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GEORGE ORWELL'S BURMESE DAYS: THE NOVELIST AS REFORMER

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The truth is that no modern man, in his heart of hearts,
believes that it is right to invade a foreign country and
hold the population down by force.

— George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*

George Orwell has earned increasing respect as a thinker, essayist and moralist but, as a novelist, he continues to be undervalued. In 1940, Q.D. Leavis wrote:

Mr. Orwell must have wasted a lot of energy trying to be a novelist. I think I must have read three or four novels by him, and the only impression these dreary books left on me is that nature didn't intend him to be a novelist.¹

In 1976, Ian Hamilton says "Queenie was dead right".² *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) have won some acclaim but Orwell's early fiction is at best viewed with affectionate tolerance. *Burmese Days* (1934) is his first novel and it has enjoyed a measure of popular readership.³ Yet the critics generally underrate it⁴ as Orwell himself did,⁵ and they neglect it. Now our expectations of Orwell's early writing ought to be higher: his early pieces 'A Hanging' (1931) and 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936) are universally lauded as

1. Quoted from Ian Hamilton, 'Making Up His Mind' : *New Statesman* 24 September 1976, p. 414.
2. Ian Hamilton, op. cit., p. 414.
3. It was published in Penguin Books (not for the first time) in 1967 and reprinted in 1969, 1972, 1973, 1975 (twice).
4. E.g., Jeffrey Meyers, 'The Ethics of Responsibility: Orwell's *Burmese Days*' : *University Review*, Vol. XXV, December 1968, p. 84; Meyers agrees with Orwell's view quoted in note 5. Raymond Williams ignores *Burmese Days* in his *George Orwell* (London: Fontana, 1971). Malcolm Muggeridge's judgement that *Burmese Days* is "the most satisfactory of Orwell's novels" is exceptional. See Malcolm Muggeridge, 'Introduction': George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1962 ed.) p. xv.
5. "When I was about sixteen..... I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions and arresting similes, and also full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of sound. And in fact my first completed novel, *Burmese Days*, which I wrote when I was thirty but projected much earlier, is rather that kind of book". George Orwell, 'Why I Write' (1947): *Collected Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961 ed.), p. 437.