Soc (2015) 52:159–165
DOI 10.1007/s12115-015-9877-3

PROFILE

The "Orwellian" Night of December 12

John Rodden

Published online: 25 March 2015

Abstract Although it is rare that one can pinpoint an historical moment in which a writer's public reputation is "launched," the day of destiny is clear in George Orwell's case: Sunday, 12 December 1954. BBC-TV's adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that night, and especially the debates in the British press that ensued for three weeks thereafter, ignited controversy that permanently boosted sales of his dystopian novel and made his very name as proper adjective—"Orwellian"—a household word. Sixty Decembers ago, the iconic figure of "Orwell"—the mythic bogeyman rather than a writer or literary figure—became one of the first examples of a celebrity created by modern television. George Orwell's posthumous fame owes less to his strictly literary achievement than to the Zeitgeist's embrace of his work in the era of the telescreen.

Keywords George Orwell · *Nineteen Eighty-Four* · *Animal Farm* · *Reader's Digest* · *Life* · Henry Luce · British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) · Nigel Keale · Cold War · National Broadcasting Company (NBC) · Telescreen · Family programming · Malcolm Muggeridge · Reputation · Fame · Celebrity · Image

The Contingencies of Fame

George Orwell is the most famous British writer of the last half of the twentieth century, and also the best-selling author of serious fiction in any language, with more than sixty million copies of his books in circulation in more than five dozen languages. His last two works, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), are firmly institutionalized in Anglo-American school curricula and even widely taught in schools in the non-Anglophone world, such as in Germany and Austria. Not a single book that he wrote is presently out of print in English; indeed *The Complete Works of George Orwell* have been published in 22 volumes, meticulously edited by Peter Davison, and they are presently available both in cloth-bound and in paperback editions.

This was Clio's caprice. Indeed it is likely that if Orwell had passed away little more than three years earlier, before his tragic early death from pulmonary tuberculosis in January 1950— that is, before the American edition of *Animal Farm* appeared in an aggressively promoted *Reader's Digest* edition in 1946—he might be utterly unknown today outside academic circles. Perhaps he would only be familiar to literary scholars who specialize in British studies of the 1930s. In fact, I would argue that if he had died even a year before his death at mid-century, in late 1948 or early 1949—that is, before completing his last book, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*— he would be regarded as a clever fabulist, a one-book author who had finally found his métier by abandoning the realistic novel and turning to satirical fantasy. *Animal Farm* would have been touted as a devastating allegory applicable not just to the history of Stalinist Russia, but also as a modern parable that offered bracing lessons for the probable course of revolutions in general. Yet it would not have contributed numerous coinages to the political lexicon. Nor would it have made the author's name as proper adjective —"Orwellian" — a synonym for "sinister," "nightmarish," "oppressive," even "totalitarian." And for those reasons, along with some others, it would not have established "George Orwell" as a name to set argument going whenever politically minded readers with a literary bent meet and debate.

I indulge here in counterfactual history— or what could be called "counterfactual biography." My claim is this: If Orwell had never published *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, his towering, if

J. Rodden (✉)
118 Beautybush Trail, Georgetown, TX 78628, USA
e-mail: jgrodden1@gmail.com

flawed masterwork whose catchphrases ("Big Brother Is Watching You," doublethink, Newspeak, and on and on) have been endlessly quoted and bannered in headlines—he would be largely unknown today, certainly outside literary academe. In fact, my case is even more extreme. I contend that Orwell and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are not chiefly famous as literary or even publishing events; Orwell's posthumous fame owes almost entirely to the TV adaptations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (or *1984*, as the pundits a.k.a Newspeak wordsmiths have invariably abridged it) that coincided with the birth of nationwide TV and the rise of the age of celebrity.

And therein lies a story.

Rumblings Before the "Perfect Storm"

In September 1953, NBC's Studio One opened its fall season with a widely praised adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. That adaptation emboldened and inspired BBC-TV to follow-up with its own, far more controversial adaptation of the novel a year later. It is this period—1953–54— that the historian can in hindsight identify as the moment in which the "myth of Orwell" began. As I shall argue, this historical moment catapulted Orwell into the stratosphere of fame, moving him decisively and permanently beyond mere literary circles into the realm of popular and mass culture and the domain of ideological politics. It was during these months that his catchwords first became bandied in screaming headlines against political foes, when they became, in Isaac Deutscher's arresting formulation, "ideological superweapons" in the Cold War of words. Yes, it was at this fateful, if little noticed, moment that the late George Orwell—and far more so, the cultural symbol and literary talisman "Orwell" — became caught up in battles between the West and the Soviet Union and gained his status as the leading Cold Warrior of the postwar West.

We turn our attention, therefore, to the mid-1950s. Radio adaptations of *Animal Farm* (1947, 1952) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1950) for the Third Programme, the BBC cultural channel, had circulated Orwell's work widely among the literary-minded in postwar Britain. But it was not until two adaptations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reached the screen—in the U.K. in 1953 and the U.S. in 1954— that Orwell's coinages began to appear regularly outside the literary pages of the press.

When NBC's Studio One opened its fall season with the first screen adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the fall of 1953, it was well received. Hailed by television critics as "masterly" and "stunning," the one-hour play starred Eddie Albert as Winston, Norma Crane as Julia, and Lorne Greene as O'Brien. It reached a viewing audience of 8.7 million homes (a 53 % share of the market), making it the highest-rated Studio One program for 1953. It also did well with the critics. "I cannot recall seeing any other television drama so imaginatively and effectively presented," wrote the *New Yorker* critic. "The new television season has come alive," said the *New York Times* reviewer, who praised the play for depicting "with power, poignancy, and terrifying beauty the destruction of the human soul."

NBC's *1984* made no explicit reference to the Soviet Union or Joseph Stalin, who had died just months before, but with the Cold War and McCarthyism dominating the news, it was inevitable that the play would get enmeshed in Cold War cultural politics. As they had done with the novel, Henry Luce's magazines boosted the TV adaptation as an anti-Communist warning. *Life* devoted a two-page picture spread to the TV play about "Big Brother and the terrifying totalitarian state." The anti-Communist implication was clear. Abner Dean's drawings of Oceania and Winston Smith, which had appeared in a special issue of *Life* in 1949, were by 1953 gracing paperback covers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Increasingly, Orwell was being taken in some quarters of the popular press as an exponent of Luce's conservative, anti-socialist politics. Let us dwell at greater length, however, on events in Britain during the following year.

Exactly six decades ago this past December, an historic "perfect storm" of cultural politics struck like a social tempest in Britain – and spread within a decade throughout the world.

The Night of December 12

It was the British adaptation of Orwell's last novel, or more precisely, the debate that ensued after its two telecasts in mid-December, which ignited disputes that established "St. George" Orwell as the patron saint of Cold War patriots in cultural circles. The NBC adaptation had begun to popularize the coinages of Orwell's words and make "George Orwell" much better known to the wider American audience. But I do not believe that its impact would have sustained raised sales of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or established Orwell as a "doomsday prophet" and a totalitarian visionary who had predicted the inevitable course of Stalinism as an anti-utopian nightmare.

Much more controversial and politicized than the NBC Studio One production was the BBC-TV adaptation, which ultimately proved responsible for Orwell's outsized public reputation. I would argue that the latter production is the determining event that moved Orwell from merely bigger circulation (and possibly no more than temporary notoriety) to literary canonization, and (apparently) enduring fame, a literary figure cherished as both a Cold War mainstay and a distinguished anti-Communist author suitable for inclusion in Anglo-American curricula.

It is unusual that one can point to an historical event marking the moment when a writer's popular reputation is "launched." But in Orwell's case the date is clear: Sunday, 12 December 1954. Directed by Nigel Keale, the two-hour

evening program appeared during prime time, on what was then Britain's only television channel. It starred Peter Cushing and Yvonne Mitchell, among the small screen's most popular actors.

Most critics hailed the teleplay as an intelligent adaptation and praised the BBC s courage in presenting it. Thousands of viewers, however, protested that the show was "sadistic" and "horrific," characterizations which the tabloid press bannered on Monday morning, 13 December. A debate over the "propriety" of the telecast quickly took shape and soon escalated into a classic confrontation over the proper function of art in the state and, more particularly, over the role that the emergent medium of television should assume in British society. Conservatives intent on limiting the presumed "adventurism" of the state-supported BBC, and parents who were outraged over the graphic depiction of violence on an "entertainment" medium, ranged themselves against socialists preaching free speech and literary men defending the production's naturalism and fidelity to Orwell's book.

Within the space of a single week, the BBC *1984* production became what the *New York Times* called "the subject of the sharpest controversy in the annals of British television." Some observers compared the BBC row to the furor in America over Orson Welles's 1938 radio hoax, *War of the Worlds*. When it was telecast again the following Thursday, 16 December, the second showing of the play attracted the largest audience in BBC-TV history to that date. Editorialized *The Times* of London at the week's close: "The term 'Big Brother,' which the day before yesterday meant nothing to 99% of the population, has become a household phrase."

That public declaration, delivered by the authoritative journalistic voice of the British Commonwealth, essentially sums up the argument of this essay. And yet, the fierce disputes about "1984" and "Big Brother" were only just beginning. BBC announcements before and during both the December 12 and 16 telecasts had made clear that the TV play would not be "light entertainment." The telecast opened with the image of a mushroom cloud (suggesting the atomic war fought in the '50s, as related in Goldstein's book) and the warning: "This program is unsuitable for children or those with weak nerves." The violence was mild by present-day BBC standards, and even by American standards of 1954—though not at all by BBC-TV norms of the mid-1950s. The shock of this upsetting departure proved a major reason why the BBC production aroused so much more argument than the NBC show. The British stage had traditionally observed social proprieties, and the British public in 1954 was quite unprepared for graphic on-stage violence. Most objectionable to some viewers were the torture scenes in which Peter Cushing, his face streaked with blood and his body reduced to a shell, was brainwashed in a coffin with electric shocks and then, in Room 101, confronted with a cage of ravenous rats. One Sunday night viewer collapsed of a heart attack after the torture scenes. On Monday (December 13) the *Daily Express* ran the story ("*1984*: WIFE DIES AS SHE WATCHES") on its front page:

> A 40-year-old mother of two children collapsed and died while watching the TV horror play 1984, it was disclosed last night. She was Mrs. Beryl Kathleen Mirfin. Mrs. Mirfin, a local beauty queen of 1936, was watching the play on Sunday night at her home in Carlton-Hill, Heme Bay. With her was her husband, who is a real estate agent, and two friends. In the early part of George Orwell's nightmarish fantasy of a Police State Future, Mrs. Mirfin collapsed. A doctor who was called asked at once: "Was she watching the TV play?"

The News Chronicle's front-page story ("*1984* SHOCKS VIEWERS") gives more fully the flavor of the tabloid press's coverage of the controversy:

> Hundreds of angry viewers telephoned the BBC and newspaper offices last night after the TV presentation of George Orwell's 1984—the story of a nightmare era. All complained that it was too ghastly for television. Not one caller praised the play. The BBC view: "We televised 1984 as a masterpiece of our time."
> Mrs. Edna Burgess of Holborn rang the News Chronicle to say: "I trembled with fear as I watched; it was not fit for ordinary decent-minded human beings. It was nothing but unoriginal bits of horror put together."
> Mrs. Vivienne van Kampen of Muswell Hill demanded an immediate campaign to prevent the BBC from repeating the play. "Some of the scenes are the most ghastly things I've ever seen," she said.
> It was not only women viewers who were upset. Mr. Frederick Poate of Woking was looking in with Canadian friends. "None of us is particularly squeamish, but we found the torture scene . . . more than we could stand," he said. Callers told the BBC that the play was worse than horror comics and not fit for public viewing.

George Orwell, "Horror-Monger"?

So began the tumult. By Monday afternoon, the chairwoman of the British Housewives League was condemning the play as "sadistic and horrible." Later that day Malcolm Muggeridge joined the head of the BBC drama division on the BBC-TV program *Panorama* to

defend the telecast on literary grounds against a Tunbridge Wells alderman. The alderman predicted "a tremendous increase in crime" if more telecasts like *1984* were shown. His claim of a firm link between television violence and criminal behavior may well mark one of the earliest appearances of the argument in public debate.

By Wednesday (December 15) the fracas had reached the floor of Parliament. Cultural Conservatives upset with the BBC's depiction of violence (deemed especially deplorable on a Sunday) faced off against libertarian Conservatives and Labourites insisting on viewers' freedom of choice and on the value of the drama as a thunderous warning against totalitarianism. Five Conservative M.P.s sponsored a motion decrying "the tendency evident in recent BBC programmes, notably on Sunday evening, to pander to sexual and sadistic tastes." Labour countered with an amendment lamenting "the tendencies of honourable Members to attack the courage and enterprise of the BBC in presenting plays and programmes capable of appreciation by adult minds." One Conservative sympathetic to the Labour motion added a clever amendment expressing thanks to Winston Churchill's government for preserving that "freedom of the individual [which] still permits viewers to switch off." Finally, a counter-amendment proposed by more Conservatives pointed out that "many of the practices depicted [in the telecast] are already in common use under totalitarian regimes" and applauded "the sincere attempts of the BBC to bring home to the British people the logical and soul-destroying consequences of the surrender of their freedom."

The Thursday repeat provoked yet another round of breast-beating— and of sensational headlines. "MORE PROTESTS OVER 'H' PLAY," shouted *The Daily Mirror*. Again viewers wrote and phoned:

> "I never want to see it again…" says Betty Tay. "I had a basinful of TV's Big Brother last night— and if that's the sort of thing the BBC is going to give us as entertainment they can keep my license for one."
>
> "My husband and I watched '1984' and were appalled. 'Horror comics' could be no more damaging in their influence on many people. The sadism and sordidness of the play certainly would not be helpful to the youth of today, who have quite a struggle to discover the true values of life among the things they see and hear around them."

Soon the posthumous Orwell was, predictably, dragged into the controversy. Complicating the British response—again unlike the situation in 1953 America—was the still-palpable presence of Orwell felt by British intellectuals. The immediate memory of the man among his acquaintances, unresolved disputes about his political position during his final years, and his radiance as an intellectual youth hero: all these factors influenced the course of the BBC controversy. Just as had already occurred in the intellectual organs and literary pages of newspapers and magazines, competing arguments began appearing in the political pages of newspapers of the Left and Right about Orwell's legacy. Newspapers on the Right hailed the BBC production as a welcome Cold War salvo. Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express*, a Conservative organ, began serializing a severely abridged *Ninteen Eighty-Four*, explaining that "the *Express* version will keep a vital argument going in every home where love and truth and honour are cherished." Lord Rothmere's *Daily Mail*, another Conservative paper, devoted two front-page editorials to a defense of the BBC play, praising it for exposing "the beastliness of Communism—…something that we must fight with all our strength of mind and will." One *Daily Mail* columnist even spoke of Orwell's "saintliness," provoking a Labour M.P. to accuse the Tories of "stealing" Orwell. The body-snatching of "St. George" Orwell, the visionary prophet and heroic patriot, had entered the official realm. In succeeding decades, it would dramatically increase, with ceaseless mantle-grabbing and coffin-shifting by intellectuals of the Left and Right – so much so that claims to Orwell's intellectual pedigree became a minor political issue in its own right.

Indeed, as we can see, the British television audience found it just as impossible to discuss Orwell the man apart from his work as did literary critics. Sonia Orwell, Fred Warburg, and several of Orwell's friends explained his politics in press interviews, arguing that he remained a socialist until his death. But many viewers simply believed that O'Brien, Winston's torturer, was Orwell's mouthpiece in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. People who had seen only the BBC telecast or read no other books by Orwell saw him as a prophet of despair, not as a desperate dissenter against totalitarianism. "Orwell was accused in letter after letter," wrote a BBC official in 1955, "of having a diseased and depraved mind." Viewers did not mince words with the BBC:

> The BBC cannot acquit itself by warnings to children and old ladies. As a front-line soldier throughout the war with no regrets, I do not think I can be charged with squeamishness, and I suggest there is a limit, and that Orwell has overstepped it here…. [It was] horrible filth, which suits the taste of only the sadistic type of viewer.'
>
> You [the BBC and Orwell] have endeavoured to open the gates of Hell to millions of people only just recovering from two diabolical wars and who are painfully

> seeking a tranquil mind with which to inspire the coming generation.
>
> We who lived through the last war know of the depths to which human beings descended—-it is still unbelievable—and we want to make sure it is a nightmare which will never be repeated. The best way is to endeavour to uplift public thought to better and higher things, not drag it down in filth and godlessness.

The prediction of one critic after the second telecast was turning out to be true: "Orwell will probably acquire an undeserved reputation as the first of a new generation of literary horror-mongers."

Yet still other viewers, however, simply found Orwell's message unsuitable for "ordinary everyday folk" or his warning exaggerated:

> Perhaps for a select intellectual audience some subtleties may have emerged from the plot, but I feel sure that, for countless millions of ordinary everyday folk, it is not suitable for them to be confronted with the frightening possibility of the loss of all human dignity, and I find it quite immoral that we should be left at the end of the play by the fact that evil has triumphed over good.
>
> The play is an overstatement of its case, and as it proceeded I found myself believing in its possibilities ...less and less. … In Orwell's grim conception, the spirit of man has no reality, and instead of glowing from an eternal source, it can be snuffed out like the flame of a candle. That surely is just not true.

But some viewers defended the production, its implicit warning, and Orwell in particular:

> The outcry against the TV presentation of George Orwell's novel, *1984*, seemed to me most unjust. A minority of viewers, including myself, have to turn off the majority of plays because they are too trivial and moronic. Surely the BBC must also cater to a small public who occasionally want to think. Its title is 40 years out of date. Just after the liberation of Paris, I was allowed to enter the infamous Gestapo headquarters there. I saw a contraption wired for electric shock and torture, almost identical to the coffin used in the TV version of *1984*. Do the British people still not know what dictatorship means? … Or do they not want to know?
>
> There has not in our generation been a better writer of English, for his chief article of belief was that clear language indicated clear thinking, and that clear thinking was the best safeguard against totalitarianism. The language and the thought of some of the objectors to the broadcast of *1984* bear him out.

Big Brother on the Telescreen at Sixty

Like the telephone calls already quoted, the letters to the BBC and press prove interesting not only in themselves but also for what they suggest about Orwell's reputation among "the wider public." As did his intellectual audiences in New York and London, many of the TV viewers misjudged him as a cynical defeatist; but others with some familiarity with his life or work saw him as an anti-totalitarian prophet. The letters indicate that Orwell's reputation among "ordinary folk" was also not monolithic; some people saw him as a tearful Jeremiah, others regarded him as a brilliant polemicist and visionary. Clearly these letters demonstrate that a "public" writer like Orwell speaks far beyond an intellectual audience. They also testify to the importance of oral and visual media in forming a popular reputation.

In the mid-'50s, then, Orwell's reputation as a public writer began to include not only readers but also viewers. How the viewer's—or listener's—reception of an author or work differs from that of a reader is a complex matter. Most BBC viewers had not already read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; evidence indicates that non-readers found the BBC production even more horrifying than readers did. Moreover, in 1954 Britain, TV viewing—especially on Sunday night—was a family event, as the above phone calls and letters suggest. (Viewers were immediately reminded of the sanctity of the Sabbath following the telecast. Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, next on the air was the traditional evening hymn, "Come, thou long-expected Jesus.") Unlike reading the book, then, viewing the play was not a private but a family and neighborhood experience. The BBC *1984* was therefore "judged by its suitability to the youngest member of the family present," as the *New Statesman* observed.

In fact, in a very real sense, the TV viewer's reception of the BBC *1984*, unlike the reader's, was not just a family and neighborhood event but a national, public one. This context must be kept in mind. The BBC *1984* was simultaneously experienced by millions and expected to adhere to certain social standards (most strict during prime time on Sunday). Clearly, given the visual and auditory power of the exciting new medium, the TV play produced a far greater collective impact on Britons than had heretofore occurred with the book. We should not, then, speak of the 1954 adaptation as a sensationalizing of Orwell's book—even though it caused a sensation.

Rather, we should note that a work which might or might not leave a deep imprint on an individual reader may, when put on the stage or screen, cause social upheaval if encountered by a pluralistic public audience—as happened with the

BBC *1984*. The protests against the program demonstrated, in the *New Statesman's* rueful words, that "the cultural rifts between us are revealed as greater than we had supposed."

Indeed the BBC *1984* controversy raised for the first time in Britain numerous questions of social policy, some of which continue to be debated to this day. Among them are the following:

- Should television be exclusively an entertainment medium or also a vehicle for social criticism?
- Should television portray graphic violence (and sex)?
- Does television have a special responsibility, particularly to youth, to furnish family programming at prime time?
- Or should viewers simply be entrusted—and expected—to "switch off"?

Parliament resolved some of these decisions in opting for diversity; in 1955 the "serious" BBC-2 and the "light" ITV were born. Although parliamentary legislation for the new channels had already been passed by the time of the *1984* hubbub, the national uproar quelled most doubts about the need for more variety in British programming. The telecast had demonstrated, noted *The Times* of London, "the tremendous possibilities of television." Henceforth it would be acceptable on British telecasts to arouse audiences in the service of artistic ends or a good cause. But whatever its liberating effect on BBC policy, the production's legacy, like Orwell's, was not without its conservative implications. Programmers made one prime-time concession to traditional mores; no more would Britons' Sunday evenings be disturbed by "BBC sadism."

From "BBC Sadism" to Supersellerdom

As if to corroborate the already quoted statement from *The Times* of London that "Big Brother" had that December become a "household word," the bestseller list registered the impact of the telecast with skyrocketing figures. Indeed the most tangible effect of the BBC telecast was its immediate and enormous impact on sales of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In mid-1954 the Seeker & Warburg hardback edition was selling 150 copies per week. A new Penguin paperback edition had just been published. During the week following the first telecast, 1,000 hardback and 18,000 paperback copies were sold. The "perfect (fire)storm" of controversy catapulted *Nineteen Eighty-Four* into what the book industry has since dubbed "supersellerdom." Equally significant, the sale of Orwell's oeuvre was permanently boosted. It should be emphasized that NBC's 1953 telecast, despite its eight million viewers and excellent ratings, produced no such impact; it did not turn Orwell overnight into "a household word" or boost sales of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* sharply.

We see, then, that it is not audience numbers alone that make a public reputation; the controversy over the BBC telecast was crucial. If not for it, Orwell might well have remained strictly a literary figure and never have entered the political pages and letter columns of the press. Thus, it is no exaggeration to pinpoint December 1954 as the moment when the language of Orwell's novel entered the popular imagination and when the book became, as Deutscher characterized it shortly after the second telecast, "an ideological superweapon." The date marks the firm establishment of Orwell's status as a "public" writer.

And yet the event has gone largely unremarked in Orwell criticism. Instead we may think of December 1954 as a volcanic moment with explosive and permanent (and arguably damaging) impact on Orwell's reputation, but which quickly faded to the general terrain of his reception history—thus becoming another forgotten, indistinguishable reception "crater." (On a lesser scale, August 1946—when *Animal Farm* was selected as a *Reader's Digest* and Book-of-the-Month Club choice—represents the same.) Such volcanic moments are important for enlarging the size of a reputation; they are sometimes dimly recalled after their eruption because they leave no durable, quotable "traces" in print for critics to enshrine.

The Dawn of Celebrity in the "Telescreen Era"

In a 1984 Gallup Poll, a remarkable 23 % of Britons and 10 % of Americans claimed to have seen a televised or movie version of the novel. The events of 1953–54 led to the decision by Columbia Pictures to adapt the novel for the big screen in 1956. (It remained the only film adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* until Michael Radford's adaptation in 1984, which starred Richard Burton as O'Brien in his last movie role.)

How media adaptations and documentaries help shape a literary reputation, particularly a writer's standing outside literary and academic circles, has been a leitmotif of this essay. Anglo-American screen treatments of Orwell have clustered in three periods: the mid-1950s, the mid- to late 1960s, and 1983–84. This broadcast material not only illumines the politics of Orwell's reputation; it also yields insight into a popular reputation in formation, a glimpse of how a "serious" writer gets known beyond intellectual circles by the wider public. In a process especially pertinent for the making of literary reputations in twenty-first century, we can appreciate how one big media event transformed Orwell into a public personality in the 1950s, and how subsequent events consolidated his reputation even as they reshaped it. In a series of books published in the last quarter-century – including *The Politics of Literary Reputation* (1989), *Scenes from An Afterlife: The Legacy of George Orwell* (2003), *Every Intellectual's "big brother"* (2008), and *The Unexamined Orwell* (2012) – I have further explored how Orwell's reputation as a public writer, given that he continues to speak to readers long after his death, evolves in response to changes in the political and cultural climate.

The treatment of Orwell's life and work by the broadcast media points to much larger questions than Orwell himself, ultimately taking us to the line where literary history and the history of publicity start to blur. In doing so it raises the enormous and fascinating question of how the modern electronic media, especially television, have altered the basic conditions on and in which public reputations are formed. In 1983–84, Orwell moved a step beyond "literary figure" and "public author" to, however briefly, the status of "celebrity."

Celebrity is a modern notion, no older than several decades. The film critic Richard Schickel has argued in his stimulating book about celebrity, *Intimate Strangers*, that the concept of fame began to change only in the 1920s and '30s with the beginnings of film, and that it did not alter fundamentally until the 1950s, with the introduction of nationwide network television. Until then, fame was still chiefly the byproduct of concrete achievement. The "famous" person was someone of significant accomplishment in a certain field. But with the rise of "image technology"—especially television at mid-century—"celebrity-hood" was born. The West entered a new age of the person "known for being known," characterized by the media's creation of the isolated image, the celebrity divorced from achievement and even history. It is noteworthy that the rise of "the Orwell myth" and the popular success of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* occurred just at the moment when this age was dawning.

Ah yes, for "as the dawn follows the night," it is otherwise most doubtful that the rapid international circulation of words such as "Orwellian," "Big Brother," and "doublethink" could have occurred without the TV plays of the 1950s—before, that is, the "telescreen era."

John Rodden, Senior Editor of *Society*, has published widely on George Orwell, most recently *The Unexamined Orwell* (2011), *The Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell* (2012) with John Rossi; and *George Orwell: Critical Insights* (2012).