

Trees, Woods and Literature—8

A thing which I regret, and which I will try to remedy some time, is that I have never in my life planted a walnut. Nobody does plant them nowadays — when you see a walnut it is almost invariably an old tree. If you plant a walnut you are planting it for your grandchildren, and who cares a damn for his grandchildren? Nor does anybody plant a quince, a mulberry or a medlar. But these are garden trees which you can only be expected to plant if you have a patch of ground of your own. On the other hand, in any hedge or in any piece of waste ground you happen to be walking through, you can do something to remedy the appalling massacre of trees, especially oaks, ashes, elms and beeches, which has happened during the war years.

Even an apple tree is liable to live for about a hundred years, so that the Cox I planted in 1936 may still be bearing fruit well into the twenty-first century. An oak or a beech may live for hundreds of years and be a pleasure to thousands or tens of thousands of people before it is finally sawn up into timber. I am not suggesting that one can discharge all one's obligations towards society by means of a private re-forestation scheme. Still, it might not be a bad idea, every time you commit an anti-social act, to make a note of it in your diary, and then, at the appropriate season, push an acorn into the ground.

And, if even one in twenty of them came to maturity, you might do quite a lot of harm in your lifetime, and still, like the Vicar of Bray, end up as a public benefactor after all.

From "A Good Word for the Vicar of Bray" (1946) by George Orwell. Included in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell; Volume 4 – In Front of Your Nose 1945-1950*, Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. (Secker and Warburg 1968, Penguin Books 1970). Reprinted by permission of Sonia Brownell Orwell and the publishers.

George Orwell was the pen-name of Eric Blair, who was born in India in 1903. After an Eton education he spent six years in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. The remainder of his life was spent as a journalist and novelist. A passionate socialist, his impatience with the imperfections of the system in practice led to the bitterness of *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). He died in London, of tuberculosis, in 1950.

The Vicar of Bray (in Berkshire, England) was the subject of the popular ballad beginning *In good King Charles's golden days . . .* describing how he switched his religion and politics to suit five

successive monarchs, with the refrain *And this is law, I will maintain, / Until my dying day, Sir, / That whatsoever king shall reign, / I'll be the Vicar of Bray, Sir.* The principle is widely applied in all walks of life.

Orwell's essay resulted from his being shown a magnificent yew tree said to have been planted by the eponymous Vicar himself.