhelming bulk of the British proletariat does not live in Britain, but in Asia and Africa.’

In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he explains how he came to socialism through his experience of the exploitation of the poor in the empire—this is how the road to Wigan Pier begins in Mandalay. He learned his sympathy with the oppressed and exploited in Burma; when he looked around the north of England in the depths of the Depression, he saw a similar kind of injustice. This may have had its drawbacks, too. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he can see the poor living conditions of the English working class, but he doesn’t see much agency in the local people; he doesn’t have much to say about the trade unions or welfare agencies, for example. This may have been a habit of mind acquired in Burma. But in the bigger picture, he thought that empire enabled capitalism and

capitalism enabled empire, and his anti-imperialism and his socialism were the same thing. He said Britain needed not just to free its colonised peoples, but to free itself, and that it couldn’t become a properly modern country until it had broken its dependency on empire.

IF: I was particularly impressed by how you managed to link Orwell’s work on the poor and downtrodden (such as *Down and Out in Paris and London* [1933] and *The Road to Wigan Pier*) and his views about colonised people expressed in his writings on empire. ‘Poverty was a kind of Orient’, you write (p. 55); what do you mean by that?

DK: It’s not me; though I think Orwell’s critics haven’t paid quite enough attention to it, Orwell himself makes this link specifically and often, in *Down and Out in Paris and London* but especially in the second part of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. There he says that, on his return from Burma, his thoughts turned to the English working class at first ‘because they supplied an analogy’. He saw a metaphorical relation between the English workers and the Burmese. I’m not sure which was the tenor of the metaphor for Orwell, and which the vehicle.

IF: There is an old debate about the boundaries between reality and fiction in Orwell’s Eastern writings. While *Burmese Days* is a work of fiction—although one drawing on Orwell’s experiences in Katha, in northern Burma—there have been long-running arguments about whether the experiences he discusses in the two essays really took place. One of Orwell’s biographers, Bernard Crick, went to great lengths to establish whether the writer had ever witnessed or participated in a hanging while in Burma, going as far as to calculate the exact number of executions

that occurred during Orwell's stay in the country, and to specify their type, in every location in which he had worked as a police officer. Did Orwell really shoot an elephant or witness a hanging? And, most importantly, does it matter?

DK: People were hanged in colonial Burma and people shot elephants. Did Eric Blair (George Orwell's real name) shoot an elephant or witness a hanging? I have to say I don't care enormously. Was Shakespeare a murderer? Almost certainly not, but *he knew what it was like* to be a murderer, so he was able to write *Macbeth*. I am interested in Orwell as a writer, and we should give him credit as a writer. He had lived in a place where these things happened; he knew what it was like. As you know, he often wrote in a way that blurred the boundaries of genre; and, after all, he doesn't say if 'A Hanging' is actuality or fiction or a mix of the two.

We think of *Down and Out in Paris and London* as an example of documentary realism, but we know its incidents are rearranged and certainly some of them are made up. Then there's the famous description of the working-class woman at the drainpipe in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. In the book, he says he saw her from the window of a train, but in his diary, he said he was in the street. This makes a difference to the way the reader sees the scene, but does it matter whether Orwell was in a train or in the street? I'm not sure it matters whether he really saw the woman, or embellished something he had really seen, or saw her in the street but remembered seeing her from the train, or just imagined her. In his brilliant essay 'Marrakesh', he describes watching a company of black colonial troops march past. As a 'witness statement', this is entirely uncorroborated. For us, it's not a question of whether he really saw this sight, but of what he did with it to illustrate a truth about how empire works.

IF: In the book, you briefly note that in his final months, when he was exhausted and critically ill, George Orwell began drafting a new novel, tentatively titled *A Smoking-Room Story*. In your words, 'in his imagination, [Orwell] was returning for a last time to the East' (p. 15). You write that '*A Smoking Room Story*, barely begun, remains one of the most intriguing non-existent books in English literature' (p. 163). What do we know about this novel and what does it tell us about Orwell's developing views of empire towards the end of his life?

DK: In the *Collected Works of George Orwell*, you can find the notes and some early drafts he wrote for this novel, which he never finished—hardly even began, in fact. It's set in the East, on a ship returning to Europe at just the time that Orwell himself left Burma to return to England. The story appears to centre on some scandal involving a young Englishman in the East, perhaps rather like Joseph Conrad's great novel *Lord Jim* (1900), which Orwell knew well. In fact, the young Englishman in the East who gets embroiled in scandal was a favourite theme—I think of Kipling's tales like 'Thrown Away' and 'Without Benefit of Clergy', or Maugham's 'The Force of Circumstance', or indeed Orwell's *Burmese Days* itself. We can't say very much more than that, but I find it poignant that, right at the end of his career and suffering from the illness that would soon kill him, *and* after the independence of India, Pakistan, and Burma, Orwell wanted to go back in his imagination to the colonial Burma of his youth.

IF: In the book, you discuss at length the parallels and divergences between George Orwell and others who wrote about the Empire—in particular, Rudyard Kipling.

However, I am curious about another writer whose presence somewhat hovers in the background of your book and is examined only in passing towards the end: William Somerset Maugham. I remember reading some essays by Orwell in which he expressed a very positive view of Maugham. Also, as you write, ‘Maugham was the modern writer who influenced Orwell most, chiefly for “his power of telling a story straightforwardly and without frills” [these are Orwell’s own words]’ (p. 162). Most poignantly, in reading your critique of Orwell’s lack of attention to the voice and agency of colonised people, I could not help but think of the same criticism being levelled at Maugham in his time. What lessons can be drawn from reading the two authors side by side?

DK: You’re quite right; Orwell said he learned from Maugham above all writers, and I don’t spend enough time on him in the book. Maugham is one of a number of very gifted English writers who wrote about the East in imperial times—a group that includes Kipling, E.M. Forster, Edward Thompson, and Leonard Woolf. Maugham is a highly skilled storyteller,

and Orwell thought Maugham’s example helped him to write more simply and directly, without romantic flourishes. There is a difference, though. All the writers I just mentioned, and of course Orwell himself, worked for some time in the East. Maugham visited and travelled as a professional writer in search of copy, like a journalist looking for a ‘story’. Hence, I think, the detachment from local life, which you mention, which is more marked in Maugham than in Orwell and the others.

I feel Maugham also has a deep, perhaps tragic, cynicism that Orwell doesn’t share. But there’s a general problem here that attends all colonial writing. If a colonial writer remains external to local experience, his or her representation of the colonised scene has an enormous blind-spot. But if they attempt to get inside the mind and experience and memory of local people, they are open to accusations of appropriation—a literary plundering equivalent to their compatriots’ economic and political appropriation—and even epistemic violence. This is the Orientalist bind, or one of them. I think Orwell was aware of it and it’s why he worked hard to promote the work of Indian-born English-language writers about the East, like his friend Mulk Raj Anand. This version of the postcolonial was where he saw the future.

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