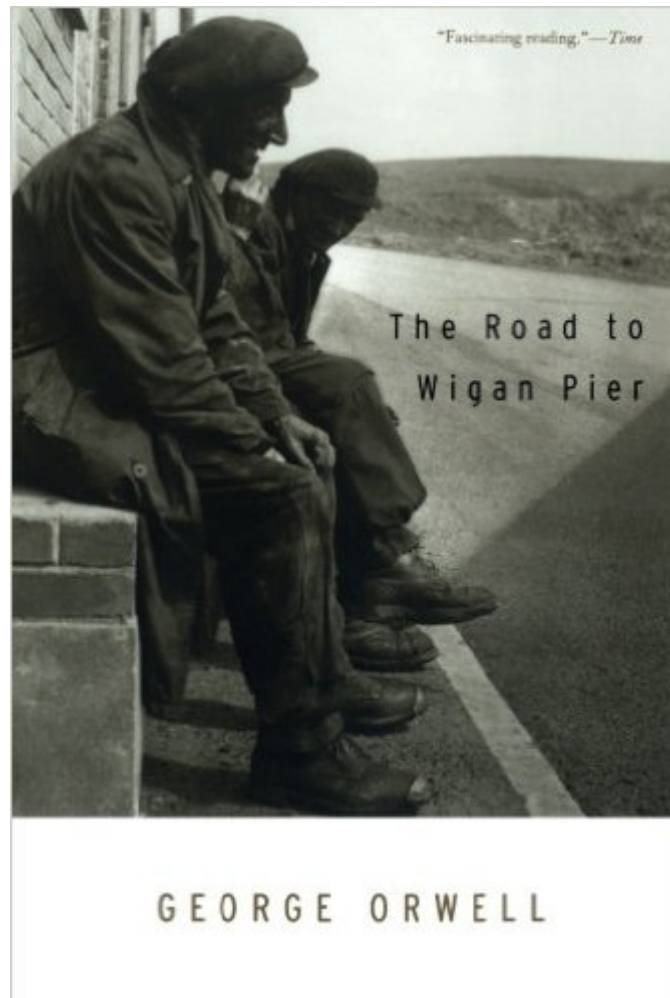


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The Road To Wigan Pier



Synopsis

In the 1930s Orwell was sent by a socialist book club to investigate the appalling mass unemployment in the industrial north of England. He went beyond his assignment to investigate the employed as well - to see the most typical section of the English working class. • Foreword by Victor Gollancz.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Contrary to my expectations, this is Orwell's most personal book. He bares his soul to us. At least I think he seriously tries to be perfectly honest, if not complete. After his success with *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Orwell got commissioned by the influential Left Book Club (Victor Gollancz one of the editors) to write a book about unemployment in the industrial and impoverished northern part of England. This was the mid 30s, the recent depression had led to high unemployment and endless misery in England as elsewhere. GO went there and dug in and lived with workers and in boarding houses and crawled through mines (though he was about twice as tall as a miner should be) and talked to people and read statistics and reports. The outcome is an oddity. Part 1 is a solid piece of investigative reporting and journalistic sociology. Chapter 1 is along the lines of *Down and Out*, an account of life in a boarding house in the North. Start with chapter 2 if you are squeamish. The hygienic conditions are worse than anything in *Down and Out*. The following chapters in part 1 give us descriptions of the life of miners and work in the coal mines, of the miners' leisure time, health,

work safety, accidents, the housing conditions in the fearful northern slums (worse than the slums in India and Burma, says GO, because of the cold dampness), of unemployment and malnutrition, of food and fuel, of the ugliness of industrial countries at the time. The strongest chapter in this part, in my opinion, is the one on unemployment and its psychology. This subject is timeless. Even if the slums have changed, the essential condition of unemployment is surely unchanged. So far so good and in line with the job description.

England in the 1930's had staggering poverty and unemployment and was still reeling from World War I. Socialism was enjoying interest from those who wanted to do something to fix the wrongs. The Left Book Club commissioned George Orwell, who had stirred attention with *DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON* to write a book about the working poor in the coal mines in Lancashire. He did that, but he also chose to go beyond the terms of his contract and assess the potential for Socialism to solve problems. His conclusions did not especially please the editors of the Book Club but to not publish the book would seem narrow-minded, so it went to press in 1937 as is tempered with a forward by Victor Gollancz, taking issue with Orwell's evaluation and vision. The first half of the book stands as a remarkable piece of journalism revealing untold squalor. Coal was the oil of its day and people wanted it in quantity and they wanted it cheap and they did not want to know what it took to produce it. It is difficult to decide what is grimmer, the work beneath the earth or the housing to which the miners returned at night. Especially mean is the fact that the privilege of a family of eight living in two leaky, barren rooms, two hundred yards from an outdoor privy, extracted most of the household wages. Orwell's urgent prose does not let anyone look away. Orwell then turns to a discussion of class differences, the bourgeois and Socialists. He portrays a culture saturated in a class system that will be difficult to eradicate any time soon, one in which the different classes have different values, fears and perspectives that obstruct understanding and reconciliation. Socialism, which had both its bourgeois and proletariat adherents, had yet to get its act together.

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