The Case for the Open Fire, George Orwell

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Before long the period of hurriedly constructed prefabs will be over, and Britain will be tackling on a big scale the job of building permanent houses.
It will then be necessary to decide what kind of heating we want our houses to have, and one can be sure in advance that a small but noisy minority will want to do away with the old-fashioned coal fire.

These people—they are also the people who admire gaspipe chairs and glass-topped tables, and regard labour-saving as an end in itself—will argue that the coal fire is wasteful, dirty and inefficient. They will urge that dragging buckets of coal upstairs is a nuisance and that raking out the cinders in the morning is a grisly job, and they will add that the fogs of our cities are made thicker by the smoking of thousands of chimneys.

All of which is perfectly true, and yet comparatively unimportant if one thinks in terms of living and not merely of saving trouble.
I am not arguing that coal fires should be the sole form of heating, merely that every house or flat should have at least one open fire round which the family can sit. In our climate anything that keeps you warm is to be welcomed, and under ideal conditions every form of heating apparatus would be installed in every house.

For any kind of workroom central heating is the best arrangement. It needs no attention, and, since it warms all parts of the room evenly, one can group the furniture according to the needs of work.

For bedrooms, gas or electric fires are best. Even the humble oilstove throws out a lot of heat, and has the virtue of being portable. It is a great comfort to carry an oilstove with you into the bathroom on a winter morning. But for a room that is to be lived in, only a coal fire will do.

The first great virtue of a coal fire is that, just because it only warms one end of the room, it forces people to group themselves in a sociable way. This evening, while I write, the same pattern is being reproduced in hundreds of thousands of British homes.

To one side of the fireplace sits Dad, reading the evening paper. To the other side sits Mum, doing her knitting. On the hearthrug sit the children, playing snakes and ladders. Up against the fender, roasting himself, lies the dog. It is a comely pattern, a good background to one's memories, and the survival of the family as an institution may be more dependent on it than we realise.

Then there is the fascination, inexhaustible to a child, of the fire itself. A fire is never the same for two minutes together, you can look into the red heart of the coals and see caverns or faces or salamanders, according to your imagination: you can even, if your parents will let you, amuse yourself by heating the poker red-hot and bending it between the bars, or sprinkling salt on the flames to turn them green.

A gas or electric fire, or even an anthracite stove, is a dreary thing by comparison. The most dismal objects of all are those phoney electric

fires which are so constructed as to look like coal fires. Is not the mere fact of imitation an admission that the real thing is superior?

If, as I maintain, an open fire makes for sociability and has an æsthetic appeal which is particularly important to young children, it is well worth the trouble that it entails.
It is quite true that it is wasteful, messy and the cause of avoidable work: all the same things could be said with equal truth of a baby. The point is that household appliances should be judged not simply by their efficiency but by the pleasure and comfort that one gets out of them.

A vacuum cleaner is good because it saves much dreary labour with brush and pan. Gaspipe furniture is bad because it destroys the friendly look of a room without appreciably adding to one's comfort.

Our civilisation is haunted by the notion that the quickest way of doing anything is invariably the best. The agreeable warming-pan, which warms the whole bed as hot as toast before you jump into it, went out in favour of the clammy, unsatisfying hot-water bottle simply because the warming-pan is a nuisance to carry upstairs and has to be polished daily.

Some people, obsessed by "functionalism," would make every room in the house as bare, clean and labour-saving as a prison cell. They do not reflect that houses are meant to be lived in and that you therefore need different qualities in different rooms. In the kitchen, efficiency; in the bedrooms, warmth; in the living-room, a friendly atmosphere—which in this country demands a good, prodigal coal fire for about seven months of the year.

I am not denying that coal fires have their drawbacks, especially in these days of dwindled newspapers. Many a devout Communist has been forced against all his principles to take in a capitalist paper merely because the Daily Worker is not large enough to light the fire with.

Also there is the slowness with which a fire gets under way in the morning. It would be a good idea, when the new houses are built, if every open fireplace were provided with what used to be called a "blower"—that is, a removable sheet of metal which can be used to create a draught. This works far better than a pair of bellows.
But even the worst fire, even a fire which smokes in your face and has to be constantly poked, is better than none.
In proof of which, imagine the dreariness of spending Christmas evening in sitting—like the family of Arnold Bennett's super-efficient hero in his novel The Card—round a gilded radiator!

The End