

A Green Bird : Imperial Nature in George Orwell and E.M. Forster

'The author loves Burma, he goes to great length to describe the vices of the Burmese and the horror of the climate, but he loves it. . . ' Cyril Connolly¹

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In his novel *Burmese Days* (1934), as well as his famous essay about Burma, 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936), George Orwell is unequivocal in his denunciation of the British Raj, under whose jurisdiction Burma came, a last late addition to the great sprawling entity of India, itself the jewel in the crown of the British Empire.² Flory, the protagonist of the novel, realises: 'The Indian Empire is a despotism—benevolent, no doubt, but still a despotism with theft as its final object.'³ Orwell the essayist confirms and reiterates this thought: 'I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better.'⁴ The word 'empire' occurs about a dozen times in the novel, but only in the first quarter of it, while the word 'imperial' can be found several times in the middle section, particularly during a hunting trip, where it refers to pigeons, and once again near the end, in reference to the Indian Imperial Police, in which Orwell himself had served.⁵ What this essay aims to examine is not so much the nature of imperialism, a subject already much discussed, but rather Orwell's depiction of Burma in terms of its natural environment, and what this might show about his attitude toward the country.

Burmese Days was the first novel authored by George Orwell (1903-1950), and arrived in the wake of another acclaimed fiction about life under the British Raj, *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster (1879-1970), which had appeared a decade earlier, in 1924. Forster's novel was his last, and is widely

considered his finest, so that Orwell's inevitably stands somewhere in its shadow. That there are certain similarities between them has been recognised: in both cases there is an ill-fated friendship between an Indian doctor and an Englishman, and in both the plot involves a young woman who has arrived from England to visit the country, and whose presence has unfortunate consequences for others in the story.⁶ In each case, too, the small attempts at intimacy between the colonial and native characters (Adela Quested's innocent outing to see the caves, Flory's relations with a Burmese woman) are completely doomed to misunderstanding. But there are also some important differences: in Forster's tale the doctor is a Moslem, while in Orwell's book he is a Hindu, and thus not a native of the country that he lives in.⁷ Forster's Dr Aziz and Orwell's Dr Veraswami likewise hold opposing views of the British colonial administration: to Aziz it is an imposition, an obstacle to his friendship with the English teacher Cyril Fielding, while Veraswami genuinely applauds it, and will never accept the criticisms of it put to him by his friend John Flory. Both stories end somewhat unhappily, with friendships and an engagement broken, though Orwell's has much the bitterer taste. When Flory's proposal of marriage to the new visitor, Elizabeth Lackersteen, which she had seemed almost to accept, ends in his complete humiliation, he shoots himself, whereas Adela Quested in Forster's novel survives the misunderstandings that bring her engagement to Ronny Heaslop to an end. That Orwell's protagonist should end his life is surely a reflection of the particular difficulties of colonial life in Burma when Orwell lived there.⁸ 'There is a rather large number of suicides among the Europeans in Burma,' observes the writer drily, 'and they occasion very little surprise.'⁹

Of the two authors, Orwell had much the deeper roots in India, for this was where his father had been employed throughout his adult life, and where he himself was born. As a boy, Eric Blair (his real name, before he adopted the pen-name 'George Orwell') was sent back to England to be

educated, and it was to England that his father eventually retired. Yet when the young man passed the India Office examination, and was asked where he would like to go, he put Burma first, though it was not a popular destination.¹⁰ One reason for his choice was that he had family connections in Burma, where some of his mother's relatives had settled permanently and where she herself had lived most of her life before marriage.¹¹ He was employed there for five years, working in several different parts of the country. Forster, on the other hand, had made protracted visits to India, first in 1912-13, when he travelled widely around the country for about six months, and again in 1921, when he held nominal employment for seven months as secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas Senior. Orwell's employment, as an officer in the Indian Imperial Police Service, had none of the ease and temporality of Forster's sojourns, since he had perforce to deal with the tough practicalities that his job involved. In order to carry out his work, Orwell also learnt the languages of the country, Burmese and Hindustani, which helped to give a degree of linguistic detail to his account that the older novelist could not rival.¹² Nevertheless, Forster gained a profound and sympathetic understanding of certain types of Indians from long acquaintance with particular individuals, most notably his friendship with Syed Ross Masood (1889-1937).¹³ What this essay is concerned with, however, is not the authenticity of either account in its overall representation of life under the British Raj, but rather with the way that each author writes about one aspect of it, which is to say the way that he writes about the natural world. This can best be illustrated by example.

The sky is a noticeable presence in *A Passage to India*, from the beginning to the very end, though it is not mentioned in every chapter. Forster devotes a whole paragraph to it in the opening description. First he introduces the land, on which sits the town of Chandrapore, beside a river. After the two long paragraphs that deal with these, his gaze lifts and he begins another with 'The sky too has its changes, but they are less marked

than those of the vegetation and the river. Clouds map it up at times, but it is normally a dome of blending tints, and the main tint blue.' The blue turns into white where it touches the arid land, and at night becomes a star-filled deeper blue, as we might expect. But then there is another paragraph, which suggests the active agency of the sky itself:

The sky settles everything—not only climates and seasons, but when the earth shall be beautiful. By herself she can do very little—only feeble outbursts of flowers. But when the sky chooses, glory can rain into the Chandrapore bazaars, or a benediction pass from horizon to horizon. The sky can do this because it is so strong and so enormous . . .¹⁴

This stepping back, and quaint personification of the powerful heavens, is present at the novel's close, when Aziz and Fielding separate, their horses going different ways around obstacles, and so their friendship ends. This is because, Forster tells us, 'the earth didn't want it,' and so all the things on it 'said in their hundred voices, "No, not yet," and the sky said, "No, not there."¹⁵ In between the opening description and these last words, the sky figures periodically. It is an oppressive element on the outing to the Marabar Hills: 'The sky dominated as usual, but seemed unhealthily near, adhering like a ceiling to the summits of the precipices.'¹⁶ In the rising heat there it is felt as 'bland and glutinous.'¹⁷ Following this disastrous expedition, the arrest, trial, and the eventual acquittal of Aziz, there is a victory party, after which the doctor and his English friend Fielding have a difficult exchange, lying on a rooftop under a night sky full of stars, and it only at the end of it that we learn 'the moon rose.'¹⁸

Burmese Days opens in the hottest season, but concentrates first on introducing not the place, but the corrupt Burmese magistrate, U Po Kyin. There is only a brief description of the surroundings, which are filled with rank tropical vegetation:

It was only half-past eight, but the month was April, and there was a closeness in the air, a threat of long stifling midday hours. Occasional faint breaths of wind, seeming cool by contrast, stirred the newly-drenched orchids that hung from the eaves. Beyond the orchids one could see the dusty, curved trunk of a palm tree, and the blazing ultramarine sky. Up in the zenith, so high that it dazzled one to look at them, a few vultures circled without the quiver of a wing.¹⁹

Orwell's attention is plainly on more detailed things than the vastness of the sky. At the end of the second chapter there is something similar :

They went out into the glaring white sunlight. The heat rolled from the earth like the breath of an oven. The flowers, oppressive to the eyes, blazed with not a petal stirring, in a debauch of sun. The glare sent a weariness through one's bones. There was something horrible in it—horrible to think of that blue, blinding sky, stretching on and on over Burma and India, over Siam, Cambodia, China, cloudless and interminable. The plates of Mr MacGregor's waiting car were too hot to touch. The evil time of day was beginning, the time, as the Burmese say, 'when feet are silent.' Hardly a living creature stirred, except men, and the black columns of ants, stimulated by the heat, which marched ribbon-like across the path, and the tailless vultures which soared on the currents of the air.²⁰

Again it is easy to see, even in this somewhat overwritten passage, that Orwell is attending to other things, above and below, for his keen eye notices the vultures being 'tailless'. Rather than conveying a general impression, with a broad sweep, he offers considerable detail, naming what he sees precisely. Perhaps more typical of his approach is the way that he describes the garden outside the Club for colonial residents earlier in this chapter,

specifically naming a dozen different plants, most of them flowers, in a single paragraph. That the brilliant colours there too 'hurt one's eyes in the glare' is merely coincidental, what seems to matter is to name them, and describe the colours ('blood-red', 'creamy', purple, scarlet, pink, 'bilious-green') accurately.²¹ There are many such passages throughout the novel, in fact they occur almost every time the characters go outside.

This is not to suggest that Forster is blind to the world around him, or that he is unaware of the natural surroundings. Oliver Stallybrass notes in an introduction to the novel that Forster had, in addition to some reading in history and art, 'made or renewed the acquaintance, at the London Zoo, of some of the Indian animals whose presence is so compellingly evoked throughout *A Passage to India*' before his first journey to the country in 1912.²² It is something of an overstatement, perhaps, to say that Indian animals are 'compellingly evoked throughout' the novel, when they occur relatively infrequently. A variety of Indian flora and fauna are mentioned, often mysteriously, but they are seldom closely described. Most often they are merely there, as in this passage early in the novel:

Some kites hovered overhead, impartial, over the kites passed the mass of a vulture, and, with an impartiality exceeding all, the sky, not deeply coloured but translucent, poured light from its whole circumference. . . .²³

The presence of the sky is notable again, but other than that there is no attention to detail. There is, however, one repeated reference to a creature that has puzzled critics, though the author himself said it had appeared for a second time 'nonlogically'.²⁴ This is the wasp that Mrs Moore, Ronny Heaslop's mother, finds on a clothes peg one evening early in the story: 'She had known this wasp or his relatives by day; they were not as English wasps but had long yellow legs which hung down behind them when they flew.'²⁵ She views it with some kindness all the same, and when the Hindu

Professor Godbole is engaged on his meditations later in the book, both she and it occur again, in his random recollections: 'Thus Godbole, though she was not important to him, he remembered an old woman he had met in Chandrapore days. Chance brought her into his mind while it was in this heated state.' Then: 'His senses grew thinner, he remembered a wasp seen he forgot where, perhaps on a stone. He loved the wasp equally, he impelled it likewise, he was imitating God.'²⁶ On this bemused view all things might resemble one another, and be equally of great or absolutely no significance at all. It is an attitude that Forster strikes throughout the book, and is an important part of its whole resonance, involving a playful interrogation of the Hindu worldview, perhaps, or the incomprehensible whole of India.

April, the time of greatest heat across southern Asia, is the seasonal banner with which Orwell announces the beginning of his story, whereas in Forster it occurs later, in the tenth chapter of his novel, near the end of Part I, 'Mosque', a brief interruption to a conversation in the chapter that precedes it. A squirrel hangs onto the front of a house across the road from where Aziz lives, and where the conversation had been going on:

It seemed the only occupant of the house, and the squeaks it gave were in tune with the infinite, no doubt, but not attractive except to other squirrels. More noises came from a dusty tree, where brown birds creaked and floundered about looking for insects; another bird, the invisible coppersmith, had started his 'ponk ponk'. It matters so little to the majority of living beings what the minority that calls itself human, desires or decides. Most of the inhabitants of India do not mind how India is governed.²⁷

Engaging as the small creatures are, only one of them is recognised by name ('the invisible coppersmith'), and Forster soon retreats to a more telling general observation, which the next sentences then extend to England. The

hot sun is personified before the conversation resumes in the final chapter of Part I. The way that Forster evokes the sub-continent and its varied forms of life is undoubtedly appealing to the reader of the novel, but what this essay is concerned with is more specifically the way that both he and Orwell describe the natural world, and this can perhaps best be illustrated by an episode a little earlier in this section, when Adela Quested announces to Ronny Heaslop that they will not be married. His previous show of impatience, towards Adela and his mother, on the grounds of their overly relaxed attitude toward Indians, is not the reason for her decision. In fact Ronny had never pressed her to a formal engagement 'because he believed, like her, in the sanctity of personal relationships.'²⁸ Both behave with restraint, careful to avoid any heated comment or reproaches, and as Adela spoke apologetically, she 'frowned up at the tree beneath which they were sitting.' Up above :

A little green bird was observing her, so brilliant and neat that it might have hopped right out of a shop. On catching her eye it closed its own, gave a small skip and prepared to go to bed. Some Indian wild bird.

They vow to remain friends, and Forster remarks: 'Experiences, not character divided them; they were not dissimilar, as humans go; indeed, when compared with the people who stood nearest to them in point of space, they became practically identical.' The Indians nearby are briefly mentioned, to establish difference, before Adela refers to the bird :

'Do you know what the name of that green bird up above us is?' she asked, putting her shoulder rather nearer to his.

'Bee-eater.'

'Oh no, Ronny, it has red bars on its wings.'

'Parrot,' he hazarded.

'Good gracious, no.'

The bird in question dived into the dome of the tree. It was of no importance, yet they would have liked to identify it, it would somehow have solaced their hearts. But nothing in India is identifiable, the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else.

'McBryde has an illustrated bird-book,' he said dejectedly. 'I'm no good at birds at all. In fact I'm useless at any information outside my own job. It's a great pity.'²⁹

Ronny's palpable regret is more at his failure to please Adela than at his limited knowledge of the place that he is living in. The mention of 'an illustrated bird-book' shows both the desire for and availability of knowledge on this subject among the colonial occupants of India. It has sometimes been suggested that the accumulation and classification of such information was in itself an exercise in imperial possession, though a comparison with Orwell may offer a more diffuse view of this matter.

Quite early in *Burmese Days*, the discontented Flory goes for a walk alone in the jungle with his dog, following an unsatisfactory encounter with Ma Hla May, the Burmese woman he engages from time to time to satisfy his sexual wants. At first his walk is disappointing :

The jungle was dried-up and lifeless at this time of year. The trees lined the road in close, dusty ranks, with leaves a dull olive-green. No birds were visible except some ragged creatures like disreputable thrushes, which hopped clumsily under the bushes; in the distance some other bird uttered a cry of '*Ah* ha ha! *Ah* ha ha!' a lonely hollow sound like the echo of a laugh. There was a poisonous, ivy-like smell of crushed leaves. It was still hot, though the sun was losing his glare and the slanting light was yellow.

As with Forster, the sun is male, but Orwell's observation and description of the surroundings is much more evocative and precise. It continues :

After two miles the road ended at the ford of a shallow stream. The jungle grew greener here, because of the water, and the trees were taller. At the edge of the stream there was a huge dead pyinkado tree festooned with spidery orchids, and there were some wild lime bushes with white, waxen flowers. They had a sharp scent like bergamot.³⁰

Further along, Flory comes to a pool, where he bathes, nibbled at by tiny fish, 'silvery *mahseer*, no bigger than sardines.' Then :

There was a stirring high up in the peepul tree, and a bubbling noise like pots boiling. A flock of green pigeons were up there, eating the berries. Flory gazed up into the great green dome of the tree, trying to distinguish the birds; they were invisible, they matched the leaves so perfectly, and yet the whole tree was alive with them, shimmering, as though the ghosts of birds were shaking it. [. . .] Then a single green pigeon fluttered down and perched on a lower branch. It did not know that it was being watched. It was a tender thing, smaller than a tame dove, with jade-green back as smooth as velvet, and neck and breast of iridescent colours. Its legs were like the pink wax that dentists use.

The purpose of this passage in the story is soon apparent when Flory reflects: 'Beauty is meaningless unless it is shared.' We are given to understand his loneliness from this, but the word 'beauty' is key to the detail of the description too. Orwell notably does not trivialise the bird as Forster does ('so brilliant and neat that it might have hopped right out of a shop'),³¹ but gives it serious attention. Indeed Orwell can hardly resist the impulse to expand upon the subject, like an ornithologist :

Suddenly the pigeon saw the man and dog below, sprang into the air and dashed away swift as a bullet, with a rattle of wings. One does not often see green pigeons so closely when they are alive. They are high-flying birds, living in the treetops, and they do not come to the ground, or only to drink. When one shoots them, if they are not killed outright, they cling to the branch until they die, and drop long after one has given up and gone away.³²

The way that Orwell writes here of the natural world has an element of celebration that Forster does not display, or displays much less, and which in this particular scene underlines the protagonist's joyless encounter with the woman. It is almost as if the only successful or pleasurable engagement with the country, under the colonial dispensation, can be an impersonal one, that does not involve the human factor. The mention of hunting, however, introduces another aspect, of depredation, or destruction.

Five chapters and fifty pages later, green pigeons appear again, and the larger imperial pigeons are introduced, while Elizabeth is suffering from the heat: 'Flocks of green pigeons, and imperial pigeons as large as ducks, came to eat the berries of the big peepul trees along the bazaar road.'³³ Birds and flowers, the most easily domesticated parts of the natural world for our personal enjoyment, are among the things that Flory feels that he would miss from Burma, and whose beauty he extols and wishes to share with Elizabeth. Earlier he had tried to interest her in flowers, and talked too much about them.³⁴ In the new hope with which his relationship with her seems steadily to infuse him, he comes to look more fondly on his life in Burma:

He came up the path, and it seemed to him that his house, his flowers, his servants, all the life that so short a time ago had been drenched in ennui and homesickness, were somehow made new, significant, beautiful

inexhaustibly.³⁵

He has fallen in love now, and when his pet cock flies up at his approach, he carries it proudly into the house, though his happiness is destroyed by the return of Ma Hla May. Hope remains, however, with the hunting trip that he has planned for Elizabeth, and this turns out to be more successful than he anticipated when they shoot a leopard. Orwell convincingly describes the suffering of the wounded leopard, yet takes time even here to express the same sense of precious natural beauty that he displays elsewhere. In the action of the hunt it is necessarily much briefer. As the beaters get to work, and Flory waits with Elizabeth, he still has time to notice what he sees: 'A wonderful bird, a little bigger than a thrush, with grey wings and body of blazing scarlet, broke from the trees and came towards them with a dipping flight.' Very shortly after this: 'A flight of green pigeons were dashing towards them at incredible speed, forty yards up. They were like a handful of stones whirling through the sky.'³⁶ Flory shoots two of these, and then announces:

'Look out!' said Flory, 'here's an imperial pigeon. Let's have him!'

A large heavy bird, with flight much slower than the others, was flapping overhead.

Flory's dog and servant retrieve these birds, but it is the protagonist's (and, we assume, the author's) comments on them that are revealing:

Flory took one of the little green corpses to show to Elizabeth. 'Look at it. Aren't they lovely things? The most beautiful bird in Asia.'

Elizabeth touched its smooth feathers with her finger tip. It filled her with bitter envy, because she had not shot it. And yet it was curious, but she felt almost an adoration for Flory now that she had seen how he

could shoot.

'Just look at its breast-feathers; like a jewel. It's murder to shoot them. The Burmese say that when you kill one of these birds they vomit, meaning to say, "Look, here is all I possess, and I've taken nothing of yours. Why do you kill me?" I've never seen one do it, I must admit.'

'Are they good to eat?'

'Very. Even so, I always feel it's a shame to kill them.'

'I wish I could do it like you do!' she said enviously.³⁷

Clearly Elizabeth's mind is on other things than the aesthetic quality of the natural world, but she is won over to Flory when they kill the leopard.

Even later in the book, when Orwell's protagonist is consumed with jealousy and despair after the appearance of a rival, who takes Elizabeth's attentions away from him entirely, the detail of the natural world remains, and is seen vividly. As the couple, Elizabeth and Captain Verrall, ride off into the jungle, the writer tells us: 'Small martins flitted round the horses, keeping pace with them, to hawk for the flies their hooves turned up.'³⁸ It is an extraordinarily close observation, by someone who was clearly used to watching this himself. Flory, meanwhile, is twenty miles away, trying to lose himself in work, before he decides to return :

He was standing at the jungle's edge by the bank of a dried-up stream, where he had walked to tire himself, watching some tiny, nameless finches eating the seeds of the tall grasses. The cocks were chrome-yellow, the hens like hen sparrows. Too tiny to bend the stalks, they came whirring towards them, seized them in mid-flight and bore them to the ground with their own weight. Flory watched the birds incuriously, and almost hated them because they could light no spark of interest in him.

From this detailed account the author is clearly fascinated by the activity of the birds, even though his character purportedly is not. And again a moment later :

He noticed a wild vanilla plant trailing over a bush, and bent down to sniff at its slender, fragrant pods. The scent brought him a feeling of staleness and deadly ennui. Alone, alone, in the sea of life enlisted!³⁹

The pain and loneliness he feels comes from the absence of Elizabeth, the companion with whom he desires to share this world, though depression more usually produces a real indifference to one's surroundings, rather than such an intense awareness of them, which can only be ascribed to Orwell himself. It is true, nevertheless, that some of the more romantic passages are overwritten, especially when Flory manages briefly to be alone with Elizabeth, and both of them are drenched in moonlight :

It was the night of the full moon. Flaring like a white-hot coin, so brilliant that it hurt one's eyes, the moon swam rapidly upwards in a sky of smoky blue, across which drifted a few wisps of yellowish cloud. The stars were all invisible. The croton bushes, by day hideous things like jaundiced laurels, were changed by the moon into jagged black-and-white designs like fantastic woodcuts. By the compound fence two Dravidian coolies were walking down the road, transfigured, their white rags gleaming.⁴⁰

This moment, when Flory kisses Elizabeth under the frangipani tree, is recalled several chapters later, near the book's end, and exemplifies the 'purple passages' that Orwell himself referred to with regard to this novel in a later essay, 'Why I Write'.⁴¹ The style, at this point particularly, is hard to reconcile with the mature Orwell, the political commentator who strove for

absolute clarity of thought and language. Unlike these romantic interludes, however, the closer descriptions of natural phenomena are not romanticised, but factual and accurate in observation. The very intensity of the writer's gaze makes of them a loving observation, the kind of close attention that we associate more with poetry than fiction.

Orwell's style had undergone considerable transformation by the time that he wrote his famous and prophetic later works, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), yet, despite his later rejection of his early novels, he did not disown his first one.⁴² One writer on Burma (or Myanmar as it is now called), Emily Larkin, has attempted to link the three books thematically, in terms of their totalitarian vision, and trace them all back to the author's experience of life in Burma, with moderate success.⁴³ It is perhaps unfair to set Orwell's immature fiction against Forster's most developed work, yet both works have been esteemed in the respective countries that they deal with.⁴⁴ A further comparison can be made with a book by another British writer dealing with a different part of southern Asia, Graham Greene's novel about Vietnam, *The Quiet American* (1955). As far as the narrow theme of this essay goes, however, Greene displays absolutely no interest in the natural setting of his story, even when it leaves the city for the countryside, apart from a few cursory descriptions of the landscape.⁴⁵ Both Forster and Orwell give their full attention to it, the former as part of a larger background, drawing from it certain of his general observations, while the latter attends to it very closely, always specific and particular, differentiating one thing from another, and ascribing to each their individual characteristics. There is a kind of rejoicing in this, a celebration of the world's diversity and beauty, its manifold attributes and the multifarious expressions of the force of life itself. One is reminded, occasionally, of a poet like John Clare (1793-1864), the intense descriptions of living creatures of all kinds in his poems, and begins to wonder that Orwell did not become a poet.

At certain times in his life, as we know from various biographical

accounts, including his own, Orwell certainly wrote verse. His interest in the natural world from an early age is also well attested.⁴⁶ Critics and admirers have noted his intense interest in natural phenomena, the flora and fauna of any place that he happened to be living.⁴⁷ The late Sir Stephen Spender (1909-1995), a politically concerned poet in the 1930s and later a friend of Orwell's, had this to say about him :

He talked in a gritty sort of rambling way. And his prose had a gritty substance, I think, because he refused to use poetic devices on his writing. He distinguished prose very clearly from poetry. I don't think Orwell read very much poetry or liked poetry. He tended to review poetry as though it were ideology. Always seeking for the ideas behind it. He was usually speculating about politics and the political situation.⁴⁸

He did write occasional appreciations of the natural world, such as his essay about the coming of spring in London, and we know that he was always keen to show his friends what might be found around them.⁴⁹ Yet he never allows this to take central place in his writing, but returns always to the problems of humanity, of moral and political truth. Indeed the verse he quotes in 'Why I Write' seems to confirm the turning-point in his own consciousness in the decade of the 1930s, from a time when :

All ignorant we dared to own
The joys we now dissemble ;
The greenfinch on the apple bough [. . .]

But now :

It is forbidden to dream again ;
We maim our joys or hide them.⁵⁰

It is almost as if his moral concern will not allow him to become a poet, as if it were a kind of solace that he must refuse, so that he eventually breaks himself on the problems of humanity. Yet the keen regard he had for nature in its many forms is still a factor present in his writing, and perhaps more than anywhere in his first book, *Burmese Days*. That he continued to remember Burma and refer to it later also attests to the vivid impression that it left on him, most strongly evident in his description of its plants and flowers, its animals and birds.

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- 1 Cyril Connolly, Review of *Burmese Days* in the *New Statesman*, London, 8 July 1935. Taken from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burmese_Days Accessed 20 December 2014.
 - 2 Although much of India had gradually come under British jurisdiction over a long period of time, Burma was won by force during the nineteenth century, as a result of wars in 1824–26, briefly in 1852, and again in 1885, when it was finally annexed.
 - 3 George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (London: Penguin Books, 2001; first pub. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934), p. 68.
 - 4 George Orwell, *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 25.
 - 5 The word 'empire' occurs on pp. 29, 30, 33, 35, 37, 38, 41, 68, 69, & 70; the word 'imperial' occurs on pp. 116, 170, 171, 180, with reference to pigeons, & 'Imperial' on p. 249, with reference to the Indian Imperial Police. Accessed on Amazon.co.uk, 20 December 2014.
 - 6 The similarities have been remarked before. See, for example, Jeffrey Meyers, *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), p. 114.
 - 7 Burma is predominantly Buddhist, though there are also animist beliefs, which Orwell describes in his novel too. Many Indians moved (or were moved) to Burma under the British administration, and many of these were expelled after independence. A substantial Muslim minority still remains, but they are of a different racial origin to the Buddhist majority and have become the object of considerable discrimination. Some of the tribal minorities in the north converted to Christianity. The complexity of this situation is well represented in Orwell's novel.
 - 8 It was regarded as an undesirable posting. See, for example, David Gilmour, *The Ruling Caste: Imperial Lives in the Victorian Raj* (London: John Murray, 2005), pp. 60 & 238.
 - 9 Op. cit., p. 295.
 - 10 See *George Orwell: A Life* by Bernard Crick (London: Penguin Books, 1982; first pub. Secker & Warburg, 1980), p. 141.

- 11 Crick gives a concise and useful summary of this, *ibid.*, p. 47.
- 12 For evidence of his linguistic abilities see, for example, *Remembering Orwell*, ed. Stephen Wadhams (London: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 22-25; also Crick, *op. cit.*, p. 148. He may also have learnt the Karen language, Crick, *ibid.*, p.153.
- 13 Much has been written about this, but see especially the biographies, *E.M. Forster: A Life* by P.N. Furbank, two vols. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1977 & 1978), and *E.M. Forster: A New Life* by Wendy Moffatt (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), *passim*.
- 14 E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987; first in this edn. 1979; first pub. London: Edward Arnold, 1924), p. 30.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 289.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- 19 *Op. cit.*, p. 1. The novel is set in the Katha district in Upper Burma, which was Orwell's last posting.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 22 *Op. cit.*, p. 9. This edition is reprinted from the posthumous Abinger Edition of Forster's works, each volume edited with an introduction and extensive notes.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 24 See the interview with Forster by P.N. Furbank and F.J.H. Haskell in the *Paris Review*, Spring 1953, No. 1. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5219/the-art-of-fiction-no-1-e-m-forster> Accessed 20 November 2014.
- 25 *Op. cit.*, p. 50.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 259.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91
- 30 *Op. cit.*, p. 56.
- 31 Whether the colour green has any significance for Forster is a question that might be considered. We know from biographical sources that he chose green ink for the manuscript of *A Passage to India*, to distinguish it from his other writing, as Oliver Stallybrass points out, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11. Curiously, a more recent account of Forster's life in India and the eventual formation of his novel, by the South African writer Damon Galgut, places a toy bird of a similar kind beside the writer as he tries to complete the book after a ten-year struggle: 'He had bought an ornamental toy in India, a little wooden bird, green with patches of red on its wings and sticklike yellow legs, which he set up on the edge of his writing desk, and it looked on as he struggled with himself.' *Arctic Summer* by Damon Galgut (London: Atlantic Books, 2014), p. 318.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

- 37 Ibid., pp. 170–171.
- 38 Ibid., p. 221.
- 39 Ibid., p. 223. The last words form the opening line of the poem ‘To Marguerite’ by Matthew Arnold (1822–1888).
- 40 Op. cit., p. 182.
- 41 After recounting his development in childhood and youth, he says: ‘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 their own 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.’, *The Penguin Essays*, op. cit., p. 8
- 42 ‘Later he repudiated his early novels, except *Burmese Days*.’ Crick, op. cit., p. 18.
- 43 See Emily Larkin, *Finding George Orwell in a Burmese Teashop* (London: John Murray, 2004), *passim*.
- 44 A translation of Orwell’s *Burmese Days* into Burmese was published in 2012, and received a literary award. See: <http://www.mhpbooks.com/80-years-after-publication-george-orwells-burmese-days-wins-burmas-highest-literary-prize/> Accessed 15 September 2014.
- 45 Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (London: Vintage, 2004; first pub. Bodley Head, 1955). See, for example, pp. 17, 38, 76, 83 & 140–142. A fruitful comparison might be made with a much more recent publication, *The Glass Palace: A Novel* by the Bengali writer Amitav Ghosh (London: HarperCollins, 2000), a book which has much in common with Orwell’s and looks retrospectively towards it. Like Orwell, Ghosh is linked to Burma through family connections, and writes in detail about many aspects of it, in a saga covering a much longer time-span. Ghosh differs from Orwell in that he seldom names the birds he mentions, and although he gives some attention to plants, he most elaborately evokes the qualities of teak, an important resource and industry that figures in the story. See, especially, pp. 60–63.
- 46 See the comment by Nancy Fox in Wadhams., op. cit., p. 27; also Kay Ekevali, *ibid.*, p. 57.
- 47 Crick, op. cit., *passim*.
- 48 Wadhams, op. cit., p. 106.
- 49 See especially his essay, ‘Some Thoughts on the Common Toad’, *Penguin Essays*, op. cit., pp. 366–368. See also ‘George Orwell: The Socialist Who Loved Nature’ a talk by Norman Bissell from the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics <http://vimeo.com/31948585> Accessed 18 September 2014.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 10–11.

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