Pandemos 3 (2025)

https://ojs.unica.it/index.php/pandemos/index
ISBN: 978-88-3312-170-3
presentato il 24.10.2025
accettato il 30.10.2025
pubblicato il 3.11.2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13125/pan-6782

Orwell

by Jeremy Black

Emeritus Professor, University of Exeter
(jeremy.martin.black@gmail.com)

Abstract

Orwell's «Decline of the English Murder» (1946) contrasts the emotionally charged "classic" murders of 1850-1925 with postwar crimes shaped by Americanisation and war. Centred on the 1944 Cleft Chin case, it laments lost moral depth. Yet Orwell oversimplifies historical change, overlooking earlier social upheavals, evolving police methods, and new psychological interpretations of crime found in interwar fiction, especially Christie's. His analysis remains vivid but ultimately descriptive rather than explanatory.

The *Decline of the English Murder* was a postwar journalistic piece more memorable for its title than its perception. Published in «Tribune» on 15 February 1946, its clarity of argument rested on a counterpointing of a classic period of murder, that of c.1850-c.1925, with a subsequent age characterised by the growing impact of Americanisation, later to be taken further in the wake of World War Two. Orwell focuses on the Cleft Chin murder of 1944 in which an American deserter was the killer, while the British victim, George Heath, had been wounded at Dunkirk in 1940, con-

cluding with a reflection both on the culture of the war and with a comment on the resonance of murder:

> The whole meaningless story, with its atmosphere of dance-halls, movie-palaces, cheap perfume, false names and stolen cars, belongs essentially to a war period. [...] It is difficult to believe that this case will be so long remembered as the old domestic poisoning dramas, product of a stable society where the all-prevailing hypocrisy did at least ensure that crimes as serious as murder should have strong emotions behind them.

There was a clear relationship with the norms established and sustained and reflected in novels and the press. Earlier in his piece, Orwell had referred not only to the «News of the World» but also to «successful novels based on» true-life murders and on «episodes that no novelist would dare to make up»'. There is of course a caricature of the interwar Golden Age detective novels that suggest a stability that was to be replaced by a more disturbing, violent, and psychologically engaged crime fiction. Orwell in part contributes to this distinction, but, possibly, some additional points should be made, and notably so in terms of the fiction of the period. To a degree there was support in Christie's novels. In *Crooked House* (1949) there is the looking back to what «in the name of respectability had been committed», and, by contrast, a reference to a more disturbed present, with the crisis of country-house living in *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952), as in Francis Duncan's *Murder for Christmas* (1949) and Henry Wade's *Too Soon to Die* (1953). In the first, Poirot reflects: «He recalled vaguely a small paragraph in the papers. It had not been an interesting murder. Some wretched old woman knocked on the head for a few pounds. All part of the senseless crude brutality of these days». In Christie's deeply pessimistic *Hallowe'en Party* (1969), there is reference to «sordid and uninteresting crimes».

In part, however, there is the standard problem of simplifying a previous age for there were crimes such as the Cleft Chin Murder in the interwar period and, indeed, prior to World War One. Orwell's piece about the disruptive nature of change could also have been made about large-scale industrialisation, internal migration and secularisation in the nineteenth century, about the social tensions of the Edwardian age, about World War One, about the "Roaring Twenties" and about the Depression. Change was very much captured in noth fact and fiction of the late nineteenth century, not least the pretended identities associated with migration and

indeed in the Sherlock Holmes stories, as well as in the Cleft Chin Murder, where the murderer claimed to be an officer.

Orwell perforce simplified the changes in the response to crime. A major one, captured by Christie in her early stories, was the adoption of the psychiatric approach linked to Sigmund Freud. Indeed, Poirot argued that he did not need to attend the scene of a crime in order to understand it, and, in this, Christie very much contrasted her creation with that of Conan Doyle, who was still writing Sherlock Holmes stories in this period. That was not a perspective that meant much to Orwell, no more than the marked development in police doctrine and methods that was linked to, but not restricted to, the reforms of Lord Trenchard, the Metropolitan Commissioner of Police from 1931 to 1935 under whom the Metropolitan Police College was opened at Hendon in 1934. These were continued by his successor until 1945, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Philip Game under whom political stability and wartime measures were crucial, rather than murders.

Orwell should not be criticised for offering far less than a full account of developments, but his counterpointing was descriptive rather than analytical, and there was a misleading account to the description.