

# Wilfred Burchett's Memoirs of a Rebel Journalist: Lessons from Hiroshima to Vietnam and Iraq

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By Stuart McIntyre

*The New York Times* revealed on October 31, 2005 that an in-house historian of the US National Security Agency has investigated the August 4, 1964 'Tonkin Gulf Incident' that the US government used to escalate the Vietnam War. According to this official U.S. historian, what happened that fateful day was deliberately misrepresented by officials who quickly discovered important mistakes in their agency's real-time reporting but immediately covered them up. A non-existent 'attack' then became a lie that took the United States into a new war against North Vietnam, at a cost of 58,000 American lives and over a million Vietnamese. It now seems clear that not one but both of the most disastrous conflicts in U.S. history, those in Vietnam and Iraq, were sparked by US officials disseminating lies and convincing the American public to go to war. Indeed, according to the *New York Times*, the NSA historian's extensive analysis of the official dishonesty was scheduled for publication in 2002-03, but the work was withheld from the public once the case then being disseminated to take the US into war against Iraq (its 'weapons of mass destruction') was itself already becoming controversial.

Among the earliest and most prominent Western opponents of the Vietnam War was the Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett, who died in 1983. Having first opposed US involvement in the Korean War, in which

*Australian troops also participated, Burchett had by then become the target of a decades-long official witchhunt which saw him barred from his home country for twenty years. Only with the election in 1972 of an Australian Labor government did Canberra finally restore his Australian passport, at the same time withdrawing the country's forces from Vietnam. In a right-wing political vendetta, even Burchett's children were long denied their Australian birthright. Some of the conservative criticism of Burchett's pro-communist views was sincere and correct, but inadequate in the eyes of his personal and political enemies. They waged a long campaign to blacken his name with lies while preventing him from returning to Australia.*

Only after Burchett's death in exile did much of the truth come out, in a series of studies written by Gavan McCormack, a leading Australian historian of Japan and Korea. These included McCormack's seminal articles, "An Australian Dreyfus?" and "Burchett in Korea" in the monthly *Australian Society* (August 1984 and September 1985), and "The New Right and Human Rights: 'Cultural Freedom' and the Burchett Affair" (*Meanjin* 3, 1986), as well as a 50-page chapter entitled "Korea: Wilfred Burchett's Thirty Years' War," in my 1986 anthology *Burchett: Reporting the Other Side of the World, 1939-1983*. Recent Australian research in British and US archives has since vindicated much of what McCormack wrote twenty years ago, highlighting the scandalous official mistreatment of Burchett and his family throughout the 1950s and 1960s. This mistreatment helped not only to silence Burchett's on-the-spot war reporting but also to

*mislead the Australian and American publics, at great human cost.*

*As a youthful traveler in inter-war Europe, Burchett had helped rescue German Jews from Hitler, and had then covered the Pacific War for British newspapers. But it may have been his experience as the first Western reporter into Hiroshima after the A-bomb, and the first to break the story of radiation, that turned him into a dissident. Horrified at what he saw of the human and physical destruction of the Japanese city, and also at its censorship by US officials, Burchett soon commenced his career-long opposition to several American wars in Asia. He entitled one of his last books *Shadows of Hiroshima*.*

*Yet there was also an important Australian dimension to his writing. Burchett's son George, an artist now living in Sydney, has co-edited a long-lost work, his father's unpublished autobiography, covering his early life as well as his world-wide career. At the Melbourne launch of *Memoirs of a Rebel Journalist*, published in 2005 by the University of New South Wales Press, the distinguished Australian historian Stuart McIntyre, Dean of the Arts Faculty at Melbourne University, stressed Burchett's youthful upbringing in an independent Australian farming family as an important influence on Burchett's inimitable style of reporting against the grain in a series of international crises. -- Ben Kiernan*

Nick Shimmin explains in the preface to this book how Wilfred Burchett's son George obtained the typescript of Wilfred's autobiography: it was kept, along with other papers, by his widow Vessa, who lived in Bulgaria, and brought back to Australia two years ago by George's wife Ilza.

Despite its length, George read the entire book in one weekend — and so did I, last weekend.

It's difficult to put it down because it is written with the freshness and immediacy of an outstanding reporter who was there when history was made: in Germany on the eve of World War Two assisting Jewish refugees, with Wingate on the Burma Road, in China as the Red Army struggled against the Japanese and Kuomintang forces, in Hiroshima after the bomb was dropped (despite attempts to prevent his access), and then in Germany after the war, in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, China, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and many other arenas of contestation and conflict.

He was not only there, he had first-hand knowledge and personal dealings with the decision-makers: Macarthur, Harriman and Kissinger, Zhou Enlai, Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk.

But this book is something more than an eyewitness record of contemporary history. It's also the story of a remarkable man. Wilfred Burchett reported events for a large number of news outlets, and he also wrote some 35 books, which were translated into as many languages.

The story he tells of himself is of a largely self-educated man (he taught himself a number of languages simultaneously and by rote while labouring on the land) who came from a strong, close family background of nonconformity, perseverance and industry, and practised all the family characteristics.

The Burchetts came to Australia from south-east England in the 1850s and were pioneers in southern Gippsland in the 1870s, enterprising builders in Melbourne during the 1880s, then forced back onto the land by the depression of the 1890s. Wilfred's father similarly went into the building industry but was ruined by the depression of the 1930s, and Wilfred (the younger son) went onto the track, experiencing the hardship and exploitation and mateship of an itinerant adventurer.

He was in Sydney in 1934 when a Methodist minister and family friend died at the Domain when speaking out against the refusal to permit Egon Kisch to enter Australia. Kisch, a flamboyant roving reporter and publicist for left causes, clearly inspired Wilfred's career. Burchett remembers him here as a champion of noble causes, 'the world was his beat'. And Kisch was also the victim of official surveillance and vilification.

Wilfred Burchett made the world his beat, championed noble causes and also incurred victimisation. He became a marked man in Japan after the Second World War when he defied the American control of information to publicise the effects of atomic radiation.

He lost the support of his Fleet Street editors as the Cold War gripped Europe. He was accused of aiding the enemy in Korea, and of interrogating or even brainwashing American and Australian prisoners of war. He was subsequently accused of working for the KGB, and living in luxury, while he plied his trade, always at the front line, surviving danger and sickness, hammering out stories on his typewriter.

He was persecuted by another Australian journalist, Denis Warner, who himself had close links with ASIO. When I googled Wilfred Burchett, the entry for Denis Warner's papers in the National Library was close to the top because they contain an extensive Burchett file.

Wilfred's passport was stolen in the mid-1950s and he was refused entry back into his own country and threatened with violence when eventually he did return by light plane from Noumea.

The autobiography concludes with his subsequent and unsuccessful suit against the DLP's former Senator Pat Kane, his failure to gain justice and the ruinous award of costs that effectively kept him out of his homeland for the

rest of his life.

As early as 1953 Wilfred Burchett was the subject of a book published by the Australasian Book Society, *He Chose Truth*. In 1986 Ben Kiernan edited a collection of essays that appraised his work. His own memoirs appeared in two previous versions, *Passport* in 1969, and then the bowdlerised and heavily reduced version of this one, *At the Barricades*, which appeared in 1981. The Memoirs conclude with the libel suit and omit a final chapter from *At the Barricades*.

There has been a hostile life of Wilfred by the ineffable Roland Perry, a far less distinguished journalist, who then turned his attention to John Monash and Don Bradman; there are security files in Canberra and other places, and there have been countless spiteful and derogatory articles.

Burchett's journalistic career was always something more than reportage, it was a commitment to a cause. That cause for Burchett was the liberation of humanity from oppression, the defeat of fascism, the success of national liberation movements and the building up of an alternative political, economic and social order.

He insisted that he was not a member of the Communist Party, and none of his critics have ever shown that he was. But he was a supporter of the communist movement in a period when the bipolar logic of the Cold War interpreted that support as treachery. His very ability to work on the other side (despite western attempts to prevent his doing so) allowed him to report world events with knowledge and insights denied to others.

Burchett repeatedly broke stories. He was the man on the spot who did not rely on official briefing and handouts, but went and saw for himself. He drew not just on his interviews with leading figures in China, Korea, Vietnam and

elsewhere but intimate contact with other participants.

As Ben Kiernan has observed, he was at his best when a story was breaking and he could take the reader behind the scenes, or in challenging and rebutting the spurious allegations that were part of the Cold War propaganda battle.

He was less successful in his judgement of communist regimes. As Ben Kiernan has observed, he was no analyst and he could not assess the direction of slow historical changes. He praised the achievements of Stalinism and downplayed its repression.

He was a crusading journalist who almost instinctively took a contrary line to Western news and news commentary. Hence he was gullible at best in his reports on the show trials in Eastern Europe after the Second World War; and he was slow to see the murderous character of the Khmer Rouge regime, or recognise the plight of boatpeople who fled Indochina.

But to suggest he simply hoed the party line is to ignore the fact that he had to and did take sides in the conflict within the communist bloc. He supported the Soviet Union against Tito, China against the Soviet Union, Vietnam

against China.

Moreover, his informed knowledge was respected by conservative diplomats such as Frederic Eggleston and Keith Waller.

We are indebted to George Burchett and Nick Shimmin for preparing the memoirs for publication. It is perhaps inevitable that there are some slips Chris Wallace-Crabbe's journalist father appears in the index as Crabbe, Wallace, but such are the hazards of a double-barrelled surname. Zelman Cowan lacks an e in his surname, Gregory Clark gets a superfluous one in his.

These are minor flaws in the remarkable life-story of a remarkable Australian.

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*Ben Kiernan, author of The Pol Pot Regime, is the A. Whitney Griswold Professor of History and Professor of International and Area Studies at Yale University, and editor of Burchett: Reporting the Other Side of the World, 1939-1983.*

*George Burchett and Nick Shimmin, eds., [Memoirs of a Rebel Journalist](#). The Autobiography of Wilfred Burchett.*