TWO:

BIOGRAPHICAL

BEARINGS.
George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair on 25th June 1903 at Motihari in Bengal, India. He was the second child of the Blairs, Richard and Ida. Richard was an agent in the Excise and Customs Department of the Indian Civil Service. Orwell's grandfathers, both paternal and maternal, lived and worked in India. His early childhood, therefore, was spent on this British-occupied sub-continent.

In the summer of 1907, when Orwell was four, the family had gone to England on vacation. Leaving the family there, Orwell's father came back to India in the autumn of the same year only to return in 1912, after retirement. At the age of eight Orwell was sent to a preparatory school at Sussex, where he stayed till he was thirteen. Thus the greatest prophet and the novelist of the century was deprived of parental care in his childhood, making him a grave cynic and a stern critic of the social institutions. These pathetic childhood memories are revealed in his own candidly bold statements distributed all over his works. He writes:

I merely disliked my own father, whom I had barely seen before I was eight and who appeared to me simply as a gruff-voiced elderly man forever saying 'Don't'.

Orwell was an intelligent lad at school. Politically he
was more aware than the other boys. He was highly critical of the discriminatory treatment meted out by the headmaster to the rich and poor boys at St. Cyprians, his next boarding school. Occasionally he won scholarships for his schools too. His literary taste could be traced back to his schooling days, where he was frequently found reading great thinkers like Shaw, Wells and Butler. Thus his early years at this school proved formative and moulded his plastic mentality. What his education of these turbulent years gave him was an everlasting feeling of insecurity, gloom and disappointment. These bitter experiences of a public school life are truthfully recorded in *Keep the Asphialistra Flying* where the author describes the hero, Gordon Comstock’s ‘preparatory’ days in these lines:

They soon found out his poverty, of course, and gave him hell because of it. Probably the greatest cruelty one can inflict on a child is to send it to school among children richer than itself... Gordon’s life had been one long conspiracy to keep his end up and pretend that his parents were richer than they were. Ah, the humiliations of those days.

A more graphic account of his life’s experiences in this school is available in one of his posthumously published essays, *Such, Such were the Joys*. The genesis of a number of his late-life convictions can be traced back to this particular phase of his life. The squalor and seediness, the economic, social and political segregation and the friction between authority and freedom are powerfully projected in many of his prose and fictional creations. Moreover, these early impressions led Orwell to harbour an innate hatred of anything that was
Scottish. A funny anecdote regarding how he converted himself from Eric Blair to George Orwell comes to light in his letter to his publisher dated November 19, 1932. His dislike of the Scottish associations of his name, Eric Blair, made him desperate for a pseudonym. He wrote:

As to a pseudonym, a name I always use when tramping etc is P.S.Burton,, but if you don't think this sounds a probable kind of name what about

Kenneth Miles
George Orwell
H.Lewis Allways.

I rather favour George Orwell. 3

This accounts for the whimsicality behind his conversion from Eric Blair to George Orwell.

George Orwell graduated to Eton as a King's scholar. According to him his years at Eton were not of any formative influence. But he was not at all critical of Eton. Those were the post-First-World-War years. His social and political ideas came to be reinforced during these convalescent years. Among his teachers Aldous Huxley influenced him the most. Besides Shaw and Wells he read Galsworthy and others for their political ideologies. Socialism had come to stay in the young mind of George Orwell. Socialism was full of promise for the young intellectuals like him. His reaction to life in general is expressed in a couple of his college-day compositions like Awake Young Men of England and Kitchener published in a local daily.
George Orwell had enough education by now. At least his tutor thought so and advised him against university education and suggested of taking up a job abroad. Soon Orwell found himself serving the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, even before he was twenty. This was the major turning point in the life of this partly Anglo-Indian novelist. The job did not suit his temperament. The reason was the British outrageousness. He hated the imperialism in principle and shared the feelings of the oppressed. But in practice remained a British Officer. In his own words:

Theoretically— and secretly, of course—I was all for Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters.

The climate ruined his health and he began to feel certain that the Empire was largely a racket. The British and the native interest constantly clashed in his case. As he was not trained in imperialism he found himself in an awkward position and had to quit his job unable to overcome his feeling of guilt. Although his novel Burmese Days records his experience as a British Officer in Burma, the Anglo-Indian sense of guilt is more obvious in The Road to Wigan Pier, where he writes:

The result is that every Anglo-Indian is haunted by a sense of guilt which he usually conceals as best as he can because there is no freedom of speech and merely to be overheard making a seditious remark may damage his career. All over India there are
Englishmen who secretly loathe the system of which they are a part and just occasionally when they are quite certain of being in the right company their hidden bitterness overflows.

What a bold and candid confession! This speaks in volumes of Orwell's condescending nature. For him such confessional expressions lightened the load of his guilt complex - a rare redemption in repentance! In this way Orwell's anti-imperialism and the hatred of authoritarianism has its roots in his Burmese experiences.

Despite his leaving the job the sense of guilt weighed down on his mind for a long time only to intensify his hatred of tyranny and oppression. For a change he went to Paris in the Spring of 1928. There he stayed in a working class quarters and his search for a livelihood that suited his temperament had begun. Suspecting his success seriously he took up to writing. It was here that Orwell watched poverty from close quarters in all its hues and shades. Poverty for him, like Shaw, was 'the greatest of evils and the worst of crimes'. The psychology of poverty fascinated him and there he lived it and gathered the first hand experience of it. He saw poverty in all its nudity in hospitals, hotels, pawnshops and parks of Paris. Orwell presents a realistic picture of these state of affairs, the sordidness and the squalor in most of his essays and novels. His life with the down-and-outs really enriched his experiences and widened his canvass. Orwell was indeed aware of the enormous injustice and misery of the world.
By then George Orwell had come into existence in the minds of his readers through various articles of sociological interest published during these years in a number of periodicals. Thus he became the socially conscious writer of the thirties rather than the aesthetic writer of the twenties. He evolved himself as a writer through the years of depression and of fascism.

In 1929 George Orwell returned to England with a view to settle down as a writer. Here too for the heck of it he used to go to the tramp and be with the hop-pickers and the working class people. He was horrorstruck to learn the level of degradation and demoralisation to which man was reduced.

For want of some means to earn his bread Orwell even took up the teacher’s job. But there too disillusionment was in store for him. Side by side he wrote reviews and articles which later he felt tiresome and disgusting. Meanwhile he prepared the manuscripts of his novels, the first of which was Down and Out in Paris and London followed by Burmese Days. Then came his The Clergyman’s Daughter and Keep the Asphodistra Flying.

Orwell’s marriage to Eileen O’Shaughnessy in June 1936 was a real turning point in his life. That year he went to Spain attracted by the thrill of participating in the Spanish Civil War. His involvement in political affairs had begun with a bang and being a socialist he found himself in a tight-spot in
Spain. Orwell gradually came to oppose Stalinist Communism and Fascism. By now his immature political ideas had taken a concrete shape in his mind. Socialism was an easy and common solution to all political disparities according to him. His practical experiences in politics and the civil war in Spain made him feel bitter towards the Soviet style of communism, a feeling which he retained till the end of his life.

On return to Willington in 1937 Orwell's new novel Homage to Catalonia was rejected on political grounds. Ill health forced him to spend some time in Morocco where he completed his autobiographical novel Coming Up for air. Back in Willington he settled in his plot of land and there came a lull in his writing activity. By now he was a confirmed tubercular. He joined the Socialist Party for the protection of his own image. Explaining his causerie he wrote:

If Fascism triumphs I am finished as a writer - that is to say, finished in my only effective capacity. That of itself would be a sufficient reason for joining a Socialist Party.

Orwell's inability to take active part in the war due to health problems was a terrible blow for him. He felt restless and finally joined a Home Guard Battalion instead to satiate his militant urge. All the same he kept up his writings. His joining BBC slackened his literary activity. His next masterpiece Animal Farm was published only after he chucked his BBC assignment.

The sun of Orwell's life was now gradually setting with the death of his wife. To be away from everything he went to
Jura island and completed his best novel *1984*. His health deteriorated and hindered his career as a writer. He married Sonia Brownell a few months before he died in January 1950.

It would be truer to say that most of Orwell's important writing is about someone who tries to get away from an oppressive normality but fails. That failure, that re-absorption, happens in the end in all the novels mentioned, though of course, the experience of awareness, rejection and flight has made its important mark. Thus without the act of awareness and rejection he would not, probably, have been a writer at all.

This is the graph of a relatively uneventful and brief span of the great novelist's life. It is remarkable to note that the pattern of his works faithfully reflects the larger pattern of his life. His life's story told in parts in all of his novels and essays taken together takes the shape of a fictionalised autobiography. The various elements of his biography, therefore, have a direct bearing on his works. Thus there is a distant similarity between the predicament of Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eightyfour* and that of the fatalist George Orwell.

---*****---
REFERENCES

Chapter II


