



George Orwell



Welcome to our October book, Historians!

Our next meeting is Tuesday, October 2 at 6:30 to discuss *Churchill and Orwell: The Fight for Freedom* by Thomas E. Ricks. While the two men never actually met and represented two different sides of political thought in the 1930s, during WWII, both understood clearly that this was a war about the freedom of the individual and for individual rights. For both men, language mattered, especially the careful use of language in written pieces. And both men valued critical thought above all else. As

independent thinkers, Ricks includes Churchill and Orwell as part of “a long but direct line from Aristotle and Archimedes to Locke, Hume, Mill and Darwin, and from there through Orwell and Churchill to the ‘Letter from Birmingham City Jail.’ It is the agreement that objective reality exists, that people of good will can perceive it and that other people will change their views when presented with the facts of the matter.” Clearly, Orwell and Churchill, who both are cited with great regularity today, have much to say to us about our own time.

Some critics of the book have questioned why Ricks chose to put these two men together as figures representative of their time. They knew of each other of course, and Churchill read *1984* twice, but they never met. Ricks explains that as a war correspondent himself, he related to these other two war correspondents and understood them in a unique way. Hence his interest in writing this book. More importantly, Ricks values Churchill and Orwell’s personal commitment to clear thinking and clear writing, even when it made enemies of people in their own political parties. Churchill spoke out against the fascists and the appeasers in his own Conservative Party. Did you know that the British Foreign Office in 1938 told British soccer players in a game against Germany in Berlin to give the Nazi salute during the playing of the German anthem? Imagine that scene.

Orwell returned from the Spanish Civil War disillusioned by what he saw on the Communist side. He spoke out against the apologists for Stalin and was ostracized by the left because of it. Both men, as Ricks tells us, put the integrity of their principles above party politics. They were willing to question the received wisdom of the time, and they both had the moral courage to stand up for the truth. You can see why *Churchill and Orwell: The Fight for Freedom* found a ready audience in our own time.

As you read, note those key moments for both men when they realized that they were going to have to go against the crowd. What pushed them to that decision? What about their characters gave each man the courage to speak out when so many others did not? Why this fierce commitment on the part of both men to honest critical thought? Ricks points out that both men, famously, believed in writing clearly and succinctly. How is this part of this commitment to critical thinking? And what led each man to value the role of language and writing so highly?

Ricks does a masterful job of recounting how Churchill used language as part of his effectiveness as a wartime leader. What examples jump out to you? And, finally, both men are certainly well-known today. What did you learn from *Churchill and Orwell: The Fight for Freedom* that you did not know before?

I look forward to seeing you on Tuesday, October 2 at 6:30. Come prepared to follow the example of Churchill and Orwell and join in a lively discussion of the importance of critical thought, clear writing, moral courage, and principled leadership as exemplified by these two men.

Donna McBride