

# GEORGE ORWELL

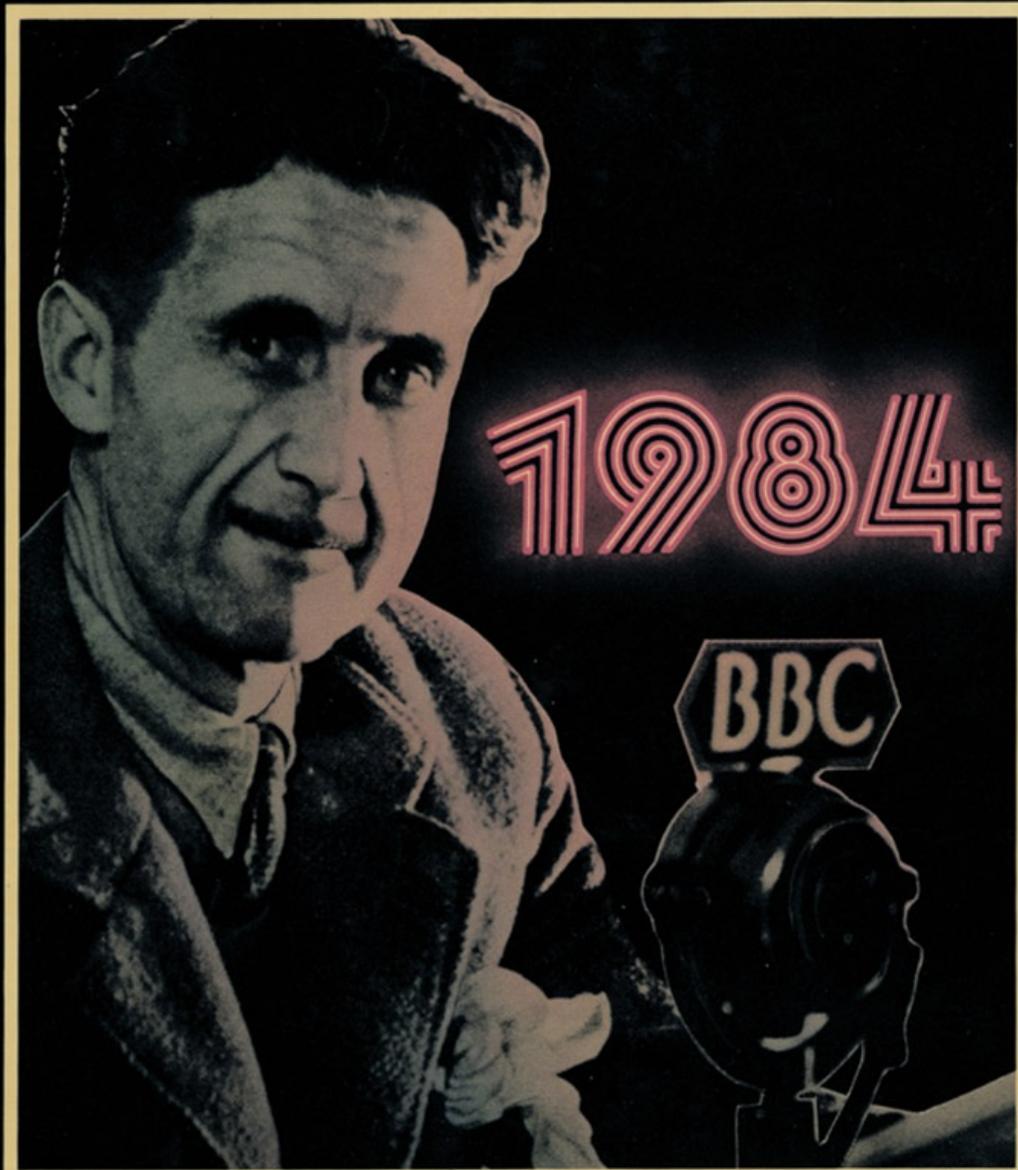
THE POLITICAL PEN



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**GEORGE  
ORWELL**

ALSO BY KEITH FERRELL

*H. G. Wells: First Citizen of the Future*

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**GEORGE  
ORWELL**  

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**THE POLITICAL PEN**

**KEITH FERRELL**

**M Evans**

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M. Evans

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FOR MY MOTHER,  
ELIZABETH BOWMAN FERRELL,  
WHOSE OPINIONS I RESPECT

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# ONE

## INDIAN BIRTH, BRITISH BOYHOOD

ALTHOUGH ERIC ARTHUR BLAIR would earn his fame under the name George Orwell, the family name was illustrious enough in its own right. Blairs had done things, they had gone places, they had made their mark. By the time Eric Blair was born in 1903, however, it was clear to all that the marks made were less bold with each generation, and the family's fortunes were not on the rise.

The peak of the Blairs' prestige had come four generations earlier, when Eric's great-great-grandfather, Charles Blair, owned Jamaican estates and plantations. (He also owned a large number of slaves.) Charles Blair died in 1802, and the inheritance he left Eric's great-grandfather, Charles Blair, Jr., was a large one; he was able to support his family comfortably. Thomas Richard Arthur Blair, Eric's grandfather, was born in 1802, the second son in the family, and the prospects he faced were less grand.

*Primogeniture:* This was the ancient word and the rule by which in the stratified British class system of the early nineteenth century, the right of inheritance belonged exclusively to the eldest son. Younger sons must face the world on their own, meet its challenges with their own personal resources. All they received from their family was their name. Still, Blair was a good, well-connected name, and a young man in Thomas Richard Arthur Blair's position found himself with several appealing options.

There was the army, into which a young man of good family could enter as a second lieutenant, and expect to rise swiftly to an even higher rank. Or there was the life of a colonial officer, serving the crown in one of the outposts of the empire, handling bureaucratic and managerial details. A third choice was the Church of England, then as much a social as religious focus for society. Churchmen had prestige of their own, and the communities they served revolved around them. Failing to achieve a career in the church or in the military or colonial service, a second son might find himself sinking into one of the professions (law or medicine) which at that time carried little honor and less income.

After a protracted period of travel and service in various minor colonial positions, Eric Blair's grandfather chose the church. Thomas Blair found himself, at twenty-seven, in Calcutta, being ordained an Anglican deacon, studying for the priesthood. His travels continued, he revealed a talent for the clergy, and he rose in the ranks of the

church. In 1843 he was serving in Tasmania, and the bishop there made him a full member of the clergy. There was little doubt in his mind that when his travels ended and he returned to Britain a vicarage would be found for him, and he would settle into the not uncomfortable life of vicar.

Such a life had its own rules of propriety. Vicars were expected to be married, to raise families, and Thomas Blair had in fact become engaged to a well-born young woman during a stop in Cape Town, South Africa while traveling from India to Britain. It was Thomas Blair's plan to marry Emily Hare when he stopped in Cape Town en route back to India. But when he returned to Africa he discovered that the impatient Ms. Hare had broken the engagement during his absence and had already married another man. Thomas Blair was a practical man, a man of action as well as a man of God, and finding Emily unavailable he proceeded to marry her fifteen-year-old younger sister Frances, an attractive young woman whom everyone called Fanny.

In 1854 Thomas and Fanny Blair returned to Britain for good, ready to take up the life of vicar and vicar's wife in a pleasant parish. The Blair name and family connections served Thomas Blair well. Through the intercession of a relative of his mother's, he was made vicar of Milborne St. Andrew, in Dorset, a parish nearly a thousand years old. Founded in 1067, a century and a half before the signing of the Magna Charta, Milborne St. Andrew's church served the village of Milborne, and its vicar was also responsible for services and church duties in nearby Dewlish. The vicarage brought with it an income of nearly a thousand pounds. Ironically, that income was substantially larger than that received by Thomas Blair's older brother, Eric. Primogeniture sometimes took strange turns.

The country life in Dorset agreed with Thomas and Fanny Blair. They settled into their vicarage and produced eight children. Fanny would bear two more sons. On January 7, 1857 she gave birth to Richard Walmsley Blair, Eric Blair's father.

Richard Blair was ten years old when his father died. As the boy passed through his adolescence and approached the age when he must enter the world of adults, he, too, discovered the problems faced by a younger son. In addition, he was the youngest son of a family whose name was still respectable, but whose connections with more influential families had grown increasingly tenuous as time passed and memories of the vicar grew dim. Faced with the same choice as his father nearly four decades earlier—church, military, or colonial service—Richard Blair decided on the colonial service. He was eighteen years old on August 4, 1875, when he was accepted by the British government of India's Opium Department and given the rank of Assistant Sub-Deputy Opium Agent, fifth grade. It was an inauspicious beginning for a bureaucratic career in a government department whose existence grew more controversial each year.

The narcotic properties of opium had been known to medicine since the time of Galen, the Greek physician and scientist of the second century A.D. The commercial properties of this derivative of the poppy, and especially the Chinese market for opium as a medicine, had been exploited by Arab traders since the sixth century. Opium's virtues as a vice were introduced by European traders, Spanish and Dutch, and by 1729 the Chinese emperor was forced to try to control an increasingly serious problem. Opium "dens" where the drug was smoked were undermining the moral fiber of a generation of Chinese, and the emperor promised swift punishment by slow

strangulation for operators of opium shops. The regulations did little to stop the traffic in opium, but until the arrival of the British the trade remained a largely unorganized affair.

The East India Company, cornerstone of the British Empire, found the opium industry in great disarray early in the eighteenth century. Sensing the profit to be taken from trade with the Chinese, whose market for opium continued to grow despite all prohibitions, the East India Company studied the harvest of poppies and manufacture of opium in Bengal, a large region in northeastern India, and examined a variety of means for controlling the opium trade with China. By 1773 the studies were complete. The opium industry was made a monopoly of the government of Bengal, while the industry itself was under the control of the East India Company. In Britain the drug remained illegal, although quantities of it were smuggled in and opium dens sprang up clandestinely in the larger cities.

For seventy-five years the trade grew; despite the vehement opposition of the Chinese government, whose laws proved powerless against the traders, despite growing uncertainty in Britain concerning the morality of the trade, and despite conflict which grew violent. (Although the so-called Opium War of 1839–1842 was sparked by a Chinese customs official's burning of a shipment of opium, the conflict sprang from more than simply the opium trade. The British were looking for an excuse to end Chinese trade restrictions in general.) British military might subjugated the Chinese, treaties were drawn up establishing British ports in China, and although opium remained illegal and trade in the substance was still forbidden, the trade flourished.

By the 1850s traffic in opium was measured in thousands of chests of the drug, manufactured, transported, and sold each year, with each chest containing 160 pounds of Bengal opium. At its peak the opium trade with China was responsible for one-seventh of all revenues derived by the British Empire from operations in India. In 1858 the Chinese became aware that they would never stem the flow of opium. They decided instead to impose a tariff on opium imports. That course of action offered sufficient legal respectability for the British to proceed with legalizing the drug traffic and making opium a government monopoly and concern, rather than a business handled by a private company. This shift was marked by the Act for the Better Government of India, passed in 1858.

Concurrently, antiopium sentiment was building in Britain, much of it coming from the religious establishment. Exposés were written about British opium dens. There was little the opponents of the trade could do, however, other than file protests and make speeches proclaiming their moral indignation. The government took firm hold over the machinery of the opium trade, and retained much of its architecture, its ranks and positions. One of the positions was that of subdeputy opium agent, a position created in 1836 by the East India Company. Subdeputy agents were the men in charge of the actual production of the opium itself. This was the job and the responsibility to which eighteen-year-old Richard Blair found himself assigned.

It was a life of travel; few of Blair's postings lasted more than a few months. As a fifth-grade subdeputy he was moved at the whim of his superiors, filling a need here, taking over a vacancy there. During a period of famine he was made a relief officer in charge of operations at Bellary in south-central India. Other posts at which he learned

the particulars and peculiarities of opium production included Allahabad, Fuzabad, Shahjahanpur, and Tehta.

No matter how controversial the Opium Department might be in Britain, its officers in India could enjoy a comfortable life. Their salaries would never make them wealthy, but money went farther in India than in Britain. Even low-grade officers such as Richard Blair could afford spacious and well-furnished quarters with a staff of servants. The work that occupied Blair and other officers was mainly administrative. It was hard work but not unpleasant. For off-duty hours, every corner of the empire held a club to which the officers retired. Within the convivial and civilized confines of these clubs, young officers such as Blair could talk with other officers over drinks that were frequently raised in toasts to Queen Victoria, whose portraits were so prominently hung.

Blair enjoyed the prestige accorded him as a white, British officer in India, and in 1896 he met and married a young woman with whom he would, after a fashion, share that life. Blair was thirty-nine at the time and was stationed in Tehta, in the Indian province of Bihar in northeast India, near Nepal. The woman Blair married, Ida Limouzin, was twenty-one years old, of French and English ancestry, born into a family of merchants who had been established in Burma since early in the nineteenth century. Ida was a robust and cheerful young woman who enjoyed reading and possessed many strong opinions to which she gave frequent voice. But she also took pleasure in the domestic duties of running a house, and despite the difference in age between Ida and her husband, the marriage was a happy one from the start.

Tehta was one of the longer postings of Richard Blair's career, and he and Ida were still there in 1898 when their first child, Marjorie, was born. Early in 1903 Blair received orders transferring him to the city of Motihari in Bengal. The trip was planned with care, for Ida was pregnant again. They arrived in Motihari without incident, and their second child was born there on June 25, 1903. The Blairs named their son Eric Arthur Blair. Before the boy was a year old plans were made for Ida and the children to return to Britain.

The decision to leave India was virtually expected of British officers' wives as their children grew older and approached school age. Typically, Ida Limouzin Blair applied herself to the details of the move with great energy and efficiency, carrying Eric in her arms and shepherding Marjorie up the gangplank onto the ship that would bear them home. She found a house in Henley-on-Thames, west of London, that they rented for nearly a year before moving to a slightly larger and more comfortable one. Neither house, though, measured up to the quarters they'd enjoyed in India, and certainly there was no room in Ida's budget for a staff of servants. But she did not complain. A good cook, she transformed inexpensive ingredients into delicious meals. Possessed of a strong, lively sense of humor, she made friends easily and soon became an important part of her community, with a large circle of friends. Her children were always clean and neatly dressed, and when they fell ill she tended them closely until their health was regained.

Young Eric was more sickly than Marjorie had been. The boy began experiencing bronchial difficulty before he was two, spending whole months indoors under the care of his mother, enduring frequent visits by the doctor. His illnesses and recuperations seemed to develop a pattern, with Eric growing increasingly active as he recovered,

climbing through windows as though to escape from the house, splashing in puddles, laughing on visits to the sea, but too soon collapsing back into bed as his lungs grew heavy with fluid and his body was shaken by spells of heavy coughing. The child tolerated his illnesses as well as any child could, but Ida was not really surprised when one of Eric's first words was *beastly*. It was an apt and terse summation of his health, of the dreary English winter weather, and of the confinement his poor constitution imposed upon Eric and Ida.

Spring approached at last, though, and Eric began to gain strength and weight. As the weather improved, Ida sought to distract Eric and Marjorie with picnics on pretty afternoons. **In** the late summer there were expeditions to gather berries for pies, long walks on sunny days. When Ida was busy she hired young local women to walk with her children. Eric enjoyed being outdoors, and delighted in wandering along the banks of the river to watch fishermen work their lines, and displayed great curiosity about the names of plants and animals. His fascination with both domestic and farm animals resulted in the Blairs acquiring a menagerie of dogs, cats, guinea pigs, even rabbits. As Eric grew more sturdy he spent most of his time with his pets.

In the summer of 1907, Eric turned four. His birthday celebration was overshadowed later that summer by the return of his father from India. Richard Blair's stay in Henley was temporary—he was on a three-month leave from the Opium Department. He was pleased with the comfortable and well-run home that Ida had established in Henley and had named “Nutshell.” Blair was equally pleased with his children's development. Marjorie was now nine years old, a self-possessed and cheerful schoolgirl who loved to read. Eric, whom Blair had not seen since the boy's infancy, was rosy cheeked and chubby, proud of his pets, surprisingly articulate for such a young boy.

It was a happy family, and one which would soon grow larger. Richard Blair, now fifty years old, a subdeputy opium agent, first grade, and his wife Ida, conceived another child during his leave. When Blair departed it was with the knowledge that his family was secure, and that this next tour of duty in India would be his last. Before too many more years passed, Blair would be able to retire and return home, with a service pension for the support of his household.

Once her husband had left for India, Ida set to work preparing Eric for school. She understood the importance of education in establishing a young man's prospects, and she had seen to it that Eric's educational preparations began early. During the winter months when Eric was often bedridden, Ida had introduced the boy to the wonderful distractions offered by the world of books. She sat for hours beside him, reading aloud children's stories, poetry, and letters from Richard Blair. Eric enjoyed the children's stories, particularly Beatrix Potter's tales of animals, but he was especially taken with poetry. Before he was five years old he had composed a poem of his own, a bit of exotic verse about a ferocious tiger with “chair-like teeth.” The clever phrase reinforced Ida's opinion that Eric was a bright boy with precocious verbal skills. Throughout the spring of 1908, as she waited for her third child to be born, Ida gave thought to the selection of a good school for Eric.

The new baby arrived on April 6, 1908, and Ida named the girl after the month, with a nod toward her own French ancestry: *Avril* Blair. Eric and Marjorie were fascinated by the tiny girl and sat beside the crib for hours, watching her.

Not long after Avril's birth, Ida enrolled Eric in Sunny-lands, a school operated by the local Anglican convent. For all her study of advertisements for other schools, Ida had finally selected one with which she was already familiar, Marjorie having entered Sunnylands when she reached school age. Ida was pleased not only with the solid educational foundation the nuns offered, but also with the school's reasonable tuition schedule. The Blairs, thanks to Richard's slow but steady rise through the ranks of the Opium Department, were well established in the upper range of the economic lower middle class, but tuition was still a factor in the choice of a school. The proximity of Sunny-lands permitted Eric and Marjorie to attend classes as local students living at home, saving Ida the not inconsiderable room and board charges she would have faced had she chosen a school outside of Henley.

Sunnylands was a delight for Eric. The nuns who taught him were friendly and attentive, and in their classrooms the boy's brightness blossomed. He quickly learned to read, and his skills with words grew stronger daily. Eric passed effortlessly from primers and Beatrix Potter to more challenging books. Marjorie, another lover of books and reading, enjoyed sharing with her younger brother the books she had enjoyed, and by the time Eric was eight he had read *Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, some of Kipling's stories, a bit of Dickens, as well as a great variety of adventure stories. His favorite was *The Coral Island* by R. M. Ballantyne, a Scottish author whose death not long before had prompted an entire generation of British schoolboys to start a fund for the erection of a statue in their favorite author's honor. Eric lost himself again and again in Ballantyne's tale of a trio of boys cast away alone on a remote island and forced to fight for survival with only their courage, skill, and a few tools.

For his eighth birthday Eric received a copy of *Gulliver's Travels* from his mother. He was so excited at the prospect of his birthday that he searched the house the night before until he found the gift-wrapped book, and took it to his bedroom where he stayed up late with it. Jonathan Swift's great story was an adventure tale as well, but even at eight Eric sensed that there was something more to *Gulliver's Travels* than simply the exciting situations and incidents faced by Lemuel Gulliver. It was a book to which he would return over and over again, learning something new from it each time he opened the covers.

In addition to books, Eric enjoyed reading magazines and read them carefully, including the advertisements that crowded their pages. He became increasingly self-conscious about his weight, and when an ad offered a certain cure for chubbiness, Eric entered into a brief correspondence with the advertiser. He dropped the idea when he learned how much it would cost.

Reading, writing, and attending to his pets occupied most of his time. Eric Blair was a child of solitary nature, never bothered by time spent solely in his own company, able to escape when alone into the world of his imagination. He was not terribly good at sports, and felt himself to be something of a misfit. He lived with three women, his mother and his two sisters. Their company did not fully prepare him for the companionship of other boys. For a time he became part of a gang of boys headed by local teenagers, but he was not comfortable in their group, and their enjoyment of rough and tumble, dirty pursuits offended his fastidious nature. He spent more time at home, reading, writing, and watching his animals and his baby sister grow.

In school he proved a good student, bright and quick, capable of concentrating

closely on his lessons. He grew distracted only occasionally, fancying himself in love with one or another of the older girls in the school but keeping his infatuations to himself. Mostly, he studied. He understood as well as Ida, it seemed, the importance of education to his future, and knew that it would not be long before he would be sent away to a preparatory school where he would be faced with courses designed to prepare him for public school (as private high schools are known in Britain).

That preparation, in fact, was the goal toward which his early years were directed. Although the Blairs were not wealthy, they held a secure position in the British class system, and a young man of Eric's background could be expected, well before the age of ten, to be sent to a fine preparatory school after which he would attend one of Britain's more prestigious public schools. After that he might go on to Oxford or Cambridge university. Even if a university was not a boy's final destination, he could expect to be in school until he was about nineteen, readying himself for a life in the army or navy, the church, or the colonial service.

By the time Eric was eight, in 1911, the same year Richard Blair retired and returned to Britain, his parents and the nuns at Sunnylands were working together to gain him entry into a good preparatory school. Eric's intelligence was in his favor, for it seemed likely that by virtue of his good grades he would be awarded a scholarship (a reduction in fees) to one of the schools most favored by the wealthy. Before her husband's return, Ida had talked with the nuns at Sunnylands, listened to their recommendations, studied the histories of various schools, and approached her final decision. She was most impressed with St. Cyprian's, a school barely older than the century, which had earned a fine reputation for itself in a short time. It was the sort of place where Eric could meet boys from backgrounds wealthier than his own, connections which might serve him well as he approached adulthood. In addition, St. Cyprian's was respected for the academic excellence it demanded of students. The nuns at Sunnylands felt confident that Eric, with his grades and intelligence, could be awarded a scholarship to St. Cyprian's. Ida traveled to Eastbourne, in Sussex, to inspect the school and to discuss Eric's prospects with its headmaster and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan Wilkes.

Such was the nature of social prestige and position in Britain before 1914 and the start of World War I that Mr. and Mrs. Wilkes were as concerned with Eric's meeting their standards as Ida was with the Wilkeses measuring up to hers, if not more so: St. Cyprian's fame had not developed by accident. The school attracted students from the very top classes of British society, and while it was important to take on bright students whose parents were not so well off, the Wilkeses were also aware that there was no shortage of qualified boys from the middle, but not privileged, landed, or titled classes. They wanted the right sort of lad to mix with the children of the nobility and the very wealthy.

Both Ida's and the nuns' recommendation of Eric made a good impression on Mr. and Mrs. Wilkes. The boy was exactly the type they sought, and they offered to accept him beginning with the fall term, 1911, and to reduce the tuition by half. Even so, the Blairs would be facing charges of £90 per school year. Richard Blair's service pension was less than £450, meaning that the boy's schooling would devour more than twenty percent of the family's income; and that was before the additional and unavoidable expenses of clothing, transportation, and incidental money.

Still, Ida was determined to launch her son well, and if the family was careful, the tuition could be worked into their budget. An agreement was reached with the Wilkeses, and it was also decided that Eric would not be told he was a scholarship student. They did not wish Eric to be made still more self-conscious by the knowledge that, relative to some of his new classmates, he was from a poor family.

That summer Richard Blair returned from India, and the family went on a long holiday to the coast. Mingled with the excitement brought by the father's return home was the excitement of the son preparing for departure. Throughout the summer of 1911 Ida remained busy packing and repacking Eric's belongings, checking off items on the list of clothes and other things the boy would need during his first term at school. She made certain she had the requisite number of socks and pajamas for Eric, that the Bible insisted upon by the school was in good condition, that his athletic clothes were in good repair, that his caps fit him snugly. It was quite an undertaking and coupled with the adjustment of having her husband home to stay, it made for a hectic season for Ida Blair.

But as September and the start of term approached, all was in readiness. The contents of Eric's bags matched the lists provided by the Wilkeses. The family had gotten used to having Richard Blair home, although the house was now kept many degrees warmer than was customary, Mr. Blair having become permanently acclimated to the heat of India. Avril was three, toddling everywhere, while Marjorie—herself in a good school, though not one so fine or expensive as St. Cyprian's—was a poised and articulate young woman.

Eric spent the time before departure with his books and his pets, reading, stroking the animals, examining prized issues in his growing stamp collection. He was very quiet; he had nothing much to say. At last September arrived, and the family traveled to London where Eric was to be placed on a train for St. Cyprian's. Other boys bound for the school were at the station, but Eric, shy, said little. He bid his parents farewell and listened solemnly to their final bits of advice. Then he boarded the train to leave home for the first time, careful to keep up his courage, determined to make the most of this adventure. It was, after all, expected of him.

## TWO

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# ST. CYPRIAN'S

WITH AN ENROLLMENT OF fewer than one hundred boys, St. Cyprian's was not a large school. Its facilities consisted of two large, many-roomed houses, under whose roofs all of the school's indoor activities took place. Long hallways lined with doors held dormitory rooms for the students, small rooms and apartments for the faculty, a dining hall, library, chapel, kitchen, and bathrooms. Outside there were spacious lawns and a single playing field that served double duty as the site not only of cricket and soccer matches but also of practice marches, during which the boys learned discipline under the command of the school's drill instructor.

St. Cyprian's had fewer than a dozen teachers, or masters, as they were called, along with Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan Wilkes. The masters were responsible for drilling the boys in a variety of subjects, and the classroom work seemed at times as much forced march and steps by the numbers as did the ranked formations on the field outside. At St. Cyprian's and similar preparatory schools across Britain, the teachers and administrations were less concerned with whether or not the students actually understood the material for which they were responsible than they were with whether or not their charges would be able to give the correct answers on the tests and examinations they would face when seeking entrance to more advanced schools. The measure of the masters' success was not the spark of intellectual excitement ignited in young minds but the number of students who won high places to the great schools such as Harrow, Winchester, and especially Eton. Good performance on entrance exams was what mattered—performance that would reflect favorably upon St. Cyprian's.

Arriving at the school in September 1911, Eric Arthur Blair, age eight, felt a curious and almost frightening mixture of emotions. The school itself was lovely, with the two huge houses dominating the grounds, which were not far from white chalk cliffs overlooking the English Channel. He was surrounded for the first time in his life by other boys of the same age, though from disparate backgrounds. Some of them were children of nobility, both British and foreign, others were accustomed to great wealth, still others were unknowing scholarship students such as himself. All felt very small as they approached the school, uncertain of what sort of world they were

entering.

They learned quickly enough. Under the unwavering guidance of Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan Wilkes, St. Cyprian's had developed a regimen for the boys designed to strengthen their characters, to instill in them the harsh discipline they would need in order to fulfill the obligations their rank in society would impose upon them.

Days began early with a communal plunge into a long, chilly pool, which also served as a bath. The shock of the cold and generally scummy water chased sleep from the boys' minds, and a vigorous toweling stirred their blood, according to the Wilkeses. Breakfast came next, and again following theories held by Mr. and Mrs. Wilkes, the meal was small: too large a breakfast, they felt, might make the boys lazy or sleepy, and there was a day's hard work ahead.

Classes began immediately after breakfast, and Eric learned from the first day that he would find at St. Cyprian's none of the excitement and fun of learning that he had so enjoyed at Sunnylands. He was older now, the masters reminded him, at eight a young man by the standards of British schooling, and his studies served a different purpose. Achievement was the rule of the day, and a person's position in the class rankings was the achievement students should keep foremost in their minds.

As a first-year student, Eric was placed in classes in Latin, French, mathematics, history, and English. He recognized immediately that the men who stood at the head of the class were little interested in him. They had been through it all before, and the world of learning and letters held no further excitement. Rarely would students read an entire book. Rather, a course in literature or history would be composed of those passages and facts most likely to be faced on the examinations that would be the ultimate test of the teachers' achievement. Lessons were taught by rote, with memorization rather than understanding the key to a good grade. It was not what Eric had expected.

Before his first day was finished, Eric was overcome with a wave of homesickness that finally broke through his self-control. He hung his head and began to weep. Mrs. Wilkes spotted the boy and bent at his side, reminding Eric that, like all the other boys, he was to call her "Mum" while he was at St. Cyprian's. She was the wife of the headmaster, and she was one of the teachers, she said, but she also wanted to be the source of maternal comfort when it was called for. She took Eric into her arms and held him tightly, but the comfort she offered was not the sort the boy desired.

Mrs. Wilkes dominated school life far more than did her husband. She was constantly on patrol, walking up and down the halls in search not only of boys in need of consolation, but also alert for transgressions of the school's strict rules. St. Cyprian's instilled maturity in its students, and the students were *expected* to display maturity from the day they arrived. Anything less was a denial of their class and of their responsibilities. St. Cyprian's was typical of such schools for the middle classes.

Eric Blair had no wish to deny his responsibilities. He endeavored to be an example of the mature young man that Mum Wilkes and the masters so frequently described as the ideal toward which he should aspire. But everything was so different. Where Ida Blair had transformed even common vegetables into tasty and appetizing casseroles and dishes, the food at St. Cyprian's was poorly cooked and often tasted spoiled. The home in which Eric had passed his childhood was kept clean and neat, but conditions at St. Cyprian's were generally filthy, from the scum on the surface of

the bathwater to the crusts of dried food that had to be chipped from plates and utensils before they could be used. Where his home life and the adventure stories he read had led him to believe that the future—including St. Cyprian’s—held challenges to which a well-prepared boy could rise and over which he could triumph, the thrust of the teaching at St. Cyprian’s seemed to be that one’s life was always poised on the edge of danger, that failure lurked everywhere, and that one must constantly be on guard against it.

Before he had been at St. Cyprian’s a month, Eric wet his bed. To Mrs. Wilkes, to her husband, and to the staff of masters, bed-wetting stood among the most grievous of offenses against not only nature but against society itself. Incontinence bespoke a lack of self-control, it revealed the hidden flaws in Eric’s character, it was an inexcusable demonstration of the boy’s lack of maturity. He was called to Headmaster Wilkes’s office and told of these truths, and reminded in no uncertain terms of the punishment that lay ahead if he failed to control himself and his bladder.

It did not help. The next night, Eric wet his bed again, and awoke the next morning to find himself summoned once more to face the headmaster and receive from that voice of authority the lecture on how Eric had failed, once more, to measure up. He would be given another chance but not, it was made clear, as an indulgence, but because he, a bright boy, should be able to bring himself under control. That, after all, was what St. Cyprian’s and the education it offered were all about: control of mind, control of manners, control of emotions, control of body.

Eric tried, but his body refused to cooperate, and, waking yet again to sodden sheets, he knew without being told that the time of warnings had passed. For this offense, for the repetition of that offense, he must be punished, not simply scolded. It was obvious to Headmaster and Mrs. Wilkes that words alone would not reach the boy. An example must be set for him.

Following afternoon tea, at which guests from the community were occasionally present, Mrs. Wilkes beckoned Eric to remain behind. The other boys left the dining hall, and Eric approached Mrs. Wilkes and an unfamiliar woman who sat at her table. He stared at Mrs. Wilkes and recalled that she had, not long after his first bout of homesickness, taken him and some other students on a picnic. It had not been the gay sort of picnic that Eric had enjoyed with his mother, though it had evidently been intended as such. Eric thought also of the nickname the older boys had given Mum Wilkes—they called her “Flip,” in crude reference to the motion of her ample bosom as she strode down the halls. The older boys were continually making vulgar jokes such as that, as well as picking on the younger, smaller, weaker boys such as Eric.

Now, in the dining hall after tea, Mrs. Wilkes introduced Eric to her companion, although he did not catch the woman’s name. He nodded at her, seeking to be polite but not quite daring to speak. Mrs. Wilkes rattled on a bit, referring to Eric occasionally, building up to the moment when, in a conversational tone of voice as though discussing something so matter of fact as gardening, she told her companion that Eric Blair was the eight-year-old who could not keep from wetting his bed.

Eric was stunned, but he managed to retain his composure. He would not give in and let Mrs. Wilkes enjoy the humiliation she had forced upon him. Nor did Mrs. Wilkes stop speaking. She chatted, while the other woman nodded in agreement, about how deplorable a thing it was for a boy of Eric’s years to soil his sheets at night. It was

a failure, certainly, and one which *would no longer be tolerated*. Should the offense occur again, she said, as much to her companion as to Eric, the boy would be turned over to the bigger students for a sound beating. Should it happen again, she said, that was all the boy would deserve. With that, she dismissed Eric, and he walked from the dining hall, conscious with every step of Mrs. Wilkes and the other woman staring at him as he left, talking about him as he departed.

And that night he wet his bed once more.

Next morning, rather than being turned over to the older boys for his beating, Eric was summoned to Headmaster Wilkes's office. Mr. Wilkes was a man of medium size, whose rounded shoulders and broad face made him seem larger than he really was. Even a small man, though, would tower over a boy of eight, and on the morning of Eric's punishment, Mr. Wilkes did tower over the boy, bending to stare at him from his vantage point and intoning once more the now familiar lecture. It was bad enough—unforgivable!—to wet one's bed, but to continue to do so was evidence of much more than mere incontinence. Such repetition was evidence of a rebellious and defiant nature and must be dealt with corporally: nothing less than physical punishment would do. Eric was told to prepare himself for a caning.

The cane used by the Headmaster was likely of bamboo, although Eric would remember it as having been a heavy, ivory-handled riding crop. Whatever the implement, its use was quickly made clear as Eric bent and braced himself, and Wilkes stood straight and raised the cane above his head and brought it down hard on Eric's back. The boy did not cry out; it was as though he had decided to prove by his lack of emotion that he *did* have control over himself and his body. He endured the caning stoically, drawing his breath as the cane rose, holding his breath as the cane sliced air on its downward arc to bite into his back. The punishment seemed to last forever, and Eric would later claim that in the midst of the beating the riding crop, as he remembered it, broke, its ivory handle flying across the room, angering Mr. Wilkes even further. Eric never cried and did not even come close to requesting mercy. He could take whatever the headmaster offered and would prove by his silence the character he knew he possessed.

When the punishment was at last ended, Eric assured Mr. Wilkes that he had truly learned his lesson and would no longer wet his bed. He was dismissed. Outside Headmaster Wilkes's office a group of boys waited, eager to hear the details of Eric's beating. Eric stood tall as he emerged from the office, and with a smirk of pride he told his classmates that the caning had not been all that bad—it hadn't hurt at all, really. His back was tougher than Wilkes's blows. Eric's brave proclamation was greeted with wonder by the boys but with anger by Mum Wilkes, who, unfortunately, happened to be passing by and overheard Eric's boast.

Such defiance was as evil as bed-wetting and could no more be tolerated than that other offense. She took Eric and marched him immediately back into the headmaster's office, where he was ordered to bend once more and receive instruction from the edge of a cane. This beating was even more ferocious, and during it Eric learned a lesson. What mattered, he realized, was for Wilkes to think that his message had gotten through. Eric collapsed weeping, crying out that he had learned his lesson, had seen the error of his ways. He knew now, he said, how bad a little boy he had been, and knew how hard he must work to become a good young man. His tears made their