

MENTAL FLOSS

13 Surprising Facts About George Orwell

By Emily Petsko

Before he assumed the pen name George Orwell, Eric Arthur Blair (June 25, 1903-January 21, 1950) had a relatively normal upbringing for an upper-middle-class English boy of his time. Looking back now, his life proved to be anything but ordinary. He's best known for penning the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—regarded as one of the greatest classics of all time—but writing novels was only one small facet of his life and career. Here are 13 facts about Orwell's life that may surprise you.

1. George Orwell attended prep school as a child—and hated it.

Eric Blair spent five years at the St. Cyprian School for boys in Eastbourne, England, which later inspired his melodramatic essay *Such, Such Were the Joys*. In this account, he called the school's proprietors "terrible, all-powerful monsters" and labeled the institution itself "an expensive and snobbish school which was in process of becoming more snobbish, and, I imagine, more expensive." While Blair's misery is now considered to be somewhat exaggerated, the essay was deemed too libelous to print at the time. It was finally published in 1968 after his death.

2. He was a prankster.

Blair was expelled from his "crammer" school (an institution designed to help students "cram" for specific exams) for sending a birthday message attached to a dead rat to the town surveyor, according to Sir Bernard Crick's *George Orwell: A Life*, the first complete biography of Orwell. And while studying at Eton College, Orwell made up a song about John Crace, his school's housemaster, in which he made fun of Crace's appearance and penchant for Italian art: "Then up waddled Wog and he squeaked in Greek: 'I've grown another hair on my cheek.' Crace replied in Latin with his toadlike smile: 'And I hope you've grown a lovely new pile. With a loud deep fart from the bottom of my heart! How d'you like Venetian art?'"

Later, in a newspaper column, he recalled his boyhood hobby of replying to advertisements and stringing the salesmen along as a joke. "You can have a lot of fun by answering the advertisements and then, when you have drawn them out and made them waste a lot of stamps in sending successive wads of testimonials, suddenly leaving them cold," he wrote.

3. Orwell worked a number of odd jobs for most of his career.

Everyone's got to pay the bills, and Blair was no exception. He spent most of his career juggling part-time jobs while authoring books on the side. Over the years, he worked as a police officer for the Indian Imperial Police in Burma (present-day Myanmar), a high school teacher, a bookstore clerk, a propagandist for the BBC during World War II, a literary editor, and a war correspondent. He also had stints as a dishwasher in Paris and as a hop-picker (for breweries) in Kent, England, but those jobs were for research purposes while "living as a tramp" and writing his first book about his experiences, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. (He chose to publish the book under a pseudonym, George Orwell, and the name stuck.)

4. He once got himself arrested—on purpose.

In 1931, while investigating poverty for his aforementioned memoir, Orwell intentionally got himself arrested for being "drunk and incapable." This was done "in order to get a taste of prison and to bring himself closer to the tramps and small-time villains with whom he mingled," biographer Gordon Bowker told *The Guardian*. At the time, he had been using the pseudonym Edward Burton and posing as a poor fish porter. After drinking several pints and almost a whole bottle of whisky and ostensibly making a scene (it's uncertain what exactly was said or done), Orwell was arrested. His crime didn't warrant prison time like he had hoped, and he was released after spending 48 hours in custody. He wrote about the experience in an unpublished essay titled *Clink*.

5. Orwell had knuckle tattoos.

While working as a police officer in Burma, Orwell got his knuckles tattooed. Adrian Fierz, who knew Orwell, told biographer Gordon Bowker that the tattoos were small blue spots, "the shape of small grapefruits," and Orwell had one on each knuckle. Orwell noted that some Burmese tribes believed tattoos would protect them from bullets. He may have gotten inked for similarly superstitious reasons, Bowker suggested, but it's more likely that he wanted to set himself apart from the British establishment in Burma. "He was never a properly 'correct' member of the Imperial class—hobnobbing with Buddhist priests, Rangoon prostitutes, and British drop-outs," Bowker wrote.

6. He knew seven foreign languages, to varying degrees.

Orwell wrote in a 1944 newspaper column, "In my life I have learned seven foreign languages, including two dead ones, and out of those seven I retain only one, and that not brilliantly." In his youth, he learned French from Aldous Huxley, who briefly taught at Orwell's boarding school and later went on to write *Brave New World*. Orwell ultimately became fluent in French, and at different points in his life, he studied Latin, Greek, Spanish, and Burmese, to name a few.

7. He voluntarily fought in the Spanish Civil War.

Like fellow writer Ernest Hemingway and others with leftist leanings, Orwell got tangled up in the Spanish Civil War. At the age of 33, Orwell arrived in Spain, shortly after fighting had broken out in 1936, hoping to write some newspaper articles. Instead, he ended up joining the Republican militia to “fight fascism” because “it seemed the only conceivable thing to do.” The following year, he was shot in the neck by a sniper, but survived. He described the moment of being shot as “a tremendous shock—no pain, only a violent shock, such as you get from an electric terminal; with it a sense of utter weakness, a feeling of being stricken and shriveled up to nothing.” He wrote about his war experiences in the book *Homage to Catalonia*.

8. Orwell’s manuscript for *Animal Farm* was nearly destroyed by a bomb.

In 1944, Orwell’s home at 10 Mortimer Crescent in London was struck by a “doodlebug” (a German V-1 flying bomb). Orwell, his wife Eileen, and their son Richard Horatio were away at the time, but their home was demolished. During his lunch break at the British newspaper *Tribune*, Orwell would return to the foundation where his home once stood and sift through the rubble in search of his books and papers—most importantly, the manuscript for *Animal Farm*. “He spent hours and hours rifling through rubbish. Fortunately, he found it,” Richard recalled in a 2012 interview with *Ham & High*. Orwell then piled everything into a wheelbarrow and carted it back to his office.

9. He had a goat named Muriel.

He and his wife Eileen tended to several farm animals at their home in Wallington, England, including Muriel the goat. A goat by the same name in Orwell’s book *Animal Farm* is described as being one of the few intelligent and morally sound animals on the farm, making her one of the more likable characters in this dark work of dystopian fiction.

10. George Orwell coined the term Cold War.

The first recorded usage of the phrase cold war in reference to relations between the U.S. and Soviet Union can be traced back to Orwell’s 1945 essay *You and the Atom Bomb*, which was written two months after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the essay, he described “a state which was at once unconquerable and in a permanent state of ‘cold war’ with its neighbors.” He continued: “Had the atomic bomb turned out to be something as cheap and easily manufactured as a bicycle or an alarm clock, it might well have plunged us back into barbarism, but it might, on the other hand, have meant the end of national sovereignty and of the highly centralized police state. If, as seems to be the case, it is a rare and costly object as difficult to produce as a battleship, it is likelier to put an end to large-scale wars at the cost of prolonging indefinitely a ‘peace that is no peace.’”

11. He ratted out Charlie Chaplin and other artists for allegedly being communists.

Orwell self-identified as a democratic socialist, but his sympathy didn’t extend to communists. In 1949, he compiled a list of artists he suspected of having communist leanings and passed it along to his friend, Celia Paget, who worked for the UK’s Information Research Department. After the war ended, the branch was tasked with distributing anti-communist propaganda throughout Europe. Orwell’s list included Charlie Chaplin and a few dozen other actors, writers, academics and politicians. Other notable names that were written down in his notebook but weren’t turned over to the IRD included Katharine Hepburn, John Steinbeck, George Bernard Shaw, Orson Welles and Cecil Day-Lewis (the father of Daniel Day-Lewis).

Orwell’s intention was to blacklist those individuals, whom he considered untrustworthy, from IRD employment. While journalist Alexander Cockburn labeled Orwell a “snitch,” biographer Bernard Crick wrote, “He wasn’t denouncing these people as subversives. He was denouncing them as unsuitable for counter-intelligence operation.”

12. He really hated American fashion magazines.

For a period of about a year and a half, Orwell penned a regular column called *As I Please* for the newspaper *Tribune*, in which he shared his thoughts on everything from war to objective truth to literary criticism. One such column from 1946 featured a brutal takedown of American fashion magazines. Of the models appearing on their pages, he wrote, “A thin-boned, ancient-Egyptian type of face seems to predominate: narrow hips are general, and slender, non-prehensile hands like those of a lizard are quite universal.” As for the inane copy that accompanied advertisements, he complained, “Words like suave-mannered, custom-finished, contour-conforming, mitt-back, inner-sole, backdip, midriff, swoosh, swash, curvaceous, slenderize, and pet-smooth are flung about with evident full expectation that the reader will understand them at a glance. Here are a few sample sentences taken at random: ‘A new Shimmer Sheen color that sets your hands and his head in a whirl.’ ‘Bared and beautifully bosomy.’ ‘Feathery-light Milliken Fleece to keep her kitten-snug!’ ‘Others see you through a veil of sheer beauty, and they wonder why!’” In the rest of the column, he went on to discuss traffic fatalities.

13. He nearly drowned while writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

One day in 1947 while taking a break from writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell took his son, niece, and nephew on a boating trip across the Gulf of Corryreckan in western Scotland, which happens to be the site of the world’s third-largest whirlpool. Unsurprisingly, their dinghy capsized when it was sucked into the whirlpool, hurling them all overboard. Fortunately, all four survived, and the book that later came to be called *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (originally named *The Last Man in Europe*) was finally published in 1949, just seven months before Orwell’s death from tuberculosis.