



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



The author with Peter Stansky (left), March 2013.

Peter Stansky, Historian and Writer, in Conversation: George Orwell and the Spanish Civil War

Darryl Burrowes

This conversation took place in Peter Stansky's study at his home in Hillsborough California in the afternoon of Sunday 24 March 2013.

Foreword by Darryl Burrowes

*I returned to university in 2011, after several 'gap' decades, to renew an old love affair – the study of the past. It was during this Honours year, while writing a thesis on General Miguel Primo de Rivera, the dictator of Spain from 1923 to 1930, that my passion for the Spanish Civil War was rekindled. Primo de Rivera's dictatorship spawned Spain's progressive Second Republic in 1931, which in turn ignited the 1936 military backlash followed by three years of bitter civil war. I was an adolescent growing up in New Zealand during the sixties. My rite of passage was a romantic fixation with John A. Lee's *Children of the Poor*¹ and a belief in the righteousness of the Spanish Civil War. I had heartfelt empathy for those who took up arms in that honourable cause; a cause which became embodied in intellectual discourses as a universal marker of human ethical behaviour in the first half of the twentieth century in Europe. I imagined myself augmenting the twenty or so New Zealanders who went to fight 'the good fight' on behalf of the legally elected Spanish Republic and against a military coup of disenchanting generals who were aided and abetted by Mussolini and Hitler.*

My PhD research at Flinders University is a natural progression of interests. My current investigation explores the issue of how the Spanish Civil War was represented by key Anglo-American writers and historians who wrote during the Cold War era. Historians do not live in a vacuum; they are influenced by the politics of their time – that is axiomatic. I want to explore how Cold War politics impacted on the production of history, with a special focus on how the communists and the Soviet Union were portrayed in the Spanish Civil War.

¹ Lee was a prominent New Zealand socialist and member of the NZ Labour Party in the twenties and thirties. *Children of the Poor* is an autobiographical portrayal of the poverty he had experienced; it advocates socialist solutions to erase poverty. His radicalism led to his being overlooked for inclusion in New Zealand's first Labour government in 1935 and eventually to his expulsion from the party.

George Orwell died in January 1950. By that time the Cold War was entrenched, and ideological positioning and a terrifying military arms race were undeniable realities. Cultural warfare for the ‘battles for men’s minds’ also became part and parcel of the Cold War. This cultural cold war was initiated in the West to extinguish any lingering fascination held by western intellectuals for Marxism and Communism and was covertly funded by American and British intelligence agencies. Orwell’s books and essays – spawned by his participation in the Spanish conflict – were used as weapons in this cultural cold war.

Peter Stansky

*Peter Stansky is an eminent Emeritus Professor of History, specialising in Modern British History, who has been at Stanford University since 1968. He has two BA degrees, from Yale College in 1953 and from King’s College, Cambridge (UK) in 1955, and a PhD from Harvard University (1961). I sought him out for his expertise on Orwell while I was researching at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University in April 2013. I was aware that Stansky had written two books on Orwell, in collaboration with William Abrahams, *The Unknown Orwell* in 1972, and *Orwell: The Transformation* in 1979. Michael Shelden, the author of *Orwell: The Authorised Biography* (1991), describes Stansky and Abraham’s books as ‘well-written, lively account[s] of [Orwell’s] early life and career, with good comments from a range of interviews’ but which were handicapped by the adamant opposition and refusal of Orwell’s widow Sonia ‘to allow them to quote from her late husband’s works.’²*

Text

What follows is essentially the verbatim transcript of the conversation that took place. It focuses on Orwell and his role in Spain and deals with some of the issues faced by Stansky and Abrahams in writing their Orwell books. The conversation also includes references to three historians who are pivotal in my thesis – Paul Preston, Burnett Bolloten and George Esenwein.

Slight changes have been made to the transcript in the interests of readability, to communicate something of body language, gesture or facial expression. Words printed in upper case indicate a higher than normal expression of volume. Ellipses indicate a pause or change in the direction of thought on the part of the speaker. As for the mise-en-scène, as one would expect from an historian who has plied his craft for more than fifty years, his study creaks with shelves of books. For most of this conversation Peter Stansky stood at the section devoted to tomes on the Spanish Civil War and Orwell.

Burrowes: How long did you travel in Spain?

Stansky: For a month or more one summer in the early 1960s. We had decided not to write about Stephen Spender but tried our best to track Orwell, Cornford and Bell.

B. So how long did it take you to write *Journey to the Frontier*?³

² M. Shelden, *Orwell: The Authorised Biography* (London: Minerva, 1991), 6. Stansky pointed out to me that this is true but there are some quotations in the book that were allowed on the basis of fair usage.

³ *Journey to the Frontier: Julian Bell and John Cornford-Their Lives in the 1930s* (London: Constable, 1966).

S. Several years: it was published in 1966.

B. I wonder where the idea to publish the American edition of, *Homage to Catalonia*, in 1952 came from? Somebody had to initiate the idea? Who initiated the idea?⁴

S. I don't know. The idea of bringing Orwell into print was building. It was in the *zeitgeist*. When I was an undergraduate and did my earlier preliminary work on Orwell ... which was great fun in a way because I virtually lived in the stacks of Yale library and I had to track down all those essays which were all scattered.⁵ I had to track down the ones I was interested in, in the various journals ... *Dickens, Dali and others*, I think it was published in Orwell's lifetime,⁶ *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were huge successes because they were adopted by the Book-of-the-Month Club, which at that time was incredibly important. My parents were members. Do you remember the Book-of-the-Month Club?

B. Yes I do.

S. They would select a book of the month and you had the option to say you didn't want it, but you had to be proactive to stop it coming, otherwise you would get a book a month. I'm pretty sure both, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, certainly *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, were selections for Book-of-the-Month Club.⁷

B. Well, that was a bit of luck for Orwell because that would have generated huge amounts of sales, wouldn't it? It's like *Wigan Pier* generated huge amounts of sales because it was a Left Book Club selection in England.⁸

S. I have the Left Book club edition.

⁴ This question was apropos of fact that George Orwell's memoir, *Homage to Catalonia*, was written in 1937 and published in the United Kingdom in 1938. The book did not make much impact when it was first published. Publisher Frederik Warburg recalls, '1,500 copies' were printed and that it sold 683 copies in its first six months, 'thereafter its annual sale was less than fifty copies [and] the remaining copies of the first edition stayed in our warehouse until Orwell's death, when it sold rapidly.'

F. Warburg, *An Occupation for Gentlemen* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1959) 238.

⁵ Stansky is referring to Orwell's essays which at that time were not published as a set of complete works. A four volume set of essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, was eventually published in 1968.

⁶ Stansky is correct. *Dickens, Dali and others* was first published in April 1946 and Orwell died in January 1950.

⁷ According to <http://georgeorwellnovels.com>: 'A Book-of-the-Month Club edition [of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*] was issued in the United States in July 1949, and by March 1952 had sold 190,000 copies.'

<http://georgeorwellnovels.com/books/publication-of-nineteen-eighty-four> , Accessed 18/11/2013.

⁸ *The Road to Wigan Pier* was published as a Left Book Club edition in March 1937. The Left Book Club was set up in early 1936 and lasted until 1948. Its aim was to provide inexpensive books of a political nature to a 'previously untapped' left-wing audience. It exceeded the expectations of its founders, John Strachey and Victor Gollancz, and attained 40,000 members by the end of its first year and by April 1939 it had 57,000 members, but an estimated readership of a quarter of a million. For more information see Stuart Samuels, 'The Left Book Club', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1.2 (1966) 65-86.

B. Don't talk about those Left Book Club books. I'm really cross about that because my father-in-law in Belfast was a subscriber...

S. He had them?

B. Yes, he had them but then my brother-in-law got rid of them all. I don't know how many there were but my wife remembers that there were quite a lot on their shelves.

S. If you went to a house and you saw on a shelf a row of these orange books you knew you were in a politically sympathetic atmosphere. It was a huge success ... Gollancz was so irritated by parts of *The Road to Wigan Pier* though, he wrote an introduction saying what was wrong with it.⁹

B. Yes. Did you ever meet Gollancz?

S. No, but actually I've just been writing about him a little. It's the way in England everything connects ... my current project is Edward Upward who went to Repton and Gollancz taught at Repton at the end of the First World War and he was fired for being too radical and then he went into publishing.¹⁰

B. I think maybe I'm reading too much into the timing of the American publication of *Homage to Catalonia*. If Orwell's popularity had increased because of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it's obvious someone would 'rediscover' *Homage* and publish it. But why pick Lionel Trilling to write an introduction to it?¹¹

S. Well, Trilling was a very prominent literary critic. Somebody must have known he liked Orwell ... and there were all these political fights going on among the *Partisan Review* group

⁹ Victor Gollancz was Orwell's first publisher. He was the UK's most influential left-wing publisher and published the Left Book club editions. Gollancz had, 'commissioned Orwell to write a book about the condition of the unemployed in the industrial north of England' with a £500 advance. According to Bernard Crick, an Orwell biographer, Gollancz wrote an introduction in order to pacify left-wing dissatisfaction with the content of the book. The introduction warned readers that the second half of the book was 'very eccentric and disputatious' and that 'no reader must forget that Mr Orwell is throughout writing precisely as a member of the "lower-upper-middle class"'. B. Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) 278, 309-10. Gollancz and Orwell eventually had a falling out over, *Homage to Catalonia*, and Secker & Warburg became Orwell's preferred publisher in the UK.

¹⁰ Stansky is referring to English novelist and short story writer, Edward Upward. Gollancz was considered unfit for overseas service during the First World War and he was sent to teach at Repton School. Stansky is using Upward, Gollancz and Repton to emphasize his belief that 'everything connects in England'.

¹¹ I am influenced here by the revelations that surfaced in the sixties that publishing houses were covertly funded by the CIA during the Cold War to publish the works of anti-communist authors. Frances Stonor Saunders in *The Cultural Cold War* writes that the publisher, Frederick Praeger 'published between twenty and twenty-five volumes in which the CIA had an interest, either in the writing, the publication itself, or the distribution. Praeger says they either reimbursed him directly for the expenses of publication, or guaranteed, usually through a foundation, the purchase of enough copies to make it worthwhile.' (244-50). I was wondering if it was possible Harcourt, Brace & Company, the American publisher of *Homage to Catalonia*, could have benefitted from such CIA largesse.

Peter Stansky, historian and writer, in conversation: George Orwell and the Spanish Civil War.

Darryl Burrowes.

Writers in Conversation Vol. 1 no. 1, February 2014

http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

and they were splitting over Communism.¹² ... This is a facsimile edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [Stansky holds up the book].

B. When did you say you started working on your book, *Journey to the Frontier*?

S. Oh, in the sixties.

B. Are you a quick writer?

S. Medium, I'd say. I was a Faculty member and Billy was an editor. In order to get Billy away from editorial work we took a freighter from here [San Francisco] to Tilbury. It took a month. Nowadays with computers and such you wouldn't be out of touch. But then, it meant Billy couldn't do any work on his publishing.¹³

B. Is Billy still alive?

S. No, no. He died a long time ago, in 1998.

B. Did you meet Richard Blair [Orwell's adopted son]?

S. No. We went up to see Avril [Orwell's sister] and her husband. And of course Orwell disapproved because Avril married the hired man and Orwell really disapproved on class terms.¹⁴

B. Some authors say Orwell was loner, but he doesn't seem to be to me. He seems to have had quite a network of people. I don't know who said he was a loner but then, there were those first few books that were published in the fifties. I call them the 'non-biographies', they really were biographies but they pretended to be other. They pretended to be works of literary criticism, for example, John Atkins's book.¹⁵ They virtually are biographies.

¹² *Partisan Review* had been set up by some New York City College Trotskyists in the thirties, 'to articulate Marxist ideas' in 'sophisticated language'. However its raison d'être changed with the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact and it became distinctly anti-Stalinist in tone. cf F. Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War* (New York: The New Press, 1999) 160. After World War Two it was funded by the American Committee for Cultural Freedom and the Congress of Cultural Freedom which were organizations that were in turn covertly funded by the CIA. cf Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1989) 230.

¹³ Billy was Stansky's sometimes co-author, William Abrahams. At this time Billy worked for Atlantic Press. In 1967 he was appointed the editor at Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

¹⁴ Stansky was referring to Bill Dunn, an ex-army officer who had returned from the Great War with a wooden leg. He was employed as a labourer on Orwell's property on Jura. Bernard Crick concurs with Stansky that Orwell was unhappy about the relationship that had developed between Avril and Dunn and writes: 'He [Orwell] was somewhat shocked when he discovered the obvious reason for Avril's happiness and Bill's familiarity'. B. Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, 545.

¹⁵ J. Atkins, *George Orwell: A Literary Study* (London: John Calder, 1954).

S. Well, there is no question that Orwell said there shouldn't be a biography. And that's what Sonia¹⁶ accused us of being – too biographical. She wasn't justified but once we broke ... I mean if we had kept on good terms we might have made *The Unknown Orwell* less biographical than it became ... but once we broke we could write what we wanted. So it is a sort of critical biographical study. *Journey to the Frontier* had demonstrated that we were interested in biography.¹⁷ But we said to Sonia, one reason ... and there were several reasons as to why our Orwell book was to be a separate book ... but one reason was that our approach to Orwell could be different, it wouldn't necessarily be the same as the biographical approach we had taken with Cornford and Bell.¹⁸

B. I think I have read somewhere why Orwell had that attitude about a biography. Someone or other's biography had been published to which the wife had given her permission and Orwell thought it was SHOCKING and said to Sonia, you would NEVER do this to me would you? Does this ring any bells with you Peter?¹⁹

S. No it doesn't ... You know we also went to see Richard Rees.²⁰

B. What did you think of him?

S. I liked him a lot. He said that Orwell felt no biography ... no history text for that matter ... has everything or can be completely truthful. Rees didn't take the stipulation against biography very seriously. And of course it didn't have any legal effect. I mean, it was just a wish.

B. These early writers just don't use the name biography. I mean Richard Rees's book was practically a biography wasn't it?²¹

¹⁶ Sonia Brownell became Orwell's second wife on 15 October 1949 at a ceremony at his hospital sickbed. Orwell died of tuberculosis on 21 January 1950. Although she was legally Mrs Blair she used Orwell as her own surname.

¹⁷ The extent to which Sonia opposed Stansky and Abrahams is obvious from a letter written by Bill Javanovich [Orwell's American publisher] to Fredric Warburg (Orwell's British publisher) on 11 October 1966. Javanovich writes: 'There is absolutely no substance in the rumour that Sonia has authorized Stansky or Abrahams, or both, to write a biography. In fact, she says she would do all she could to stop such a work. Sonia talked with these men several years ago at a time when they wanted to write about not only Cornford and Bell but also Spender and Orwell as participants in the Spanish Civil War. She says she disliked these authors intensely, and when she saw that they were moving in the direction of writing about personalities rather than "history," she cut off correspondence with them.'

¹⁸ Stansky and Abrahams had originally intended their book, *Journey to the Frontier*, to include Orwell and Spender as well as Bell and Cornford.

¹⁹ The incident I was alluding to here is recounted in Hilary Spurling's, *The Girl from the Fiction Department: A Portrait of Sonia Orwell*, (New York: Centrepont, 2002, 149-50). Spurling writes: 'Sonia knew at first hand how fiercely her husband had guarded his own and his family's privacy. She told Ian [Angus] that George had been so infuriated by a life of Joseph Conrad written by his widow that he hurled it across the room, saying to Sonia (who was mystified): "Never do that to me."'

²⁰ Rees was editor of the literary journal, *The Adelphi*, in the thirties and encouraged Orwell as a writer. He volunteered in the Spanish Civil War as an ambulance driver in Catalonia. After Orwell's death he and Sonia became joint literary executors of Orwell's estate.

S. Well, a sort of study.

B. I have read somewhere that the biography that had upset Orwell was full of muckraking. I don't know how much truth there is to that, or whether Orwell just wanted to control his own legacy. That's too far-fetched isn't it?

S. Well, I just think it might have been out of some modesty ... of course, you know John Rodden's big book ?

B. I probably do. Is it called, *Every Intellectual's Big Brother*? Is that the Rodden book you are referring to?²²

S. No ... but have you seen Peter Carroll's book?²³ [Stansky picks it up from the shelf].

B. No, I haven't seen Peter Carroll's book actually. Do you recommend it?

S. I think it's a very good book. And here's the Australian, Amirah Inglis ... [takes her book from the shelf].

B. Yes, I know of her. She is not actually a professional historian but I don't think that matters at all. What's it called?

S. Oh it's very straightforward – *Australians in the Spanish Civil War*.

B. You were going to tell me what your impressions of Paul Preston were.²⁴

S. One time I met him we just spoke very briefly. It was at a publication party for A.J.P. Taylor's memoirs. I remember the reception. It's not very relevant but the two things I remember ... A J P Taylor's last wife was Hungarian and I was saying goodbye to her and she said, that's the problem with English parties, nobody introduces anybody to anybody else. 'Now for instance, do you know this person here I'm talking to?' To which I said, 'no I don't.' And she said, 'it's Paul Preston.' I said, 'PAUL PRESTON, I'm very pleased to meet you.' And she said, 'you see introductions should be made.' So we had a brief conversation I guess about Spain. But also I remember it was the same time that there was all this dispute and fight going on, where Hugh Trevor-Roper had said the 'Hitler Diaries' were real. After the party I took a taxi and the taxi driver turned to me and he said, 'Have you heard? It's a

²¹ Richard Rees book is *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961).

²² Stansky was referring to Rodden's *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell*.

²³ Carroll published, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* in 1994.

²⁴ Paul Preston is the pre-eminent British historian on the Spanish Civil War and the author of fifteen major works. He holds Spain's greatest honour, the Gran Cruz de la Orden de Isabel la Católica and edits the Cañada Blanch series of books on contemporary Spain of which there are currently fifty titles.

forgery. Trevor-Roper has admitted it was a forgery.²⁵ It was wonderful to have this level of interest from a taxi driver. So it was an historical day, A.J.P. Taylor and Trevor-Roper, who of course hated one another. Another time I met Preston was just at a seminar. It was interesting. Preston talked about these various Russians who had been in Spain during the Civil War but I thought he was very short on the reasons why Stalin purged them after the war.

B. Preston's a very prolific writer. Last year, *The Spanish Holocaust*, came out – quite a controversial title.²⁶

S. Yes, he's quite conscious it's controversial to call it a holocaust but I was sympathetic to his approach.

B. I have this feeling that Franco was too often seen ... now this is anecdotal, but when I was at school, at a Catholic school in New Zealand, all those years ago, we were taught how bad and awful Hitler and Mussolini were but Franco was never put into that realm. I think Preston is reacting against this type of attitude and repositioning Franco if you like, because he was a pretty evil dictator, Franco. And I often wonder if that soft critical approach to Franco that I experienced at school in the sixties was part of the Cold War rebranding process of Franco from fascist dictator to worthwhile ally against the communism.²⁷

S. There's a book been written, which I reviewed for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade publication *The Volunteer*, about Britain and Spain during the war. It shows that Britain was really very clever in keeping Spain neutral although to a degree Franco was helpful to Hitler ... the British were trying to ensure that he wasn't more so. And there is also the argument that Franco may or may not have helped or allowed his people in Spain to help but didn't prevent them from helping Jews of Sephardic descent. Because I think there were some Sephardic communities in Greece that with the cooperation of the Spanish Consul-General, were helped to get out and get to Spain and then leave Spain. And very rapidly Franco was seen as an ally in the Cold War.

B. Yes it was but I don't think Eisenhower liked him at all.

²⁵ In 1983 Hugh Trevor-Roper, an experienced and reputable historian who in the past had been very critical of others with flawed process, made his own over-hasty decision to authenticate the 'Hitler Diaries'. He was under pressure for a speedy decision from his 'boss' Rupert Murdoch, who wanted his newspaper, *The Times*, to be the first to publish the 'Diaries' in serialized form, and make huge profits in the process. Trevor-Roper was enticed by the sheer number of 'Diaries' (sixty-two) and made the reputation-tarnishing decision to authenticate. Within two weeks, the West German *Bundesarchiv* revealed that the Hitler Diaries were grotesquely superficial fakes made on modern paper using modern ink and full of historical inaccuracies.

²⁶ *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: HarperPress, 2012).

²⁷ After World War II Franco was not removed from power and democracy was not restored to Spain by the victorious Allies who had ostensibly fought for democracy. To the contrary his regime was befriended and nurtured by the Allies because he was seen as a political necessity in the new Cold War world, so he had to be reinvented, if not exactly as a 'good guy', at least as a harmless, stable and necessary ally against the spread of communism from Russia.

S. No, I don't think anybody liked him. People on the left were caught, they hated war and they hated Fascism, and so those hates were in conflict, and in the Labour Party I think the hatred of war outweighed the hatred of Fascism, while other parts of the Left increasingly felt the hatred of Fascism was more important than the hatred of war.

B. Yes ... Do you like Orwell's writing?

S. Yes. I think he's a wonderful writer.

B. Do you like his essays more than his novels?

S. Well in many ways I think his essays are the greatest writing. I like *Burmese Days* a lot. Some people love *Coming Up For Air*, which I enjoy.

B. Of course *Burmese Days* was published in America. Gollancz wouldn't publish it. He was worried ...

S. NO! NO! I think the English edition was first but somewhat bowdlerised.

B. Oh yes, that's right.

S. The American one is the original and then of course he wasn't published in America again until *Animal Farm*. I think he is a wonderful prose writer. *Shooting an Elephant* is one of the greatest things ever written about the true nature of imperialism.

B. And you like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?

S. Yes. It's a bit heavy handed, but I think it's very powerful and I regard it as not being anti-Socialist but what Socialism might become.

B. Do you think it would be silly of me to refer to three of Orwell's books as his Spanish Trilogy? *Homage to Catalonia*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm* – just because they were inspired by what he saw in Spain.

S. I don't think there is any question that the lessons he took from Spain were how fragile the revolution was and how easy it was to be betrayed. Barcelona had been even more revolutionary earlier, before Orwell arrived there, but it was still somewhat revolutionary. You know, he went to be a reporter. He didn't go to fight and he said this is the great society, this is the new world.²⁸

²⁸ The Spanish Civil War was the result of a failed military coup against the legitimately elected Republican government on 17 July 1936. The coup set in motion a bold, social and anarchist experiment of collectivization in the cities and countryside that was to last until mid 1937 when the central government eventually, and with some brutality, regained control, aided and abetted by a greatly strengthened Communist Party. Orwell had arrived in Barcelona at the end of December 1936 so he witnessed this revolution and more importantly its snuffing out during the so called 'May Days' of 1937. The events he witnessed are retold in his memoir, *Homage to Catalonia*.

B. So Peter you think Orwell never intended to go to fight. Warburg in his memoir,²⁹ which I confess I have problems as to its reliability at times, says he remembers Orwell coming into his office and saying, 'I'm going over there. I've got to help out those Spaniards.'³⁰

S. Well, he could have said that. He was going to help through his writing. I think he went to report.

B. Then why did he take those clothes with him? Boots and stuff as if he was equipping himself to fight?³¹

S. Well it's a long time since I looked into all this but I do think that he thought that this is the new world. I mean this is the world as it should be. This is the world of equality.

B. And he didn't know this before he went to Spain.

S. He saw it in the atmosphere of Barcelona.

B. And he was captivated by it. Wasn't he?

S. Yes. I think it was a sort of ideological awakening for Orwell. When we were in England we went to see John McNair. He lived in Newcastle.³²

B. Did you really? Gosh, you saw a lot of people.

S. Yes. A lot of people were still alive. We saw people who were at school with Orwell. We saw Cyril Connolly who was with him at St Cyprian's and Eton and the wonderful thing was we went to see Mrs Vaughan Wilkes.³³

²⁹ Fredric Warburg, *An Occupation for Gentlemen* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1959). Fredric Warburg replaced Victor Gollancz as Orwell's publisher.

³⁰ On re-reading the quote I agree with Stansky. The exact quote from pages 231-2 of Warburg's memoir is as follows: 'Of his [Orwell's] first meeting with me I remember little. It was short, business-like, and highly undramatic. "I want to go to Spain and have a look at the fighting," he said, "write a book about it. Good chaps, those Spaniards, can't let them down. Can probably give you the book a month or two after I get back." Some such words as these were the prelude to the signature of a contract which was the most important in my [Warburg's] whole career.'

³¹ Here I was referring to descriptions of Orwell that indicate he was well kitted out. The British volunteer Bob Edwards remembers: 'He [Orwell] wore corduroy riding breeches, khaki puttees and huge boots, I've never seen boots that were so large. He had a yellow pigskin jerkin, a coffee coloured balaclava hat and he wore the longest scarf I've ever seen, khaki scarf wrapped round and round his neck right up to his ears.' Quoted in B. Crick, *George Orwell*, 324-5.

³² John McNair was a committed socialist and a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and ran the Party's Barcelona office, coordinating the money and materials and men that had been sent from Britain to support the POUM – the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista, a quasi-Trotskyist party which was hated by the Communist Party. When Orwell arrived in Barcelona he went and saw McNair who arranged for him to fight in a POUM unit.

³³ Orwell spent a miserable six years at St Cyprian's Preparatory school as a scholarship boy on reduced fees. The school was run by Mr and Mrs Vaughan Wilkes and Orwell described them and the school in terms even he believed were, 'too libellous to print', in his essay 'Such, Such Were the Joys'. Orwell portrayed a school of 'cruelty,

B. I don't know her.

S. **YES YOU DO. It was a wonderful essay – 'Such, Such Were the Joys'.**

B. Oh yes, of course.

S. **She was the headmistress and she told us Orwell was, 'Such, a poor little boy. I tried to be nice to him.' You know she prevented publication of 'Such, Such Were the Joys' and it wasn't published in England until after her death. It was published in America before her death. Some people said Orwell didn't mean it to be published, but I don't think that's true. I don't think a writer writes anything he doesn't mean to be published.**³⁴

B. Yes, I agree.

S. **We had gone to see her because Connolly had said to us, 'you must go and see Mrs Vaughan Wilkes. She is still alive.' We said, 'have you seen her?' You know, here was Cyril Connolly, this very eminent literary figure, and he said to us, 'No! I'd be too scared.' This was the terror the woman had instilled in a schoolboy. After she died, we saw Connolly once again and he said, 'I went to her funeral. I wanted to be sure she was dead.' So she inspired strong feeling. We were in touch with people who knew Orwell at Eton such as Denys King-Farlow, but also John Lehmann, who was great friend of Julian Bell and who was Orwell's fag at Eaton, and also Steven Runciman. So we were in touch with quite a few people who knew him at Eton because after all this was the 60s and these people would have been in their sixties. They weren't all that old.**

D. It sounds very exciting and in a way I'm doing something similar. I'm seeing you, Gabriel Jackson and Paul Preston.³⁵

S. **Preston is presumably younger than I am and Jackson older.**

B. Preston's three years older than me.

S. **I wouldn't trust Radosh.**³⁶

favouritism, snobbery, bad teaching, filth and bullying'. Mr Vaughan Wilkes was nicknamed 'Sambo' and his wife 'Flip'. The nickname 'Flip' alluded to Mrs Vaughan Wilkes's 'well-developed bust' which tended to 'flip-flop' as she walked. cf B. Crick, *George Orwell*, 71-3. Stansky believes the teaching at the school by the standards of the time was probably good and helped Orwell to get admission to Eton and Wellington.

³⁴ The essay was commonly thought to have been written in 1947 but Crick believes several factors suggest an earlier date. cf B. Crick, *George Orwell*, 586-9. It was not published until 1968 in the UK, a few months after Mrs Vaughan Wilkes's death at the age 92. A version was published in the USA by *Partisan Review* in 1952 and a year later Harcourt Brace Jovanovich published it in a book of essays of the same name. In both these early American editions the name St Cyprian's was changed to 'Crossgates' and the names of the students were changed. Orwell's essay was finally published in its original form in Peter Davison's, *The Complete Works of George Orwell* in 1998.

³⁵ I interviewed Gabriel Jackson, author of *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War 1931 -1939* (1965) at his home in Ohio and Paul Preston at his home in London.

³⁶ Stansky is referring to the neo-conservative American historian Ronald Radosh.

Peter Stansky, historian and writer, in conversation: George Orwell and the Spanish Civil War.

Darryl Burrowes.

Writers in Conversation Vol. 1 no. 1, February 2014

http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

B. I'm not sure if my thesis will deal with him. It may stop before him but it will depend on how much I find out. I think Radosh's neo-conservative perspective is important AND because he edited this book after the Russian archives opened up in the nineties, which emphasises the evils of the Russians in Spain and mentions Preston as being flawed but promotes Bollothen.³⁷

S. **The Russians and Communists behaved horribly and did terrible, terrible, things. On the other hand I hate the red-baiting. To put it another way, I think you can attack what the Russians did.**

B. Are you talking about in Spain?

S. **In Spain, but so many of these people are using it. They are using it as weapons in the Cold War. I rather fear that Orwell would rather approve of using the bad things the Russians did in Spain as weapons in the Cold War.**

B. I think I agree with you.

S. **But I'm sad about that.**

B. Is that because of the list of names he gives ...

S. **Yes, yes. As I say, I think he became obsessed and he became legitimately furious. *Homage to Catalonia*, is a wonderful book. I love it. So he wrote this terrific book that raised doubts about the Russians and it got suppressed. I mean it wasn't totally suppressed.**

B. No, it got published, but I don't think it got really favourable reviews that would sell it.

S. **It got a reaction, an understandable but terrible reaction. You may be right, but the attitude was we want to get on with the Russians because the greatest enemy is Hitler and to be anti-Russian is bad in terms of – we want Russia as an ally.**

B. And as time progresses Spain is irrelevant in a way. It's done and dusted and they want to maintain the Russian alliance and not give cause to offend the Russians, so there is a new pressure of keep *Homage to Catalonia* out of the public domain.

³⁷ The book referred to is, R. Radosh, Mary Halbeck and Grigory Sevostianov (eds), *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union and the Spanish Civil War*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001. Burnett Bollothen is a featured historian in my thesis. He had been in Spain when the Spanish Civil War ignited and became a United Press war correspondent reporting from the Republican zone. After the war he dedicated himself to writing what he believed would be a 'definitive' history of the war which would reveal the real role the Communists and the USSR played in crushing Spain's anarchist revolution. Bollothen acknowledged his ambitious objective in a letter to Antonio Villanueva, dated 30 June 1949: 'I am making every effort to write the most seriously documented book [and] no possible source of information has been neglected in the hope of obtaining all the available data on the subject and making the work a definitive history.' Antonio Villanueva-Bollothen Correspondence, Hoover Institution, Box 7, Folder 25.

S. Yes. Churchill's famous remark, you know, 'I would say good things about the devil, if he were an ally.'

B. An intriguing man, Churchill. And apparently he [Churchill] had four different positions on Spain over the period of the Spanish Civil War... It must have been quite exciting for Orwell because he got involved in all this intrigue that was taking place in Barcelona. If he hadn't gone to Spain when he did and he'd gone at a different time, he would probably have been in the International Brigades and seen action down in Madrid. Some people would say he would have seen the real war then because he wasn't seeing the real civil war on the Aragón Front because it was a non-front. They say he was participating in a non-front. And then, when he returned to Barcelona on leave the May Days had begun and he got involved and witnessed all this repression. After that, he returned to the front and nearly got killed with a bullet in the neck and it was back to Barcelona again and more intrigue, with agents bursting into his room because they had him listed down as unreliable and had a warrant for his arrest.

S. Oh yes, he had to hide out and we [Stansky and Abrahams] climbed to the top where Orwell had mounted guard – the Falcon theatre.³⁸

B. I think it is too strong to brand Orwell as colluding with the intelligence services after 1945. Don't you?

S. Yes, but I dislike the list.³⁹

B. But it was not a blacklist like an 'un-American activities list'. It was a list, correct me if I'm wrong, of people Orwell thought were too unreliable to be paid to write about the Soviet Union.

S. Well he's labelling, he's blackballing them ... you know – these are bad people who are too much fellow travelers.

B. And you don't know how it affected their career prospects do you?

S. And was SHE a government employee?⁴⁰

B. She was working in the Information ...

S. But it wasn't MI5?

³⁸ Stansky is referring to the chaotic 'May Days' which lasted for four days in 1937. Orwell spent three of these days on the roof of the cinema opposite the POUM headquarters protecting access to the building.

³⁹ Stansky is referring to what has become known as 'Orwell's List'. cf footnote 40.

⁴⁰ 'SHE' is Celia Kirwan who worked for the Information Research Department. Orwell gave her a list of names in 1949 of notable writers and other persons he considered to be unsuitable as possible writers for the Information Research Department's anti-communist propaganda activities. He believed them to be crypto-communists, fellow-travellers or inclined that way and should not be trusted as propagandists.

B. It was a part of it. NO, NO! It was part of the foreign office not MI5.

S. I don't think it was a nice thing to do. I don't approve of it.

B. It was called the Information Research Department. Its role was to create propaganda to persuade intellectuals and the public that the Soviet Union was bad and Communism was bad and treacherous.

S. In a way it was almost a sort of pointless list. In the sense that she [Kirwan] would have known full well that most of those people weren't going to write or were not likely to write anti-Russian things. But it was labeling. I mean, I think it was a bad thing to do and I think it had some significance, but I think it was casual.

I love the essay, 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War'. I think it's very powerful. I think it's wonderful. Isn't 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War' where it ends with Orwell shaking hands?

B. Yes, that's a terrific essay and the, 'Spilling the ... Beans' one.⁴¹ Orwell was cross, because he couldn't get a publisher for *Homage*, so he tried to get this very brief essay published and he had trouble doing that as well. He eventually did but in a minor publication that people weren't going to read, which made him more angry and I think he saw it as a sort of conspiracy.

S. But of course, I think the point in a way is, he was anti-Russian and the thing I think that is sort of intriguing about Orwell is that he is both a premature anti-fascist and a premature anti-communist and so he is suppressed as an anti-communist early on and then he is taken up with the Cold War.

But what would the CIA have tampered with in terms of the Second Spanish Republic?⁴²

B. Oh, the role and the extent of the repression that took place against the anarchist movement and other movements as the central government tried to reassert its control.

S. I mean would the CIA have been sophisticated enough to plant documents about the POUM? Was there more and more attention paid to the May Days? How does Bollothen change? What happens in the subsequent editions of his book?

B. Bollothen doesn't change too much on what happened in the early book. They are not new books. They are extensions because he concluded his first book, *The Grand Camouflage ...*⁴³

⁴¹ This refers to Orwell's essay, 'Spilling the Spanish Beans' published in *New English Weekly*, September 1937.

⁴² Paul Preston, Herbert Southworth et al have claimed that the CIA attempted post-1945 to manipulate the historiography of the Spanish Civil War and besmirch the role played by the Communists and the USSR in supporting the Second Spanish Republic simply because it was the last remaining jewel in the Communist's crown.

⁴³ Burnett Bolloten wrote three books; *The Grand Camouflage: The Communist Conspiracy in the Spanish Civil War* (1961), *The Spanish Revolution: The Left and the Struggle for Power during the Civil War* (1979), *The Spanish Civil War* (published posthumously 1991).

S. I think that's the only one I read. It was probably the only one available when I was working on Orwell.

B. Yes, I'm sure it was because that's the one that came out in 1961. It took him about twelve years or so to find a publisher and the publisher added the subtitle, *The Communist Conspiracy in the Spanish Civil War*. Bolloten didn't even want that subtitle because he felt it was too inflammatory to a lot of people. I think that book ended in 1937, and so the next volume, *The Spanish Revolution*, published in 1979, was extended by two hundred or so pages and took the story on a little further, until the third and last volume, *The Spanish Civil War* – a mighty tome of a thousand pages.

S. Maybe I don't have them all. I think I have two, but there were three?

B. There were three. Southworth says Bolloten really only wrote one book. You know Southworth is very interesting.⁴⁴ There's a guy over in New York, Sebastiaan Faber. Have you heard of him?

S. Yes. He's at Oberlin College. Well he's Peter's successor.⁴⁵

B. [Stansky holds up a book he has found] Yes, that's Bolloten's the second book. Is there a Foreword in there by Stanley Payne?⁴⁶

S. No. There is a Foreword by a more eminent historian in my view – Raymond Carr.

B. Raymond Carr is still alive.

S. Yes. He's just published a memoir I think. He is very much an English gentleman. He's devoted to fox hunting.⁴⁷

B. He was going to be Paul Preston's DPhil supervisor at Oxford. However, when Preston arrived at Oxford, Carr was in America on a lecture tour or something. Now this is just an interesting story that Preston told me – it's not secret or anything. Carr returned after a year and Preston had been doing his dissertation with ... Oh, I've just forgotten who he was doing it with – some eminent scholar. Anyway, when Carr came back they met – Preston uses the word 'coincided', and Preston told Carr that he was researching the extreme Right in Spain in the Civil War. And Carr said to him, 'YOU can't do that, Blinkhorn is doing similar', and he told

⁴⁴ Herbert Southworth is another of the historians who features in my thesis. He could reasonably be described as a forensic historian who conclusively proved that Gernika was bombed by the German airforce at the behest of the Franco rebels during the civil war, and not by the Catalans themselves as Francoist historians claimed.

⁴⁵ Stansky is referring to the position of Chair of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. Peter Carroll used to be the Chair prior to Faber taking over.

⁴⁶ Payne is an eminent conservative American historian of the Spanish Civil War.

⁴⁷ The book referred to here is actually a biography by María Jesús Gonzáles, *Raymond Carr: The Curiosity of the Fox* (2013).

Preston to change it. So Preston, after a year changed his thesis to incorporate a study of the Left.⁴⁸

WOW! IS THAT BOLLOTEN? [Stansky is holding up a newspaper cutting] Is that Burnett Bolloten? NOW that's the first photograph I've seen of him.

S. Now here's a review [Stansky passes it to me] of Bolloten's book by Anthony Burgess, of all people. And here is a reply by George Esenwein.⁴⁹

B. Peter I was going to ask you about institutionality – an ugly word. Do think historians are influenced by their surroundings?

S. Oh sure yes.

B. It's axiomatic. But how does it work? How does that process happen?

S. The zeitgeist.

B. Yes ... OK. Sebastiaan Faber talks about institutionality ...

S. Sebastiaan, who I know slightly, is a professor of literature and they use fancy words.

B. It's an ugly word but I quite like it. Institutionality is academia, I suppose. So, it works for good and it nourishes and encourages but it also can curtail and bully. It can be a surveillance and a control mechanism. From your experience would you agree with this?

S. I think it's very hard to answer. I think an institution tries to tame you a bit to be an orthodox scholar but on the other hand I think one has extraordinary freedom. I mean you have to write in order to have a successful career. You have to write acceptable work. On the other hand controversial books are frequently and ultimately more important than books that don't upset anybody. But what's the question?

B. George Esenwein would say there is a control on the way historians interpret the Spanish Civil War. For example lots of scholars think that Bolloten is correct but it's politically incorrect, for want of a better phrase, to come out and actually support the Bolloten perspective on the Spanish Civil War because this other group is controlling the narrative. Do you think this is a possibility?

⁴⁸ The eminent scholar was Hugh Seton-Watson. Martin Blinkhorn was researching the Carlists (monarchists). In fact Preston's thesis looked at the conflict between the two great mass parties in the Spanish Republic – the left-wing PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) and the right-wing CEDA (Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas). Preston's thesis was eventually published as the book, *The Coming of the Spanish Civil War*.

⁴⁹ Esenwein was Bolloten's friend and amanuensis. He has become an historian of the Spanish Civil War in his own right and is currently Associate-Professor of History at the University of Florida. He has co-authored with Adrian Shubert, *Spain at War: The Spanish Civil War in Context, 1931-1936*, (1995). In 1989 he published, *Anarchist Ideology and the Working-Class Movement in Spain, 1868-1898* and in 2005, *The Spanish Civil War: A Modern Tragedy*.

S. Do we agree that Bolloten is politically incorrect? I don't criticize George [Esenwein] for this but I think he was incredibly close and fond of Bolloten and so I think he wants to defend him and so he's almost looking for a theory ... you know it's not really my field. I am interested in British participation so I don't really pretend to know the Spanish story well. I don't think it would be so politically incorrect to say that the communists were total villains. I think that almost everybody agrees they were villainous, but my hunch would be that most Spanish historians would feel that Bolloten went too far. You know I think he felt he had the key. Possibly he was right, even if you think that Bolloten was right I don't think I would agree with George [Esenwein] that other Spanish historians think he's right but feel it's incorrect to say so. An academic who says Burnett Bolloten's interpretation is correct is not going to suffer for it. They're not going to lose a job. Their salaries aren't going to be affected. I mean why wouldn't they say that?

B. Well, I don't know. But I know this is what George feels about it is because he sent an email to me.

Afterword by Darryl Burrowes

Peter Stansky has a corpus of fourteen works and is the recipient of many distinguished awards. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and while at Harvard he was awarded the DeLancey K. Jay Prize, for his dissertation. He has been awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships, 1966-67 and 1973-74. Stansky is now all but retired from teaching at Stanford. At the time of the interview he taught one undergraduate course on 'British Society through Fiction: From Fielding to Waugh'. He is currently involved in writing a biography of Edward Upward (1903-2009), the novelist and erstwhile member of the communist party from 1934 to 1948.

Main Works of Peter Stansky

Ambitions and Strategies: The Struggle for the Leadership of the Liberal Party in the 1890s (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

England Since 1867: Continuity and Change (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

From William Morris to Sergeant Pepper (Palo Alto, Calif: Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1999) .

Gladstone: A Progress in Politics (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979)

Journey to the Frontier: Julian Bell and John Cornford: Their lives and the 1930s, with William Abrahams (London, Constable, 1966)

Julian Bell: From Bloomsbury to the Spanish Civil War (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012)

London's Burning, with William Abrahams (London: Constable, 1994)

On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and its Intimate World (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996)

Orwell: The Transformation, with William Abrahams (London: Constable, 1979)

Redesigning the World, William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985)

Peter Stansky, historian and writer, in conversation: George Orwell and the Spanish Civil War.
Darryl Burrowes.

Writers in Conversation Vol. 1 no. 1, February 2014
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

Sassoon: The Worlds of Philip and Sybil (New Haven., Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003)
The First Day of the Blitz (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007)
The Unknown Orwell, with William Abrahams (London: Constable, 1972)
William Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983)

Peter Stansky, historian and writer, in conversation: George Orwell and the Spanish Civil War.
Darryl Burrowes.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 1 no. 1, February 2014
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/