

## ALL'S WELL WITH ORWELL

By Eli Shaltiel Haaretz

The author of '1984,' who expressly stipulated in his will that he did not want biographies written about him, has continued to attract biographers :

- "Orwell's Victory" by Christopher Hitchens, Allen Lane/ Penguin Press, 150 pages, 9.99 pds sterling

- "George Orwell" by Gordon Bowker, Little & Brown, 495 pages, 20 pounds sterling.

- Jeffrey Meyers' biography, "Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation,"

On June 25, admirers and critics of George Orwell marked his 100th birthday by launching into an other round of debate over his controversial legacy and personality. This clash between fans and foes has been going on since his untimely death in 1950. Every symbolic date has been exploited for this purpose. On the eve of 1984, Orwell's nightmare vision was picked to the bone. Biographers have a habit of being needlessly apologetic in choosing to write about the life of a person that has already been explored. They pull out all kinds of arguments about sensational findings that supposedly shed new light on issues that others have examined.

In my review last June of Jeffrey Meyers' biography, "Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation," I noted that the author felt he was justified in adding another volume to the already sagging Orwell bookshelf because his book, unlike the others, came out after the publication of Orwell's complete works. But that was not his only excuse.

He also said he was the first Orwell biographer to write a book after the death of Orwell's widow. In consequence, he was free of the shackles that fettered his predecessors. Gordon Bowker boasts of the new input he has brought to the task: In recent years, fascinating documents have come to light in the Soviet Union that greatly enrich our knowledge of Orwell's involvement in the Spanish Civil War during his Barcelona years.

Bowker also says he has discovered letters and diaries that add an interesting dimension to a subject addressed by all Orwell biographers: his strange, complicated relationships with women. Orwell, who expressly stipulated in his will that he did not want biographies written about him and urged all those who held him in esteem not to cooperate with potential biographers, has thus continued to attract biographers, and they, in turn, have found willing audiences.

Biographers explain their decision to ignore such an explicit request from a beloved and admired author by saying that anyone who objects to this kind of intimate burrowing into his life and work would not leave behind so many visible tracks and clues. Not so enlightening Bowker's biography proves yet again what readers of previous Orwell biographies have already realized, which is that the disclosure of seemingly new details is not all that enlightening. Readers do not need to know that Orwell was hounded by the KGB and Soviet agents when he lived in Barcelona in order to explain the horror and fear aroused in him by the Stalinist regime.

What was presented a few years ago as a startling discovery that fundamentally alters our assessment of Orwell - the list of communist sympathizers in Britain that he submitted to the Foreign Office - turned out, on closer inspection, to be a lot of hype and hot air. Orwell scholars found that the "scoop" was no scoop: It was already mentioned by Bernard Crick, one of the pioneers of Orwell research, in the excellent biography he published in the 1980s. Orwell was a complex man, full of contradictions

and a bewildering assortment of prejudices. But these traits are already evident to anyone who has read his books. Bowker labors needlessly to find in Orwell's female characters evidence of his hatred of women. Who needs all the little hints he finds in Orwell's letters to know that the author was never able to sustain a healthy, equal relationship with the women in his life? The same goes for Bowker's attempt to prove Orwell's sadistic tendencies. Neither do we need his descriptions of Orwell's hunting expeditions and killing of animals to tell us that his attitude toward the world of nature was far from simple. Orwell comes right out and says so. In his writing, for example, he is quite blunt about his conflicting emotions as a civil servant in Britain's foreign colonies. Those who conclude that Orwell was a cruel and insensitive colonialist, and that his opposition to colonialism was sanctimonious and insincere, are not looking for the truth in all its complexity. They are merely undermining the "secular saint" image attributed to Orwell in some circles - a title he never sought for himself. In fact, Orwell's frankness supplied his opponents and foes with plenty of ammunition. Christopher Hitchens, a staunch admirer of Orwell whose own writing has produced a flock of enemies, is well aware of all the flaws and perversions Orwell was accused of in his lifetime, and all the more so after his death. He discusses them openly, one by one. At the same time, when he confronts those who malign Orwell, exploring the motives for their fierce criticism, he points out that Orwell, unlike his opponents on the right and left, fought a heroic and never-ending battle against his flaws and misdeeds. He was honest enough to own up to his mistakes and seek forgiveness for them. The title of Hitchens' short, brilliant book, "Orwell's Victory," testifies to his purpose: Now, 50 years after Orwell's death, as Orwell's achievements and failures are being assessed, there is no escaping the conclusion that Orwell emerged triumphant in the battle he waged in his brief but tempestuous life. The ability and willingness to recognize his limitations and grapple with them, and particularly his diagnosis of the chief problems of his era, are overwhelming proof of Orwell's "victory." Fascism, Stalinism and colonialism: These are the three core "isms" that preoccupied Orwell in his personal life and literary career. In the wake of what he had to say about these complicated issues, his name has become inextricably bound up with some of the defining terms of the 20th century. If we break down Orwell's prophecies, as his detractors have done, in search of flaws, it is not hard to find predictions that failed to materialize. Like all members of his generation, Orwell lived in fear of a war that could wreak havoc on the whole world. The World War III he saw in his mind's eye was even more horrible and destructive than its predecessors. So far, of course, no such war has erupted. Fortunately for us, his predictions of a world dominated by the Stalinist lie did not come true either. Nevertheless, Hitchens claims that when Orwell's judgments are isolated from their immediate context and plumbed for their universal significance, one finds in them a humane message that remains valid long after the principal actors have left the stage. Fatal mistake Hitchens has not written a new biography of George Orwell. What he offers is a different and surprising look at a life that we already know so much about. Hitchens' interest lies in precisely those issues latched on to by Orwell's detractors. Thus he has a chapter on Orwell and the British Empire, a chapter on Orwell and the left, and a chapter on Orwell and the right. He challenges the feminist criticisms of Orwell, and duly addresses the question of how much of an "Englishman" he really was. But before he commences his brilliant exploration of these topics, there is a sore topic he tries to get out of the way. It has to do with a tendency that biographers have in general, and especially Orwell's biographers. Unable to put their finger on the reasons

for contradictions in Orwell's life, they make the fatal mistake of not clearly distinguishing between the fictional characters and the author who puts the words in their mouths. Orwell's books, like those of other great authors, are not an archive that one sifts through to find solid evidence of an author's life and times. His writing may be infused with autobiographical elements, but his book about Burma, for instance, is not an autobiography in the full sense of the word. Orwell is inscrutable enough without attributing to himself the personality of his characters or the blunt opinions they express. Orwell's highly independent stance on issues that divided his generation led people from all over the political spectrum to turn him into the spokesman of their cause. Hitchens is particularly eager to expose the duplicity of rightists who adopted Orwell as their own. There is no denying that the CIA made use of Orwell's work in its battle against the evils of communism. The moment he died, people forgot his anger toward the right for cynically exploiting his books to trample on the vision of a just society. He repeated time and again that he was a Labor loyalist, but the conservatives put his solid criticisms of Soviet totalitarianism to fine use in challenging supporters of nationalization and social-democratic society. This manipulation continued on an even broader scale when Orwell was no longer around to protest and set the record straight. Even neo-Conservatives at the end of the 20th century could not resist the temptation of exploiting the "saint of the left" for their purposes. Orwell had no great love for high-minded, living-room leftists - another one of his unsettling prejudices - and he frequently mocked them. He poked fun at vegetarians, at pacifists, at intellectuals who wore sandals to show off their love of nature and the common man. He felt that the time he spent in the company of homeless vagrants on the margins of society gave him the right to count himself among those who understood the proletariat. Another of his bizarre weaknesses. But when Norman Podhoretz seizes upon these strange antipathies to launch an attack on the world's liberals, Hitchens leaps to the defense. If Podhoretz is having so much fun tossing around Orwell's prejudices, he asks, why not mention a few others? Like certain remarks he made that reek of crude anti-Semitism, or his fierce opposition to Zionism and the idea of Jewish renaissance in the State of Israel. Orwell's feelings about the United States and the fact that he totally ignores the tremendous role it was slated to play in the modern world is one of the great mysteries in his political thinking. The man who saw through totalitarianism and realized the dangers of Bolshevism long before many of his sharp-eyed friends, took an oddly conservative and shallow view of the United States. He ridiculed its culture, ignored its economic power, and above all, failed to predict its historical predominance in the post-war era. He never visited America or expressed the slightest interest in taking up the invitation of his devotees in the U.S., of whom there were many. Hitchens draws a comparison between Orwell's attitude toward the U.S. and the attitude of his critics toward him. Both, he says, are guilty of simplistic thinking and turning a blind eye to complexity and nuances. In describing the incongruities in American history and culture, Hitchens shows how much his own writing has been influenced by his beloved teacher and mentor: "[America] has had its full share of contradictions and negations - its original proclamation by slave-holders who insisted that 'all men are created equal' is one of the first affirmations on record that some are more equal than others." Orwellians will love that. The two masterpieces Orwell wrote in the last years of his life, "Animal Farm" and "1984," brought him world fame and many admirers, but also - for the first time in his life - a tidy profit and financial security. Without detracting from the literary significance of these two books, even Hitchens admits that their contribution to

20th century literature is not the sole reason they have continued to attract new readers. Regrettably, the success of these novels has pushed another aspect of Orwell's literary-cultural creativity into the shadows: his brilliant essays, his political writing and his far-reaching influence, especially on authors who read him in their younger days, learned their lesson well and went on to succeed in their own right. Hitchens points out, as other Orwell biographers have in recent years, that Orwell, without knowing it or having any such intentions, lay the groundwork for what is now known as "culture studies." In his articles on culture published in magazines for children and young adults, as well as his charming essay on the tea-drinking habits of the English, Orwell was the forerunner of a new genre: socio-cultural observation free of the limitations of traditional academic research. With more than 50 years gone by since his death, and a whole century since his birth, writes Hitchens, Orwell's readers are in a better position to ignore the political context of his writings and focus on their timeless message. Those who are smart enough to see that totalitarianism, lies, oppression and poverty have not vanished from the world but have only changed their appearance and their address, will also appreciate the magnitude of Orwell's triumph, not only as a great writer but as an inspiring humanist for the 21st century. Dr. Eli Shaltiel's biography of Moshe Sneh was published by Am Oved. Ralph Steadman, "George Orwell."