

Warnings from the Past

Caesar's Column

and

Nineteen-Eighty Four

Steven Trimble and Donald E. Winters

IN THE SPRING, 1981, issue of this magazine, Harlan Cleveland examined "The Future of the Past." As the Orwellian year draws to a close, it is perhaps timely to look at the future in the past. Partly as a result of team-teaching a course on Orwell and his well-known book, the authors of this short appraisal decided to compare the 20th-century work and its 19th-century ancestor. Steven Trimble, a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago, is a social science instructor at Minneapolis Community College and a free-lance historian. His current study of the Loring Park neighborhood in Minneapolis will be published in 1985. Co-author Donald E. Winters, a humanities instructor at Minneapolis Community College, received his doctorate at the University of Minnesota. In 1983 he won the Gabriel Prize, a national award for American studies dissertations. His book, entitled *The Soul of the Wobblies*, will be published next year.

1984, the year made famous by George Orwell's novel of the same name, is finally here. The arrival has prompted innumerable newspaper and magazine articles, radio and television specials, and several scholarly conferences. Talk of "Big Brother," "Thought Police," "the telescreen," and "doublethink" fill the air as people debate whether or not the terrifying world predicted by Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1984) is here. Several scholarly conferences have been prompted by this symbolic year, including one at the University of Minnesota in April. While Orwell and his works were carefully

studied and 1984 dissected and subjected to comparative analysis, nowhere was there a mention of Minnesota politician-writer Ignatius Donnelly and his landmark novel, *Caesar's Column*.

While Donnelly's book, published in 1890, is no literary rival to Orwell's 1948 work, it too presented a picture of a nightmarish future that had a strong impact on the reading public. *Caesar's Column* may not have had the staying power of 1984, but it is estimated that over 200,000 copies were sold.¹ In the United States its title became, at least for a time, a household word that conjured up images of a world perched on the edge of destruction. This year, thanks to the financial support of the Minnesota Humanities Commission, 40 scholars will be leading almost 150 public discussions throughout the state on the ideas and issues in 1984. It seems appropriate that some recognition should be given to *Caesar's Column*, its neglected literary forebear.

Both *Caesar's Column* and 1984 are part of what is called "the dystopian tradition." Dystopias, the opposite of utopias, portray a world gone wrong. There is an extensive literature, including comparative studies, on both utopian and dystopian works. There has, however, been little cross-generational analysis and nothing that has compared a late 19th-century work from the American Middle West with one written in postwar England. The novels are similar in the personal development of the authors and in the political and economic crises of both periods. There are, too, interesting dissimilarities that reflect the intellectual and cultural differences of time and place. Finally, comparison of the two novels illustrates the general nature of dystopian fiction and demonstrates the relationship between a literary work and its social setting.

¹ Walter B. Rideout, "Introduction," in Ignatius Donnelly, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*, xix (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

BOTH Donnelly and Orwell were independent radical thinkers, disappointed and disillusioned with the politics of their eras without becoming cynical or unpolitical. Each pushed for fundamental changes in the social structure. Donnelly, who held state offices and in 1862 became a United States representative from Minnesota, started out as an enthusiastic supporter of the new Republican party. He was a member of its radical wing and demanded social and economic changes for freed blacks. Within a few years, however, he became alienated from the increasingly business-oriented party he had once supported.

He became more and more a maverick in his political outlook and in 1868 announced that, although he was running as a Republican, he was not an uncritical supporter. "The honest impulses of the human heart," he told a reporter, are "not confined to the lines of any party." Infighting on the state and national levels became so intense that Donnelly finally lost faith in the party that had initially brought him to office. Reeling from a series of attacks from his erstwhile fellow Republicans, he wrote in his diary: "there is no other political party in the world that would have permitted one of its most laborious laborers to have been trampled under the feet." In his eyes, "The state of Minnesota and the Republican party stand disgraced before the world as a cowardly, cringing, time-serving community." Donnelly then bolted the party and began a career of involvement with a variety of reform movements that swept through Minnesota later in the century.²

While Orwell's political life was different, general parallels do exist with Donnelly's attitudes. The English writer, like the Minnesotan, developed an abiding suspicion of dogmatic adherence to any single party line. He considered himself a socialist throughout his life but feared that the Marxist socialists of the 1930s were so blinded by their own dogma that they were unable to anticipate such crucial events as the rise of fascism in Europe.³ His early experiences with the English class system and British colonialism pointed him toward the democratic socialism that dominated his political life.

Orwell's socialism, like Donnelly's radicalism, became increasingly antidogmatic, and he frequently criticized fellow leftists for substituting preconceived theories for unbiased observation of events. He warned that "the intellectuals are more totalitarian in outlook than the common people." While the English intelligentsia opposed Hitler, Orwell felt that most of them were "perfectly ready for dictatorial methods, secret

police, systematic falsification of history . . . so long as they feel that it is on 'our' side."⁴

The totalitarian potential of rigid party-line politics that Orwell experienced in the Spanish Civil War had a profound effect. He went to Spain in 1936 to report the fighting but soon joined an English militia unit of Independent Labour party volunteers. The group was affiliated with a Spanish left-wing opposition party that was later put down by the Spanish Communist party. Orwell's sympathies with the suppressed group increased the more brutally it was attacked. Like Donnelly, his "impulses of the human heart" were drawn toward the victim rather than toward those in power. "To many English intellectuals the war was a deeply moving experience," Orwell later commented, "but not an experience about which they could write sincerely. There were only two things that you were allowed to say, and both of them were palpable lies." The Spanish Civil War, he felt, "produced acres of print, but almost nothing worth reading."⁵

Orwell and Donnelly shared the feeling that writing should be "worth reading" and should make the reader aware of potential dangers in society. Orwell wanted literature to be politically persuasive but knew that it was almost universally true that "political writing is bad writing." In the case of exceptions, Orwell stated, "it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions, and not a 'party line.'" Orwell said that his political writing had always been his best work; toward the end of his life he wrote that "What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice."⁶

² *St. Paul Daily Press*, September 4, 1868; Ignatius Donnelly Diary, March 16, 1870, in Ignatius Donnelly Papers, division of archives and manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. For this and other biographical information, see Martin Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly*, 115-148 (Chicago, 1962).

³ Orwell, "Prophecies of Fascism — July 12, 1940," reprinted in Irving Howe, ed., *Orwell's Nineteen-Eighty-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism* (1984), 278 (New York, 1982).

⁴ Orwell to H. J. Willmetts, May 18, 1944, published in Howe, ed., *Orwell's 1984*, 280.

⁵ Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature," in Howe, ed., *Orwell's 1984*, 269.

⁶ Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" and "Why I Write," both in Howe, ed., *Orwell's 1984*, 255, 247, respectively.

The Plot of *Caesar's Column*

Gabriel Weltstein, a farmer from Africa, visits New York City, a hierarchal and corrupt society, in 1888. He is threatened by the ruling clique but escapes with the help of a leader of "The Brotherhood of Destruction," a secret group plotting the overthrow of the country's rulers. Gabriel falls in love with Estella, rescues her from the evil Prince Cabano who runs the city, and the two flee to the protection of a leader of the underground brotherhood. The wealthy elite are overthrown in a violent rebellion, but the brutalized workers fight among themselves and bloody chaos ensues. Gabriel, Estella, and friends escape to Uganda, where they help establish a utopian community, safe from the outside destruction.

Similar motives prompted Donnelly to take up the pen during one of the infrequent lulls in his political life. While admitting that one of the two incentives for the writing of *Caesar's Column* was "to make some money, which I greatly need," the other was "to do some good." He wanted to open some eyes because of his belief that "if mankind does not change its course, the book will be prophetic." Donnelly even asserted in the preface to a later novel that "it is not of so much importance that the author should glorify himself, by the perfection of his workmanship, as that he should set his readers to *thinking*; and thereby, perhaps, open new gateways to better conditions of life for the multitude."⁷

Donnelly and Orwell's novels make powerful political statements; both are skillfully crafted and popular works of fiction; both were well received by readers of their own eras. And both contain classic dystopian elements, themes, and lessons, even though the plots, as would be expected, are quite different.

BOTH WORKS fit within the category of dystopian fiction. This genre, a literary invention first described in the words of John Stuart Mill during the mid-1800s,

⁷ Donnelly Diary, May 17, 1889, Donnelly Papers; Ignatius Donnelly, *The Golden Bottle*, 3, 4 (Reprint ed., New York, 1968).

⁸ Kenneth Roemer, *The Obsolete Necessity: America in Utopian Writing, 1888-1900*, 3 (Kent, Ohio, 1976); John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America 1776-1900*, 186 (New York, 1976).

⁹ Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 4.

The Plot of 1984

Winston Smith, a member of the outer party, hides from the omnipresent telescreen and begins a diary — a forbidden act. He has come to hate Big Brother, symbol of the party that rules Oceania where he lives. He begins a secret love affair with Julia, another rebellious act. They try to contact The Brotherhood, which supposedly subverts the party, and are given literature by O'Brien, an inner party member. They are eventually caught by the Thought Police, and Winston is tortured physically and probed intellectually by O'Brien, who had helped trap him. Emotionally shattered, Winston betrays Julia, loses his will to fight the party, accepts the totalitarian doctrines of Oceania, and ends up "loving" Big Brother.

flourishes during periods of crisis. It seeks to express, in vivid and disturbing terms, the frequently submerged fears found in a society. Both utopian and dystopian writings blossomed during the time when Donnelly wrote *Caesar's Column*. One literary critic has labeled the 12-year period between 1888 and 1900 as "the heyday of American utopian novels and treatises," during which at least 160 such works were published. It certainly was a time characterized by mass immigration, large-scale urbanization and industrialization, and a series of economic upheavals. Great fortunes were made and large monopolies arose, dampening the expectations of many who had hoped for a rebirth of a democratic spirit after the Civil War. It was an interval of instability for farmers and workers because of an economy compared by one recent historian to "an erratic and dangerous machine, capable of great bursts of activity, then inexplicable slumps."⁸

The Midwest of Ignatius Donnelly's time seemed especially affected, and numerous social and political movements emerged as a response to these conditions. In Minnesota, groups such as the Knights of Labor, the Grangers, the Anti-Monopoly party, and the Farmers' Alliance feared the growing concentration of wealth and discussed developing class divisions. In the introduction to *Caesar's Column*, Donnelly echoed the common belief that "life is a dark and wretched failure for the great mass of mankind. The many are plundered to enrich the few." Because of a lack of Christian love, "standing armies are formed on one side, and great communistic organizations on the other; society divides itself into two hostile camps."⁹

Clearly, the themes in *Caesar's Column* show that Donnelly's dystopia is, as one writer said of utopias, "a sensitive indicator of where the sharpest anguish of an age lies."¹⁰ Although the themes and the setting of Orwell's dystopia differ in emphasis, *1984* also reveals where the historical shoe of his era pinched most painfully. For Orwell the period of crisis ran from the Great Depression through the post-World War II era, with its ever-growing threat of totalitarianism. As a socialist, he, like Donnelly, was opposed to the continued concentration of wealth, but the threat that the vast oppressive machinery of the modern state held for the private life of the individual became a major concern.

One classic dystopian theme revolves around the conflict between nature and technology, the machine in the garden. Both *Caesar's Column* and *1984* contrast the redeeming and healing qualities of nature with the alienating and oppressive environment of the city and its technology. This theme is much more evident in *Caesar's Column*, which refers frequently to the brutalizing forces of society. "And a city, after all, is only fit for temporary purposes — to see the play and the shops and the mob — and to wear one's life out in nothingness."¹¹

In *Caesar's Column* the situation has become so bad that there is no hope for reform of any kind, whether through trade unionism, communism, or the social gospel. For Gabriel and his friends flight is the only alternative. They find temporary refuge just outside the doomed city, where the "air was pure and sweet and light; it seemed to be breathed right out of heaven." In this setting Donnelly conjures up images of pure and magnificent nature. "And oh, what a contrast," he said, "with the world they had left behind, 'in yonder close-packed city, with its poverty, its misery, its sin, its injustice, its scramble for gold.'" At last they escape to the new world in Africa where they establish a pastoral, small-town civilization with a utopian constitution that provides for social and economic equality. It is, as the chapter that details it is titled, "The Garden in the Mountains."¹²

Although *1984* does not exhibit such a sentimental attachment to the rural world, Orwell implies that nature is at least a symbolic counterbalance to totalitarian society. Winston Smith's first rebellious encounter with Julia, for instance, takes place in a rural setting. As he waits for her to arrive, Winston kneels down to pick some of the bluebells growing along the footpath. Compared to the controlled world they had temporarily left,

this is nature at its healing best: "The sweetness of the air and the greenness of the leaves daunted him. Already, on the walk from the station, the May sunshine had made him feel dirty . . . a creature of indoors, with the sooty dust of London in the pores of his skin."¹³

In contrast with the decaying urban nightmare that often symbolizes the totalitarian society of *1984*, Winston had often dreamed of a "Golden Country," and as he and Julia walk along arm in arm, he has a *déjà vu* experience. "Winston looked out into the field," and, while he had never been there before, "he knew it by sight. Surely somewhere near by there must be a stream with green pools." Winston and Julia sit and listen to the song of a thrush, watching "with a sort of vague reverence." With birds singing in the background, Winston and Julia make love in the grass in spite of the party's stand against sexual behavior. The sounds, sights, and smells of nature exist in contradiction to Big Brother.¹⁴

ANOTHER theme found in dystopian works is that of romantic love as a source of strength and of freedom from the oppressive, impersonal presence of the government. Although this element is present in *1984* and *Caesar's Column*, the difference in sexual attitude between Orwell's and Donnelly's novels reveals a good deal about the shift in the status of women that occurred between the 1880s and the 1940s. For Gabriel, who held the Victorian view of women as the moral citadels of society, the revolutionary power of woman is that of purity. Orwell's work is more a product of Freudian attitudes; his protagonist asserts that "not love so much as eroticism" is the enemy of the oppressive state.

Winston's love for Julia comes from her sexuality, not her purity. When she reveals that she has had many secret affairs with party members, he is exhilarated, not shocked. "His heart leapt. Scores of times she had done it," he thinks. Winston "wished it had been hundreds — thousands. Anything that hinted at corruption always filled him with a wild hope. . . . Listen," he says to Julia, "The more men you've had, the more I love you. Do you understand that? . . . I hate purity, I hate goodness. I

¹⁰ Frank E. Manuel, "Toward a Psychological History of Utopias," in Manuel, ed., *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, 70 (Boston, 1965).

¹¹ Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 225.

¹² Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 234.

¹³ Orwell, *1984*, reprinted in Howe, ed., 79.

¹⁴ Orwell, *1984*, reprinted in Howe, ed., 82, 83.

don't want any virtue to exist anywhere. I want everyone to be corrupt to the bones."¹⁵

Donnelly's main character, Gabriel, worshiped purity as fervently as Winston despised it. His reason for loving Estella was "not alone for her beauty. there is that in her which wins my profoundest respect and love — I had almost said my veneration." The body, he said, is secondary, for "her frame is but the crystal-clear covering of a bright and pure soul. It does not seem possible for her to be otherwise than good."¹⁶

Julia, the character in *1984*, is admired because she secretly rebels; the women in *Caesar's Column* are admired because their innocence shields them from the corruption around them. Gabriel's friend becomes involved with a young woman who selflessly works to keep her family together. She is only 17, a paragon of virtue and, in the midst of the "contaminating surroundings, was the air of innocence and purity and lightheartedness which shone over every part of her person." Stabbed by a jealous pursuer, she refuses to bring charges against him. "It will do no good to bring disgrace on a respectable family. This great lesson may reform him."¹⁷

THE FINAL dystopian motif common to both novels is the existence of an apocalyptic force that doomed the future society. The variances between Donnelly and Orwell's depiction of this reveal the differences in the periods of the works and of the personal experiences of the authors. The factors that bring about the catastrophe in *Caesar's Column* are set in motion by the avarice of capitalists and technocrats. When Gabriel assessed the condition of the 1988 society in America, he did not blame nature or civilization. The responsibility, he said, lay with "human greed, — shallow cunning; the basest, stuff-grabbing, nut-gathering, selfish instincts."¹⁸

Orwell, writing in the mid-20th century, felt that the era of worshiping money had passed, making way for the worship of naked power. O'Brien and the rulers portrayed in *1984* are not revolutionaries working for

the interests of the people; they seek only to perpetuate their own power. While they share this self-interestedness with the rulers in *Caesar's Column*, there is a fundamental difference. Near the end of the novel, while O'Brien is grilling Winston, he explains the party's desire for control. "The Party," he states, "seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness," O'Brien concludes, "only power, pure power."¹⁹

Donnelly and Orwell's novels illustrate the dystopian quality of a modern technological society where, as one literary critic put it, "the whole world is destined to the same social fate with no place to hide." They differ dramatically, however, in the amount of hope with which they leave their readers. The society that exists in *Caesar's Column* is doomed, but Gabriel and a few friends do manage to escape and set up one in which corruption is treason and laws are designed "to insure to every industrious citizen not only liberty, but an educated mind, a comfortable home, an abundant supply of food and clothing, and a pleasant, happy life." There was a chance to start over, to learn from mistakes, and to create a utopia in spite of the dystopian events that fill most of the book.²⁰

Orwell leaves Winston and the reader no such escape valve. There is only utopia betrayed, "turned inside out," as a writer described it, "inverted — nullified." As O'Brien tells Winston in torture room 101, the future will be void of any of the comforting abstractions that 19th-century writers (such as Ignatius Donnelly) celebrated. "There will be no loyalty, except toward the Party. There will be no love, except the love of Big Brother," he tells his victim. "There will be no art, no literature, no science." He says, "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face — forever."²¹

Readers tend to look at books like *1984* and *Caesar's Column* as predictions and to dismiss them if their portrayals are not accurate. Both Donnelly and Orwell, however, make it clear that they are not trying to detail the future. Their goal is to convince readers of their eras that changes are needed to forestall the logical consequences of current trends. Each felt strongly that, unless reversals came about, something similar to what they described *might* develop. Donnelly pointed to the concentrations of wealth and to the division of capital and labor into two hostile camps that had developed in a few decades. Multiply these conditions "by the years of

¹⁵ Orwell, *1984*, reprinted in Howe, ed., 83.

¹⁶ Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 191.

¹⁷ Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 200, 222.

¹⁸ Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 72.

¹⁹ Orwell, *1984*, reprinted in Howe, ed., 175.

²⁰ Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias," in Manuel, ed., *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, 29; Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 306.

²¹ Philip Rahv, "The Unfuture of Utopia," and Orwell, *1984*, both in Howe, ed., 311, 177, respectively.

another century," he conjectured, "and who shall say that the events I depict are impossible?" Donnelly believed that there were opportunities as well as threats, a feeling he expressed in his diary shortly after seeing his newborn grandson. "I held him in my arms and thought that I was nearly sixty years old, and he not yet sixty minutes old," he wrote in the spring of 1890. "If he lives to sixty it will be 1950 — he may live to 1990. Lord! what a changed world that will be! Either *Caesar's Column* or a magnificent, perfected civilization."²²

George Orwell, too, wrote from a perception of the dangerous trends that he saw developing — emotional nationalism, attacks on personal freedom, the totalitarian outlook of many intellectuals, and shifts in the world power balance that some thought were setting the stage for permanent war and the division of the globe into two or three superstates. Even though Orwell emphasized that *1984* was not an attack on socialism, he did see it as "a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable." Still, he denied that he was predicting an inevitable future. As he said in a letter written near the end of his life, "I do not believe that the kind of society I describe *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive."²³

Both Ignatius Donnelly and George Orwell offered important and profound warnings about the future. Each man's work reflected the complex interaction between the experiences and perceptions of the author

and the historical underpinnings of his era. Speaking at a University of Minnesota conference, one participant suggested that "there is surely a need, every so often, of a writer like Orwell and a book like *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* to prick the conscience, explode the bubble of complacency, and set the mind free from political orthodoxies by pitting them against the possibilities that can be entertained in imagination and art."²⁴

Similar statements could be made about *Caesar's Column*, a work unlikely ever to be the focus of as much attention as Orwell's dystopia. It is doubtful that even *1984* would be in the spotlight to the same degree today had Orwell used the alternative title he was considering — "The Last Man in Europe." One can only speculate on whether four years from now Minnesota and the nation might have been preparing for an onslaught of articles, media productions, and academic conferences had Donnelly chosen to give his dystopia a different title and, based on the year in which it supposedly took place, it had come rolling off the presses as *1988*.

²² Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*, 4; Donnelly Diary, March 25, 1890.

²³ Orwell to Francis A. Henson, June 16, 1949, reprinted in Howe, ed., 286.

²⁴ Michael Sherman, "Orwell's Art and Politics: A Continuing Dilemma," in University of Minnesota, *Orwell's 1984, The Text and Its Transformation and Legacy*, 14 (Conference proceedings, April 5-7, 1984 — Minneapolis, 1984).



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).