

# How different are the two 1984's?

By Sharon Leighton

A movie is being shown. On the screen, a ship full of fugees is trying to escape from hovering helicopters. A man tries to swim from the ship; the audience watches transfixed as he is shot full of holes and the water around him turns red. In the ship, a mother tries vainly to protect her three-year-old son from the guns. A bomb is dropped. The audience cheers as the boy's arm soars into the air above the rest of the debris.

A man meets an elderly married woman. Without thinking, he calls her, "Mrs. Smith". She is gracious; she overlooks his social blunder. He reminds himself that there is not supposed to be any difference between the sexes now, that "Mrs." is a word "somewhat discountenanced".

An old man tries to buy something. An angry exchange takes place as he demands a pint. "Litres and half-litres, that's all we serve," he is told. He protests, "A half litre isn't enough. It don't satisfy. And a whole litre's too much." Those are all incidents taken from George Orwell's book, *1984*.

When I first realized that we had actually reached that dreaded date, I was jubilant. "1984! And the world isn't like that at all!"

Then I read the book again.

*1984* was published in 1949, a dire prophecy of a dismal future. An entire generation used it as a warning, a sign reading, "Don't let this happen."

Then the warning was forgotten.

## Lessons About the Past

One of the most objectionable features of Orwell's *1984* world is the perpetual falsification of history by those in authority. The hero, Winston, is never certain of a fact. He is not even sure that the year really is 1984. If a person should be "vaporized" — that is, killed by the State of his political opinions — a massive research project would uncover all pertinent references to that person. Then the books, magazines, and newspapers containing those references would either be destroyed or rewritten without mention of him.

People were told that they were much wealthier than their grandparents had been, when in fact they were a great deal poorer. A common official announcement was: "The standard of living has risen by no less than 20% over the last year." People were expected to believe this, although they had to make razor blades last six weeks, there was never enough food, people slept naked because they could not afford pajamas, and the houses they lived in were falling apart due to lack of repairs.

People are not, as far as I know, vaporized in Canada in the real 1984. However, lie after lie is told us about our past, and we swallow them.

The most obvious lie today is the same one Orwell prophesied. "The standard of living has risen ..." We are supposed to believe that we are immensely better off than people were a hundred years ago.

This is not true. Walk down some of the older streets of Charlottetown and count the twenty-and thirty-room dwellings you see. These were all built roughly a hundred years ago as single family dwellings. Today, they are apartment buildings; who can afford a house that size? Only the lucky can afford a house at all. The difference, we are told, is made up for by the things we own.

Today, everyone has a car. True enough, and a hundred years ago everyone had a horse and carriage, which represents an equivalent cost. That's all right, we're told, but today everyone has a television, a stereo, a refrigerator, a dishwasher. That is true to an extent, and to the same extent, a hundred years ago everyone had a piano or fiddle and one or two servants.



Graphic/Varsity

The costs of these things are basically equivalent. The people of the 1880s were at least as well off as we are, and probably were wealthier.

Another common lie is about women. In the January, 1984, issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*, the *Journal* celebrates its hundredth anniversary by gloating over the "fact" that women are no longer the fragile, useless creatures of 1884.

A book called *The Household Guide, or Domestic Cyclopaedia* published in 1894, offers this advice to young women: "If you are in the country, or can get there, ramble over the hills and through the woodlands; hunt bird nests, and chase butterflies ... Take a lesson from the English girl who ... spends more than one-half of her waking hours in physical amusements ... She rides, walks, drives, rows upon the water, runs, plays, swings, jumps the rope, throws the ball, hurls the quoit, draws the box, keeps up the shuttlecock ..." This is fragile?

Ordinary women in the 1880s had to do more actual work while doing their week's laundry than the average woman of today does all week. No one who looks at the facts, no one who listens to reminiscences about their own great-grandmothers, no one who reads anything published before the First World War can believe that Victorian women were fragile, useless creatures who sat around doing embroidery all day. Yet the lie is still told to us.

## Proliferation of Arms

In Orwell's *1984*, the major powers of the world were in a constant state of war, although the actual fighting was of secondary importance. "The primary aim of modern warfare," stated an underground book read by the hero, "is to use up the products of the machine without raising the general standard of living ... A Floating Fortress (one of Orwell's imagined super-weapons), for example, has locked up in it the

labour that would build several hundred cargo-ships. Ultimately it is scrapped as obsolete, never having brought any material benefit to anybody, and with further enormous labours another Floating Fortress is built ..."

Replace the words "Floating Fortress" with "Cruise Missile" and you have a timely discussion of a current problem. If the money spent on one missile were poured into agriculture or fisheries or small business, it would be difficult to talk about "Hard Times in the Maritimes" anymore. Canada, of course, does not take part in this arms race to any great extent. However, the arms race does exist, almost exactly as described by Orwell. And it does affect Canadians.

## Undermining of the Thought Process

A major focus of the efforts of the authorities in Orwell's *1984* was the undermining of thought. The more important methods used were propaganda and the destruction of the language. What was important was that people learn to accept what they were told, in spite of the evidence of their senses.

"How easy it was, thought Winston, if you did not look about you, to believe that the physical type set up by the Party as an ideal — tall, muscular youths and deep-bosomed maidens, blond-haired, vital, sunburnt, carefree — existed and ever predominated." And how easy it is, in the real 1984, to believe that the only normal men are handsome, distinguished, with cigarettes in their hands and an air of freedom; how easy it is to believe that all normal women weigh less than 120 lb. and wear designer jeans. The propaganda is not put out by a political party, but it exists.

The destruction of the language had the simple purpose of making speech "independent of thought". Once good English called "Oldspeak", was forgotten, a heretical thought would

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