

Eric Laursen. *The Duty to Stand Aside: Nineteen Eighty-Four and the Wartime Quarrel of George Orwell and Alex Comfort.* Chico: AK Press, 2018. 180 pp. \$16.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-84935-318-2.

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It is perhaps appropriate to begin with Eric Laursen's reminder in his preface: "Comfort is remembered today mainly as the author of an extremely successful 1972 book, *The Joy of Sex*" (p. 4). Yes--it is that very same successful author who forms the subject of this "political" book (AK Press openly claims the label for its productions) side by side with George Orwell, who needs no introduction. Why should the two men find themselves the protagonists of the same book? Where do their trajectories intersect? The answer is in two words of the long subtitle: their "wartime quarrel." And even more cryptically, in the silhouette of a bomber that separates the title from the subtitle on the cover. To go straight to the point: they radically disagreed on the justification or otherwise of bombing enemy populations, however repulsive their regimes, however horrid was the thought of these barbarous tyrannies winning the war and dominating the world. "Can we make sense of the complicated feelings between these two remarkable writers and the way their relationship ended?" (p. 13): Laursen's central question therefore provides the guiding thread of his book.

Thirty years before publishing *The Joy of Sex*, Alex Comfort, then a medical student, was writing poetry that George Orwell appreciated. Laursen speaks of "Orwell's admiration for Comfort's poetry--though not his fiction" (p. 9). Yet, in spite of

some points of agreement visible in their wartime correspondence (they only met once, in 1945), indicating "a cautious friendship," their relations gradually deteriorated (p. 9). The culmination took place when what Kristian William sympathetically calls "Orwell the imperfect creature" included Comfort as a "pacifist-anarchist" in his notorious list to a friend working in the anti-Soviet Information Research Department of the Foreign Office.[1] Orwell's comments are reproduced verbatim in *The Duty to Stand Aside*: "Main emphasis anti-British. Subjectively pro-German during war, appears temperamentally pro-totalitarian. Not morally courageous. Has a crippled hand. Very talented" (p. 11). Comfort's disfigurement referred to an accident from trying to make fireworks when he was fourteen.

Comfort died before that list (discussed in chapter 7, "The 'Snitch List'") was fully released in 2002, and he never knew about it. For his part, Laursen describes Comfort as "a dedicated, outspoken pacifist and--by the end of the war--an anarchist who charged at every possible opportunity that Britain's wartime leaders were ordering atrocities as bad as those of Hitler's and that intellectuals who did not denounce their own government had 'sacrificed their responsible attitude to humanity'" (p. 9). Of course, in 1944 Orwell was just one of these "intellectuals who did not de-

nounce their own government"--and this explains why their postwar reconciliation took some time. Still, how then is one to explain Comfort's presence on George Orwell's list? Laursen has an argument which some will find convincing, others doubtful: "Orwell would not have included Comfort on his Foreign Office list if he hadn't cared what Comfort thought, wrote, and advocated" (p. 13).

Yet, fundamentally, they always asked the same question: "How to respond?" to the threat of the totalitarian barbarians (p. 13). For Laursen, their differing answers did not reflect a fundamental theoretical or ideological divergence, but only what he calls "a clash of temperaments," discussed in chapter 2, where he rightly reminds us that if Comfort continued to be "an absolutist" in his criticisms of government, "this was more or less the position Orwell himself had taken in the late 1930s" (p. 22). Gradually and inevitably, the discussion turns to an evaluation of the bombing war--a subject of endless debate in countless serious monographs since the war, leaving alone the scurrilous and provocative neofascist ones. Laursen heavily relies on Richard Overy's work (for example, *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe 1940-1945*, 2014), which tends to support the Anglo-American decision for a no-holds-barred bombing campaign and reinforce Orwell's point that after 1940 refusing to bomb Hitler's Germany was to play into his hand. Here, one might reproach Laursen with being selective in his choice of sources, since he omits to mention important "pro-Comfort" works like Anthony C. Grayling's *Among the Dead Cities: Is the Targeting of Civilians in War Ever Justified?* (2006),^[2] though he is probably right to leave out Jörg Friedrich's highly controversial *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945* (2007). Much revolved of course around that vogue word introduced by the Marxists, "objectively": thus, in heated correspondence in the September/October 1942 issue of the American *Partisan Review*, Orwell accused the anarcho-pacifists, among them

Comfort, of being "objectively and to some extent emotionally pro-Fascist" (quoted, p. 47).

Trying to be evenhanded, Laursen unfortunately takes Comfort's side in his attacks against Winston Churchill, repeating canards that have long been disproved by Churchill specialists. Churchill did not "order poison gas to be used against rebels in British-held Iraq" in 1920, if by poison gas one means lethal gas like mustard gas--but only tear gas to make them disperse (p. 52). Churchill did not condone the "Amritsar massacre of 1919"--on the contrary, as secretary of state for war in 1920, he persuaded a reluctant House of Commons to impose sanctions upon the British general who had ordered the shooting. And above all, Churchill never "tolerated" the Nazi régime--he denounced Hitler as soon as he became chancellor in January 1933, much to the chagrin of his Conservative "friends" (p. 53). So Orwell was perfectly justified in supporting Churchill's anti-Fascist and anti-Nazi wartime government--it was certainly not a case of Tweedledum and Tweedledee with Mussolini or Hitler, as "Comfort and other dissidents" suggested (p. 53). The book reprints large extracts from Orwell's poem, "As One Non-Combatant to Another," subtitled "A letter to 'Obadiah Hornbrook,'" the latter a pseudonym used by Comfort, in which Orwell crosses swords in verse with Comfort's own poem (both published in June 1943), and in which Orwell reaffirms his support for Churchill, even if only for the duration of the war. And while we discuss Churchill, one must point out another common mistake: on the photograph of page 35, Churchill is not inspecting the ruins of Coventry in 1940, as indicated in the caption. He feared the reaction of the many communist trade unionists there and only went when it was safe--in September 1941, after the Soviet Union had entered the war.

In the final months of the war, when it had become clear that it was only a matter of time before Hitler's Germany was crushed, the more pressing question on the left was no longer

whether or how one should fight fascism--made explicit by Laursen as "What is the right and appropriate way for a writer or artist to respond to war?"--but how to organize the return to peace, preventing the ruling classes from confiscating the common victory (p. 126). Orwell had long been thinking ahead--and so had Alex Comfort, on other lines of course. It seems that it was Hiroshima, that "criminal lunacy" (p. 88), which made them converge again, with Orwell writing in October that the atomic bomb would "intensify the [freedom-destroying] trends which have been apparent for a dozen years at least" and "the drift ... towards the reimposition of slavery" (pp. 89-90). It is a moot point, Laursen argues all through his chapter 6, "The Sociopathic State," whether Orwell was influenced by Comfort when writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). In the next chapter, however, Laursen notes that "the two men's emotional responses to the war were very different" (p. 111): while Orwell hoped that the war might have made the British people progress toward socialism, Comfort never entertained any such wild illusions. Thus Comfort was not saddened when socialism did not materialize, while Orwell "poured his disappointment into the unrelenting gloom of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (p. 112). "The right to stand aside," as claimed by Comfort in his seminal book of 1950, *Authority and Delinquency in the Modern State* (p. 129) is of course illustrated by Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, intriguingly described by Laursen in his concluding chapter as "a novel of universal defeat written from the vantage point of one of the war's victors" (p. 144). As a committed left-wing activist, Laursen extrapolates from both authors' writings to denounce American presidents from Dwight D. Eisenhower to G. W. Bush, their cult of power, their fueling of the Cold War and later the "War on Terror"--much as Big Brother always needed to invent and identify the common national enemy. Here we leave the domain of academic criticism to enter that of political pamphleteering, with all its pitfalls. Fortunately, Laursen forgets his militancy in his last

two insightful sentences, with which every bona fide reader can agree: "But Orwell and Comfort both, for similar reasons, dreaded the world that would follow the war almost as much as the war itself. They were right" (p. 152).

If one forgets all the irksome attacks on Churchill, Eisenhower, et cetera, and concentrates on what Laursen has to say on the heated debates between Comfort and Orwell on issues of the first magnitude for the organization of society (one definition of politics), then all is well: the book is full of little-known information on that most interesting "quarrel" between the two thinkers--and most readers familiar with Orwell's writings will discover those of another intellectual of high caliber whom they possibly only knew as the author of *The Joy of Sex*.

Because of its overtly "political" tone in some passages, I would not recommend the book to undergraduates, as they probably do not possess the critical distance that enables more seasoned readers to distinguish between factual exposition and "presentist" extrapolation. Also, the spelling of names is sometimes unreliable (Antony Beevor becomes "Anthony Bevoor," p. 155n41, and Paul Ricoeur becomes "Ricouer," p. 165n10). But colleagues--from right or left--interested in the political debate in British intellectual circles in the 1940s should not miss Laursen's magisterial exploration of the fundamental issues at stake in this undeservedly forgotten "quarrel."

Notes

[1]. Kristian Williams, *Between the Bullet and the Lie: Essays on Orwell* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 39.

[2]. Also subtitled: *The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan*.

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