

# IN SEARCH OF WILFRED BURCHETT

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Ben Kiernan, ed, *Burchett. Reporting the Other Side of the World 1939 — 1983*, Quartet Books, London, 1986. 302p. \$48.95 cloth.

Wilfred Burchett (1911-1983) is Australia's most internationally famous journalist. Apart from all that followed, his first major achievement would be sufficient to earn him a place in history. Burchett travelled alone through recently surrendered and barely occupied Japan to Hiroshima weeks after the world's first atomic attack. As a result of this heroic journey (recounted sensitively in this volume by Richard Tanter) he described, for the first time and against the claims of the US military, the continuing and horrifying effects of radiation on the bomb's victims.

Burchett's post-war career was notable in that the great majority of it was spent in communist countries. For this reason, his career has certainly spawned more controversy than any other Australian journalist's. It included periods in Eastern Europe, China, and North Korea, but in terms of relevance and quality, by far his most important post-war writings concerned the Indochina War. His unparalleled access to the communist side in the conflict was one distinctive feature, but another was his willingness to go to remote and dangerous areas, even in his fifties travelling with communist troops in South Vietnam, and producing rich and often moving descriptions of the war's impact and dynamics.

Burchett's significance lies not only in his writings but also in the extraordinary reaction he elicited. It is well known, but should never be forgotten, that conservative Australian Governments stripped him of his citizenship rights, denying him a passport for nearly two decades because of his political activities, and just as determinedly refusing to undertake any formal prosecutions against him, presuming him guilty but afraid to test their presumptions in court. From the viewpoint of the 1980s it seems scarcely credible that one left-wing journalist, without any regular output in the Australian media, should have occasioned such close attention from the Government's most senior Ministers. The episode is more testimony to the Government's pusillanimity and underdeveloped sense of justice than to any wrongdoing by Burchett.

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Apart from the passport saga, the main strand of the public controversy are charges that he was a traitor, a KGB agent or a Communist apparatchik. As support for the Vietnam war declined, Burchett grew in respectability. The Australian audience attending to his writings expanded from small groups of Communist Party of Australia (CPA) cadres to a broad range of anti-war critics. Possibly as a response to his growing influence, there was a resurgence of efforts to discredit him. This period of controversy peaked in 1974 when Burchett sued the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) magazine *Focus* and Senator Kane for libel for calling him a KGB agent. The trial ended unsatisfactorily. The welter of witnesses called by both sides at great expense proved almost irrelevant, although significantly the judge instructed the jury that no evidence had been produced to substantiate the charge that Burchett was a KGB agent. This implicitly rejected the evidence of the defence's star witness, KGB defector Krotkov, whose credibility was perhaps weakened in that he had not only named Burchett as a KGB agent, but others including John Kenneth Galbraith and Jean-Paul Sartre. However the judge also said that the defence might be able to claim that the report although libellous was a fair report of what had been said in Parliament, and therefore protected by Parliamentary privilege. The jury accepted this, and the huge costs involved were awarded against Burchett, who, as a result of his inability to pay, never again visited Australia. An appeal court ruled that the judge's instructions to the jury about the defence of Parliamentary privilege were mistaken, but because of the expenses involved did not order a new trial. The case demonstrated again that libel trials are one of our most expensive but least edifying legal circuses.

Burchett's death rekindled a self-sustaining controversy. The various pro and con obituaries produced a cycle of reaction and counter-attack between the two sides. The chief proponents have been Robert Manne, who won a *Quadrant* prize for his work on Burchett, and Gavin McCormack, who is not only a contributor to the present volume but has defended Burchett in several shorter articles, notably a particularly cogent recent counter-attack on Manne and others in *Meanjin*.<sup>1</sup>

The book under review brings together a dozen authors, most of them sympathetic to Burchett but not uncritical of him. The public debate has long since become hackneyed, but Kiernan's volume offers much fresh detail and insight, and especially a

depth of research which the multitude of shorter articles has patently lacked. One weakness is the lack of any biographical overview or chronology of Burchett's life, so that it is sometimes hard to put individual chapters into their exact biographical context.

In seeking a perspective on Burchett, it is first necessary to consider whether his actions and writings are explained by, or lend credence to the idea that he was a KGB agent or professional Communist propagandist. As several contributors to this book argue (notably Kiernan, McCormack, and Carey) the attacks on Burchett have a constant conclusion — Burchett's guilt — but enormous variety in how the conclusion is reached. Discredited evidence is abandoned without acknowledgment. The constant conclusion is built upon unreliable and shifting evidence, which at key points has always been unsubstantiated, and perhaps even fabricated.

The case that Burchett was consistently an agent for some power is weakened by his changing alliances within the savage schisms of contemporary communism. There are certainly constant ideological strands in Burchett's work (internationalism and anti-colonialism, strong opposition to racism, a strongly egalitarian ethic and a romantic radicalism about the possibility and efficacy of revolutionary change). There is also constancy in whom Burchett has been against: he had few kind words for any American Governments.<sup>2</sup> But his meanderings between the Soviet Union, China and Vietnam undermine any notion that he was a continuing agent for anyone.

Apart from the evidence about specific incidents the general plausibility of the case against Burchett is reduced in that it rests upon a distorted or at least seriously incomplete view of Burchett's personality, an anaemic caricature rather than a rounded portrait. From many sources<sup>3</sup> Burchett emerges consistently as a gregarious and convivial companion, whose basic commitments and beliefs were always openly expressed, whose capacity for human interchange and relationships often transcended ideological boundaries, and who was a restless adventurer. If he was a propagandist, he certainly was not in the mould of Goebbels or the communist Koestler, sitting in an office inventing stories. In the case against Burchett as propagandist, no unambiguous charges of invention have been substantiated<sup>4</sup> — uncritical reporting of the views of communist officials, yes; omission and selective emphasis and interpretation, yes — but invention, no. Moreover, he had an apparently insatiable urge to be an eyewitness to key events and situations, frequently and courageously exposing himself to danger to do so. The man who travelled to Hiroshima in September 1945 or crawled through Viet Cong tunnels under American bombing in the 1960s was clearly motivated by more than a desire to invent

propaganda. He was more an adventurer than an apparatchik, driven by idealism and curiosity.

In popular polemics, the defence of Burchett too often passes into uncritical adoration. If Burchett was not a traitor, it does not follow that he was a hero. Because Burchett has been the victim of unjustified criticisms, it does not follow that there are no valid criticisms to be made. For example, in the most important episode in mounting the case against Burchett — his interactions with allied prisoners of war in Korea — McCormack has shown that there is no proof that he behaved traitorously or cruelly. But he is insufficiently sensitive to how Burchett's presence and behaviour must have appeared to the incarcerated Australians and others, and to the ambiguities of his role there. Burchett did not engage in indoctrination, but he did give lectures on the progress of the war; he did not interrogate prisoners, but he possibly occasionally helped with interpreting; he did not spread propaganda, but he helped to edit confessions made under the duress of imprisonment. There is no evidence that Burchett ever tortured prisoners and there is some evidence of his showing individual kindnesses across ideological lines, but there was certainly little heroic about Burchett's behaviour, and there can be little doubt of the resentments it would have engendered.

Similarly, although there is no proof that Burchett was a continuing agent for the Soviet Union or anyone else, it is plausible that during his long decades behind the Iron Curtain, there were occasions where his professional judgments were compromised by immediate exigencies. Interestingly Burchett has written of occasions when his integrity was tempted by offers from the Right, but never of any similar rejected temptations emanating from the Left. He has claimed that his freelance status helped his independence freeing him from the political directions an employer might give. However Burchett's 'independence' in the 1950s and 60s consisted of living under Communist regimes, subject for his livelihood on their tolerance, without any secure income, and with a very uncertain welcome, perhaps even prosecution, awaiting him in the West. Neither Burchett nor the contributors to the Kiernan volume devote much attention to how the vagaries and difficulties one imagines this insecure, politically vulnerable, expatriate life situation affected Burchett.

Perhaps the paramount question is the status and quality of Burchett's writings. Are they centrally influenced by a propagandist intent? . . . or skewed by a prism of selective sympathies and scepticism? . . . or are they the reliable testimony of an individual with strong views but with equally strong professional ideals and skills, which created controversy only because they contradicted the propaganda interests and prejudices of the Western powers? Most of the contributors to the Kiernan volume are aware of

flaws in Burchett's work. One fallback defence which some adopt is that the weaknesses betoken no lack of integrity, or suppression of journalistic goals to political ones, but rather that Burchett was a good observer but a poor analyst. This is plausible in that Burchett's, like many journalistic writings, is most valuable for its immediacy rather than its depth of analysis. Rowley, in his account of Burchett in Eastern Europe, adopts this position. After citing many damning examples from Burchett's work, culminating in his observation that 'Burchett had witnessed the consolidation of Stalinist control over Eastern Europe. And he didn't even notice it' (52), he concludes with a ringing endorsement that Burchett 'told the truth as he saw it' and was a 'principled, left-wing journalist'. Burchett's omissions and acceptance of Stalinist rationales are ascribed to his innocence (51).

In my view this defence is inadequate to account for Burchett's lack of scepticism toward official communist sources and his parallel tendency to omit politically unpalatable facts. It required a very selective myopia not to perceive Stalinist repression. Similarly his inability to acknowledge Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia for several years, until after the Pol Pot regime was at war with Vietnam, constituted, as Kiernan observes, a serious failure, a failure which remains without a satisfactory explanation. Burchett had an amazing capacity for avoiding dissonant themes: despite his unique vantage points, he wrote nothing of value on the Sino-Soviet split; and it takes a special talent to write about North Korea over three decades without ever focusing upon the sickening cult around Kim Il Sung.

The problem with Burchett is not simply that he reported from the other side — although that is a sufficient explanation of the McCarthyist persecutions to which he was subjected — but how he reported from the other side. In my view Burchett's journalism was fundamentally flawed by a partisan mentality, an apparent need in all conflicts to affiliate with the 'heroes' against the 'villains'. This produced amazing double standards. McCormack's mass of detail on the POW allegations during the Korean war is insufficient to dispel the suspicions raised by contrasts such as the following cited by Manne: 'He compared the communist POW camps to Swiss holiday resorts and their United Nations equivalents to Nazi extermination camps.'<sup>5</sup> The mendacity of American propaganda during the Korean armistice negotiations is no excuse for the lack of scepticism toward North Korean claims.

There can be little doubt that Burchett's partisanship affected not only his perceptions and analysis, but also his decisions about what to disclose. Defenders of Burchett have sometimes praised him for ameliorating prisoners' conditions in Korea, but not also criticised him for never having exposed their sufferings to an international audience.

Early in his career, when he arrived in Chaing Kai-shek's China during its war with Japan, he found that 'genuine friends of China... suppressed the real picture' of the corruption and misdeeds of the Chinese regime because this might undermine international sympathy.<sup>6</sup> Throughout Burchett's career being a true friend of the causes he espoused, too often took precedence over giving his audience a full picture and letting them decide their sympathies.

Wilfred Burchett had an amazing life, and many of his writings were uniquely valuable contributions to journalism. He was close to many of the major historical convulsions of the last half century, but his response has nearly always been one of simple partisanship. His acknowledgments of earlier errors were always made without evident anguish and without prolonged or searching self-criticism. He seems to have lacked any capacity for reflective introspection or any tolerance for acknowledging moral ambiguity or for fundamentally re-thinking earlier commitments and beliefs. In these senses, he seems simply the sum of his activities. There may be less to Wilfred Burchett than meets the eye.

#### NOTES

- 1 McCormack Gavin, 'The New Right and Human Rights: "Cultural Freedom" and the Burchett Affair', *Meanjin*, 45(3):389-403, September 1986.
- 2 From the communist side, Burchett was always a dove, advocating detente rather than conquest; for example, acting as a conduit between Kissinger and Chou En-Lai during Nixon's overtures to China.
- 3 Such sources include many mainstream and conservative journalists, and figures like Sir Keith Waller, former Australian Ambassador to Moscow and later Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs, who sought unsuccessfully to have Burchett's passport restored. (See Carey's chapter.)
- 4 The strongest case for Burchett having invented propaganda was his accusations of germ warfare against the Americans during the Korean War. My own estimate of the balance of probabilities is that the Americans did not engage in germ warfare. (No documents have emerged under Freedom of Information or anywhere else to establish they did, and no pilots or officials have ever in their memoirs or elsewhere ever confessed in America to doing so.) It does not follow that Burchett invented the story. It is possible, even probable, that he was too influenced by the 'confessions' of imprisoned American pilots and some ambiguous physical evidence, which also influenced others including Joseph Needham to believe the charges. The influence of Hiroshima, six years earlier, should not be under-estimated as a factor in Burchett's behaviour during this period.
- 5 Manne R, 'The blind faith of Wilfred Burchett and his admirers', *News Weekly*, 15/10/1986:12.
- 6 Burchett W, *Passport*, Nelson, Melbourne, 156, 1969. Also cited and discussed in Tiffen Rodney, *The News from Southeast Asia. The Sociology of Newsmaking*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 96, 1978.