



**Citation for Mr Richard Blair
Honorary Fellowship
7 September 2023, 1.00pm**

Vice-Provost, I have pleasure in presenting Richard Blair for admission to the UCL Honorary Fellowship.

In 2017 a life-sized statue of the writer George Orwell was unveiled outside Broadcasting House, the BBC headquarters, in London.

As I'm sure everyone here knows, George Orwell is one of the world's most influential writers, the visionary author of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* and of the non-fiction classics *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*.

Inscribed on the wall behind the statue are the words "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear". Taken from an unused preface to *Animal Farm*, they are a rallying cry for the idea of free speech in an open society. It is a call needed as much today as at any time since *Animal Farm* was first published in 1945.

Today, we're here to celebrate and recognise the tremendous work being done by Orwell's son, Richard Blair, in ensuring Orwell's legacy continues. He does this through his extraordinary philanthropic support for the Orwell Archive here at UCL; through his many contributions to the work of the Orwell Foundation, also established at this university; and through his work as Patron and Trustee of the Orwell Society. His modesty is such that he may, indeed, feel we are telling him what he does not want to hear, but Richard, this is for you, and what you have done, in your own right. We're delighted to welcome you and Eleanor, and members of your family, here today.

Richard was born in May 1944 and adopted soon after by Eric Blair – George Orwell's real name – and his first wife Eileen. Unexpectedly and tragically, Eileen died less than a year later. Orwell received the news while he was in France reporting on the invasion of Europe. He returned home and became a single parent to his baby son, taking Richard to the Hebridean island of Jura in the late 1940s, where he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

Richard has spoken of his memories of his father, writing upstairs in their extraordinarily remote and beautiful house overlooking the loch while he, Richard, ran about in the grounds. Spending time with his father was not without its dangers – Orwell nearly drowned Richard and several other children when he took them through the notorious Corryvreckan whirlpool that lies between Jura and Scarba; Orwell saved Richard from

under the boat by yanking on his trousers. Richard also ate all the peas and kicked the cauliflowers over.

But by 1949 Orwell, who had been suffering from tuberculosis for many years, went into a sanatorium, dying in January 1950 in University College Hospital. Richard, aged just five years old, was brought up by his aunt Avril, Orwell's sister.

Richard was educated at Loretto School and attended agricultural college. He worked for the tractor company Massey Ferguson for many years before running his own business, which he bought in 1986. Since 2008 Richard has dedicated his time and energy to supporting, investigating and promoting his father's legacy.

George Orwell's papers were initially given to UCL by Orwell's widow Sonia in 1960. However, the legal rights and provenance of the papers took many years to settle, during which Richard was active in managing the archive and supportive of UCL as the right place for his father's papers. He has been steadfast in his belief that the papers should be kept together and be available for interpretation and work at UCL. He has been clear that his father would have wanted them in public ownership.

In 2018, the Orwell Archive was granted UNESCO World Heritage status, making UCL the centre and destination for Orwell scholars and work surrounding his legacy. More recently, Richard has bought caches of his father's letters as they've become available and – despite a vast increase in their value – has donated them to the UCL archive. His patience and generosity, along with his clear-sighted and strategic philanthropy, have enormously increased the reach, profile and value of the archive. Today, UCL houses the most significant collection by far of Orwell's papers.

To that end, Richard has been immensely generous with both his time and attention. He is a founder of the Orwell Society and his support for the Orwell Foundation is unstinting. Working from UCL beside the work of the archive, the Foundation promotes Orwell's work and values, brings critical academic scrutiny to it and develops Orwell's ideas in a contemporary context. Richard's involvement with the Foundation gives it an almost priceless authority.

Richard is a trustee of the Foundation and with it has made films about his father using the archive, enabling it to reach a wide audience. He has spoken at UCL/Orwell Foundation events, made appearances on radio and television, and assisted in every way to make the archive more known and the work of the Foundation more prominent.

The six prizes presented by the Orwell Foundation are hotly competed for. Now covering political writing, political fiction, journalism, social evils reporting, the reporting of homelessness and a youth writing prize, the entries bring a wide range of insight to current issues both foreign and domestic and help take Orwell's values into contemporary debate. The Youth Prize is especially close to Richard's affections. Richard's support at the lectures and activities attached to the prizes is enhanced by his modest, humorous, quintessentially English presence. We are also deeply grateful to him as founding patron of UCL's annual Orwell Festival, co-sponsor of the Orwell Fiction Prize and substantial donor to the Orwell Youth Prize.

Richard's public role on behalf of his father's legacy is highly valued by those he works alongside. Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Orwell Foundation, Lord Macdonald, told us: "Richard's extraordinary generosity to the Archive is a testament to the importance he attaches to UCL as the nation's 'Orwell Centre'... In addition to the intelligence and charm that he brings with his contributions, he is also, in the realest sense, a living link to the great man that is much cherished by those who would keep Orwell's spirit alive."

Orwell's most recent biographer D J Taylor adds: "in terms of making material available and encouraging its use, he has done more for Orwell Studies in recent years than anyone living, and deserves the widest possible recognition for his work."

And so, in recognition of his very considerable contribution to promoting academic work and public engagement with the work and legacy of George Orwell; in recognition also of his support, as Orwell's son, for the archive at UCL and the reputational gains to UCL from that support, and in gratitude for his major philanthropic gifts to UCL, Vice-Provost, it is a pleasure to present Richard Blair for admission to the Honorary Fellowship of UCL.