

THE SPACE AFTERWARDS: 2014 AND A CENTURY OF BRITISH REMEMBRANCE

([HTTPS://SCALAR.USC.EDU/WORKS/THE-SPACE-BETWEEN-LITERATURE-AND-CULTURE-1914-1945/VOL10_2014_TODMAN](https://scalar.usc.edu/works/the-space-between-literature-and-culture-1914-1945/vol10_2014_todman)) (7/12)

Book Review | Orwell Today

Orwell Today. Edited by Richard L. Keeble. Bury St Edmunds: Abramis Academic, 2012. 169 pp. \$24.00 paper.

Reviewed by Krystyna Wieszczyk, University of Southampton

The title of this new essay collection, *Orwell Today*, evokes the urgent call of the newspaper report. The collection's appearance suggests the continued importance of Orwell, a writer who has been the object of interest from both sides of the political spectrum, and whose image has often been reshaped to fit the ideologies and preoccupations of each age. The "today" of Richard Keeble's collection refers more precisely to contemporary critical approaches from contemporary feminist scholarship to ecocriticism that might help us reconsider Orwell's by-now familiar fiction and journalism.

Keeble's introduction "Orwell: The Cultural Icon of Today" implies a recent upsurge in global interest in Orwell's work and legacy. And the collection does not need to look far to make the case for Orwell's continued relevance—at least in the Anglophone world—from the recent biography, through the Orwell Prize, to the Orwell Festival in Letchworth, which generated many of the articles here. The new Orwell biography by Robert Colls (2013) emphasizes a man who was no saint. Although Keeble introduces us at first to a familiar version of Orwell: intellectually honest, with a good sense of humor, and given to confronting failure, he and other contributors to the collection do useful work in "extricating [Orwell] from a pile of saccharine tablets and moist hankies" (5), as Christopher Hitchens once memorably recommended.

The amount of contextual information that tends to furnish the new findings suggests a readership pitched halfway between the aficionado and the uninitiated. The range of the collection, comprising nine articles, is necessarily partial and incomplete, but it certainly indicates some updated ideas and sources for further reading, many authored by the



contributors to the collection themselves. The editor gathers the articles thematically into three sections: “Orwell: The Personal and the Political,” “Orwell and the Media,” and “Orwell’s Politics – Paradoxes, Appropriations and Problematics,” although they defy easy grouping and the gap especially between the first and the third sections may not be so obviously clear-cut.

Kristin Bluemel’s essay, “The Intimate Orwell: Women’s Productions, Feminist Consumption,” opens the first section. It examines the old and playful question of the “intimate Orwell” from a contemporary feminist perspective. Following the pairing of Orwell and Stevie Smith in Bluemel’s *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics* (2004), she presents a sharp and insightful rereading of Orwell’s depiction in Smith’s *The Holiday* (1949). The essay also uncovers Orwell’s attitude toward female friends and notes the feminist lacunae in Orwell scholarship; as Bluemel observes, Orwell studies has been slow to address feminist critiques of his work. Nick Hubble, on the other hand, offers Orwell up as a commentator on working-class masculine culture and discusses Orwell’s “myth of masculinity,” homophobia, “autobiografiction,” political vacillation and opinion on Popular Front. Attempting to determine what we can learn from Orwell about today’s problems, his article draws on the work of Stan Smith, Ben Clarke, and Max Saunders. While Bluemel applauds Clarke’s 2007 book for providing a rare feminist approach to Orwell studies by a male author, Hubble is disappointed that Clarke falls short of offering any helpful elucidation on problems of the working class in this century. Orwell himself falls short in the eyes of Adam Stock who in his essay, too, ends up drawing attention to the questions of gender. Stock examines Orwell’s relationship with nature considering it both as the environment and human biology and finds that somehow Orwell’s acute gift for observation and his awareness of connections between political and social developments fails him when it comes to writing about women or homosexuality. The subject of the natural, as opposed to the acquired, is also touched upon in Beci Dobbin’s vivid essay on Orwell’s squeamishness, which closes the section. Showing how Orwell’s squeamishness produced a schism between his perceptions and his politics, Dobbin traces how this class-specific sensibility became a productive tool of his political expression in later works, especially *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Reading Orwell through the work of David Trotter, Michael Levenson, and Richard Rorty, Dobbin makes a convincing case for squeamishness as “a mode of recoil that may not be dictated” and “describes the only possibly site of resistance” in a totalitarian state (74).

The second section, on Orwell and the media, comprises two articles. The late John Tulloch offers an overview of Orwell’s astonishing number of film reviews and his attitude to the emergent film industry, another underexplored subject of study. In his analysis of the reviews, Tulloch argues for Orwell’s “Edwardianness” and his dislike of Hollywood cinema. While Tulloch mitigates the common complaint that Orwell’s film reviews were hasty and formulaic on account of his being a man of letters and not a performing arts expert, Tim Crook portrays Orwell’s enthusiasm for producing and writing radio drama. He reminds us that Orwell’s involvement with the radio extended much beyond his BBC Eastern Service. Crook also studies the early UK and US radio and screen adaptations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*. He gives particular attention to the often overlooked, even by the likes of John Rodden,

first radio adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from 1949 by NBC which, as he claims, “resisted the Cold War propagandist and ideological morphing” that befell many of his works’ subsequent adaptations and editions (103).

Philip Bounds’s essay opens the last section. The essay explores Orwell’s striking “habit of using communist arguments to make anti-communist points” (129), pointing the interested readers to a further discussion on the subject in his own book. It may usefully contribute to the broadening of our understanding of the notorious question of the appropriations of Orwell by different and often opposed ideologies, one aspect of which is explored in the subsequent essay by James Winter. Winter notes that in 2011 the Canadian press referred to Orwell on average nearly once every day, within both trivial and serious political and environmental matters, and sometimes made “Orwellian use” of his original message by twisting it to suit their particular purpose. Especially chilling are Winter’s references to a *Montreal Gazette* column discussing the Pentagon’s Orwellian uses of euphemisms (146-47). If Orwell’s failures of insight and observation become our own, his satirical targets are also easily co-opted. Winter’s case study together with editor Richard L. Keeble’s introduction provides the clearest evidence of Orwell’s continuing relevance within Anglophone popular culture. Yet Keeble also provides an interesting and original case study of his own to conclude the collection. Informed by broad archival research, it explores Orwell’s complex relationship with the intelligence services and highlights how Orwell’s publications were associated with stark warnings against a totalitarian state, whereas he associated personally with the spooks. The reader can judge whether it was irony, as the author suggests, or simply a real life illustration of Orwellian “doublethink.”

Orwell Today does not provide an integral and systematic overview of the current state of Orwell scholarship, but the nine contributing scholars bring together their expertise in such areas as literature, media, and journalism, and offer a new and updated look at Orwell from diverse foci, often signaling broader discussions elsewhere. The layout and book design may not be very inviting, but the rewards within are rich. The volume will serve as an important update for Orwell scholars and provide a compelling introduction to a writer still fiercely contested, appropriated, and lionized.

« (https://scalar.usc.edu/works/the-space-between-literature-and-culture-1914-1945/vol10_2014_query_review?path=vol10_2014_todman)

Continue to “Book Review | The Love-Charms of Bombs:
Restless Lives in the Second World War”
(https://scalar.usc.edu/works/the-space-between-literature-and-culture-1914-1945/vol10_2014_derdiger_review?path=vol10_2014_todman)

The Space Between Society

Version 1 (https://scalar.usc.edu/works/the-space-between-literature-and-culture-1914-1945/vol10_2014_wieszczek_review.1) of this page, updated 19/10/2015 | All versions (https://scalar.usc.edu/works/the-space-between-literature-and-culture-1914-1945/vol10_2014_wieszczek_review.versions) | Metadata (https://scalar.usc.edu/works/the-space-between-literature-and-culture-1914-1945/vol10_2014_wieszczek_review.meta)



(<http://scalar.usc.edu/scalar>) Powered by Scalar (<http://scalar.usc.edu/scalar>) (2.6.8 (<https://github.com/anvc/scalar>)) | Terms of Service (<http://scalar.usc.edu/terms-of-service/>) | Privacy Policy (<http://scalar.usc.edu/privacy-policy/>) | Scalar Feedback (<http://scalar.usc.edu/contact/>)