Sean McElroy, Class of 2012

Thanks to a Nyhus Travel Grant from Bowdoin’s History Department, I was able to travel over the past winter break to conduct research at the Orwell Archives, located in University College, London. The Orwell Archives are an extraordinarily rich source of not only Orwell’s own manuscripts, letters, and possessions, but perhaps the foremost collection in the world of published and unpublished material relating to appropriations of Orwell after his death in 1950 in the old University Hospital, a hospital which stood only a few hundred meters from the archive.

In my work at the Archive, I was given access to an extraordinary wealth of primary materials that has greatly enhanced my project. I was able to access and read many of Orwell’s letters, as well as the correspondence of his second (and final) wife, Sonia Brownell, which highlighted how the Orwell estate attempted to control Orwell’s work. I was also able to access many original and unpublished adaptations of Orwell’s work, which enabled me to understand how various individuals and groups appropriated and manipulated Orwell’s ideas, along with a wealth of other invaluable primary materials.

My project discusses the history of Orwell’s appropriation, focusing on elements and agents that attempted to claim and shape the Orwell image during the Cold War. More specifically, my project presents a history of how various ‘conservative’ elements and individuals transformed the Orwell image into a mechanism to gain popular support, whether for the Cold War prerogatives of the 1950s, or to provide an intellectual ‘forefather’ to the emerging neoconservative movement of the 1980s. This project has been greatly enriched thanks to my research at the Archive, which was fully enabled by this grant.

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