

Orwell | Shooting an Elephant

George Orwell
Shooting an Elephant
and other Essays

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Shooting an Elephant

In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was subdivisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty 5
kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter. No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so. 10
When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me 15
when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans. 20

All this was perplexing and upsetting. For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil

2 **Moulmein**: today's Mawlamyine. | 4f. **subdivisional**: *bezieht sich auf eine Unterabteilung der Polizeidivision*. | 5 **petty**: small-minded. | 7 **guts** (pl., coll.): courage. | 8 **bazaar**: oriental market. | 9 **betel juice**: chewed mixture of nuts from the betel tree (*Areca catechu*) and leaves of the climbing pepper plant (*Piper betle*). | 10 **to bait s.o.**: to attack s.o. | 11 **nimble**: quick. | **to trip s.o. up**: to cause s.o. to fall. | 13 **hideous**: shocking, ugly. | 14 **to sneer**: to laugh with contempt. | 15 **to hoot**: to shout with contempt. | 20 **to jeer at s.o.**: to insult s.o. | 21 **perplexing**: confusing.

thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it
 the better. Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all
 for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the Brit-
 ish. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I
 5 can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty
 work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners
huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey,
cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks
 of the men who had been flogged with bamboos – all these
 10 oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. But I could
 get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated
 and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence
 that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. I did
 not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less
 15 did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger em-
 pires that are going to supplant it. All I knew was that I was
stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my
 rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make
 my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought
 20 of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something
clamped down, in saecula saeculorum, upon the will of

1 **to chuck up s.th.** (coll.): to give up s.th. | 3 **oppressor:** *Unterdrücker(in)*. |
 6 **at close quarters:** from nearby. | **wretched:** *elend.* | 7 **to huddle:** (*sich*) zu-
sammenkauern. | **lock-up:** jail. | 8 **cowed:** discouraged. | **scarred:** *mit Narben*
bedeckt. | **buttocks** (pl., coll.): seat of the body. | 9 **to flog:** to beat. | **bamboo:**
Bambus(stock). | 10 **to oppress s.o.:** *jdn. unterdrücken*. | **intolerable:** *unerträg-*
lich. | 12 **utter:** complete, total. | 16 **to supplant s.o./s.th.:** to replace s.o./s.th. |
 17 **to be stuck:** to be caught. | 18 **evil-spirited:** mean. | **beast:** here: rough
 person. | 20 **British Raj:** rule of the British Crown on the Indian subcontinent
 from 1858 to 1947. | **unbreakable:** s.th. that cannot be broken. | 21 **to clamp**
s.th. down upon s.o.: to impose s.th. on s.o. | **in saecula saeculorum** (Lat.):
 forever and ever.

8 Shooting an Elephant

prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.

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One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism – the real motives for which despotic governments act. Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station the other end of the town rang me up on the phone and said that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar. Would I please come and do something about it? I did not know what I could do, but I wanted to see what was happening and I got on to a pony and started out. I took my rifle, an old .44 Winchester and much too small to kill an elephant, but I thought the noise might be useful in terrorem. Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant's doings. It was not, of course, a wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone 'must.' It had been chained up, as tame elephants always are when their attack of 'must' is due, but on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. Its mahout, the only person who could manage it

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1 **prostrate**: lying on the ground facedown. | 2 **bayonet**: *Bajonett*. | 3 **guts** (pl.): bowels (pl.). | 4 **by-product**: *Nebenprodukt*. | 5 **off duty**: outside of work. | 6f. **in a roundabout way**: indirectly. | 7 **enlightening**: providing understanding. | 8 **glimpse**: view. | 12 **to ravage s.th.**: to damage or destroy s.th. | 15 **to start out**: to leave. | 17 **in terrorem** (Lat.): as a threat. | 19 **doings** (pl.): action(s). | 20 **tame**: not wild. | **to go 'must'**: *musth* (Urdu), annual main period of reproduction in male elephants causing aggression and violence. | 20f. **to chain up**: to bind with a chain. | 23 **mahout**: *mahaut* (Hindi), s.o. who trains, rides or keeps a working elephant.

when it was in that state, had set out in pursuit, but he had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours' journey away, and in the morning the elephant had suddenly reappeared in the town. The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. It had already
5 destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock; also it had met the municipal rubbish van, and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the van over and in-
10 flicted violences upon it.

The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian constables were waiting for me in the quarter where the elephant had been seen. It was a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palm-leaf, winding all over a
15 steep hillside. I remember that it was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains. We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information. That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a dis-
20 tance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any

1 **to set out in pursuit:** to chase, to hunt. | 6 **hut:** *Hütte, Behausung*. | **to raid s.th.:** to attack s.th. | 7 **fruit-stall:** *Obststand*. | **to devour s.th.:** to eat s.th. quickly. | 8 **municipal:** belonging to the town. | 9 **to take to one's heels:** to run away. | **to turn s.th. over:** *etwas umstürzen*. | 9f. **to inflict s.th. upon s.o.:** to cause s.o. s.th. | 11 **constable:** policeman. | 12 **quarter:** here: district. | 13 **squalid:** dirty and neglected. | 14 **thatched:** covered. | 15 **hillside:** *Hang*. | **stuffy:** *schwül, stickig*. | 16 **the rains** (pl.): wet season. | 18 **to fail to do s.th.:** not to succeed in doing s.th. | **invariably** (adv.): always. | 23 **to profess s.th.:** to declare/admit s.th.

elephant. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a **pack of lies**, when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a loud, **scandalized** cry of 'Go away, child! Go away **this instant!**' and an old woman with a **switch** in her hand came round the corner of a hut, **violently shooing** away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, **clicking their tongues** and **exclaiming**; **evidently** there was something that the children ought not to have seen. I **rounded** the hut and saw a man's dead body **sprawling** in the mud. He was an Indian, a black **Dravidian coolie**, almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had **come** suddenly **upon** him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its **trunk**, put its foot on his back and **ground** him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had **scored** a **trench** a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his **belly** with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was **coated** with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth **bared** and **grinning** with an expression of **unendurable agony**. (Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the

2 **pack of lies**: all lies. | **yell**: scream. | 3 **scandalized**: shocked. | 4 **this instant**: at once. | **switch**: *Gerte, Rute, Rohrstock*. | 5 **violently** (adv.): with force. | 5f. **to shoo away s.o.**: to drive away s.o. | 7 **to click one's tongue**: to make a noise with one's tongue. | **to exclaim**: to yell. | **evidently** (adv.): clearly, obviously. | 9 **to round**: to walk around. | 9f. **to sprawl**: to lie with arms and legs spread out. | 10 **Dravidian**: belonging to an ethnic group mostly living in the south of India. | **coolie** (pej.): low-paid, unskilled Far Eastern labourer. | 12 **to come upon s.o.**: to meet s.o. by chance. | 14 **trunk**: *Rüssel*. | **to ground s.o. into the earth**: to press s.o. down. | 16 **to score**: here: to dig. | **trench**: cut in the ground. | 17 **belly**: stomach. | 18 **to coat**: to cover. | 19 **to bare**: *blecken*. | 19f. **to grin**: *grinsen*. | 20 **unendurable**: *unerträglich*. | **agony**: great pain, esp. before death.

corpses I have seen looked devilish.) The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. As soon as I saw the dead man I sent an orderly to a friend's house nearby to borrow an elephant rifle. I had already sent back the pony, not wanting it to go mad with fright and throw me if it smelt the elephant.

The orderly came back in a few minutes with a rifle and five cartridges, and meanwhile some Burmans had arrived and told us that the elephant was in the paddy fields below, only a few hundred yards away. As I started forward practically the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me. They had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant. They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot. It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides, they wanted the meat. It made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant – I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary – and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you. I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels. At the bottom, when you got away from the huts, there was a metalled road and beyond that a miry waste of paddy fields a thousand yards across, not yet ploughed but

1 **friction:** *Reibung*. | 2 **to strip from:** to remove. | 4 **orderly** (n.): soldier carrying messages. | 6 **fright:** fear. | 8 **cartridge:** *Patrone*. | 9 **paddy field:** rice field. | 10f. **practically** (adv.): almost, nearly. | 11 **to flock out:** to run out. | 18 **uneasy:** nervous. | 20f. **unnerving:** upsetting. | 23 **to jostle:** to push. | 25 **metalled road:** *asphaltierte Straße*. | **miry:** wet with mud. | **waste:** *weite Fläche*.

soggy from the first rains and dotted with coarse grass. The elephant was standing eighty yards from the road, his left side towards us. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth. 5

I had halted on the road. As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant – it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery – and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided. And at that distance, peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow. I thought then and I think now that his attack of 'must' was already passing off; in which case he would merely wander harmlessly about until the mahout came back and caught him. Moreover, I did not in the least want to shoot him. I decided that I would watch him for a little while to make sure that he did not turn savage again, and then go home. 10 15

But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. It blocked the road for a long distance on either side. I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes – faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but 20 25

1 **soggy**: heavy with water. | **coarse**: rough. | 5 **to stuff**: stopfen. | 9f. **comparable**: vergleichbar. | 10 **costly**: expensive. | 14f. **to pass off**: abklingen, vorübergehen. | 19 **savage**: wild. | 21 **immense**: huge, large. | 24 **garish**: (too) colourful. | 27 **conjurer**: magician.

with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, **irresistibly**. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the **hollowness**, the **futility** of the white man's **dominion** in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – **seemingly** the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd **puppet** pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I **perceived** in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, **posing dummy**, the **conventionalized** figure of a **sahib**. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the ‘natives,’ and so in every crisis he has got to do what the ‘natives’ expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to **trail feebly away**, having done nothing – no,

5 **irresistibly** (adv.): impossible to resist. | 7 **hollowness**: senselessness. | **futility**: uselessness. | 7f. **dominion**: rule. | 9 **seemingly** (adv.): *anscheinend*. | 11 **puppet**: marionette. | 12 **to perceive s.th.**: to realize s.th. | 14 **to pose**: *posieren*. | **dummy**: *Gliederpuppe*. | 15 **conventionalized**: ordinary, according to convention. | **sahib**: *Sāhib* (Arabic), *Herr* (in *Britisch-Indien* *Anrede eines Europäers*). | 24 **to trail away**: here: to leave unofficially. | **feebly** (adv.): weakly.

that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.

But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that **pre-occupied** grandmotherly **air** that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not **squeamish** about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a *large* animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his **tusks** – five pounds, possibly. But I had got to act quickly. I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who had been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing: he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might **charge** if you went too close to him.

It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within, say, twenty-five yards of the elephant and test his behaviour. If he charged, I could shoot; if he took no notice of me, it would be safe to leave him until the mahout came back. But also I knew that I was going to do no such thing. I was a poor **shot** with a rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. If the elephant charged and I missed him, I should have about as much chance as a **toad** under a steam-roller. But even

5f. **preoccupied**: lost in thought. | 6 **air**: look, appearance. | 8 **squeamish**: *zimperlisch*. | 13 **tusk**: an elephant's long tooth. | 18 **to charge**: to attack. | 24 **shot**: *Schütze/Schützin*. | 27 **toad**: *Kröte*.