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Laura Beers, *Orwell's Ghosts: Wisdom and Warnings for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Hurst/ New York: W. W. Norton, 2024), 224 pp. £20/ \$26.99, ISBN-13 9781911723028.

George Orwell is an almost inescapable figure in contemporary British and American culture. Discussions of state or business surveillance routinely prompt references to 'Big Brother', just as anxieties about the policing of opinion lead commentators to invoke the 'thought police'. Officialdom's use of euphemistic and misleading language, the manipulation of the voters with 'fake news', and authoritarian attempts to punish political opponents are all labelled 'Orwellian'. Orwell's two most famous novels, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949) remain staples on school and university curricula, still sell well, and enjoy considerable public acclaim: in 2021, readers of the *New York Times* voted *1984* as the third best book of the past 125 years. Orwell continues to receive critical attention too. In the past five years, there have been new or updated biographies (by Richard Bradford and D. J. Taylor), explorations of his interest in gardening (Rebecca Solnit), and two books about his first wife, Eileen O'Shaughnessy (Sylvia Topp and Anna Funder). The author Sandra Newman has even produced a fictional reworking of *1984* from the perspective of Julia, the female protagonist. Laura Beers's *Orwell's Ghosts* arrives in a crowded marketplace.

As a historian, Beers is equally inspired by the opportunities brought by Orwell's ongoing political resonance and determined to counter and correct the misuse of his ideas by ill-informed or careless pundits. Beers argues that the 'uncanny parallels between the interwar decades and our political moment' – by which she means the crisis of liberal democracy, the rise of populism and anti-immigration sentiment, and calls to reform the widening inequalities brought about by capitalism – 'gives Orwell's writing a renewed salience in the twenty-first century' (14). She therefore uses his writings 'as a lens through which to re-examine the crisis of our own historical moment' (15), exploring themes including truth and disinformation, the

social inequalities of class, gender and race, the dynamics of authoritarianism, and the appeal of revolutionary change. Beers ranges far and wide, from cancel culture and ‘fake news’, via fast fashion and the threat to abortion rights, right up to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. She leads the reader through Orwell’s key patterns of thought, and then applies some of his ideas to the pressing issues of the day. This is a book that is reaching for a broad audience, and is very aware of the risks of either boring the reader or assuming too much knowledge of Orwell’s works and world.

There is a real risk that books like this fall between stools. Although Beers uses the first chapter to sketch out the outline of Orwell’s life, this is not a mini-biography or detailed examination of his output. At the same time, there is more history here than many readers of current affairs books will be accustomed to. Overall, though, Beers pulls off the difficult balancing act. Her success is down to three things. First, her enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, Orwell’s writing is infectious. She is unapologetically a fan, even while she is fully aware of his blind spots. He was, she argues, ‘a broad and deep thinker who opposed inequality as fervently as he opposed censorship and tyranny’ (13), and suggests that ‘his political writing is characterized by an insight and honesty that marks it as some of the best in the English language.’ (19). She rejects the caricature of Orwell as a Cold War warrior concerned only with Soviet authoritarianism and demonstrates, in particular, his commitment calling out the lies and hypocrisies of partisans of all political stripes. In an era of misinformation, Orwell’s commitment to truth-telling is bracing. As he famously wrote in *1984*, liberty is ‘the freedom to say that two plus two makes four’ - not that it equals five.

Second, Beers deploys her skills as a historian wisely. She roots Orwell’s ideas about subjects such as authoritarianism, imperialism and social inequality in the inter-war period, explaining the influence on him of events such as the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. At the

same time, she does not use his upbringing or circumstances to excuse his misogyny and sexism. On this, she is clear-sighted, remembering her own deep discomfort as a young woman reading passages of sexual violence in his writings and wondering why they did not prompt more attention. But, she argues persuasively, Orwell's views 'on reproductive rights, his demeaning manner in writing about women, and his seeming casual acceptance of sexual violence cannot simply be dismissed as products of their time' (157), and she compares him unfavourably to contemporaries with far more progressive opinions.

Third, Beers takes a refreshingly sensible and even-handed line on how we should deal with writers holding views, or acting in ways, which we now found unacceptable. 'Cancelling' Orwell, Beers observes, 'risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater' and losing all that is 'prescient and valuable' in his work. Just as important, she notes, 'by continuing to engage with Orwell's writing in its entirety—including its discomfiting depictions of sexual predation—we can gain a clearer understanding of the long, embedded history of sexual harassment and predatory behavior even among those who believe themselves to be enlightened and on the right side of history' (159). This is a mature reading of Orwell, warts and all, with lessons to be applied to other historical figures.

Not everything in this book works. The passages connecting the experiences of the Second World War and the Covid-19 pandemic are not entirely convincing, and some of the reflections on very recent events will probably be soon overtaken. Nevertheless, there is much to be enjoyed in *Orwell's Ghosts*, and it provides a useful model of how historians can make political writing from earlier decades relevant and engaging. With Donald Trump's re-election as President of the United States it seems likely that Orwell's thought will continue to offer some useful guidance in the years ahead.

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