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George Orwell: A Life in Pictures

Anarcho

January 12, 2009

This year is the centenary of George Orwell's birth. To mark this event, BBC2 showed an innovative documentary about his life and work called "*George Orwell: A Life in Pictures*." To get round the fact that there are no known recordings of Orwell's voice or film of him, the BBC recreated key aspects of his life by means of pseudo-authentic documentaries and interviews. An actor voiced Orwell's words to illustrate aspects of his ideas and life. Thus we have a 1930s style movie-news clip of him on the Aragon front explaining the way to make a great cup of tea and a particularly stiff-upper lip round table discussion between him and two pacifists (one of which was Alex Comfort) to allow Orwell's position on the Second World War to be explained.

This format was used in an attempt to explain how he came to write 1984. As Orwell himself noted, in a pseudo-interview at the start of the programme, he considered it impossible to understand why a book was written unless you knew the history of the author.

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A review of an excellent 2003 BBC programme on George Orwell.

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And the format worked remarkably well. The pseudo-films managed to get a feel of time and Orwell's opinions. It did not hide his revolutionary politics or his hatred of inequality. Nor did it pull any punches in portraying working class poverty in the 1930s and what was like being shot in the neck (as Orwell recounted in "**Homage to Catalonia**").

It even discussed the revolution in Spain. Sadly, this let the whole programme down. You simply cannot understand why Orwell wrote 1984 unless you explain the lies put out by the Communists at this time. The programme did use real archive footage of the revolution in Spain and of the CNT militia (which it implied Orwell had joined!). It did clearly state that the Communists betrayed the revolution and how they arrested anti-fascists. However, it failed to mention anarchism once, talking instead of a "workers' state" in Barcelona, "the unions" going further than anti-fascism in revolution and "the militias" being hounded by the Communists after the May Days. All nearly right, but not quite.

More importantly, however, the programme failed to discuss Communist lies and rewriting of history Orwell experiences first hand as the results of the May Days. This was as important in producing 1984 as the repression Orwell and other revolutionaries suffered at the hands of the Communists. Nor did the programme discuss the egalitarian spirit of the militias which impressed Orwell so much. While Spain gave Orwell a hatred of Stalinism, it confirmed the democratic socialism he held to the end of his life.

The programme produces should be congratulated in producing such an innovative and fine tribute to one of England's greatest writers and socialists. However, they failed to quite get it totally correct. But hopefully the programme will introduce a new generation of readers to the joy which George Orwell's writings and common decency bring.

Freedom Press has produced an excellent book called "*George Orwell: Essays and Photographs*" which contains

three anarchist essays on his politics and his relation to anarchism. If you are interested in him, this is a good place to start. And if you have not read his best work yet, namely "*Homage to Catalonia*," then go yourself a favour and do so. You will not be disappointed.