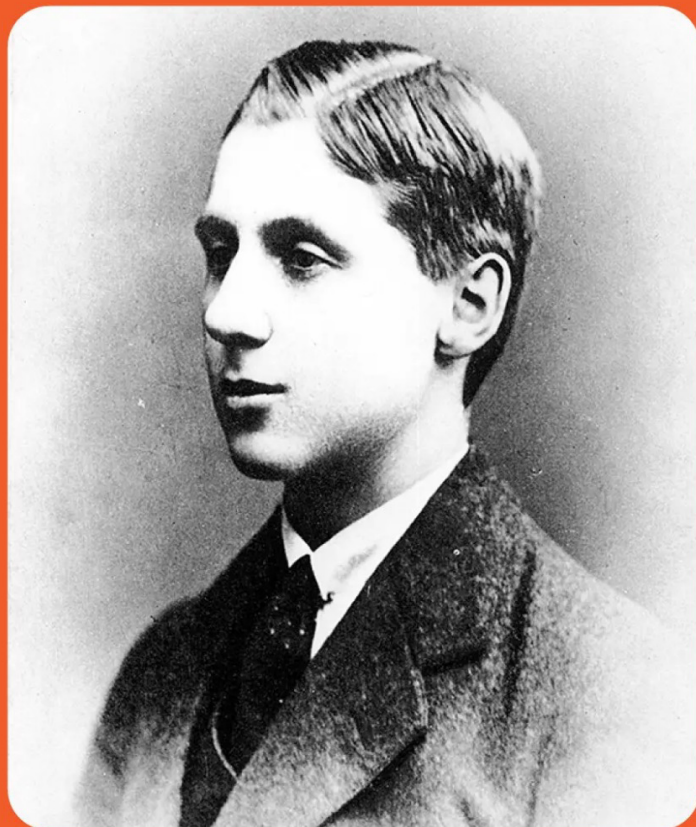
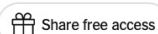


FICTION

Before He Was George Orwell, He Was Eric Blair, Police Officer

Paul Theroux's new novel, "Burma Sahib," explores the writer's formative experiences in colonial Myanmar.



Fresh from his elite school, Eric Blair headed east to British Burma at 19. Private Collection, via Bridgeman Art Library

By William Boyd

William Boyd's most recent novel is "The Romantic."

Feb. 5, 2024

BURMA SAHIB, by Paul Theroux

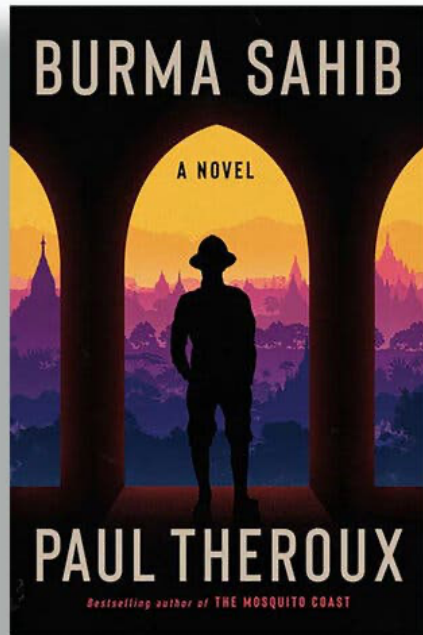
George Orwell died of tuberculosis in 1950, at the age of 46. Yet today, over 70 years later, his long shadow remains as dark and well defined as ever, particularly in Britain, where he is enlisted and quoted as an authority as often as Shakespeare, Winston Churchill or the Bible. The word “[Orwellian](#)” is as omnipresent as “Kafkaesque.” His two dystopian novel-allegories — “Animal Farm” and “1984” — have sold in the millions around the world.

Orwell’s influence extends far past his literary reputation. He has become a kind of posthumous public intellectual, and it’s hard to imagine other figures in literature who command the same import as a sage and a seer. Albert Camus, perhaps? Henry David Thoreau? Walt Whitman? Tolstoy? In any event, the Orwell industry is thriving. Almost everything that Orwell wrote seems to be in print. [Biographies](#) of the man abound.

But there is one area of his life that is relatively unexplored and full of baffling gaps, not to say mystery. In 1922, a 19-year-old man named Eric Blair, fresh from his elite private school, Eton College, traveled to what was then the British colony of Burma (present-day Myanmar) to train and work as a colonial police officer, as many middle-class Englishmen did in those days when a job in the colonies was more easily had than one at home. He was still several years removed from becoming “George Orwell” by adopting the nom de plume that would carry his legacy.

[Paul Theroux](#) has exploited this biographical lacuna with great shrewdness and gusto. He not only knows all the details of Orwell’s life but he also knows Burma well, and his fictional account of Blair’s life there from 1922 to 1927 is a valid and entirely credible attempt to add flesh to the skeletal facts we have of this time.

The narrative follows Blair’s itinerary through Burma — the spells passed in Rangoon and postings to various provincial towns and districts — and it also draws from his 1934 novel, “Burmese Days,” and the celebrated essays “[A Hanging](#)” and “[Shooting an Elephant](#).” Theroux reimagines these familiar scenes with gritty aplomb. If you are going to write fiction about a real person, then there is no point in simply reiterating the received wisdom about that person’s nature or character. He or she must be rendered idiosyncratically; the curated myth must be robustly de-mythologized or else the endeavor is pointless.



Theroux is very much up to the task. His Blair is a somewhat tormented soul, naïve and out of his depth, increasingly uneasy about his responsibilities as a police officer and increasingly repelled by the snobberies and barbarities of colonial life. He's also a victim of the arrogant and resentful bullies who are his superiors. His thoughts, as imagined and detailed by Theroux, are full of anguished questions and examinations of his feelings and motives.

This Blair also has an active sex life with local prostitutes and colonial wives. We know nothing of Orwell's sexual activities during his four and a half years in Burma but everything Theroux writes reeks of plausibility. The deadening torpor of colonial life, its petty jealousies, its social hierarchies, its sexual hypocrisies, its unthinking racism all ring exceptionally true.

Theroux, of course, has a parallel reputation as one of our greatest travel writers, and the Burma that he conjures in these pages is wonderfully present in lush and dense prose:

He was happier in this forest and farmland, the trees dusted gold by the sunset. He felt hopeful — or at least calmer — at dusk, and in the humid darkness he smelled the fragrance of the damp foliage and fresh grass and the

lotuses crowding the ponds. When night fell the darkness was complete and it was as though they were tunneling underground, perfumed by night-blooming trees. He relaxed, the tightness in his body gone; he rolled another cigarette and smoked some more.

The implicit theory behind the novel is that Blair's experiences in Burma made him the writer and thinker who became George Orwell. The point is underlined in the novel's epigraph, a quote from "Burmese Days": "There is a short period in everyone's life when his character is fixed forever." And so Theroux's Blair leaves Burma, after a short period, a different man, embittered by his experience of colonialism and transformed from a lanky schoolboy into a hardened individual ready to reinvent himself as a writer. On the boat homeward he begins the novel that will emerge as "Burmese Days." "George Orwell" is about to come to life.

The late Martin Amis once declared that "novelists tend to go off at 70. ... The talent dies before the body." Theroux is now in his early 80s and this novel is one of his finest, in a long and redoubtable oeuvre. The talent is in remarkable shape.

BURMA SAHIB | By Paul Theroux | Mariner | 390 pp. | \$30

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/05/books/review/george-orwell-burma-sahib-paul-theroux.html>