In the Picture: Orwell, India and the BBC

Douglas Kerr University of Hong Kong

> Alastair was gradually learning the new languages. . . . The first time that Captain Mayfield had asked him, 'Are you in the picture, Trumpington?' he supposed him to mean, was he personally conspicuous. He crouched at the time waterlogged to the knees, in a ditch; he had, at the suggestion of Mr Smallwood – the company commander – ornamented his steel helmet with bracken. 'No, sir', he had said, stoutly. (Evelyn Waugh, *Put Out More Flags*, 1942)

Late in 1939 George Orwell was reviewing, without much enthusiasm, a travel book by Max Relton entitled *A Man in the East*. 'There is the usual photograph of Mr Relton sitting rifle in hand on a dead tiger', he informed the readers of *Time and Tide*. 'I never see one of these without wanting to see a photo of a tiger sitting on a big-game hunter' (11:422).[1] His fantasy of reversing this heraldic image of the white man's triumph points to Orwell's commitment to the anti-imperial cause and specifically to the object of ending the British occupation of India. It is not an easy matter to say just when this commitment solidified for Orwell. His novel *Burmese Days*, published in 1934, is full of anger about the British and their empire but it is arguably just as disgusted by the forces of Burmese nationalism who opposed them, and seems unable to envisage the possibility of things in Burma ever being different. By the end of the decade, however, Orwell's position had clarified to the extent that he can be described as unambiguously anti-imperialist, belonging to the party of the emblematic tiger and not that of the big-game hunter. Of course, at the end of the decade there was also a gigantic new dimension to the question, the imperial nation being now at war with an antagonist closer

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 44

to home. 'If I thought that a victory in the present war would mean nothing beyond a new lease of life for British imperialism', Orwell wrote truculently in the spring of 1940 during the Phoney War, ' I should be inclined to side with Russia and Germany' (12:122–3)

On the outbreak of war Orwell, who had fought in Spain, applied to undertake war work and also tried to enlist. He was rejected as medically unfit for the forces; and his services as a writer were not required either. He had to content himself with joining the Home Guard, a force which is nowadays thought of as strictly burlesque but which Orwell and some other veterans of the Spanish war took seriously, at least for a time; it was after all a militia of more than a million volunteers, under arms to resist fascism, who might yet play a significant part in the fortunes of a country very likely to suffer invasion and the imposition of a collaborationist government. So in the evenings, Orwell shouldered a rifle, prepared homemade bombs, and gave lectures on street fighting. But it is the other part of his war work in these years which is my topic here. From August 1941 until November 1943 he worked as a Talks Assistant, later Talks Producer, in the Indian section of the BBC's Eastern Service.[2]

Orwell famously discovered when his country went to war that he was 'a patriot after all' (12:151).[3] He professed himself a socialist; he wanted to see Britain transformed but he did not want to see it destroyed. He had a deeply felt loyalty to his country, in a moment when its values and indeed its life were threatened by a totalitarian and militaristic Germany. On the other hand he was just as convinced that his country had no right to cling on, as it seemed determined to do, to an empire exploited for profit and controlled by force, and especially at this time when there was a widespread popular movement, at least in India, to get the British out. Still, if the British did lose control of India in wartime, they would lose it to the Japanese and their Axis allies, a loss that might well tip the balance of the conflict and ensure a victory for totalitarianism in what was truly a global war. But then again, if Britain and her allies emerged victorious, it would seem that the war had secured the triumph of colonialism, the opposite of what Orwell wanted to see. Defending the bad against the worse, in Cecil Day Lewis's gloomy phrase, seemed to entail defending the Raj against the Reich.

It was in just this state of confusion that Orwell in 1941 stepped right into the discursive whirlpool of information and propaganda, becoming a part of the voice of the metropolis broadcast daily to the far-flung and troublesome eastern quarter of the empire. Was the subversive now contained in the discourse of colonialism? Had the would-be poacher signed up as a gamekeeper? Orwell would later speak dismissively of his time in broadcasting as wasted years; but this judgement in itself is hardly conclusive since he disparaged everything he did. However, the BBC phase of the story of George and the tiger is in a simple sense a shaggy dog story, since Orwell eventually lost heart in the enterprise, and resigned, largely because the BBC's own

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 45

research had belatedly discovered that there were few radio sets in India capable of receiving broadcasts from London and negligible numbers of listeners were actually tuning in to these programmes.[4] But in another sense it is a dramatic and important narrative. It was not just that Orwell was a player in a global discourse struggle which was a vital feature of the war, a 'hearts and minds' campaign fought over the airwaves during some of the most critical years of the last century. The discourse struggle was also taking place within him, and is important not only as a phase in one writer's intellectual development, but also as a particularly well-documented space in the ideological and emotional history of the emergence of a postcolonial world, a product of the nineteen-forties arguably even more significant than the defeat of Germany and Japan.

It was of course as a veteran of 'the dirty work of empire' (10:501) that Orwell claimed a first-hand authority on what he described as 'the inherent evil of imperialism' (10:508). He was already writing in *Burmese Days* of the way that empire dehumanized the subject peoples and brutalized the imperialists at the same time.[5] He fully concurred with Kipling's view that the English were astonishingly and perhaps wilfully ignorant about their empire. 'And what should they know of England who only England know?' is not an argument for the educational value of travel but a plea for the English to recognize their global role, and it is one that Orwell would have endorsed.[6] The English – and the meaning of that phrase was one of Orwell's main themes in the forties – would never begin to develop a true sense of their own identity until they owned up to themselves to the implications of their empire. Back from Spain in 1937, he was ready to collapse the very distinctions by which he would later justify his propaganda work in the Indian broadcasts.

> After what I have seen in Spain I have come to the conclusion that it is futile to be 'anti-Fascist' while attempting to preserve capitalism. Fascism after all is only a development of capitalism, and the mildest democracy, so-called, is liable to turn into Fascism when the pinch comes. We like to think of England as a democratic country, but our rule in India, for instance, is just as bad as German Fascism, though outwardly it may be less irritating. I do not see how one can oppose Fascism except by working for the overthrow of capitalism, starting, of course, in one's own country (11:80).

Though he would modify this opinion about British rule in India, he was to maintain his conviction that the English were a nation compromised and corrupted by the possession of an empire, however much they preferred not to think about it. When he described England as 'a family with the wrong members in control', he extended the metaphor to note 'a deep conspiracy of silence about the source of the family income' (12:401). What was unmentionable was the existence of a great 'coolie empire' (13:510). To speak of nineteen-thirties Britain, or France, as a democracy was to turn a blind eye to centuries of autocratic rule of people overseas. So was to think of the

political arena in terms of a domestic class struggle. 'What we always forget is that the overwhelming bulk of the British proletariat does not live in Britain, but in Asia and Africa' (11:360). This is why, in a disconcerting move, Orwell suddenly starts talking about Burma in the middle of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a book supposed to be a report on conditions in the north of England. In non-fiction, his particular contribution to political discourse on the left in the two decades of his writing life was his steady insistence that the whole picture – an idea that was to be crucial to the broadcasts, as we shall see – must be a global one. You could not talk about home without talking about empire, or about England without talking about the Orient.

Orwell's own identity as a writer was bound up with the East. He was known as the author of a novel about Burma, and he was sent scores of books to review on Asian and imperial topics (like Relton's *A Man in the East*). It was his involvement as a writer with Asia that recommended him, of course, to the Eastern Service of the BBC. He was a celebrity, in a small way, and there was a possibility his name might be known to Indian listeners. The fact that *Burmese Days* was banned in India was not considered a problem, and indeed it may have been thought that someone like Orwell, a critic of the Raj, would appeal to the Indian public at a time of much animosity and distrust between Britain and the subcontinent.[7]

There were large numbers of Indians in the armed services of the empire, but the war put a different complexion on the struggle for Indian independence which had been the great imperial theme of the nineteen-thirties. The attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 (four months after Orwell started broadcasting to India) brought the British empire into a state of war with Japan, and immediately placed all Britain's eastern possessions under military threat. This threat loomed more menacingly over the Raj after the string of British defeats in Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore and Burma and the American reverses in the Pacific and the Philippines. The British position with regard to India was now a very precarious one. While the leaders of the Indian Congress stepped up their demands that the British quit India, British policy was that now of all times this was out of the question, since the withdrawal of the garrison from the subcontinent would leave it vulnerable to the approaching Japanese, and in effect cast all Asia into jeopardy. But at the same time it was felt that Britain could not afford so to antagonize the Indians, denying their long-term demands, as to drive them into the arms of the Japanese with the same effect. In India there were mixed feelings. Some Indians felt an enhanced loyalty to the Raj in this time of peril. Others saw in the crisis an opportunity to get the British out; ways would be found of dealing with the Japanese, by non-violent resistance perhaps as Gandhi recommended, if they did prove to be a real threat. Still others followed Subhas Chandra Bose, the former Congress leader who threw in his lot with the Axis, broadcast anti-British propaganda from Germany, and later raised troops to fight alongside the Japanese against the British forces occupying

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 47

India.[8] In these circumstances, Britain had to be careful what it was going to say to India.

It had been clear since the nineteen-twenties that radio would have an important role to play in information and propaganda in the next war. The BBC was a publicly-funded corporation and not a government department, and had established a reputation for the relative impartiality and reliability of its news services. Nevertheless, nobody seriously believed or argued that in wartime the corporation would be independent of the government, least of all in its overseas services. The BBC like all other publication media came under the supervision of the Ministry of Information, housed in the University of London Senate House and notoriously a model for the dreaded Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and directed by the aptly-initialled Brendan Bracken. Policy directives were issued to the BBC from time to time by the Ministry, and the corporation was charged with censoring its own output in conformity with government requirements. Every broadcast script was vetted in advance, twice, once for Policy and once for Security. Improvisation on air was not allowed. This had a peculiar effect on discussion programmes, for example, in which the pretence was maintained that dialogue was proceeding spontaneously whereas in fact each intervention and response was read from a prepared script. A switch censor monitored all broadcasts with instructions to interrupt any attempt to deviate from the script. This applied to entertainment and cultural programmes as much as to news and editorial matter.

The grip of external authority on BBC broadcasters was firm, but not asphyxiating.[9] The corporation's airwaves were not used for the transmission of hard propaganda or outright lies, and late in 1942 Orwell was able to say that the anonymous weekly news commentaries he had prepared for broadcast to Asia 'in fact have contained very little that I would not sign with my own name' (14:101). Broadcasts toed a government line, unobtrusively if undeviatingly, a view of the world usefully underwritten by the BBC's reputation for impartiality and independence. Listening to the BBC was banned in Germany and occupied Europe, and consequently 'the BBC is listened in to all over Europe with passion', Orwell noted wryly in a lecture to the Fabian Society in 1941, a few months after he joined the corporation. 'You can see from Goebbels' speeches that he is aware that if he could only lift the ban people would stop listening to the BBC, but he cannot do so because the notion of giving a free hearing to an enemy is contradictory to the whole fascist outlook' (13:74). Meanwhile, he claimed, 'nobody' listened to German propaganda broadcasts to the British Isles because they were not forbidden. Later, programmes from the Eastern Service were broadcast to Japanese-occupied Malaya and the Indonesian islands and may have been picked up as far away as Hong Kong, but there is no knowing how many people knew about them, and had the opportunity and took the risk of listening to them.[10] The main target audience was of Indians in India, and there it is known that the numbers were small.

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 48

Orwell said that he had discovered his latent feelings of patriotism in a dream (12:271). If so, the dream was playing the traditional role of a message from the ancestors. He recognized these patriotic stirrings as a reactivation in him of the instincts of his class (12:151). In just the same way, as *The Road to Wigan Pier* had explored, many of his feelings about Burma and Burmese people (not to mention the working class at home) could be explained as reflexes conditioned by middle-class habits, education and prejudices, themselves formed by the history of that class in the service of empire. Orwell was in many respects the sort of person he disliked and violently took issue with. When he embarked on the project (which he attributed to the poet John Cornford) of 'building a Socialist on the bones of a Blimp' (12:272), the skeleton remained Blimpish, however you judge the success of the superstructure.[11] The invention of 'Orwell' recognized a desire to become someone (something) else, but the metamorphosis was to be awkward, always incomplete, always subject to ungainly interruptions and regressions. There is no point in looking in Orwell for an unchanging solidity of position, or for a complete transformation from one person to another (Eric Blair to George Orwell, as it might be).[12] He was as inconsistent and untidy as anyone else. But in these inner dissentions he found his creative ground, the quarrel with himself.

Orwell's rather stuttering discourse on the transition from a colonial to a postcolonial world reflects a wider uncertainty about this question, in left-wing thinking and in public opinion as a whole during and after the war. In Orwell's case the sticking point is not hard to identify.

He was consistent in his condemnation of British rule in Asia, from the time of his first published articles, written in Paris. In 'How a Nation is Exploited: The British Empire in Burma', written by Mr E. A. Blair for *Le Progrès Civique* and published in May 1929, it is explained that the Burmese have been drawn into the system of industrial capitalism, without any hope of ever becoming capitalist industrialists themselves.

> So they are under the protection of a despotism which defends them for its own ends, but which would abandon them without hesitation if they ceased to be of use.
>
> Their relationship with the British Empire is that of slave and master (10:147).

This remains substantially Orwell's position. The empire was economic exploitation, whatever effort might be made by Kipling and others to avert their eyes from this fact. It was indefensible, and must be brought to an end, for it corrupted the imperialist as well as robbing and degrading the colonized. Of the six points in the programme of political action he proposed in *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, in 1940, three deal with 'the Empire and the world', and include immediate Dominion status for India with power to secede after the war, and the formation of an Imperial General

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 49

Council 'in which the coloured peoples are to be represented' (12:422). The empire had to go. The problem was what happened next.

That first article on Burma declares that, 'as things now stand, if the English were to give up India, it would only result in a change of master' (10:147). This is a theme that carries through Orwell's writing for many years,[13] and of course it was to underlie the propaganda of the BBC work, with its warnings of what would happen if India fell into the hands of the Japanese. Orwell could also imagine India coming under Russian control – the bugbear of proponents of the Great Game – and did not think a Soviet India would be less of a despotism than the Raj (13:276). In a certain light, after all, the granting of independence might be as much a betrayal as a liberation, and it would be irresponsible to turn Asia into 'a patchwork of comic opera states', easy prey for any power in the region with ambitions and an army (15:48). He argued, in 1943, that the current war had been a cruel demonstration of what can happen to weak nations. And so, 'In a world in which national sovereignty exists, India cannot be a sovereign state, because she is unable to defend herself' (15:211).

It was not only the likely weakness of a postcolonial India that worried Orwell. Opposition to British rule was led by the National Congress Party, and embodied in Gandhi, and Orwell was suspicious of both, especially after the campaign of civil disobedience was begun again in August 1942. He sympathized with the cause of independence, and condemned the jailing of Gandhi and the Congress leaders later that month. But if India was to be independent, it should not be controlled by Congress, and it must be kept in the war (13:480). He thought the Congress volatile and opportunistic, and inspired by just the kind of nationalism which had plunged the world into war; a postcolonial world should be a postnationalist one if it was to be an improvement on what had come before. Nationalist propaganda which declared every existing evil to be a direct result of British rule was dishonest and hysterical, he said in October 1944, adding rather wildly that the Congress party had 'considerable resemblances to the Nazi Party' and was backed by 'sinister businessmen with pro-Japanese leanings' (16:447). At the same time he conceded that what he called 'the appalling atmosphere of Indian politics' was a commentary on British educational methods, and that the 'noise-makers' of the Nationalist movement 'might develop a more grown-up mentality if they had real responsibilities to face' (16:447). The critique of irresponsibility was applied particularly to Gandhi and his insistence on non-violence in the event of an invasion. Gandhi's political methods might have been effective against 'an old-fashioned and rather shaky despotism' like the Raj, but they would be no defence against a totalitarian Power (19:452). If the British were indeed forced to quit India in wartime, it was a sentimental delusion to suppose this would mean Indian independence. After all, 'Already [1943] there are only five genuinely independent States in the world, and if present trends continue there will in the end be only three' (15:211).

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 50

This position on India has to be understood in the context of a broader analysis and critique of nationalism, which culminated in 'Notes on Nationalism', an important essay written after the end of the war in 1945 (17:141–57). Nationalism was a diversion, and a dead-end. 'The Socialist movement has never gained a real foothold in Asia or Africa, or even among the American Negroes: it is everywhere side-tracked by nationalism and race-hatred' (16:23). But some of the language of his critique of Indian nationalism – its violence and hysteria, its blindness to realities, the sinister interests of its backers, its failure to achieve a 'grown-up mentality' – has an emotional colouring that is reminiscent of the hostile depiction of anti-British groups in Burma, in *Burmese Days* and 'Shooting an Elephant'. Both these narratives are sympathetic to the Burmese, while at the same time attributing to them qualities of hysteria, dishonesty, fanaticism, vengefulness and immaturity, familiar from the lexicon of 'Orientalism'. Orwell was an anti-imperialist, but also an anti-nationalist, and if his anti-nationalism sounds Blimpish, that was an idiom that was available to him – his own emotional nationalism, which he could not fully leave behind.

He could envisage (at least in 1940) the British Empire evolving into 'a federation of Socialist states, freed not so much from the British flag as from the money-lender, the dividend-drawer and the wooden-headed British official' (12:427). This idea of a postcolonial socialist commonwealth did not last long. A couple of years later, considering the case of Burma, he was ready to propose placing 'the whole mainland of south-east Asia, together with Formosa, under the guidance of China', part of 'a general Asiatic federation of which China and India would be the leaders' (15:50). Such redrawings of the world map were not uncommon in the geopolitical fluidity of wartime. The point here was to offer a postcolonial future which would also be post-nationalist. But whether or not such a disposition was credible, it was certainly not imminent. And so for the anti-nationalist and anti-Fascist, with India's best interests for the future at heart, the maintenance of British political control and military occupation of India, for the time being, seemed essential, as 'the lesser evil' (16:191).

An end to empire was desirable, and inevitable, in the longer term, but its continuation was desirable, and essential for India's protection, in the immediate term. In this way the emergency of war placed Orwell in the classic liberal imperialist position, and enabled him to work at the BBC, and to write and broadcast propaganda aimed at securing the loyalty of Indian people to their colonial masters. Indeed, such a continuation of the *status quo ante bellum* also served to defer the problem of India's postcolonial future, for which Orwell was not able to see a desirable and realizable shape.

The war conferred the strange but not unwelcome benefit – one perhaps reproduced in millions of lives at the time – of posing an immediate, vital, and simple question, while allowing other more complex and intractable problems to be filed for reference in some future when the life-and-death

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 51

crisis of war should be over.[14] This was essentially what the British government was asking of the Indian nationalists, and it was what Orwell was doing in devoting himself in his BBC years to the task of binding India to the Allies for the duration of the war. Until the Axis was defeated, nothing else could even be contemplated. A 'short-term view' was unavoidable, and in that view it was clear 'that the necessary first step towards Indian freedom is an Allied victory' (15:211).

Propaganda is the engineering of point of view. In this case its workings can be best examined in the weekly news commentaries or newsletters Orwell wrote for broadcast to Asian audiences, some in English and others translated into Asian vernaculars.[15] Fleay and Sanders quote another confidential BBC memorandum, written by the Assistant Controller of Overseas Programmes in February 1942, which makes it clear that news commentaries were thought of as propaganda, their function being to supply a correct 'perspective' on events.

> The primary purpose of news commentaries is propaganda. They make it possible to 'put across' the British view of the news, without sacrificing the reputation that has been carefully built up for veracity and objectivity in news presentation. The commentary can, by its selection of particular events for emphasis and its explanation of tendencies, supply the perspective that is needed, in close proximity to the news bulletins, especially when news as revealed in official communiqués is bad, or fluctuating rapidly.[16]

To convince the people of Asia that they have common cause with the Allies, Orwell embarks on what is essentially a narrative, historiographical project. In commentary after commentary, he tells the unfolding story of the war. Or rather he retells it, processing its events through a modality meant to enable Indians to see and possess it as their own story. Japanese propaganda depicted the European empires as fighting to cling on to their eastern possessions. Obviously, the war that Orwell interprets to Indians is not an imperialist struggle (except on the part of the Japanese), but a global conflict in which all peoples have a stake. He is always very careful not to give the patronising impression of exporting the view from London. Instead, the favourite trope of the newsletters is an invitation to imagine the globe itself, or a map of the world, so as to be able to see the whole picture. The newsletters themselves move like a restless searchlight easily across the face of the earth, reporting news from the Pacific and Russia, Mexico and North Africa, in the space of a few paragraphs. In a surprising application of modernist cosmopolitanism, they urge emancipation from provincial short-sightedness.

> But in order to follow the events of this war, it is more than ever necessary to study the map of the world, and in addition to remember that the world is round. When we hear of those early successes of the Japanese in the

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 52

> Pacific, we may be inclined to think that they offset the defeats which the Germans have received in Russia and Libya. But when we look at the map, we see a different picture, and we see one immense advantage which the democratic powers have over the Fascists. This is that they can communicate with one another (13:115).

Placing the map in the hands (or the minds) of the Indian listeners was a sort of liberal empowerment, an educational gift that would enable them to share the strategic vision.[17] Orwell's constantly pictorial and cartographic tropes mark his discourse with the idiom of Enlightenment. Meanwhile the global knowledge which underwrites the truth of his perspective is derived from his access to privileged metropolitan sources of information – the BBC's own Monitoring Service, which recorded broadcasts around the world, and briefings from the Ministry of Information. And if the watchword was interconnectedness, it was also interdependence. Indians had to be reminded that this was their war too, like it or not, and the way to remind them was to insist on seeing the struggle 'in its true perspective', looking at 'the whole picture and not merely one corner of it' (14:6). This global picture – the view from space – was a favourite image of nineteen-thirties writing.[18] It is related to the emergence of the commercial empires of international broadcasting and entertainment media; the turning globe, and the emission of radio waves with their global reach, were images many people encountered every week in the cinema at the start of Universal and RKO movies. In this case it is obviously related to the global scope of the BBC itself. This 'true perspective' is the value-adding process which allows Orwell to re-export (as it were) to India an Indian point of view of the conflict, in which India's own interests and obligations are fully and truly clarified. In the east, 'a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the source of events the vaguer it becomes', Orwell had written in 'Shooting an Elephant' (10:502). Asian people were not always very good at explanatory narrative; this was a service the newsletters could provide, equipped as they were with the global perspective of the BBC, a truly world service. In this way Indians could be represented to themselves, while the all-seeing but invisible metropolitan observer fulfilled what has been called 'the ambition of regimes of colonial representation: to see without being seen'.[19]

The Japanese, needless to say, saw things differently – the propaganda war was essentially a war of 'pictures' or worldviews – and their own propagandists were busy persuading Asians that Japan was their neighbourly liberator from the alien empires of Europe.[20] Orwell's listeners were warned against this attempt to sell them 'the picture of a war of Asia against Europe' (13:126); they must be helped to see things as they really were. A fine example comes in a newsletter broadcast in May 1942. With India at this point 'within measurable distance of invasion' (13:323), Orwell's task is to make his Indian audience *see*.

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 53

> When we look at the history of this war, which has now gone on for two and a half years, we see that something which started as a localised struggle has become definitely worldwide, and that a meaning and purpose which were not apparent at the beginning have gradually become clear. More than that, we see that this war is not an isolated event, but part of a worldwide process which began more than ten years ago. It started, properly speaking, in 1931, when the Japanese invaded Manchuria, and the League of Nations failed to take action. From then onwards, we have seen a long series of aggressions, first of all unresisted, then resisted unsuccessfully, then resisted more successfully, until finally the whole picture becomes clear as the struggle of free peoples who see before them the chance of a fuller and happier existence, against comparatively small cliques who are not interested in the general development of humanity but only in advancing their individual power. One country after another is sucked into the struggle, and they are sucked in not purely for reasons of geography, and not purely for economic motives, but primarily for what are called ideological reasons – that is to say, they are practically compelled to take one side or the other, according as their national philosophy is a democratic one or the contrary (13:324)

Thus Indians are put in the picture, in both senses, and it is a picture that speaks for itself, showing that India 'finds itself inescapably on the democratic side, and this fact is not really altered by the ancient grievances which India may feel against Britain' (*ibid.*). India is compelled to be with Britain, because victory for the Axis would postpone Indian independence much longer that any British government would be able to do.

> Willy-nilly, India is already in the struggle; and the outcome of the war – and therefore India's independence – may be determined to a very great extent by the efforts that Indians themselves now make (*ibid.*).

That last move was one that Orwell had been building up for some time. The global perspective not only enabled Indians to understand the war as a necessary passage to a postcolonial world, but also reconfigured the map of the world as Indocentric. India was not only involved, it was the key player, and now in the war subaltern India was promoted to the highest importance, holding in its hand not only its own future as a nation but the very outcome of the world war. With the loss of Singapore, Orwell had written for broadcast in February, 'India becomes for the time being the centre of the war, one might say, the centre of the world' (13:180). The world was turned not only upside down, but inside out, and the imperial margin turned into the global centre. Orwell's story reveals a teleology which is both postcolonial and redemptive. India can save the world, and secure its own freedom, the newsletter concludes, for if India has the will to resist, its enemies can never prevail. 'The thing that will defeat them is the same thing that has defeated the Japanese assault on China and the German assault on Russia – the resolution and obstinacy of the common people' (13:327).

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 54

This newsletter is a remarkable piece of propaganda. If it is colonial discourse – and it should be recalled that its primary motivation is to consolidate British hegemony in India at a time of crisis – it expresses itself in terms which have become familiar in the postcolonial lexicon (the challenge of a war for national liberation, the reorientation of colonial centre and margin, the location of resistance and agency in the people, the contratextual engagement, and so on). A remarkable synthesis is achieved at the level of rhetoric, whether you look at it as Orwell smuggling out his anticolonial views under a cloak of war propaganda, or fatally compromising those views by making them serve as arguments for the continued obedience of the colonised in the shorter term. And to this we have to add the further irony that in war propaganda Orwell was able to bury for the time being his fear that a postcolonial India, when it was achieved, might simply be a reinstantiation of the paranoid nationalism which had brought the world to war in the first place. At least there was no doubt that Germany and Japan had to be defeated. To this pragmatic necessity, all other considerations had to defer. And so the propaganda project provides a direction and a firm foothold across a morass of doubts and fear and compromises, about present and future arrangements east and west.

Meanwhile, it is a very good story that Orwell sends from London to Asia, a true liberal narrative, educative, uplifting and organic, with a happy resolution in sight. If its teleology is postcolonial, its material is dependent on the technologies of empire – English as a world language, and a picture of history that rests on the scopic regimes of British world power, institutionalised in the global information gathering and broadcasting resources of the BBC. If it is ultimately a story about India determining its own future, it is not a story that India could have told by itself.

Arguably, indeed, the propaganda broadcasts simply reproduce colonial relations as they pretend to democratize them and point the way to their supersession. It is a discourse addressed to Indians, yet not really answerable to Indians. Is this not the familiar 'Orientalist' story of the East being represented to itself by a Western power, through Western expertise? To an Indian ear, the broadcasts were monologic. The countertext of Japanese propaganda may be actively engaged and debated, but the more dangerous countertext, of Indian opposition to continuing British rule, is never allowed to raise its voice. For all its gestures towards Indian empowerment, Orwell's propaganda does not, obviously, relax its grip on the microphone. Language and medium are entirely in the control of metropolitan personnel. Then there is the double naturalization of the voice: in the earlier broadcasts at least, the voice has no identifiable personality but it does have an Indian accent; and furthermore a radio voice, embodied neither in a visible speaker nor in the signs of writing, is simply *there*, inhabiting the ambient air, traceable to no human source, unanswerable. And listeners have a silent role in this drama, subject to the discourse but never subjects of it, denied linguistic

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 55

agency, the passive receivers of stories told about them by an authoritative voice from far away. The discourse scene of radio speech itself imposes silence on the Other.

And so on. It would not be hard to prolong the catalogue of factors that compromise Orwell's appeal to the people of India to play a part in the war against Fascism while remaining within the British Empire. Some such embarrassment, it could be said, must attend any message of solidarity from the metropolis to the orient in the colonial period. For a while these compromises seemed to Orwell to be worth making. Later they did not. By early 1943 it was judged that there was no longer the serious threat of a Japanese invasion of India (14:315). But for some time before, Orwell had been of the opinion, he said, that the BBC should broadcast news and music and nothing else to India (14:76). He went on dutifully writing newsletters, but for the remainder of his time at the corporation, which he quit in November, his main energies went into the cultural and educational programmes which had always been the other part of his brief as a producer in the Eastern Service.[21] In this BBC work, he retained some measure of belief, as he explained in a letter to Alex Comfort in July 1943. He was urging Comfort, who had just edited an anthology of new writing, to publish more work by Indian writers.

> It is tremendously important from several points of view to try to promote decent cultural relations between Europe and Asia. Nine tenths of what one does in this direction is simply wasted labour, but now and again a pamphlet or a broadcast or something gets to the person it is intended for, and this does more good than fifty speeches by politicians. William Empson has worn himself out for two years trying to get them to broadcast intelligent stuff to China, and I think has succeeded to some small extent. It was thinking of people like him that made me rather angry about what you said of the BBC, though God knows I have the best means of judging what a mixture of whoreshop and lunatic asylum it is for the most part (15:166).

Notes

1 Volume and page references to all quotations from Orwell's writing refer to the twenty-volume *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. Peter Davison (London, 1998).

2 For Orwell's work at the BBC, see Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (London, 3rd edition. 1981); Michael Shelden, *Orwell: The Authorized Biography* (London, 1991); Stephen Ingle, *George Orwell: A Political Life* (Manchester, 1993); Peter Davison, *George Orwell: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke, 1996) and Jeffrey Meyers, *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation* (New York, 2000). William Empson left an affectionate memoir of Orwell at the BBC in Miriam Gross (ed.), *The World of George Orwell* (London, 1971), pp. 94–9. W. J. West first collected and edited *Orwell: The War Commentaries* (London, 1987) and *Orwell: The War Broadcasts* (London, 1987), though Davison's edition of the *Complete Works* has a more full and accurate collection. West's *The Larger Evils: Nineeen Eighty-Four: The Truth behind the Satire* (Edinburgh, 1992) is also germane. See also C. Fleay and M. L. Sanders, 'Looking into the Abyss: George Orwell at the BBC', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 24:3 (July

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 56

1989) pp. 503–18. The BBC's story in wartime is told in Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: Volume 3: The War of Words* (London, 1970). For further discussion of Orwell's writing for the Eastern Service, see Douglas Kerr, 'Orwell's BBC Broadcasts: Colonial Discourse and the Rhetoric of Propaganda', *Textual Practice*, 16:3 (Winter 2002), pp. 473–90.

3 Peter Davison uses the phrase, from Orwell's review of a book by Malcolm Muggeridge, for the title of the twelfth volume of *The Complete Works*.

4 See the report of 11 January 1943 by Laurence Brander, the BBC's Eastern Service Intelligence Officer, written after a fact-finding trip to India (14:309, 15:343–56). It is not certain that Orwell saw this report but he certainly heard about its depressing conclusions from Brander himself as early as October 1942 (14:74).

5 See Douglas Kerr, 'Orwell, Animals and the East', *Essays in Criticism* 49, no 3 (July1999), 234–55.

6 The line, often misquoted, is from the first stanza of Kipling's poem 'The English Flag 1891'.

7 Fleay and Sanders quote a BBC memorandum of February 1941 on Programmes for India, written by R. W. Brock: 'Valuable influence would be exerted by spokesmen of the Nazi-occupied countries, by anti-Japanese material, addresses by distinguished Indians in London and by outstanding exponents, especially from the Left, of British thought and war effort . . . '. 'Looking into the Abyss: George Orwell at the BBC', p. 504.

8 When Orwell edited *Talking to India* (London, 1943), a selection of broadcasts by the Indian section of the Eastern Service of the BBC, he included a specimen of Bose's propaganda alongside some of his own news commentaries. The dilemmas of loyalty facing many Indians in wartime are an important theme in Amitav Ghosh's fine historical novel *The Glass Palace* (New York and London, 2000).

9 For the BBC and wartime propaganda see Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting*. An impassioned account of censorship and Orwell's work before and during the war is in W. J. West, *The Larger Evils*.

10 Peter Davison, *George Orwell: A Literary Life*, p. 117.

11 'Colonel Blimp' was a generic caricature figure. Orwell defined 'Blimps' as 'the military and imperialist middle class' (12:405).

12 This is a favourite narrative of Orwell's 'development'. It provides the organizing principle of the study by Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *Orwell: The Transformation* (London, 1979), a still useful book which is a good deal more nuanced than the title might suggest.

13 For example, in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, written in 1940: 'Had any Labour Government come into office with a clear majority and then proceeded to grant India anything that could truly be called independence, India would simply have been absorbed by Japan, or divided between Japan and Russia' (12:419).

14 Though the situations are by no means the same, there were calls for a similar appraisal and stacking of political priorities on the Left in the aftermath of the bombings of 11 September 2001. For example, a letter from Janet Williams to the *New Statesman* on 26 November 2001 (p. 36) concludes: 'The defeat of Taliban terrorism against millions of Afghan women should be ample justification for the actions of the US and its allies'.

15 Orwell's English news commentaries were read on air by his superior in the Indian section, Zulfaqar Ali Bokhari, a distinguished broadcaster who was to become Director General of Pakistan Radio. In November 1942, after a change of policy, Orwell began reading his own scripts.

16 Fleay and Sanders, 'Looking into the Abyss: George Orwell at the BBC', p. 508.

17 The commentaries took place in a context that was educational in more direct senses too. 'Orwell devoted much more time to educational and cultural programmes

Chap 4 26/2/04 9:30 am Page 57

than to his commentaries. He ran what would now be called on Open University long before that concept was launched. He designed thirteen courses based on Calcutta and Bombay University syllabuses in English and American Literature, science, medicine, agriculture and psychology. The speakers . . . . included T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, Joseph Needham, V. S. Pritchett, L. A. G. Strong, Stephen Spender, Ritchie Calder, Gordon Childe, Sir John Russell and Harold Laski.' Peter Davison, *George Orwell: A Literary Life*, p. 117.

18 There is a fine example in Auden's 'In Time of War', written after his journey to China in 1938. See W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War*, revised edition. (London, 1973), p. 270. 'Night falls on China; the great arc of travelling shadow / Moves over land and ocean, altering life . . . .'

19 James B. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (London, 1997), p. 144.

20 Laurence Brander on his visit to India had liaised with the Government of India's Counter-Propaganda Department, which was seriously concerned with Japanese broadcasts to India which encouraged disaffection and acts of sabotage, just as the BBC did in broadcasts to occupied Europe (15:343).

21 'When one looks at the kinds of programme Orwell organized, from talks on great books (including *The Social Contract*, *The Koran* and *Das Kapital*) to discussion of social problems (e.g. 'Moslem Minorities in Europe', and 'The Status of Women in Europe'), one can only conclude that, as war propaganda, it was idiosyncratic, remarkably enlightened, and its nature almost certainly unrealized by those in high authority.' Davison, *George Orwell: A Literary Life*, pp. 117-8.

Address for Correspondence

Douglas Kerr, Department of English, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, China. E-mail: kerrdw@hkuck.hku.hk