

inside story

notes from a small island

George Orwell's *1984* is often said to be a product of the wild and lonely landscape in which he wrote it. But that's unfair on Jura, says director **Chris Durlacher**, who went there to film a documentary about the author. The cameraman shot a whole 12 minutes of sunlight

IN SPRING 1947, GEORGE ORWELL TEMPORARILY put aside the manuscript of his new novel, *1984*, to pen an invitation to Sonia Brownell, with whom he had recently broken up after a brief affair and whom many believe to be the inspiration for Julia – the heroine of *1984*. “Dearest Sonia, I do so want to have you here,” he wrote. “Here” was Barnhill, a farmhouse on the ruggedly beautiful north-east coast of the Hebridean island of Jura. The travelling instructions Orwell enclosed with his invitation suggested a daunting remoteness. He explained that, from Glasgow, Sonia would have to take a train, then a boat, then a bus and then another boat to reach Jura, where there was a chance she might find a car to get her some of the way to his farmhouse. He advised that she should “bring a raincoat and, if possible, stout boots”, since arrivals often had to walk the last seven miles. The invitation was never accepted.

When he wrote it, Orwell was still settling into the farmhouse. The year before, he had been living in a flat in central London, but he decided that the big city was distracting him from writing novels (with typically perverse timing, he had moved to London just in time for the Blitz and left as soon as peace descended). One of his friends, who knew Jura well, was “horrified” by Orwell’s latest “crazy” move, because – although this magnificently wild and lonely island was an ideal writer’s retreat – it seemed totally inappropriate for Orwell. He was only 44 years old, but a chronic tuberculosis infection (made worse by the black shag roll-ups he smoked incessantly) had left Orwell at times a virtual invalid, unable to climb a flight of stairs without coughing up blood. On top of that, he was a widower with a three-year-old adopted son, Richard. An untreated farmhouse, miles from the nearest telephone and even further from a doctor, hardly seemed the best place for such a vulnerable family.

Today, Jura still attracts the intrepid visitor. I went there to shoot some scenes for a drama-documentary that will form part of the commemoration of Orwell’s centenary this summer. I had originally planned to take the entire cast and crew to Jura, but the logistics were so complex – and expensive – that we ended up recreating Barnhill’s interior

in a studio, and just the cameraman, Jeff Baynes, and I went to Jura to shoot the exterior shots.

We discovered that Barnhill is still way beyond the northernmost end of the island’s only road, just as it was in Orwell’s day. In fact, most of the 40-odd square miles of Jura remain inaccessible and empty. The island’s 200 inhabitants make do with only one town, Craighouse (it has one shop and one pub), and beyond that there’s only an awful lot of deer – about 5,000 of them. Until the shooting season starts, the animals wander around as though they own the place.

Apparently, in the late 1940s, Orwell tinkering with his motorbike, which was either broken down or had a tyre punctured by a particularly severe pothole, was as common a sight in Jura as a stag is now. His former retreat is right on the coast, two hours’ drive from town in a modern four-wheel-drive vehicle, but probably much longer on Orwell’s bike. Famously unmechanical – or, as one friend put it, “the inanimate world seemed set against him” – Orwell did once own a van, but that had been craned off the ferry with its engine seized up and never again rolled an inch under its own power. It could still be seen rotting on Jura’s quayside in 1976.

Born on 25 June 1903, into what he described as England’s “lower upper middle class” – which he said was “the upper middle class without money” – Orwell was educated at Eton, before becoming an officer with the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. His real name was Eric Arthur Blair, but he adopted the pen name George Orwell when *Down and Out in Paris and London* was published. Some say he changed his name to protect his ever so respectable parents from association with his autobiographical books, but there is also the suggestion that he took the new moniker to disassociate Eric Blair with possible failure. He told Victor Gollancz, who agreed to publish the book after the manuscript had already been rejected twice, “I have no reputation that is lost by doing this and, if the book has any kind of success, I can always use this pseudonym again.”

Five years after joining, he resigned from the imperial force, partly because the tropical climate had damaged his health and partly because he wanted to be a writer, but ►



SPLENDID ISOLATION
Barnhill, the remote
farmhouse on the
island of Jura, where
Orwell wrote *1984*

► most of all because he hated it. "I could no longer go on serving an imperialism that I had come to regard as very largely a racket," he explained.

Returning to Europe, he lived in Paris for two years, writing two novels – which were rejected by every publisher, and which he burnt afterwards. Eventually his money ran out and he fell into severe poverty, becoming first a dishwasher and then a tramp. He found life in the gutter uncomfortable but invigorating, and said of his enthusiasm for beggars and thieves: "I was very happy – here I was at the bedrock of the western world."

But that all changed when he made a trip to the north of England, and wrote about the mining communities there. By the time he reached his 30s, Orwell had become Britain's leading correspondent of the dispossessed. He married in 1936 (his wife, Eileen, later died of a heart attack during the war), in almost the same week that civil war broke out in Spain. And when the Spanish called for volunteers to help them repel fascism, Orwell went to Barcelona.

After several months in the trenches, he was wounded by a bullet in the neck. By the time he was fully recovered, the Second World War had begun. Unfit for active service, he first joined the Home Guard and then followed the allied armies into Germany as a war correspondent. He was there when he heard that his wife had died and, to cope with his grief he threw himself at the typewriter, often staying at the keys until the early hours of the morning.

After the war, lonely and sick with TB, he proposed marriage to a string of elegant young women – among them Anne Popham, to whom he wrote: "There is no knowing how long I shall live, but what I am really asking you is would you like to be the widow of a literary man? There is a certain amount of fun in this." The replies to his catastrophic seduction technique were uniformly negative and, following this string of rejections, Orwell travelled north to Jura.

Many people saw his retreat there as evidence of a death wish – that he was desperately lonely and prematurely aged. In fact, as we found on our filming trip to Barnhill, Jura is watertight, peaceful, surrounded by breathtaking scenery and, all in all, a rather pleasant spot (so much so that, in its summer guise as holiday cottage, Barnhill is often fully booked). The truth is that Orwell possessed no death wish. He was just cavalier about his illness rather than wallowing in it, especially when it got in the way of his work. Barnhill would be a good place to write *1984*, he mused, therefore Barnhill it had to be.

When I went to the farmhouse, I sat in Orwell's old bedroom. About 12ft square, with whitewashed walls and a recessed window that offers a fine view down to the sea, it's probably not much different now from how it was 50 years ago. There is a fireplace in the bedroom, but in Orwell's day it didn't draw very well, so heat was supplied by an old paraffin stove that leaked lethal fumes.

This paraffin flog, mixed with the cigarettes Orwell virtually chain-smoked, would have damaged even the sturdiest of lungs, and the effort of writing the first two drafts of *1984* undoubtedly damaged Orwell's health. But, after 18 months of work, he was at last on the final draft, writing to a friend, "I am just on the grisly job of typing up my novel. It is a very awkward thing to do in bed, where I still have to spend half the time."

The final draft was finished just before Christmas 1948, shortly after which Orwell collapsed. Just capable of writing to a friend that "I am really very unwell indeed", he was rushed to the mainland and then south to an



A LITERARY MAN
Orwell (left) died just a few months after *1984* was published; the author (above) with other boys at Eton around 1919

English sanatorium. *1984* was published in June 1949, but Orwell never returned to Jura. In fact, he never got out of hospital again. He survived just long enough to persuade Sonia Brownell to marry him, before dying, three months later, on 21 January 1950.

The book he left behind is, as the author himself had explained, "a book about the future, in a sense a fantasy". It was not a prophecy – despite the predictions of two-way televisions, Room 101 and Big Brother – but rather a description of the imagined triumph of the dangers that Orwell saw looming over post-war society, and that we are still threatened by today. "Maybe I am pessimistic," he

is infected by Orwell's own grim prospects as he was writing it. But the facts refute this. Even as he was typing up that last draft, he applied to have his driving licence renewed – not the act of a man slowly committing suicide.

Others suggest *1984*'s bleak outlook was a product of the blasted glens that the book was written in. But that's an oversimplification of Orwell's imagination, and unfairly maligns Jura. The island is cold and wet, but it's not ugly and miserable like the setting of *1984*. Despite the problem of rain on the lens, as film-makers, we loved Barnhill. So much so that Jeff even shot an entire 12-minute roll of film of just the patterns of sunlight on the sea.

I think Jura suited Orwell in three ways. First, and most obviously, there was the almost monastic seclusion. Ever since his days of poverty, he had found it hard to turn down journalistic work, but in Jura – beyond the reach of the telephone – he never got offered any and so could concentrate on his novel. Second, it must be understood that *1984* is a very metropolitan novel. Nearly all of it takes place in London, transformed in the book into the chief city of Airstrip One. Not only does this reveal how intensely he loathed the city, but it would also have been much harder to launch such a vicious attack on metropolitan life from deep within it.

Most of all, though, I think what drew Orwell to Jura was that it fitted his state of mind. One of his friends, the critic

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admitted, "but at the same time there does not seem to be much cause for optimism in the world today."

It is a frightening book, and one that shows a future where love does not conquer all. Its two lovers, Winston and Julia, finally betray each other as their torturer boasts, "In our world, there will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph and self-abasement... The sex instinct will be eradicated. We shall abolish the orgasm... There will be no loyalty except loyalty to the Party... If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face forever."

Such a dismal ending has suggested to many that the book

Cyril Connolly, described Orwell as having a bracing pessimism. Although Orwell believed the world was heading for catastrophe, he could accept this fate and did his best to enjoy himself nonetheless. On Jura, where nice days often turn out worse, and where the locals admire self-sufficiency and relish both being battered by the wind and rain and being isolated from comfort, bracing pessimism is the norm. Here, probably for the first time in his life, Orwell actually fitted in. ■

George Orwell: A life in Pictures is due to be broadcast on BBC2 on 14 June