



# Introduction

*For all I know, by the time this book [Animal Farm] is published my view of the Soviet régime may be the generally-accepted one. But what use would that be in itself? To exchange one orthodoxy for another is not necessarily an advance.*

George Orwell, 'The Freedom of the Press'

*Animal Farm*, as its author later wrote, 'was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole.' And indeed, its pages contain a synthesis of many of the themes that we have come to think of as 'Orwellian'. Among these are a hatred of tyranny, a love for animals and the English countryside, and a deep admiration for the satirical fables of Jonathan Swift. To this one might add Orwell's keen desire to see things from the viewpoint of childhood and innocence: he had long wished for fatherhood and, fearing that he was sterile, had adopted a small boy not long before the death of his first wife. The partly ironic subtitle of the novel is 'A Fairy Story', and Orwell was especially pleased when he heard from friends such as Malcolm Muggeridge and Sir Herbert Read that their own offspring had enjoyed reading the book.

Like much of his later work – most conspicuously the much grimmer *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – *Animal Farm* was the product of Orwell's engagement in the Spanish Civil War. During the course of that conflict, in which he had fought

on the anti-Fascist side and been wounded and then chased out of Spain by supporters of Joseph Stalin, his experiences had persuaded him that the majority of 'Left' opinion was wrong, and that the Soviet Union was a new form of hell and not an emerging Utopia. He described the genesis of the idea in one of his two introductions to *Animal Farm*:

. . . [F]or the past ten years I have been convinced that the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if we wanted a revival of the Socialist movement.

On my return from Spain I thought of exposing the Soviet myth in a story that could be easily understood by almost anyone and which could be easily translated into other languages. However, the actual details of the story did not come to me for some time until one day (I was then living in a small village) I saw a little boy, perhaps ten years old, driving a huge cart-horse along a narrow path, whipping it whenever it tried to turn. It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat.

I proceeded to analyse Marx's theory from the animals' point of view.\*

\* Orwell once wrote that all his happiest memories of boyhood were somehow connected to animals, yet his favourite word of disapproval for human behaviour was 'beastly'. He made his name with an almost self-hating essay about shooting an elephant. As an amateur farmer he came to detest pigs. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the most horrifying moment involves the use of rats as instruments of torture. Yet he also loved the Thames Valley and was plainly influenced by *The Wind in the Willows*. One wants to read, or perhaps write, an essay on this subtext and its implications.

The apparently beautiful simplicity of this notion is in many ways deceptive. By undertaking such a task, Orwell was choosing to involve himself in an extremely complex and bitter argument about the Bolshevik revolution in Russia: then a far more controversial issue than it is today. *Animal Farm* can be better understood if it is approached under three different headings: its historical context, the struggle over its publication and its subsequent adoption as an important cultural weapon in the Cold War, and its enduring relevance today.

### *Historical Background*

The book was written at the height of the Second World War, and at a time when the pact between Stalin and Hitler had been replaced abruptly by an alliance between Stalin and the British Empire. London was under Nazi bombardment, and the original manuscript of the novel had to be rescued from the wreckage of Orwell's blitzed home in North London.

The cynical way in which Stalin had switched sides had come as no surprise to Orwell, who was by then accustomed to the dishonesty and cruelty of the Soviet regime. This put him in a fairly small minority, both within official Britain and among the British Left. A considerable number of 'progressive' persons still believed that Communist collectivisation of Russian agriculture had benefited the peasants, and maintained that Stalin's judicial murder of his former political comrades had constituted a fair trial. Orwell had not visited the USSR but he had seen the Spanish version of Stalinism at close quarters and broadly took the side of the Left Opposition or Trotskyist forces, whose perspective is expounded by a four-legged character in this book. With a few slight alterations to the sequence

of events, the action approximates to the fate of the 1917 generation in Russia. Thus the grand revolutionary scheme of the veteran boar Old Major (Karl Marx) is at first enthusiastically adopted by almost all creatures, leading to the overthrow of Farmer Jones (the Czar), the defeat of the other farmers who come to his aid (the now-forgotten Western invasions of Russia in 1918–9) and the setting up of a new model state. In a short time, the more ruthless and intelligent creatures – naturally enough the pigs – have the other animals under their dictatorship and are living like aristocrats. Inevitably, the pigs argue among themselves. The social forces represented by different animals are easily recognisable – Boxer the noble horse as the embodiment of the working class, Moses the raven as the Russian Orthodox Church – as are the identifiable individuals played by different pigs. The rivalry between Napoleon (Stalin) and Snowball (Trotsky) ends with Snowball's exile and the subsequent attempt to erase him from the memory of the farm. Stalin had the exiled Trotsky murdered in Mexico less than three years before Orwell began work on the book.

Some of the smaller details are meticulously exact. Due to the exigencies of the war, Stalin had made various opportunistic compromises. He had recruited the Russian Orthodox Church to his side, the better to cloak himself in patriotic garb, and he was to abolish the old Socialist anthem 'The Internationale' for being too provocative to his new capitalist allies in London and Washington. In *Animal Farm*, Moses the raven is allowed to come croaking back as the crisis deepens, and the poor exploited goats and horses and hens are told that their beloved song 'Beasts of England' is no longer to be sung. Orwell's rendition of those yearning and touching verses was one of the many ways in which he managed to keep the

essentially tragic narration relatively light. This is also one of the very few of his works to contain any jokes: after the revolution the animals discover some hams hanging in Jones's kitchen and take them outside for decent burial; the first time they take a vote on the rights of non-domestic animals the farm's cat is found to have voted on both sides.

There is, however, one very salient omission. There is a Stalin pig and a Trotsky pig, but no Lenin pig. Similarly, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we find only a Big Brother Stalin and an Emmanuel Goldstein Trotsky. Nobody appears to have pointed this out at the time (and if I may say so, nobody but myself has done so since; it took me years to notice what was staring me in the face). In the 1930s and the 1940s, and indeed for some decades afterwards, there was a very hot dispute about whether or not Stalin's terror was a direct consequence of Lenin's revolution, and also speculation concerning the likelihood or otherwise that Trotsky would have been better than Stalin. Orwell had broadly Trotskyist sympathies but did not necessarily believe that any one form of Russified Communism would have been superior to another. Uncharacteristically for him, then, and possibly for the sake of simplicity, he seems to have decided to let this evident contradiction remain unaddressed.\* This didn't save him from the censure of those who could see the dangerously subversive possibilities that were latent in his apparently innocuous version of the pastoral.

\* In 'The Freedom of the Press' he does make an approving reference to Rosa Luxemburg, the martyred Jewish German-Polish revolutionary, murdered in 1919 by the German right-wing, who was on the extreme Left but who had prophetically warned Lenin of the danger of making a habit of 'emergency measures'.

## *The Story of Publication*

It is sobering to consider how close this novel came to remaining unpublished. Having survived Hitler's bombing, the rather battered manuscript was sent to the office of T.S. Eliot, then an important editor at the leading firm of Faber & Faber. Eliot, a friendly acquaintance of Orwell's, was a political and cultural conservative, not to say reactionary. But, perhaps influenced by Britain's alliance with Moscow, he rejected the book on the grounds that it seemed too 'Trotskyite'. He also told Orwell that his choice of pigs as rulers was an unfortunate one, and that readers might draw the conclusion that what was needed was 'more public-spirited pigs'. This was not perhaps as fatuous as the turn-down that Orwell received from The Dial Press in New York, which solemnly informed him that stories about animals found no market in the United States. And this in the land of Disney . . .

The wartime solidarity between British Tories and Soviet Communists found another counterpart in the work of Peter Smollett, a senior official in the Ministry of Information who was later exposed as a Soviet agent. Smollett made it his business to warn off certain publishers, as a consequence of which *Animal Farm* was further denied a home at the reputable firms of Victor Gollancz and Jonathan Cape. For a time Orwell considered producing the book privately with the help of his radical Canadian poet friend, Paul Potts, in what would have been a pioneering instance of anti-Soviet samizdat or self-publishing. He even wrote an angry essay, entitled 'The Freedom of the Press', to be included as an introduction: an essay which was not even unearthed and printed until 1972. Eventually the honour of the publishing business

was saved by the small company Secker & Warburg, which in 1945 brought out an edition with a very limited print-run and paid Orwell forty-five pounds for it.

It is thinkable that the story could have ended in this damp-squib way, but two later developments were to give the novel its place in history. A group of Ukrainian and Polish socialists, living in refugee camps in post-war Europe, discovered a copy of the book in English and found it to be a near-perfect allegory of their own recent experience. Their self-taught English-speaking leader and translator, Ihor Ševčenko, found an address for Orwell and wrote to him asking permission to translate *Animal Farm* into Ukrainian. He told him that many of Stalin's victims nonetheless still considered themselves to be socialists, and did not trust an intellectual of the Right to voice their feelings. "They were profoundly affected by such scenes as that of animals singing "Beasts of England" on the hill . . . They very vividly reacted to the "absolute" values of the book.' Orwell agreed to grant publication rights for free (he did this for subsequent editions in several other Eastern European languages) and to contribute the preface from which I quoted earlier. It is affecting to imagine battle-hardened ex-soldiers and prisoners of war, having survived all the privations of the Eastern Front, becoming stirred by the image of British farm animals singing their own version of the discarded 'Internationale', but this was an early instance of the hold the book was to take on its readership. The emotions of the American military authorities in Europe were not so easily touched: they rounded up all the copies of *Animal Farm* that they could find and turned them over to the Red Army to be burned. The alliance between the farmers and the pigs, so hauntingly described in the final pages of the novel, was still in force.