

No Air for George

No one perhaps has done as much as the British writer who calls himself George Orwell to persuade former fellow travelers that their ways lie in some direction other than the Stalinist party line. Orwell's peculiar power in this respect derives partly from his prophetic skill in epitomizing the further horrors of machine-age culture, but also in a kind of incorruptible radicalism.

He remains to the left of all the Leftist parties, cherishing the dream that he knows is vain, an unreconstructed Utopian who understands as well as anybody that Utopia means "no place."

Happy Family. The novel called *Coming Up for Air* (Harcourt, Brace; New York: \$3), first published in the U.S. last week, represents an earlier phase of his awakening. It was written after his return from Spain, where he fought in a Trotskyist unit with the Loyalists and was badly wounded. There is however, nothing about that in this novel which concerns a fat and middle-aged insurance solicitor, George Bowling, who lives with his stupid, petulant wife and a pair of burdensome children in a repulsively modern suburb of London.

Bowling is a somewhat coarse, sensual, but on the whole rather decent and well-meaning fellow. His life, as it is, unfolded in his reveries, becomes Orwell's mirror for the British social his-



George Orwell. In *Lower Binfield*, a smell of decay.

tory of the 20th century. Bowling is sensitive enough to feel in the gaudy and brittle civilization that surrounds him "the sullen presage of decay." The son of the village grain merchant, Bowling was a grocer's assistant when England went to war in 1914. Soon after the war he marries the daughter of a retired minor official of the Indian civil service. Socially, then, he has come up a cut or so in the world; but he knows that his new world has fewer satisfactions than the simpler and humbler world of his childhood.

It is while he is full of such thoughts that George Bowling suddenly decides how to spend the £17 he won on a horse race. He will take a respite from the 20th century and from its "everlasting din of buses, bombs, radios and telephone bells" by revisiting his native village of Lower Binfield. It will be a way of coming up for air, like "one of the big sea turtles when they come paddling up to the surface and stick their noses out and fill their lungs with a great gulp before they sink down again with the seaweed and the octopuses." To conceal his purpose from his parsimonious wife, Bowling invents a business trip to Birmingham.

The Old Home Town. But of course George Bowling finds Lower Binfield transformed out of all recognition, overgrown into a small city with a bomb factory, a military airfield and endless new housing developments. The home of his parents has become an artificially quaint tea shoppe; the village pub has become a smart tourist hotel; Binfield House is a private lunatic asylum. The rustic pool where he had hoped to recapture the joy of fishing has been drained and converted into a refuse dump.

The 20th century has come to Lower Binfield, and has carpeted it, like all the rest of the world, with a litter of paper bags and fag butts. And to remind George Bowling even more forcibly of the date and of what was coming, a Royal Air Force plane accidentally drops one of its bombs on the place.

With his lungs still full of the debris, George Bowling, his winnings spent, returns to his suburban household to brave out the nagging fury of a wife who has just discovered that he has not been in Birmingham at all.