

## *Book Reviews*

**Nineteen Eighty-Four.** GEORGE ORWELL. London: Penguin, 1954. (First published by Secker & Warburg, London, 1949) 251 p.

I was fifteen when I ran across Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Subsequent student forays into *Animal Farm*, *Homage to Catalonia*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *Down and Out in Paris and London* whetted my curiosity about George Orwell as writer and journalist, partly because I sensed a pragmatic cynicism in his view of life and wondered how he had arrived at this state. Some of the answers were to be found at a later date when reading through Sonia Orwell's four-volume compilation of her husband's *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*. I learned for example that Orwell's last novel, finished in the Hebrides while he was dying of tuberculosis, was not intended to be a prophecy (as the title tempts one to believe), but rather what he called "a show-up of perversions" which he saw as endemic to communist and fascist political systems. The nightmarish scenario of his imaginary totalitarian regime, especially the omnipresent televisual eye, the dehumanisation of individuals, the distortion of language, the alteration of thought, and the seedy desolation of work, sexual encounter and environment, were skilful mechanisms for warning people in post-war Europe of attitudes and power-plays he had experienced or sensed — particularly in the Spain of 1937. Inevitably, in 1984, appraisals of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* abound as commentators rush to calculate how much of the scenario has been realized, predicted or not.

Should the archivist be professionally interested in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? Orwell makes no mention of archives *per se*, unless we think of them as his "vast repositories where the corrected documents were stored, and the hidden furnaces where the original copies were destroyed. And somewhere or other, quite anonymous, there were the directing brains who coordinated the whole effort...." No dull records clerk sells his soul to a Le Carré spy or acts as pallid guardian of secret files from which "truth" can ultimately be divined. Certainly, one could hardly expect from Orwell the fanciful eroticism of Marian Engel's designated archivist in *Bear*. It had never occurred to me that the process of continuous alteration at Orwell's Ministry of Truth could be called archival or that Winston Smith might be seen as an archivist. My memory of the work at the Records Department was that it led to lies rather than truth and therefore had no right to be seen as an archives. Yet, barely a month ago, a disciple of Marshall McLuhan wrote in the *Globe and Mail* that one of the more "arresting insights" of Orwell's novel is the rewriting of history "by an army of

archivists" whose task it is to change the statements in the media about the past to suit the changing opinions of "Big Brother." Derrick de Kerckhove went on to say that he considered "history is being revised, rethought and refelt all the time, without the benefit of civil servants pushing paper." This repetition of the popular perception of the archivist as some tedious functionary tweaked my recollection of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and, twenty-five years on, prompted another look at George Orwell's grim imaginings.

As an archivist, my initial reaction is to dismiss as futile any consideration of a society where its past was not only purposely wiped out, but re-created to support state control over personal thoughts and actions. How could anything archival exist by our (dare I say democratic) standards? The Records Department of Oceania's Ministry of Truth does not deal with permanence. Everything is changed, all the time, to suit totalitarian convenience. Winston Smith noted in his revisionist work on a newspaper article that "there had been other charges — two, three, he could not remember how many. Very likely the confessions had been rewritten and rewritten until the original facts and dates no longer had the smallest significance. The past not only changed, but changed continuously." It is not just a matter of suppressed information and secret documentary sources, as modern espionage writers like to believe. Orwell intriguingly extended that notion well beyond conventional appreciation, even for the 1940s, but in so doing he removed any basis for regarding the product of such managed information (in whatever medium) as archives. I suspect Orwell had in mind a variety of the many government information ministries that flourished during the Second World War. Propaganda activity is presumably the only reason for Oceania's combrous records regeneration process. I suppose that Orwell could be indulged this flight of fantasy as a "logical" step in his description of totalitarian baggage. By far the most attractive speculation for the reader living in a democratic society is, however, the process by which archives degenerate to propaganda. Orwell more or less presents us with a *fait accompli* on this score and we are left to wonder about the symptoms of the disease.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* most sharply reinforces the value of archives as a social memory. Relatives of sufferers from Alzheimer's Disease know how well loss of memory cells leads to confusion in the afflicted individual. Uncertain identity of self, surroundings, and purpose produces great physical stress within the individual and contagiously among companions. Increasingly, there is a disconnection from points of reference and a corresponding growth of vulnerability. In similar fashion, the breakdown or collapse of corporate and national memory could encourage the strength of scavenger and sectarian groups which seize upon weakness. Archives, judiciously enriched by caring archivists, provide for society the most permanent, the most comprehensive, and the most "truthful" point of reference possible. They are, as Arthur Doughty said, a precious gift passed from one generation to another to remind us of our linkages with each other, informing us of who we are, what we have done and when we did it — indeed, permitting us to understand *why* affairs are the way they are. Winston Smith accidentally ran across a torn newspaper photograph some ten-years old, prompting a stab of recollection and acute apprehension simply because "this was concrete evidence; it was a fragment of the abolished past, like a fossil bone which turns up in the wrong sub-stratum and destroys a geological theory. It was enough to blow the Party to atoms, if in some way it could have been published and its significance made known." Evidence, in one

form or another, is what archives are all about. Preserving it in as many forms as we are able is what archivists can most intelligently contribute to a society that hopes to escape the fears of Winston Smith.

The corollary to preservation is, of course, use. Regular recourse to archival materials by many sectors of society, by no means only university academics, is both a spur to archivists' diligence in preserving records and a reflection of society's image of itself. In Oceania, re-created records are constantly used, not by government to purvey and enforce ideology, not by individuals seeking answers to questions. To raise the past in explanation of the present or in preparation for the future is not the prerogative of the citizen — that way lies "thought-criminality" and "vaporization." As he furtively and urgently drew upon his memories, Winston Smith realised that "what was happening was only the working-out of a process that had started years ago. The first step had been a secret, involuntary thought, the second had been the opening of the diary. He had moved from thoughts to words, and now from words to actions. The last step was something that would happen in the Ministry of Love. He had accepted it. The end was in the beginning." There is little doubt that archives are being used and extensively so. We can naturally point to ill-use or poor use or just under-use, but the plain fact is that there are many more archives than there were a decade ago and most of them are in daily activity. Their holdings are amazingly diverse and constitute a more or less bottomless pit. Some archives go out of their way to summon the user, to demonstrate just how variously their records can be stretched. This very variety, this almost impossible drawing together of infinite strands, ensures an accountability of government to governed. Questions cannot be forbidden and facts suppressed in a community where constant, vigorous referral is made to what has gone before. The implications for archival acquisition are profound. The opportunities for use are myriad. Perhaps it is trite to state such obvious matters, but I have to admit that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* forces no less in its abandonment of the freedoms we take virtually for granted. Indeed, a reading of the novel encourages some sober reflection on the validity of those reasons proffered by governments for the exclusion of certain information from open consultation by any citizen. Witness an official government response to a recent news service accusation of "doctoring of documents" gained through two access-to-information requests for official departmental records on the reduction of lead additives in gasoline: "Deletion is justified if release of information could be injurious to the decision-making process." We are provoked by Orwell's fictional reversal to ask ourselves as archivists to what degree we can abide by and administer secrecy or obscurity in the interests of protecting our employers.

These musings legitimately direct attention to the archivist's role in society. Defining our role always causes collegial agonies, but the need to be clear about what one is doing as an archivist looms large in the context of Oceanic scenarios. Somehow, in our processes and habits, we have to make plain the humanist purpose of our job — to provide the wherewithal in recorded information from public or private provenance to support individuality and to deflate what George Woodcock, a late friend of Orwell's, has aptly termed "the pretensions of state." If this gives to the archivist's mien a decidedly political tinge, I am tempted to line up behind the "activist" archivist identified by American colleagues. The alternative of passive civil servant or flaccid corporate apologist, both common public images though generally distorted by exceptions, leads too smoothly to entrapment. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

ought to stiffen archivists' professional resolve to rise above the clerically mundane and persist with a steady revelation of mankind to itself through unfolding the resources in their care. This may entail battle and endurance, but the Ministry of Truth convinces me that constant vigilance is indeed the price of liberty, especially for the archivist who must assume the rare and fairly lonely task of public vigilante.

The flip side of freedom to open, to expose, to probe, and to question is inevitably the archivist's most constant dilemma. As recent privacy laws suggest, there is a point in records keeping for public information where the individual is eminently vulnerable and where the state, already stuffed with personal data, can exercise a devious power. "Big Brother" and O'Brien may have devoured Winston Smith through the all-seeing eye of television, but archivists know well enough today that no visual record of our movements is really necessary, only a comprehensive record of our lives — coded and tabulated in machine-readable data "banks." If Canadians had overlooked this melancholy fact, they were swiftly reminded of it in the first month of 1984 by a Revenue Canada film (unaccountably produced by the usually humane National Film Board) which announced in computer logic that the taxpayer could not escape. What indeed *is* personal privacy when it comes to records and archivists? To what extent can the archivist protect the individual at the expense of society? The answer is impossible but always worth pursuing, like Keats' immortal shepherdess forever tempting and unattainable.

O'Brien's caged rats clamouring within millimetres of Winston Smith's eyes were my most vivid recollection of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The real scare of course is the terrible destruction of mental processes wrought by "doublethink" and "Newspeak." Orwell's ingenious design for Oceanic man, a single system of thought governed by its own tortured etymology, enabled even Smith ultimately to believe that black was white ("blackwhite"), to know it to be so, and "to forget that one has ever believed the contrary." Much of the novel's core is to be found in the book-within-a-book device adopted by Orwell as Emmanuel Goldstein's *Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*. In a preamble of sorts to his development of the "doublethink" system, Orwell had the fictitious Goldstein write:

Past events, it is argued, have no objective existence, but survive only in written records and in human memories. The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon.... It will be seen that the control of the past depends above all on the training of memory. To make sure that all written records agree with the orthodoxy of the moment is merely a mechanical act. But it is also necessary to remember that events happened in the desired manner. And if it is necessary to rearrange one's memories or to tamper with written records, then it is necessary to forget that one had done so. The trick of doing this can be learned like any other mental technique.... In Oldspeak it is called, quite frankly, 'reality control'. In Newspeak it is called doublethink....

It's probably unwise to make too many connections between Oceania and the present, but the notion that records (concrete, factual, evidential) can be intrinsically affected and changed by memory (fleeting, impressionistic, informational) is interesting to archivists. We have accepted today a much broader umbrella for the term "record" than was current in Orwell's day, especially in Canada where we talk and practise "total" archives. While few of us would dispute the evidential base of

our work, it is equally true that much of the media which we today hold as archival could not, as it were, be taken into court. It struck me that, since archives are held up as reflecting mirrors, something of the fluidity between records and memory (as described by Orwell) could be insidiously creeping into archives in our society. To what extent, for example, can films, photographs, paintings, posters, sound recordings — all so susceptible to manipulation and deceit — pose a threat to the integrity (as we understand it) of the collective record over time? Do the memories fed into oral history tapes eventually insinuate themselves into total archives to such a degree that they threaten the hitherto “proven” facts? Are archives, reaching to be kaleidoscopic, in danger of severing their roots and dissolving into an enormous cauldron of informational resources? How can, or should, archives escape the hallucinatory un-reality of hot video — where nothing is still, stable, or credible? Wrote Orwell: “And so it was with every class of recorded fact, great or small. Everything faded away into a shadow world in which, finally, even the date of the year had become uncertain.”

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* nourishes such feverish meanderings. The archivist does well to drop some of them into his own “memory hole” after due mulling over.

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**The Rosenberg File: A Search For the Truth.** RONALD RADOSH and JOYCE MILTON. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983. xv, 608 p. ISBN 0-03-049036-7 \$29.95.

During the early years of the Cold War there was no event which roused such violent emotions and left such lasting scars as the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for atomic espionage in 1953. The image of the Soviet agents handing over to the USSR the terrible power of the atomic bomb galvanized feelings of rage and impotence on the part of American Cold Warriors. The image of the working-class Jewish couple sent to their deaths leaving their two little children orphaned raised a vast anti-American wave in Europe. In the United States, the Rosenberg case has taken on the resonance of the Dreyfus affair; an entire generation defined its politics by its attitude to the Rosenbergs. For the Right they were traitors who deserved to die; for the Left they were innocent martyrs framed by a vindictive and corrupt legal system.

When the American Freedom of Information Act came into force there were those who believed that the truth would finally be revealed. Pro-Rosenberg partisans, including their sons, one of whom has written extensively on the affair, were confident that if all the documents were released, the entire case would be revealed as a frameup. Cold Warriors spoke with equal confidence of damning evidence, withheld at the time due to national security considerations, which would definitively demonstrate the Rosenbergs' guilt. Walter and Miriam Schneir updated their *Invitation to an Inquest* unshaken in their belief that the entire spy-ring story was a gigantic fraud. Into this minefield stepped Radosh and Milton, who subtitled their study *A Search for the Truth*. Based on extensive documentation just released as well as interviews, Radosh and Milton claim their study is non-partisan. Their