

## **George Orwell's "English Scene", 1939-1949: Recording Britain, Britain in Pictures and the Festival of Britain**

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In "England Your England", the first essay in his collection of three essays *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (1940), George Orwell attempts a study of the social atmosphere of England and summarizes the "diversity" and "chaos" of England as follows: "The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn mornings—all these are not only fragments, but characteristic fragments, of the English scene" (CW 12: 392). This study examines Orwell's interest in "the English scene" from the novel *Coming Up for Air*, published in 1939, to his final novel *Nineteen Eighty-four* of 1949 in light of three major culture initiatives undertaken in Britain from 1939 to the post-war years, namely, the Recording Britain art project, the Britain in Pictures publishing initiative and the Festival of Britain. The Recording Britain art project was started in 1939 and involved close to one hundred artists who traveled around England and produced some 1500 drawings and watercolor paintings of buildings, villages, churches, statuary, and other sights. Together, these works, which were shown in exhibitions during the war and led to a major 4-volume Recording Britain publication in 1946, constituted a visual archive of landscapes, buildings and lifestyles threatened by the twin onslaught of modernity and war. Orwell's writings from 1939 to 1949 resonate with this program and present a similar account of a threatened cultural heritage. The second initiative, Britain in Pictures, was a set of 132 books on a wide range of topics covering Britain's history, geography, nature, regions, society, and culture, which was published from 1941 to 1950 with the financial support of the UK Ministry of Information. Orwell himself contributed a volume to this series on *The English People*, which though completed in 1944 was not published till 1947. The Festival of Britain, finally, was launched by the post-WW II Labor government and intended to showcase a nation confidently moving beyond the ravages of war. In doing so, it celebrated the history, arts, people, and regions of Britain, but also echoed the kind of triumphalism and government-directed national pride Orwell warned about in *Nineteen Eighty-four*. In anchoring Orwell's work to the immediate cultural context of these culture initiatives, this study sheds new light on the narrative techniques and culture politics of one of the most influential 20th c. English writers. Relevant texts to be examined in this study include the novel *Coming Up for Air* (1939), the political essays in *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (1940), the long essay *The English People* from the Britain in Pictures series (), and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949).