

George Orwell writing "Nineteen Eighty-Four" on the island of Jura

"My new book is a Utopia in the form of a novel. I ballsed it up rather, partly owing to being so ill while I was writing it, but I think some of the ideas in it might interest you."

George Orwell to Julian Symons, 4 February 1949

There is something unpalatable and Citizen-Kane-ish about the first major building you see after landing by ferry on Jura in the Inner Hebrides. Black wrought-iron gates, the height and width of those at Versailles, stand in front of Jura House. A media-shy child retiree hedge fund manager has bought up the most traditional estate here and turned it into a golf course with hotel.

Money has always abounded on an island still owned in part by the Astors. Thirty years ago rave music pioneers KLF burnt a million pounds at a boathouse on the shoreline just beyond these gates. The money, in the form of £50 notes, was dropped into the flames from a suitcase under scrutiny that included video recording. All indications are that every one of the notes was indeed cash. Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty had musical pedigree but also a performative artist streak, having fired blanks from a machinegun during the Brit Awards. A wicker man had been set alight earlier in the evening here while party-goers cavorted in druid outfits on ground that has been home to real druids. Anything elsewhere on Jura has surely been tame? Well maybe not? George Orwell had already written the novel of the century at the head of the island.

This is a stretch of featherbed bog shaped like a teardrop sitting between the Sound of Jura and the Atlantic. It's 26 miles in length and home to 200 people who coexist with 6,000 deer. Unsurprisingly, the best way to move around is by boat, a fact soon absorbed by our man. Orwell had a hard-to-control RAF dinghy and from the summer of 1947, a wooden dinghy. He had an outboard motor (I think used on both vessels) that gave him problems with magneto and starting plug. In 1947 he nearly drowned himself and three others in Scotland's maelstrom, the Corryvreckan Whirlpool, when he misread his own tide timetable.

So why was he here? Orwell first visited Jura in the summer of 1944 having been

invited to stay on the Astors' Tarbert estate. The suggestion had come from David Astor, editor of *The Observer*. Orwell subsequently spent time at a fisherman's cottage and visited Barnhill farmhouse, deciding to rent it for much of 1946. He made the decision partly through fear of nuclear war as he tells crime novelist Julian Symons: "If the show does start and is as bad as one fears, it would be fairly easy to be self-supporting on these islands provided one wasn't looted." Astor was horrified by this proposed long tenancy and neighbours were surprised when Orwell arrived with only a kettle, saucepan and typewriter.

Other reasons for being here? The thinking that the Gulf Stream makes for a warmer climate in the Hebrides is sound and Orwell had thought this through. By now he must have known that his health was compromised and the right environment might help. Ever commonsensical, he would have consulted reference books. It's nonsense to suggest that he had a death wish or was self-martyrising. Being 23 miles on an atrocious road-cum-track from the island's only doctor (elderly and unlikely to make a trek) was of course unwise. Being cut off from literati – although there was a flow of visitors – offered a chance to focus on finishing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Orwell's pushy shabby-genteel mother, Ida, had secured a place for her son on reduced fees (as potential open scholarship material) at St Cyprian's, a fashionable high-performing prep school in my home town of Eastbourne where many of the boys were junior lairds, the sons of Scottish aristocrats who would holiday on the islands and mainland. Christopher Hitchens thought that by coming here, Orwell may have been making up for experiences he didn't have as a child. By now, royalties had started coming in from *Animal Farm* (at least £0.5m at today's prices), money that Orwell called "fairy gold" during the final months as an ironic comment on his limited scope for spending it.

Passengers on foot or bike can take a catamaran direct to Jura from Tayvallich near Loch Sween. If you have a car or truck, the crossing is from Kennacraig to the adjacent island of Islay and then a ten-minute hop on a small council-run ferry for which there is no timetable. It's organized on a common sense basis so don't be surprised if you are bumped off by an agricultural vehicle. They will come back for you. There is only one road, the A846, though the 'A' disguises the fact that it's single-lane with passing points. Vehicles perform minuets (etiquette is generally good) to use these. Edge too far off the road during a manoeuvre and you are likely to find yourself axel-deep in the peat bog that gives the single malt here its flavour. The road takes the shape of a fishhook before being closed to regular traffic just short of Barnhill in the north. There is no road on the western (uninhabited) Atlantic side.

The Jura Hotel in Craighouse, the sole significant settlement here, has half-timbering that smacks of mock Tudor. Soft furnishings are picked out in a light tartan that I

can't identify but isn't that of Jura families such as the Fletchers or Campbells. A previous owner and significant estate holder, Tony Riley-Smith, hoped for increased visitors (numbers are usually healthy) in the year 1984. He bought a Land Rover for the hotel and expected to ferry Orwell enthusiasts to Barnhill. To his surprise, despite a profusion of journalists, interest from tourists proved negligible. Sales of the book worldwide surged of course.

The adjoining whisky distillery is predominantly white, boasts a single tubular chimney and has a functional Le Corbusier feel. The building is hard by the fishing harbour which in Orwell's day would have been the dock for the "steamer" or mailboat. Everything is in gleaming whitewash that sets off the palette in front of me. This ranges from dolly- mixture-pink buoys to water the colour of a Slush Puppie which is being swirled into eddies towards Cairn Pier. You could be forgiven for thinking that this scene has strayed here from a theatre or opera set.

The distillery site includes a lodge where Will Self stayed for a month as the island's official writer in residence at the invitation of the Scottish Book Trust. Single malt might have been tame for Self; he was famously turned over by a fellow journalist who reported him for taking heroin while following John Major on the campaign jet during the 1997 election. I've resorted to a cheap jibe. Self is a hiker who is fond of the last stretch of the South Downs Way which comes within yards of the St Cyprian's site in Eastbourne, and his courtesy to walking companions extends to packing a second set of waterproofs for them in case they are ill-prepared. I should be lucky to have him with me here and he would be interesting company as he is an Orwell sceptic. He has done much close reading and admires the novels but takes issue with Orwell's views on plain writing, believing that adherence to the rules would set English prose in aspic.

I don't think Orwell was much of a whisky drinker (he and his sister had nightly tots of rum or brandy) at Barnhill though I believe I once saw a letter – I can't track it down – in which he asked for whisky to be sent from the mainland. Childhood companion Jacintha Buddicom recalled that as an adolescent he made a whisky still that prompted an enraged servant to hand in her notice. Even if he didn't drink the stuff, he would have wanted a supply for local passersby and his own visitors. This isn't coals to Newcastle as the distillery (founded in 1810) closed down in 1901 and would not reopen until the 1960s. It now produces 2.3 million litres a year and visitors can take a 40-minute tour. Orwell did drink whisky occasionally and as a young man he got tanked on it in the hope of being locked up for the night during one of his social experiments for Down and Out in Paris and London. I should have liked to have shared a cell with him drunk or sober.

The first hamlet north out of Craighouse is Knockrome whose wonderfully named Lowlandman's Bay curls round on itself so that it's almost enclosed. There are a

surprising number of palm trees here, and the tropical feel is reinforced by red hot poker plants, also known as torch lilies. They taper from Kodak yellow to rock candy red, could almost be imagined as a torture instrument and seem to ooze heat. I make for a red telephone box surrounded by harebell and helleborine that serves as a library for the island. Even at a distance, the books reveal themselves to be mostly pulp fiction. Will there be anything by Orwell, about him, or of possible interest to his shade?

A "BBC Active Talk" Spanish course complete with cassette tapes (would anybody be able to play them now?) is the first thing I pick up. In *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell belittles his ability with the language, saying that he would stitch together pidgin sentences from a Hugo's dictionary when asking his sergeant to demonstrate use of a machine gun. My bet is that he was proficient and would also have fared well with Catalan which is even closer to French and Latin. The books are not just low-brow, they are largely junk as though there has been some genteel fly-tipping. The best of them include Andrew Marr's *The Making of Modern Britain* which has an index. I read Marr's summation: "Orwell was a strange fish, but he was right about the big things, and his assertion that the workers of Britain were more likely to carry on dreaming of horses coming in at twenty to one, and moan over their tea, than revolt was proved spot on." This sounds like the pastimes provided for the proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Focused on our man, my teetotal companion Wensleydale ("Wens" from now on) drives the Merc straight past the barn-like structures that make up the Lussa Gin distillery at Ardlussa. Why is gin so sexy these days? I'm a reformed alcoholic, with gin having done much of the damage. All true alcoholics will tell you that once addiction kicks in, anything from Dom Pérignon to White Lightning cider is simply fuel. The Lussa Gin website details many awards, so you have to reckon that the products are better than the woeful Victory Gin that Winston swills (often to relieve pain) in the novel. It's news from the settlement here that makes for the most unpleasant and revealing entry in Orwell's diaries. "June 12, 1947. Five rats (2 young ones, 2 enormous) caught in the byre during about the last fortnight ... I hear that recently two children at Ardlussa were bitten by rats (in the face, as usual.)"

The route gives us a view of Ardlussa House, a baronial-style stalking lodge owned by the Fletcher family who were Orwell's landlords. The terrain has opened up a little now into broad sweeps with russet tones. As a resident of the lodge, you can stalk deer and fish the Lussa river. You don't get to keep the venison which is sent to London restaurants, but you can keep the head. Another time perhaps; it would be a tough item to bring through Gatwick with my EasyJet hand luggage. I think this and the Jura Hotel are the only hotels on the island unless you are playing golf at Ardfin.

It's a mandatory four-mile walk each way to Barnhill, the previously abandoned

farmhouse that Orwell rented in 1946 from Margaret Fletcher. She was the husband of Robin Fletcher who had been a housemaster and classics teacher at Eton in the 1930s. The BBC had the sense to do an "Arena" series on Orwell sufficiently early (1983) to record first-hand recollections, and the programmes are on YouTube. Margaret speaks to camera about the writer's gaunt appearance and what she took to be sadness at being a recent widower. Robin Fletcher spent the war as a prisoner of the Japanese in Burma, mastered his captors' language within six weeks, and showed courage both on the railway and at Changi Prison. Burma and Eton links must have made for conversation between the men.

The walk starts from a parking space at the remains of a quarry just beyond Lealt next to a slope of rock debris. "End of road – please leave all vehicles here" reads the information board. Richard Rees quoted a letter from his friend: "It's quite an easy journey really, except that you have to walk the last eight miles." Yet another Etonian – though three years older which would have prevented meaningful contact – Rees edited *The Adelphi* magazine. He had encouraged the struggling Orwell and published his pieces. The sign (the drawings are wonderful) also promises short-eared owls which are by no means purely nocturnal so I'm hopeful.

The spot where the track declines must have changed since the Forties or perhaps Orwell is detailing the distance after a car ride to his landlords at Ardlussa? The track has not ended and continues at the same width and state of disrepair but there is now a succession of padlocked chains with ditches on either side. Only people with legitimate business at Barnhill or travelling to the settlement of Kinuachdrachd can go any further in a vehicle.

Much suspense now and I can feel a history of reading Orwell stir inside me. Stamina is not a problem; any moderately fit person will do this without discomfort. But it's a trek and you will feel, as the writer said of himself after shifting two tons of earth in his garden one afternoon, that you "have earned your tea". My ankles are feeble and I'm afraid of turning them on the stones which sometimes behave like scree. Effort is concentration rather than cardio-vascular. You could do this walk wearing trainers in summer though hiking boots help. I wonder what footwear Orwell used here – there had been trouble finding size 12 boots while he was fighting in Spain. The British Army may have shod him for a stint as a war correspondent early in 1945 during which he reported from bombed-out cities on the continent for *The Observer* and *The Manchester Guardian*.

Jackie in the shop at Craighouse (the same site that Orwell used) has sold me a booklet, an OS map, and some tame postcards. They are bland library shots; there is no sign of the crude innuendo-stuffed McGill postcards about which Orwell wrote a piece for *Horizon*. Having a few here might please him. He didn't like them much

and was sniffy in his essay but they had caught his interest since boyhood. There is 4G across much of Jura but the OS map consistently gets us out of trouble in coming days.

In Orwell's time, the boat from the mainland came to Craighouse. Jackie tells me that the author would ride down from Barnhill to the settlement on his motorbike. The bike, a 499cc Rudge-Whitworth Multigear, would have been at least 25 years old when he acquired it, and with wire wheels must have been a dog to handle. At 6ft 3in, he could only have ridden it with knees near the handlebars as if on one of the Seventies kids' bikes a Raleigh Chopper. Islanders reported that the engine frequently let him down, and he would sit in his oilskins tinkering. He usually had a scythe tied to his back so that he could slash at tussocks in the middle of the rutted track. There have been modest improvements since his day; the route is two paths of pebbles with boot-high rushes in the middle and lady's bedstraw on the edges. Punctures must have been unavoidable. In September 1946 (so still summer) he describes the track as "a morass".

Over the three years there was an assortment of transport including a strong-willed Highland pony called Bob, a bicycle, and a tank-like Austin car. A ten-horse-power Ford truck he had bought from Spanish Civil War comrade Georges Kopp seized up just after the ferry crossing. It lay abandoned on the Craighouse quay, and in an era when recycling and landfill were unheard of, could still be seen – if without anything removable – as late as 1976. Money injected into the farm by Rees was spent on another lorry that proved dilapidated from the beginning according to Orwell's sister, Avril. I fancy that interest in lorries would have been all about wheel clearance over this wretched road rather than size, especially with fuel being rationed in the post-war years. Rees managed to contribute to life on Jura without distracting his friend from the task of writing and was a frequent visitor. He is surely the inspiration for the magazine editor Ravelston in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.

The other regular visitor was the trench coat-wearing, broadsheet-hawking, stuttering, blinking Anglo-Canadian writer Paul Potts. A Walt Whitman-like figure, he was a prose poet on the fringes of Soho and the neo-Romantics. Much of his best work was inspired by Blake. One of those people who seem primed for hurt, his whole life turned on an unrequited love. Devolving into a drunk, he was eventually banned from central London pubs. But he was clubbable at Barnhill and Orwell was devoted to him. The friendship even survived an incident in which, having been asked to find firewood, Potts cut down the only nut-bearing tree on the farm. With the possible exception of a nurse, Potts would be the last person to see Orwell alive at University College Hospital in January 1950. He had come with a votive offering of a box of tea (probably the favoured Typhoo) but seeing that his friend was sleeping he simply left it at the door.

For a while the terrain becomes bland, like an undistinguished links golf course. This is hardly the repeating theme of the "Golden Country" sought by Winston and Julia in Nineteen Eighty-Four or by Orwell at his childhood home of Shiplake in Oxfordshire. What it most certainly is not is "the finest scenery in Europe", a description by Potts. The road has been carved out of peatbog which explains the absence of grazing animals or arable farming. Only in areas where the soil has more minerals is there any chance of agriculture. Orwell did okay with the land and once reported that his strawberries were "superlatively good". But it was not success across the board: "The things that always seem to fail here are anything from the onion family."

The diary tells us that Orwell's one cow became bogged and had to be hand-fed gruel while she regained strength to stand. Later, I will see muscular quizzical-looking cows right down on the sand at coves towards Craighouse, but they are not the Highland breed with horns and shaggy coat. Deer join them there as if this were Blackpool beach. The deer are curious and unselfconscious. Seen in profile, the hinds have a cartoon quality. By contrast, the cattle preen themselves a little.

Orwell observed farming practice closely and was intrigued to watch corn (oats) being sown "broadcast" i.e. randomly rather than in rows. But agriculture is limited. Fishing is the main industry here followed perhaps by tourism. There will be marketing and sales people at the distillery, but my understanding is that whisky production is labour-unintensive.

A succession of birch woods and aquamarine bays to the right raises my mood. Sea thrift, the colour of parma violet sweets, is growing on rocks down to the waterline. After a kink in the path, the ground falls away revealing an expanse of irises and bluebells. It's as if someone has pulled back a curtain. Laid out below is a whitewashed farmhouse with dormer windows against an upland of bracken and a spinney of pines. The four-mile channel that is the Sound of Jura sits to the east. Panning around, I note the mainland looming up in ridges across Knapdale. Seen from this height, the colours are preternatural and have a Hornby or Dinky Toy quality.

A stretch of grass in front of the building (a rye-grass field in Orwell's day) has just been mown in circular patterns with the cuttings left to bed in. The wind is in the west and the grass is being blown seaward. Orwell's entry for 27 August 1946 tells us that he can see the Skervuile Lighthouse reflected in front of the meadow. Not today, but with field glasses I can make out the islet of Eilean na h-Eairne. During his tenancy there would have been foxgloves and primroses at the porch, a vegetable garden and two fields for arable crops.

Orwell wrote primarily in the top-left of the four bedrooms which gave him a view of

woodland and the bay. In the final summer when there were many visitors (and needing all the fresh air he could get) he slept on the grass in a tent. During the bitterest months there were spells in London, but he never shirked the harsh conditions here. It was always an escape where he could concentrate. Fug created by his shag tobacco roll-ups and fumes from a paraffin-stove must have warded off would-be interrupters in the household as he thumped away on a portable Remington. Nineteen Eighty-Four may have been sketched out quite well, certainly in his head, before he got here. The huge effort, one that had an effect on his health, was the graft of typing. Frustrated at not being able to persuade a stenographer-typist to visit the island, he bashed out a fair copy of the novel himself at 4,000 words a day. And with two carbon papers between the rollers, he really would have been pounding the machine. Often, he was propped up in bed and coughing blood. Annotations could be made with one of the new-fangled Biro pens (only just available in Britain) sent by Symons.

A video cameraman is staking out an upper field of machair flowers and thistles. Something about him (and not just the gargantuan tripod) says two things. The work being done now is exploratory but whoever he is, this technician is first-rate. At the front of the house there is another camera on a clothes horse-type device which the technician is tripping remotely or perhaps it is tripping itself on movement when a large animal passes?

Wens and I have encroached ten yards or so onto private property and should not have done so. There must be a stream of enthusiasts of all stripes and standards of behaviour here every day, and we have no invitation. I've prepared thoroughly for this trip, but my general Orwell knowledge is modest. It's on us now. Saying I'm from Eastbourne is not a trump card; Orwell hated his prep school there. The owner, Fiona Fletcher, is mistaken in thinking that we have driven, and she points to a mystery 4x4. We are on the receiving end of a lot of hand-wagging until she realizes from our backpacks and demeanour that the car is not ours. Fiona climbs down, warms to us and is charming.

I empathize with Fiona when she admits to deflation after realizing that the diaries are so quotidian – often details of kerosene consumption, a running laying total from his Rhode Island Reds, lobsters caught, letters to seed merchants, and the epic battle with slugs which had followed him from the stores cottage in Wallington. However prosaic (although there are snatches of humour and lyricism) the diary-writing is perhaps significant in that Winston's first act of rebellion against Big Brother is ... starting a diary.

The scoping-out video work in the field above is on behalf of Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck who only this June had his documentary about Ernest Cole, a South African photographer who exposed apartheid, premiere at Cannes. It will be released

in France this December. Peck is now creating a documentary about Orwell. Fiona's view is: "When people of this calibre approach you, you don't refuse them."

Looking east from the bay I think of some moments of high comedy here. In December 1947, a Christmas goose escaped and was spotted swimming near the head of the island. It was followed in the rubber dinghy, shot and eaten none the less. The diary does not report whether the gooseflesh was compromised by seawater and Orwell would not have known about this directly. He had left for a tuberculosis clinic near Glasgow on Christmas Eve.

With the objective achieved, we can take in more things on the way back to Craighouse. It might be a phenomenon only in Sussex, but I've been brought up to expect gorse to smell of coconut. Not so here though it may not be in full flower. Occasional scarecrows throughout the island appear to have been designed by the same person. They all have their right arm held aloft as if appealing for offside. From behind a substantial outhouse, we hear gravelly whistled phrases of birdsong. Wens holds up his iPhone using an App to identify this, and the answer comes back. It's a stonechat. The clue is in the name I suppose.

I wonder what Orwell, who could have written an Audubon-style book about species in Europe, would have thought of such a low-brow approach. Chaffinches were his bugbear, destroying his parsnips. He built devices to ward them off, but the birds tumbled to these within 48 hours. The observations about birds (as with the more serious writing) are full of notes and questions. "Cuckoos all over the place. Query whether they really change their note in June or merely become more irritating as they cease to be a novelty." Later in this year [1947] he describes watching an eagle being forced to the ground by crows.

Back at Craighouse I scour the hotel for Orwellana which may not be a noun. It should be remembered that not everybody who visits is a diehard fan and Barnhill is a considerable trek. Clueless as to what an aspidistra looks like, I Google it and examine the many pot plants around the lounge but draw a blank. Behind me is a framed illustration of Orwell wearing clothes in Michael Portillo pastel shades. He looks far too gregarious and comfortable in his own skin. The writer was one of those men on whom even classic clothes never hang well, his frame being too rangy. And he sports a bunch of daisies in his buttonhole which is unlikely. Inevitably, there is a tab on the go. The typewriter at which he is pecking is an Olivetti that is at least a decade too modern. Much is wrong but I'm glad he looks so jaunty even rakish.

The reactionary in me is taken aback when a non-resident marches to the bar and asks, with emphasis, what vegan sandwiches are available. Orwell had no truck with vegetarians, fruit-juice drinkers, sandal-wearers, health food shops, and natural medicine quacks. The idea of veganism would have been unfamiliar to him though

the word was coined in 1944. I believe I can ventriloquize him here. One of the reasons for being on Jura in the post-war era of rationing – he makes it clear in several letters including the one to Symons above – was the quantity of fish, rabbit (and occasionally venison) he could consume in addition to what was available at Craighouse in exchange for his coupons. By way of example, an August 1946 diary entry casually mentions that his dinghy contains no fewer than six dozen lobsters.

A little later, the youthful vegan orders a pint of bitter – and a five-percent Scottish bitter at that! It's served in a straight glass of which Orwell would disapprove. He argues for glasses with handles when imagining his ideal pub in a whimsical late essay "The Moon Under Water" for The Evening Standard. My hackles come down and I realize that (a good advert for his food regime) this is the cyclist who breezed past me earlier on the track to Barnhill. Wens, who could tempt a Tao contemplative into unburdening himself, engages the man in conversation. He is Spanish, lives in the US and is here with his brother who is a carnivore. They both work in Silicon Valley and are not on Jura for Orwell which is almost refreshing.

At dinner I sit next to two Swiss men who have come over from the adjacent island of Islay which has nine distilleries. I make few claims in terms of knowledge or insight but feel I can intuit when other people understand their subject. These guys are stellar whisky buffs. They take double measures of Jura after their meal and murmur "Too peaty!" It's a predictable verdict perhaps; even the water in the noisy, always hurrying streams here is of a tobacco colour due to the peat. It should be said that while there is only one distillery, it produces 14 variants so this snap judgement is perhaps unsafe.

A major unOrwellian mistake by Wens and me is to refuse the sticky toffee pudding which is going down well at other tables. Later I learn that Orwell, like his father, was fond of steamed puddings and would make appreciative noises while eating them. I wonder if he ever got to prepare a dish that he discusses in an early diary entry – rabbit stewed with pickled onions. He is welcome to that, just as he is welcome to stag's liver (he was gifted one) and seaweed cooked in milk to make a blancmange. There was a perversity in his attitude to food. His wife Eileen enjoyed telling the story of how she once went out leaving a shepherd's pie in the oven for him and eels in a dish on the floor for the cat. Orwell ate the eels.

The highlight of the evening is observing Wens chatting up an improbably younger woman in the hotel lounge with great chivalry. She is gamine, from Brittany, and has a Mia Farrow-ish air complete with cloche hat. Outward fragility is belied by the fact that she is doing many of the islands and will head to Skye tomorrow. Capable of wild camping when necessary, she spent the previous night in a bothy at Glengarrisdale Bay on the northwest of the island where she would have had a view of Mull. Here is Orwell's diary entry for 7 June 1946: "Fine all day. Walked to

Glengarrisdale & back. Exactly three hours each way ... Old human skull, with some other bones, lying on the beach ... Said to be survivor from massacre of the McCleans (sic) by the Campbells. Two teeth (black) still in it. Quite un-decayed." The skull has not been seen for decades (it may have washed away from its position on the high-tide mark) but if it were to reappear, I doubt it would faze this intrepid Breton.

The chat-up routine is of interest, even instructive, and I eavesdrop while skimming Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* which I've borrowed overnight from the phone box library. I wonder what Truss would make of Orwell's pride in not having used a single semi-colon (he considered it an unnecessary stop) in his 1939 novel *Coming Up For Air*. There were no copies of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* at the library but there is an edition here, perhaps the most widely printed, a Penguin featuring a painting by Vorticist William Roberts on the cover. The maps that people are consulting in the picture are of the Home Counties, and it's worth remembering that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is set in London. The novel uses many real place names, notably the locations of Winston's walks and his outdoor trysts with Julia for which she is logistics manager.

On the journey home, I read Sandra Newman's recent novel *Julia* which is *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from Julia's perspective. It's metafiction of the highest order and enriches the original. After a stuttering start, even the sex is good for Julia. Despite his missing teeth and varicose vein, Winston looks "piratical", turns her on and can "ring her like a bell". The nightmare canteen is memorable, with a menu that includes soup that is "a bean-based swill with a pronounced odour of dog". I hope that in a parallel universe, Orwell has read the novel and even reviewed it (this was a staple part of his journalism) either using his own voice or in the style of the hack writer he mocks gently in "Confessions of a Book Reviewer".

In the same parallel universe, I hope he watched a 1954 television adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* starring Peter Cushing as Winston. The programme caused outrage and even prompted questions in Parliament. George Orwell, a shipping clerk in south-west London, received so many abusive telephone calls that his wife demanded their phone be disconnected until such time as their name could be removed from the directory.

Only photography could draw Wens away from his new friend and he walks out to the harbour with a camera. There is currently Northern Lights (aurora borealis) mania across the UK on account of geomagnetic storms and good potential for pictures. Orwell saw the lights here in August 1947 and managed to be both pithy and lyrical. "Last night saw the northern lights for the first time. Long streaks of white stuff, like cloud, forming an arc in the sky, & every now & then an extraordinary flickering passage over them, as though a searchlight were playing on

them.”

Banks of gunmetal rainclouds surround Craighouse the next morning but the skies soon clear over the Island of Goats lighthouse. There is no agenda, and our walk takes us to Tarbert Bay whose burial ground dates back to the druids. The early-medieval chapel of St Columba is just a recess in the grassland, a segment of lichen-encrusted wall the colour of old mustard, and a standing stone with Latin crosses. Didn't Kenneth Clark say in *Civilisation* that St Columba's followers used to preach to seals on the shore at Iona? The interesting stuff is obviously underground, and Historic Environment Scotland should bring archaeologists to Tarbert pronto. The protectiveness of deer (all hinds and juveniles) towards this site as they race up from the direction of Keils could make you believe they are reincarnated druidical priests. Guidebooks claim there are several standing stones ("menhirs" in the Breton language) here and we look for a noted one standing eight feet tall but can find no trace. A Google image search subsequently shows it standing out like a prick in Speedos on terrain that we surely covered so I'm at a loss.

In his diary for July 1946, Orwell records making a handle for a sledge hammer out of mountain ash. I should not have wanted to stand near him when he was using it. By contrast with fellow allegorist Arthur Miller (in *The Crucible* at least) who could fashion anything out of wood, Orwell struggled with such tasks. He moans throughout the diaries that he can never find a piece of straight decent timber for his carpentry which ranged from boat repairs to making toys for Richard. For cruder things there was driftwood which included pitprops that he immediately recognized from his time down mines for *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

Other projects included creating bedroom slippers out of rabbit pelts and casting a bathroom plug in lead. Orwell was always keen to work with his hands and never shy of admitting to failures. Friends reported that the shelves of the bookcases he made curved like a hammock. He shot rabbits with a fair level of success using a service revolver that had a heavier pull than he would have liked. He did not spend every waking hour with a loaded Luger nearby for fear of assassination by a Communist hitman as is sometimes claimed. In a letter to the translator and dramatist Michael Meyer, he admits that he does not have a firearms license but notes there is no policeman on the island!

A bird of prey (there are golden eagles and sea eagles here) with a curiously unsteady flight is overhead and carrying something string-like. Wens says that it could be anything from an adder to a hiker's bootlace. Orwell reports seeing a buzzard carrying a rat, perhaps inwardly congratulating the buzzard. He tells us about birds minutely right down to speed of wing-flapping. This can even be analyzing sound only; on a still day he says he is able to hear a cormorant rising from the sea. That at a distance of 400 yards. He teaches us to use all our senses.

The wry observations extend to every manner of wildlife, and he chuckles at a tortoiseshell so-called wildcat that he sees "stalking in a very amateurish way". He is even able to distinguish between different types of hare when I can just about tell a hare from a rabbit. He notes that lobsters are left or right-handed – the extra claw can occur on either side.

Orwell's main fear for the welfare of Richard was a snakebite. A diary entry for June 1946 when the boy would have just turned two, has his father encountering an 18-inch long snake (probably an adder) with a zigzag marking. Confident he had killed it after cutting it in half, Orwell picked up what he believed to be the tail end and was surprised when he was almost bitten. One of the delights of the diaries and letters for this period is the pleasure taken from Richard's development, robust good health, usefulness around the farm and proficiency with a miniature fishing rod. Richard Blair now owns a property on the mainland more or less opposite Jura and occasionally comes over under power of sail. He attends events associated with his father.

A grey seal is flopped on a rock far out in Tarbert Bay. He is not doing much, certainly not singing since he is on his own, and not much of him is visible. Orwell describes seeing one up-close "with nose almost perpendicular, like a periscope". Later he would remark on the animal's inquisitiveness. Wens has now produced a lens the size and shape of a mortar, but the seal peers at us and makes off in a series of arcs towards Lagg Bay. Photography seems not to have interested our man, but his mother was keen and did her own printing which would have involved considerable effort and skill early in the century. Orwell's sister once spotted a creature from the whale group and Richard Rees saw a shark when crossing from the mainland. Disappointed, Wens settles for photographing cormorants.

There is time to linger at Ardlussa Bay. Orwell and Richard fished for trout on the Lussa here just a mile or so inland. I wonder if the water is fresh or brackish. I think that I'm watching another seal a fair distance from the shore but there are giveaways in the form of a V-shaped wake and a generally more purposeful manner. This is fleeting contact with a sea otter who soon dives in the direction of Tramaig Bay. That is as close as it's going to get. I should have loved to watch otters hold hands which they do when open ocean becomes choppy. Orwell is good on otters of course, noting that in addition to their standard diet of fish, they also catch lobsters. And otters can overpower larger lobsters than a fisherman would normally catch in a wicker basket. Great as the experience is, part of me feels guilty at seeing this creature since there are people in the hotel who are specifically here for sea otters, spend all their time at coves known to be favoured by them, and yet still draw a blank. That glimpse is something I shall treasure from these extraordinary few days.

I would give a lot for Orwell's knowledge of wildlife and plants. Scouring the diaries

both before and after the trip, I find that the descriptions of nature (particularly on the shore) help with things I've been trying to identify and have noted down. Orwell is better than any App. This is the closest I'm going to get to conversations with him, and those moments of fleeting connection are intense. There are some idols you acquire too early who later turn into walking parodies of themselves. Not so here. This subtle, charming, complicated man prompts people to trudge up that woeful track every day. Nobody in the twentieth century came closer to understanding and interrogating his own prejudices which is perhaps why Christopher Hitchens entitled his critique *Why Orwell Matters*. I'm proud to have clambered up the same path on which Orwell carried his three-year-old son.

Orwell left in 1949 for the last time as a passenger in his giant Austin with the destination being a sanatorium. He was now towards the front of the queue that we all form for the check-in to eternity. It might not be to Will Self's taste, but I value the translucent writing style and try to keep to the rules in "Politics and the English Language" though no doubt I've broken many of them here. Orwell was surely the best social observer of his times and remains unique for having, in V. S. Pritchett's wonderful phrase, "gone native in his own country".

It's the range of activity from a dying man that is dizzying. Orwell made jam and children's toys here, combining animal husbandry with writing the ultimate dystopia. Of course he was now working from his reserve tank, but the sentences still fire off like darts. Don't believe anybody who tells you that Jura was not good for Orwell. Potts puts us straight on that: "Ever since I had known him, he'd been given up as hopeless. During that time he'd lived a fuller life than a whole company of A.1 recruits." The islanders (Diurachs) like to relate stories of Jura's history and foretell things. My favourite concerns the witch who predicted that the last remaining member of the Campbell family would leave with one eye and on a horse and cart. Wens is Scottish but not a Campbell. He and I are still binocular as he eases the Merc onto the Feolin ferry.

Jeremy Malies

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photographer, Rob Marshall.

