

Eileen Maud O'Shaughnessy, Mrs Blair (English Language and Literature, 1924)

1905 – 1945

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Eileen O'Shaughnessy is better known to posterity as the first wife of the novelist George Orwell (Eric Blair) though she had intimated to friends that she had her own literary ambitions.

This was illustrated in a poem written by Eileen in 1934 entitled 'End of the Century, 1984' inspired by reading Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. It was composed in honour of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Sunderland Church High School where Eileen had been Head Girl, and was said to look ahead to its centenary. The poem was long forgotten but there is an uncanny resemblance to certain references in Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen eighty-four* published in 1949. Critics disagree however on whether Orwell intended the novel to be a homage to his wife who had died 4 years before.

Eileen was born in South Shields on 25 September 1905 and was of Irish descent. She matriculated at St Hugh's in 1924, and her tutors' reports are still in the College archives. She was frequently complimented on her literary style. The reports show a progression in confidence and in the tutors' confidence in her. The earlier ones highlighted errors and weakness in preparation but her final report from Trinity 1927 by the Principal Miss Buckhurst states: "*Her work . . . is pleasant and attractively fresh. She writes with point and edge and with good taste and discrimination*".

Competing with her brother Lawrence for a First she was very disappointed to graduate with a Class II though she was one of 10 at St Hugh's, and the remaining 33 were awarded lower degrees. Indeed, a Somerville student was the only woman awarded a First in English during the 3 years that Eileen was at Oxford.

The impression given of Eileen through many later recollections was of her being witty, fun and mischievous. This is reinforced by the discovery of 6 vibrant letters written by her to her St Hugh's contemporary (Elizabeth) Norah Symes. Norah (Mrs Myles) also read English Language and Literature, and was one of those who were awarded a Third. The letters were only discovered in 2006, and although the friendship started in 1924, the letters date from 1936 to 1939 during Eileen's marriage to Orwell.

They have an immediacy of style with Eileen dashing off what she was doing or intending to do at that moment, whether smoking a cigarette or imminently leaving to join up with Orwell in the Spanish Civil War. It is clear that she had a very warm friendship with the Symes family, and with Norah, signing herself off as "Pig" with expressions of great affection. There are insights into the Orwell marriage including his apparent reluctance to allow her to take a weekend off to see her friend; bitter and protracted arguments including about the primacy of his literary work; Eileen's support for him going to the Front in the

Spanish Civil War; and humorous speculations on what they would be doing when they met up in Barcelona.

Eileen had met Orwell in 1935 at a tea party given by his landlady who had invited friends and acquaintances from University College London. Eileen was studying there for an M.A. in Educational Psychology, with a particular interest in testing children's intelligence. Her route to postgraduate studies had been meandering in that she had worked in a number of different jobs beforehand: teacher; secretary; reader to an elderly lady; owner of a typing bureau; freelance journalist; amanuensis to her surgeon brother Lawrence.

Orwell apparently remarked after meeting Eileen that she was the type of woman he would like to marry, and the nicest person he had met for a long time. Eileen considered Orwell to be extremely interesting despite his cadaverous appearance as a very tall thin TB sufferer. They married in church on 9 June 1936 with Eileen declining to vow to obey her husband. His family, the Blairs, humorously questioned Eileen on whether she knew what she was letting herself in for.

The answer to that question turned out to be "rather a lot".

Much has been written about the drama of Orwell's service in the Spanish Civil War and the couple's frantic escape but before that came a very straitened start to married life in a damp and decrepit Hertfordshire cottage. There were no mains utilities, an outside privy and merely one paraffin lamp to share between them. Orwell usually won the tussle for it so he wrote by lamplight while Eileen typed his manuscripts by guttering candlelight. She kept a goat for milk, and chickens, and eked out a living for them by running a grocery shop from their front room. Both were frequently ill in the insanitary conditions, and Eileen was described as extremely thin. She gave up her postgraduate studies. Their rather wretched bickering existence was vividly described in a letter to Norah Myles in November 1936 although with a characteristic jauntiness used by Eileen to offset her ability to paint a very lifelike picture.

It was not a way of life which either Eileen or Orwell had been born to, as their families were both comfortably middle class with their fathers working in the civil service. It was more Orwell's conviction that he should live the life of the poor who could barely scrape a living: from old Etonian Eric Blair to anti-authoritarian social commentator George Orwell. He felt a calling to act as the moral conscience of the middle class and expose unwelcome truths. The cottage, even if a relative hovel, was however lent to him by his aunt.

After completing the commissioned *Road to Wigan Pier* on the bleak conditions in mining communities in Lancashire and Yorkshire, Orwell left for Spain in late December 1936 to report on the Civil War. Once in Barcelona, exhilarated by the optimistic egalitarian atmosphere there as described in *A Homage to Catalonia* (1938), he enlisted in the Marxist militia POUM which was associated with the British Independent Labour Party, and was sent to the Front at Aragon. Eileen wrote approvingly about this, and her own departure on the next day, in one of her letters to Norah Myles.

Eileen followed Orwell to Barcelona in February 1937, and with her professional skills became the secretary to John McNair, the ILP's representative, producing the ILP newsletter. Although Eileen was able to visit Orwell and take some luxuries, the couple were not able to spend time together until he received leave at the end of April 1937 when Eileen made the amused comment that he was tanned and looked well but had lice. One of the few acknowledged photos of Eileen is that in which she is seated as the only female amongst a 12-strong armed militia band, with the immediately recognisable tall figure of Orwell standing beside her. Another volunteer Harry Milton was third from the left. Orwell's superior was Georges Kopp, an enigmatic soldier of fortune who was POUM's commander of the Third Division Lenin Regiment, and became Eileen's lover. In a frank explanation of her feelings, Eileen wrote to Norah Myles that he could never take her husband's place but their relationship had progressed in "little leaps" prompted by the extraordinary feelings of danger and that Kopp could be killed at any moment.

On 20 May 1937 it was Orwell who was shot through the throat and almost killed while on sentry duty. Harry Milton saved his life. As Orwell was reported missing, Eileen went to the Front to find him with the help of John McNair. Orwell received no substantive treatment for over one week, and Eileen and Georges Kopp managed to get him admitted to a POUM convalescent home in Barcelona. The couple spent their first wedding anniversary there. On 31 May 1937 at Eileen's dictation Kopp sent a letter full of accurate medical detail with a sketch of the wound to her brother Lawrence for Orwell's future treatment. He could scarcely speak and it was clear that he was no longer fit to fight.

Added to Eileen's shock and fear about Orwell's long-term recovery, there was an abrupt ending to what had originally been seen as a romantic socialist adventure. Barcelona had plunged into a febrile atmosphere of street-fighting between various Republican militia groups with the pro-Stalinist Communists accusing POUM of being a secret Fascist organisation. In the "May Events" POUM fought against the Republican police which ultimately led to its downfall.

In order to be medically discharged from duty Orwell had to return to the front line for his papers to be signed. Whilst he was away, POUM was declared illegal and amongst many others, Georges Kopp was imprisoned. Eileen's room at the Hotel Continental was searched and her diaries seized but instead of being arrested, she was placed under surveillance. Returning to Barcelona on 20 June 1937, Orwell knew nothing until Eileen greeted him in the hotel lobby by extravagantly kissing him and whispering "Get out of here at once!". He then roamed the streets and slept in a ruined church to keep out of sight. However, the couple did put themselves at risk by visiting Georges Kopp in prison and trying unsuccessfully to obtain official documents to secure his release.

With documents from the British Consulate declaring them to be tourists, the couple fled by train to France on 23 June 1937 with John McNair of the ILP. They were pursued by Stalinist hit-squads with a mission to liquidate Trotskyite militia such as POUM. Documents later recovered from Soviet archives indicate that the couple were already being spied on by pro-Stalinist military intelligence within the International Brigades, and by a British Stalinist spy working inside the same ILP office as Eileen. Her affair with Georges Kopp had been made known, and a sinister network fabricated or imagined linking Orwell and Eileen with German and Italian Fascists, and French intelligence.

On 13 July 1937 they were charged in the Special Tribunal for Espionage and High Treason with being Trotskyite agents of POUM. The trial and conviction for rebellion of the surviving POUM leaders took place in late 1938. Franco's forces took Barcelona on 26 January 1939.

The couple's experiences in Spain gave Orwell a crash course in seeing at first hand that not all socialists fought for the same cause, a factor which substantially influenced his later works.

Returning once more to their Hertfordshire cottage after this adventure, Eileen wrote to Norah Myles on New Year's Day 1938 with the usual vivid description of domestic privation, and Orwell's monopolisation by finishing *A Homage to Catalonia*, seemingly his only topic of conversation. Before its publication in April 1938, Orwell suffered a lung haemorrhage and his long convalescence prompted a stay for the couple in French Morocco from September 1938. Eileen appears to have been told frankly about her husband's condition by her brother Lawrence, a thoracic surgeon. The couple hated some aspects of being in Morocco which they regarded as extremely insanitary, and Orwell appears to have used in a later essay on Marrakech an unappetising excerpt on flies from one of Eileen's letters. Resenting loss of income, Orwell started to write *Coming Up for Air*.

The couple returned to England in March 1939, and with war looming, Eileen took a job in the Censorship Department of the Ministry of Information then in 1942 in the Ministry of Food. Unfortunately, her much-loved brother Lawrence was killed in the Dunkirk evacuation in May 1940, and she suffered great grief. In late 1940 Eileen wrote to Norah Myles about weeks of physical illness with mysterious diagnoses ranging from Brucellosis to ovarian complications, and a gloomy expectation of cancer. In early 1941 she was depressed by the monotony of her work, shuttling between London and the Hertfordshire cottage, and financial constraints, with air raids as the only enlivening events. The earlier upbeat tone of her letters was missing.

Orwell was unfit for military service due to TB, became a member of the Home Guard, and in 1941 joined the BBC as a producer in the Indian section as fitted in with his own earlier life in India and Burma. In 1943 he became literary editor of *The Tribune* and started to write *Animal Farm*.

Despite the hazardous conditions of wartime, the couple decided to adopt a child as Eileen had not conceived after 8 years of marriage and Orwell thought that he was probably sterile. It may have been more Orwell's choice as Eileen was reportedly reluctant as she was unsure if she could love an adopted child sufficiently. In June 1944 they adopted a 3-week-old baby Richard Horatio, found for them by Lawrence's widow Gwen who had returned to the North East. One of the few acknowledged photos of Eileen show her holding Richard in her arms and kissing him. In the same month as the adoption, the Orwells' flat in London was bombed out so the family of now 3 spent much of 1944 and 1945 staying with Gwen and her children. Part of the reason for remaining in the relative comfort and safety of Gwen's home was that Eileen was in poor health.

Despite Eileen's constant efforts to restrain him owing to her concerns about his own fragile health, Orwell had accepted as many journalism commissions as possible to make a living. In February 1945 he had gone to Paris as a war correspondent for *The Observer* on the closing stages of the Second World War. Eileen arranged to have a hysterectomy in a well-

reputed private maternity hospital in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Orwell was made aware of her plan as she wrote to him deferentially about the cost. More concerned about Orwell's longevity than her own, she had also made a comment about who would be best placed to look after Richard in future. When her letters to Norah Myles were discovered, it was established that she had meant Norah and her GP husband.

Eileen died unexpectedly on 29 March 1945 during the hysterectomy, aged 39. The death certificate indicated, and Orwell was thus led to believe, that she had suffered a cardiac arrest as the result of an allergic reaction to an anaesthetic. However, it is entirely possible that the death was due to medical negligence as the operation was already under way when she died, and she was suffering from acute anaemia for which no blood transfusions were given in that private hospital. Eileen had been in the middle of writing her husband a chatty letter when the pre-operation morphine started to take hold. The letter was never finished, ending with "I also see the fire and the clock". Orwell got back from Paris 2 days later. *Nineteen eighty-four* starts with clocks chiming a foreboding 13 on a bright cold April day, such as that on which Eileen was buried in 1945.

Baby Richard was 10 months old when Eileen died, and Orwell took him to live on the island of Jura in the remote house they had chosen as a literary retreat. Eileen had arranged the lease but never lived to see it.

Eileen remains something of an enigma. Contemporaries later recalled her with affection, with even an old flame of Orwell's describing her as gay, lively and interesting, and effectively on Orwell's wave-length which is what Eileen herself thought. However, her jauntiness seemed to mask a more elusive character who friends could not quite pin down. Her letters to Norah Myles show real descriptive talent and humour in the face of adversity including her tempestuous marriage marked by hardship and infidelity. Her warmth and capacity for long-lasting friendship shine out in those letters so it is a great pity that none from Norah to Eileen, to complete the picture, have yet been found.

There is disagreement between critics not only about the extent of Eileen's influence on Orwell's writing but on whether he selfishly demanded her self-sacrifice or she willingly gave it to nurture his genius. One of Orwell's earliest biographers icily dismissed the notion that Eileen could have had any influence including on *Nineteen eighty-four*. Others discern more zest, colour and humanity in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* completed after they met, than in his earlier works.

Certainly, *A Homage to Catalonia* reflected the experiences they had both shared in civil war Spain, and *Coming Up For Air* and *Animal Farm* were written during the height of their marriage. Orwell, in common with many writers, may have bounced ideas off other friends and contacts, including his various mistresses. However, it seems implausible that with Eileen sharing his experiences; typing and proof-reading his manuscripts; pulling strings to get him published and generally organising his life, he would not have been influenced by her views and suggestions. She was after all a highly-educated and opinionated woman with a good Oxford degree in English Language and Literature, and an expressive flair.

As to self-sacrifice versus nurturing genius, there is every evidence that the Eileen who refused to “obey” her husband in her wedding vows regarded herself as his personal, if frequently exasperated, equal. It is not far-fetched to assume that she admired his work and shared his passionately-held beliefs, ultimately forged while they were together in Spain; and that she chose to help him achieve success as best she could. There were certainly elements of their marriage which belonged in the 1930s such as her deference on how their joint funds should be spent but she was at the same time a working woman, not a stay-at-home muse. Perhaps she genuinely had no real intention of pursuing her own literary career.

Further Reading

Eileen O’Shaughnessy’s poem ‘End of century, 1984’ can be found on www.orwelltoday

Homage to Catalonia by George Orwell. Penguin Modern Classics 2003, originally published in 1938 by Secker & Warburg

The Lost Orwell ed. by Peter Davison. Timewell Press 2006. (The Norah Myles letters)

Eileen: The Making of George Orwell by Sylvia Topp. Unbound 2020.