

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO GEORGE ORWELL'S



**ANIMAL
FARM**

“Connell Guides have the gift of making the daunting
and overwhelming accessible and digestible.”

HELENA BONHAM CARTER

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Zachary Seager

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Introduction

In 1943 George Orwell was working at the BBC, overseeing cultural broadcasts to India. He was living in a flat in Kilburn, West London, and contributing to left-wing magazines, newspapers and journals in his spare time. He had not published a novel since *Coming Up for Air* (1939).

Born Eric Arthur Blair in British India in 1903, he had been a schoolboy at Eton, a policeman in Burma, and a teacher in West London; he had written about the life of the poor in London and Paris, and fought in the Spanish Civil War (1936-9) as part of a Trotskyite militia. He had also written several novels – none them commercially successful – and published a great deal of non-fiction, mostly about social and political issues.

But in 1943 he wondered whether he would ever write fiction again. He was worried about money, and life in London was hard during the war. Then, finally, inspiration struck. He wrote to his friend and literary agent, Leonard Moore, in December, 1943: “You will be glad to hear that I *am* writing a book again at last.”

Animal Farm was intended as an attack on Soviet communism and especially on Stalinism. Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) was a popular figure amongst the left-leaning British intelligentsia during the 1930s and 1940s, and Orwell hated this. It came as no surprise to him that when the novel was finished in April, 1944, nobody was willing to

publish it. Anti-Soviet books were not in demand during the war, especially by Orwell’s regular publisher, Gollanz, which specialised in radical left-wing literature.

When *Animal Farm* was finally published in the UK in August, 1945 and in the US in 1946, it caused a sensation: 4,500 copies were sold in the first six weeks, and nine translations were under way within the first eight months. More than a million copies were sold in the 1940s and 1950s, and by 1972 sales had reached 11 million.

The novel’s commercial success was partly due to its propaganda value. In America, in particular, it became a weapon in the Cold War battle of ideas between democratic capitalism and totalitarian communism. The British government used it, too, funding a newspaper comic strip in the 1950s based on *Animal Farm*, which ran in, among other countries, Brazil, Burma, India, Mexico, and Thailand.

But *Animal Farm*’s success is largely attributable to its exceptional quality; it quickly became a classic of 20th century literature. No two books by a single author have sold more copies than *Animal Farm* and the Orwell novel which shortly followed it, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. *Animal Farm* has been translated into more than 70 languages, and global sales are estimated at more than 20 million, making it one of the best-selling books in the history of publishing.

A summary of the plot

Animal Farm is set on the Manor Farm, a typical working farm in rural England run by Mr. Jones. Mr. Jones drinks too much, and neglects his duties towards the animals.

At the beginning of the book an elderly boar named old Major summons all of the animals on the farm together for a meeting. Telling them that humans are their enemies, he teaches them a revolutionary song called 'Beasts of England'. The animals are roused by old Major's speech, and they each go their way, singing their song and dreaming of a revolution.

Soon after the meeting old Major dies, and two young pigs named Napoleon and Snowball take it upon themselves to direct the other animals. They tell the animals to prepare for the great Rebellion, and together the animals revolt, driving Mr. Jones and his wife from the farm.

In celebration of their victory they rename the Manor Farm "Animal Farm", and establish 'Beasts of England' as their anthem. Immediately, they institute the "Seven Commandments of Animalism", which dictate that "All animals are equal" and that "Whatever goes on two legs is an enemy", but that "Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend". These Commandments are to "form an unalterable law by which all the animals on Animal Farm must live for ever after".

There is plenty of food and the farm runs

smoothly. Snowball, a very intelligent pig, teaches the other animals to read and write, while Napoleon, a "large, rather fierce-looking Berkshire boar... with a reputation for getting his own way", instructs a new litter of puppies on the principles of Animalism. Work is divided evenly, and everything is determined by committee. The animals are happy: they are free, and amongst equals.

The pigs, however, begin to separate themselves from the others. They set aside milk and apples for their own private use, arguing that the health of the pig is important for the health of the farm itself.

Eventually Mr. Jones and his men try to take back the farm. Other local farmers support Mr. Jones, mostly because they are afraid of revolutionary activity on their own farms. The animals are prepared, however. Led by Snowball, who has been studying the battles of Julius Caesar, they at first begin to retreat. Mr. Jones's men sense an easy victory, and so chase the animals into the middle of the farm, at which point Snowball orders the animals to attack from all sides, forcing Mr. Jones and his men to retreat. The animals win the day, and Snowball is declared the hero of "The Battle of the Cowshed". The Battle is commemorated each year, alongside the anniversary of the revolution.

After the farm is secure, normal life resumes. Snowball announces his plans to build a windmill, acknowledging that the work will be hard, but arguing that in the end it will reduce the labour of the animals. All of the animals support Snowball's

idea except Napoleon, who seems put out by it.

One day the animals hear a strange growling sound coming from the farmhouse. Suddenly a pack of dogs appears and attacks Snowball. They bite and scratch and terrorise the intelligent pig until he has no choice but to flee the farm. It quickly becomes clear that these dogs were the same puppies who Napoleon had instructed in the principles of Animalism.

With Snowball gone Napoleon begins to establish his supremacy. He replaces group meetings with a committee of pigs which will run the farm. He moves into Mr. Jones's old house and begins to adopt human habits such as the use of bed-sheets and the drinking of whisky. When the animals notice that Napoleon is breaking two of the Commandments of Animalism – “No animal shall sleep in a bed”; “No animal shall drink alcohol” – they go to refer to the Commandments themselves, which had been written on the side of a shed for all to see. The animals learn that the Commandments have been changed; or at least they think they have been changed, because they cannot quite remember the original wording of the Commandments. When the animals raise their concerns about Napoleon's behaviour, Squealer, a cunning young pig, claims that the Commandments have always been the same.

Napoleon announces that the animals are to build a windmill. The animals are struck by Napoleon's apparent change of heart, but Squealer says that the idea of the windmill had been



An artistic impression of the flag of Animalism - notably similar to the Communist symbol of the hammer and sickle. According to the novel, the green represents the fields of England, while the hoof and horn represents the Republic of the Animals

Napoleon's in the first place, and that Snowball had stolen it from him. The animals work hard, and progress is made on the windmill.

One night a storm comes and knocks it down. Napoleon says that the collapse of the windmill was Snowball's fault, and that he had been attempting to undermine Animal Farm. Moreover, Napoleon says, some animals on the farm remain loyal to Snowball, and these animals must be dealt with. Following Napoleon's orders, the disloyal animals are executed by the dogs. Soon it is claimed that Snowball had collaborated with Mr. Jones at The Battle of Cowshed, and that it was Napoleon himself who won the day.

‘Beasts of England’ is replaced with a song that celebrates Napoleon. Although not all of the animals are happy with what has become of the revolution, many of them are more concerned about Mr. Jones, worrying that the old farmer might take advantage of any internal division on the farm.

One day a farmer named Mr. Frederick attacks the farm in the hope of winning it for himself. Mr. Frederick’s men are repelled, but the Battle of the Windmill, as it comes to be known, causes great damage to the farm. The newly rebuilt windmill is destroyed, and many of the animals, including Boxer, the hardworking horse, are injured.

Boxer had been instrumental in the revolution, and responsible for a great deal of the work on the windmill. But when, after the battle, Boxer collapses while working, Napoleon arranges for him to be taken to a vet. Benjamin, a donkey who “could read as well as any pig”, notices that the van which arrives to pick up Boxer belongs not to a vet but to a knacker’s yard. The animals are angry and confused. But Squealer says that the van had in fact been bought by the animal hospital, which had simply forgotten to repaint it.

A festival is held the day after Boxer’s death, and the animals are told to follow his example and work even harder, for the benefit of Animal Farm.

Eventually the windmill is restored, and a new windmill is built. The farm begins to prosper, and the pigs increasingly take on the habits and mannerisms of the humans. Napoleon spends the

money he earned from selling Boxer to the knacker’s yard on whisky.

Many of the animals who had participated in the revolution die, and so too does Mr. Jones. The pigs begin to walk upright, to carry whips, and to wear clothes. The Seven Commandments of Animalism are reduced to a single phrase: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” And Napoleon changes the name of Animal Farm back to Manor Farm.

At the end of the novel, Napoleon holds a dinner party in Mr. Jones’s old house. The party is for the pigs and local farmers, and it is held in order to celebrate a new alliance between them. The other animals look in through the window and see the pigs and the humans drinking alcohol and playing cards together. They realise, finally, that they can no longer distinguish between the two.

What is *Animal Farm* about?

There is no mystery about this: *Animal Farm* is about the rise of communism in Russia and the political and social developments that took place in the early days of the Soviet Union.

Orwell acknowledged in a letter to his friend, the American writer and editor Dwight Macdonald, in December 1946 that his intention from the start

was to write “a satire of the Russian Revolution”. He even suggested that the French translation be titled *Union des républiques socialistes animaux*, or *URSA*, an acronym which resembles that of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, otherwise known as the USSR. (*Ursa* is also Latin for bear, and, at least from the 16th century onwards, the bear has been a national symbol of Russia.)

Orwell’s aim was to satirise the Soviet Union in “a story that could be easily understood by almost anyone and which could be easily translated into other languages”. But why did he want to write such a story?

Why did Orwell write *Animal Farm*?

Orwell took great pains with his broadcasts at the BBC, always striving to make them popular; he was a little bored by the work, but not unhappy. Then, in 1943, the BBC handed out a pamphlet on wartime propaganda, which included advice for writers on how to deal with anti-Soviet feeling amongst the British populace. Orwell was enraged.

Although there was plenty of anti-Soviet feeling in Britain, little of it came from the left. As Orwell himself put it, amongst the left

Stalin is sacrosanct and certain aspects of his

policy must not be seriously discussed. This rule has been almost universally observed since 1941, but it had operated, to a greater extent than is sometimes realised, for ten years earlier than that. Throughout that time, criticism of the Soviet regime from the left could only obtain a hearing with difficulty.

Orwell found this attitude repugnant. He believed that Stalinism was reprehensible, and was appalled to see Stalin’s supporters excusing the most egregious acts to uphold the good name of communism. As he wrote in his essay ‘The Freedom of the Press’, originally intended to be the preface for *Animal Farm*:

At this moment what is demanded by the prevailing orthodoxy is an uncritical admiration of Soviet Russia. Everyone knows this, nearly everyone acts on it. Any serious criticism of the Soviet regime, any disclosure of facts which the Soviet government would prefer to keep hidden, is next door to unprintable.

Much as Orwell tried to persuade others on the left that Stalinism was wrong, his criticisms were deemed unwelcome.

When it came to Stalinism Orwell knew what he was talking about. He had fought in the Spanish Civil War in a militia loyal to the ideals of Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), and had written about the