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978-0-521-71826-4 - Rebel Journalism: The Writings of Wilfred Burchett

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Excerpt

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The Atomic Plague [1945]

On 6 August 1945, as I shuffled along in the ‘chow line’ for lunch with fifty or so weary marines at a company cookhouse in Okinawa, a radio was spluttering away with no one paying attention to it as usual . . . I strained my ears to pick up a few snatches from the radio – enough to learn that the world’s first A-bomb had been dropped on a place called Hiroshima.¹

Wilfred Burchett’s international reputation as a journalist and war correspondent was built upon one of the great scoops of 20th century reportage. After the second atomic bomb was dropped on Japan in August 1945 and the Japanese had announced their surrender, the Americans issued accreditation to several hundred correspondents to report on the signing of the surrender documents. All the accredited journalists dutifully made their way to the USS *Missouri*, but Burchett ‘slipped the leash’ and in the small hours of the morning of 2 September 1945, he boarded a train for Hiroshima.

The story of his journey to the bomb site and his efforts to get the despatch to London is one of the epic tales of modern journalism. General MacArthur had not yet sent official US Army journalists to the bomb site to manufacture a propaganda story (they arrived while Burchett was there), and so the following report was the first independent account of the results of the nuclear attack to appear anywhere in the world.

The impact of the following article on world opinion and the subsequent debate about nuclear weapons cannot be overestimated.

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The Atomic Plague

'I Write This as a Warning to the World'

Doctors Fall as They Work

Poison gas fear: All wear masks

Express Staff Reporter Peter Burchett [*sic*] was the first Allied staff reporter to enter the atom-bomb city. He travelled 400 miles from Tokyo alone and unarmed carrying rations for seven meals – food is almost unobtainable in Japan – a black umbrella, and a typewriter. Here is his story from –

HIROSHIMA, Tuesday.

In Hiroshima, 30 days after the first atomic bomb destroyed the city and shook the world, people are still dying, mysteriously and horribly – people who were uninjured by the cataclysm – from an unknown something which I can only describe as atomic plague.

Hiroshima does not look like a bombed city. It looks as if a monster steamroller had passed over it and squashed it out of existence. I write these facts as dispassionately as I can in the hope that they will act as a warning to the world. In this first testing ground of the atomic bomb I have seen the most terrible and frightening desolation in four years of war. It makes a blitzed Pacific island seem like an Eden. The damage is far greater than photographs can show.

When you arrive in Hiroshima you can look around and for 25, perhaps 30, square miles you can hardly see a building. It gives you an empty feeling in the stomach to see such man-made devastation.

I picked my way to a shack [*sic*] used as a temporary police headquarters in the middle of the vanished city. Looking south from there I could see about three miles of reddish rubble. That is all the atomic bomb left of dozens of blocks of city streets, of buildings, homes, factories and human beings.

Still They Fall

There is just nothing standing except about 20 factory chimneys – chimneys with no factories. I looked west. A group of half a dozen gutted buildings. And then again nothing.

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The police chief of Hiroshima welcomed me eagerly as the first Allied correspondent to reach the city. With the local manager of Domei, a leading Japanese news agency, he drove me through, or perhaps I should say over, the city. And he took me to hospitals where the victims of the bomb are still being treated.

In these hospitals I found people who, when the bomb fell, suffered absolutely no injuries, but now are dying from the uncanny after-effects.

For no apparent reason their health began to fail. They lost appetite. Their hair fell out. Bluish spots appeared on their bodies. And the bleeding began from the ears, nose and mouth.

At first the doctors told me they thought these were the symptoms of general debility. They gave their patients Vitamin A injections. The results were horrible. The flesh started rotting away from the hole caused by the injection of the needle.

And in every case the victim died.

That is one of the after-effects of the first atomic bomb man ever dropped and I do not want to see any more examples of it. But in walking through the month-old rubble I found others.

The Sulphur Smell

My nose detected a peculiar odour unlike anything I have ever smelled before. It is something like sulphur, but not quite. I could smell it when I passed a fire that was still smouldering, or at a spot where they were still recovering bodies from the wreckage. But I could also smell it where everything was still deserted.

They believe it is given off by the poisonous gas still issuing from the earth soaked with radioactivity released by the split uranium atom.

And so the people of Hiroshima today are walking through the forlorn desolation of their once proud city with gauze masks over their mouths and noses. It probably does not help them physically. But it helps them mentally.

From the moment that this devastation was loosed upon Hiroshima the people who survived have hated the white man. It is a hate the intensity of which is almost as frightening as the bomb itself.

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‘All Clear’ Went

The counted dead number 53,000. Another 30,000 are missing, which means ‘certainly dead’. In the day I have stayed in Hiroshima – and this is nearly a month after the bombing – 100 people have died from its effects.

They were some of the 13,000 seriously injured by the explosion. They have been dying at the rate of 100 a day. And they will probably all die. Another 40,000 were slightly injured.

These casualties might not have been as high except for a tragic mistake. The authorities thought this was just another routine Super-Fort raid. The plane flew over the target and dropped the parachute which carried the bomb to its explosion point.

The American plane passed out of sight. The all-clear was sounded and the people of Hiroshima came out from their shelters. Almost a minute later the bomb reached the 2,000 foot altitude at which it was timed to explode – at the moment when nearly everyone in Hiroshima was in the streets.

Hundreds upon hundreds of the dead were so badly burned in the terrific heat generated by the bomb that it was not even possible to tell whether they were men or women, old or young.

Of thousands of others, nearer the centre of the explosion, there was no trace. They vanished. The theory in Hiroshima is that the atomic heat was so great that they burned instantly to ashes – except that there were no ashes.

If you could see what is left of Hiroshima you would think that London had not been touched by bombs.

Heap of Rubble

The Imperial Palace, once an imposing building, is a heap of rubble three feet high, and there is one piece of wall. Roof, floors and everything else is dust.

Hiroshima has one intact building – the Bank of Japan. This in a city which at the start of the war had a population of 310,000.

Almost every Japanese scientist has visited Hiroshima in the past three weeks to try to find a way of relieving the people’s suffering. Now they themselves have become sufferers.

For the first fortnight after the bomb dropped they found they could not stay long in the fallen city. They had dizzy spells and

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headaches. Then minor insect bites developed into great swellings which would not heal. Their health steadily deteriorated.

Then they found another extraordinary effect of the new terror from the skies.

Many people had suffered only a slight cut from a falling splinter of brick or steel. They should have recovered quickly. But they did not. They developed an acute sickness. Their gums began to bleed. And then they vomited blood. And finally they died.

All these phenomena, they told me, were due to the radio-activity released by the atomic bomb's explosion of the uranium atom.

Water Poisoned

They found that the water had been poisoned by chemical reaction. Even today every drop of water consumed in Hiroshima comes from other cities. The people of Hiroshima are still afraid.

The scientists told me they have noted a great difference between the effect of the bombs in Hiroshima and in Nagasaki.

Hiroshima is in perfectly flat delta country. Nagasaki is hilly. When the bomb dropped on Hiroshima the weather was bad, and a big rainstorm developed soon afterwards.

And so they believe that the uranium radiation was driven into the earth and that, because so many are still falling sick and dying, it is still the cause of this man-made plague.

At Nagasaki, on the other hand, the weather was perfect, and scientists believe that this allowed the radio-activity to dissipate into the atmosphere more rapidly. In addition, the force of the bomb's explosion was, to a large extent, expended into the sea, where only fish were killed.

To support this theory, the scientists point to the fact that, in Nagasaki, death came swiftly, suddenly, and that there have been no after-effects such as those that Hiroshima is still suffering.

[*The Daily Express*, London, 5 September 1945.]

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With Mick Griffith to the Plaine des Lacs [1941]

In 1937 Burchett boarded a ship to England and in 1938 he travelled to Nazi Germany and experienced first hand the horrors of fascism while helping Jews escape its terror. On returning to Australia he bombarded the newspapers with letters warning against the danger posed by German and Japanese militarism, but they were ignored. The mood at the time was one of appeasement and conciliation, but when Hitler attacked Poland and Chamberlain declared war on Germany, Burchett was suddenly in demand as ‘one of the last Australians to leave Germany before the war’.

Then on New Year’s Eve 1940 he set out to investigate Japanese activities in New Caledonia, recognising the French colony’s strategic importance in the event of war with Japan. *Pacific Treasure Island* is the result of this trip. It was also Burchett’s first book and he was obviously enjoying himself and his newly discovered writing talents, making the most of the exotic locations and colourful locals. The following chapter demonstrates this, but it also displays Burchett’s acute sensitivity to geopolitical circumstances.

By the time this book was published, Burchett was on his way to Burma and China, and the start of his career as a war correspondent.

* * *

Mick Griffith is one of the best known mining characters in New Caledonia – and one of the best liked. Mick admits that he likes a drink or two – or more – but always hastens to tell you that when he’s in the bush he’s ‘off the likker.’ With his brother he came to New Caledonia in the early 1900’s – as a timber-getter – helping to deplete the giant kauri forests which existed in the early days of the colony. When timber-getting began to be played out, Mick turned his attention to prospecting and mining, and found that one can have much more luxurious debauches from the results of

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a successful prospecting tour, than after years of toil as a timber-getter.

Thus when he returned to Sydney and Melbourne in 1939 after having sold his nickel mine to Krupps' representative he was able to go through £1,500 in six weeks with the greatest of pleasure. He borrowed his fare back to Noumea, and regarded his new situation quite philosophically. 'There's plenty more holes in the ground where a man can pick up a few more quid when he wants them,' said Mick, and promptly went bush again for a few weeks. The result of this trip caused a well-known Australian mining engineer to rush across to New Caledonia, and caused another even better-known industrial concern to send over their expert a few weeks later to check up on the report brought back by the first engineer.

When I met Mick he wasn't very sober, but he had such an open, likeable face that it was difficult not to take notice of what he said, even if his language was a little thick.

'So yer'n Australian journalist are yer, hic?' he asked.

'Well, I can show yer something that'll make yer ***** eyes pop right out of yer ***** head . . . We'll get a car, shove a bit of kai kai in a bag.

'Uve yer got any blankets?' he demanded suddenly. 'Well it don't matter, Priday and I'll get enough of 'ern.' (Mr. Priday, by the way, is Reuter's and United Press' correspondent in New Caledonia, and formerly well known in West Australian journalistic circles.)

'Yer don' mind sleepin' on the ground? Good. We'll get the ***** car to Plum, to the Forestière if we can, an' I'll ring the Jap so's he'll have the choot-choot motor ready for us to go up to the 23 kilometre.'

All these directions meant nothing to me, but as Priday nodded to me every now and again to agree, I made intelligent noises of assent. Without having the slightest idea of where we were going or what we were going to see, I agreed to be ready at 5 o'clock next morning for a three days' excursion – somewhere.

At 5 a.m. I was sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for a motor car to hoot, as arranged. At 6 a.m. I was still sitting there. At 6.15 I went down and had coffee, and commenced searching for Mick. Arrived at his hotel – everybody in New Caledonia who hasn't a home lives in a hotel – I found Priday vainly trying to remind Mick

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of the excursion he had promised for the three of us. My entrance clinched the discussion, and Mick jumped out of bed, apologising for his lapse of memory.

Blankets were rolled up into swags, Mick searched for and found his compass, while Priday went looking for a taxi. The next thing was the purchase of kai kai – which in any part of the Pacific signifies food. Priday, who had a bad cold, was in favour of taking along a bottle of rum, but Mick, to my surprise, was strongly opposed to this. He knew his limitations. Kai kai consisted of half a dozen long rolls of bread, 6 tins each of beef, pate (type of beef paste) and preserved fruit, with a couple of dozen small lemons with which to fight Priday's cold.

The 5 a.m. became 10.30 a.m. by the time our taxi rolled out of Noumea and turned south-eastwards towards our first destination – Plum, about 30 kilometres from Noumea. On the way we passed the St. Louis mission station, one of the earliest mission settlements in the island – and possessing 10,000 acres of the richest land within miles of Noumea. It was obtained by giving a few axes to tribal chiefs. Most of the colony's sugar used to be grown at St. Louis, but now there is only enough cultivated for the monks to distil the famous St. Louis rum, known by connoisseurs the world over. As we drove past, a new crop was flourishing on the flat level acres bordering the road – the monks' first attempt to grow rice in New Caledonia. Arrived at our Plum, we had to obtain permission from the gendarme before we could proceed. There had been an outbreak of the plague in a Catholic mission station at Touaourou, in the direction of our excursion, and a 'cordon sanitaire' had been placed around the entire district. As we were able to convince the gendarme that we weren't going within the prescribed distance of the plague spot, we were allowed to continue.

Mick and Priday explained to me then, that in normal circumstances we would have gone by boat to within a few miles of our destination, but the plague had interrupted the coastal steamer service, and as we had to reach the far side of the island we would have to go as far as possible by car and 'choot-choot motor,' and walk the rest. I was kept guessing as to the identity of 'choot-choot motor' until we arrived at 'La Forestière,' the site of a huge timber mill. My guides informed me that an Australian company had worked

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a kauri concession in this district and taken out millions of feet of some of the best timber in the world.

The place had something of the air of a ghost camp about it, with the engines, and lines of sideless trucks which had been used for bringing the timber down from the forests miles inland, all in perfect condition. The whole equipment was left just as it had been when the last log was handled. Tremendous transport difficulties would make the cost of dismantling and transferring the plant to Noumea heavier than importing a new one from Sydney. There were several neatly built houses but no sign of life, until we walked half a kilometre up the line and could see blue smoke curling up from one of the cottages.

Mick was hailed with a great shout, and a couple of Japanese who were at work in a nearby shed, repairing a boat's bottom, dropped their tools to come over and welcome Mick, and be presented to Friday and me. We dropped our packs on the ground alongside the railway line, and followed the Japanese up to the source of the blue smoke. Following our guides' example we slipped our boots off before we stepped on the spotlessly white, kauri floor of a tidy verandah. A couple of gravely smiling Javanese women came out. There were more introductions and we were invited into another spotlessly clean kauri-planked room.

Tablecloth and plates were laid, a tin of beef, loaf of bread and a litre of wine produced by the silent bare-footed Javanese. Anti-mosquito coils were lit, and while Mick, between mouthfuls of bread and beef, conversed with Japanese and Javanese alike in a vile mixture of French-Melanesian and Javanese, Friday and I concentrated on having a good meal and observing the cleanliness and tidiness of the bush establishment. Mick's French was enough to make any French scholar retch, but, as he said, it was based on utility rather than grammar, and Mick could certainly make himself understood anywhere on the island, whether he was amongst Javanese, Arabs, Chinese, natives or French. Of course his expressive hands played their part too.

The meal finished, we were introduced to the 'choot-choot motor' – a motor-bike engine geared to a small railway trolley. There was room for four passengers, one seated on the driver's seat, and three more on a long coffin-like narrow box mounted

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directly on the trolley floor. Our provisions were stacked in the box, a bag thrown over the top for upholstery and we were ready for our 23 kilometre journey. With a Javanese boy in the saddle and myself as cameraman installed on the front of the box we set out along the 24-inch gauge line, while Mick regaled us with stories of terrible accidents that had occurred along the line.

When the line was laid it seemed they had no curved rails, and the process of rounding the many hairpin bends en route was extremely painful, as we lurched round in a series of jumps as the wheels met the join in the straight rails. Mick explained that it was usually at these places that the accidents occurred. The ‘choot-choot’ sometimes didn’t make the curve and went straight over, to land in the river a few hundred feet below us. While my legs were dangling down in front of the box, Mick remembered another accident that occurred to a native, who was sitting like me, when a truck load of ore swung round a corner, hit the ‘choot-choot’ head-on, and cut the native’s legs off at the knees.

‘You should have seen him as his legs went flying down into the creek,’ he said enthusiastically. He relieved my feelings and incidentally Priday’s too, by telling us that the line was out of use at the present time, so we weren’t likely to encounter any traffic. Nevertheless I tucked my feet up and sat on them, as apparently the system of signalling wasn’t very efficient and there seemed no way of telling if something was travelling in the opposite direction. The grade was uphill, so no record speeds could be attained, although I was mentally trying to work out how fast the contraption would travel when we were coming back with the weight of four men to give it impetus. For most of the journey the track skirted the Blue River, a wide rushing stream. With the river on our right, and steep barren-looking hills on our left, the track wound in and out, skirting deep gorges on crazy bridges – on which most of the sleepers had been gouged out by bushfires. The swaying of the bridge reminded Mick that sometimes sleepers get burnt, the pegs holding the rails in place get loose in their sockets, the line spreads and ‘away goes the “choot-choot” over the bridge.’

The Javanese boy sat impassive at the controls, a cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth, as we chugged up sidings, through great red-earthed cuttings, and past the poorest country