

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Rebel Journalism

The Writings of Wilfred Burchett

This book is an anthology of the writings of Wilfred Burchett, perhaps the greatest journalist and war correspondent Australia has ever produced. He was also one of the most controversial figures of the Cold War, both here and overseas. Burchett published more than 30 books, and this volume brings together extracts from most of these, spanning the entire breadth of his career, from World War II, through Hiroshima, Eastern Europe, Korea, Russia, Laos, Cambodia, China, Vietnam, Angola, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and other areas from which Burchett reported. The book presents these documents of reportage mostly in chronological order, and thus serves not only as a significant historical overview of the period, but also as a reader in Cold War journalism.

George Burchett is an artist and translator. In 2005 he co-edited, with Nick Shimmin, *Memoirs of a Rebel Journalist: The Autobiography of Wilfred Burchett*.

Nick Shimmin completed a doctorate at the University of Lancaster in 1989 on the Manx writers T.E. Brown and Hall Caine. Since that time he has worked in sales and marketing and as a subtitling editor at the Special Broadcasting Service.

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Rebel Journalism

The Writings of Wilfred Burchett

EDITED BY GEORGE BURCHETT AND
NICK SHIMMIN



Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521718264

© The Estate of Wilfred Burchett 2007

First Foreword © John Pilger 2007

Second Foreword © Gavan McCormack 2007

This publication is copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2007

Printed in Australia by Ligare

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication data

Rebel journalism : the writings of Wilfred Burchett.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-52171-826-4 (pbk.).

1. Burchett, Wilfred, 1911–1983. 2. Foreign correspondents – Australia. 3. War correspondents – Australia. I. Burchett, G.H. (George Harold). II. Shimmin, Nicholas L.
070.4332092

ISBN-13 978-0-521-71826-4

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders, and the publishers will be happy to correct mistakes or omissions in future editions.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-71826-4 - Rebel Journalism: The Writings of Wilfred Burchett
Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Photographs</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Foreword by John Pilger</i>	ix
<i>Foreword by Gavan McCormack</i>	xv
<i>Introduction</i>	xix
1 The Atomic Plague [1945]	1
2 With Mick Griffith to the Plaine des Lacs [1941]	6
3 Who Is Wingate Anyway? [1944]	17
4 The Trial of Cardinal Mindszenty [1951]	31
5 Liberty in Eastern Europe [1951]	44
6 The Microbe War [1953]	51
7 Kojé Unscreened [1953]	69
8 The Ball-Point Pen Murders [1954]	79
9 South of the 17th Parallel [1955]	88
10 Front-Line Village [1959]	105
11 Welcome Home [1961]	115
12 Gagarin: The First Interview with Western Journalists [1961]	124
13 Virgin Lands [1962]	130
14 Lilac and Outer Space [1962]	139

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)**vi** Contents

15	War Against Trees [1963]	151
16	The Tragedy of South Vietnam's Ethnic Minorities [1964]	168
17	Interview with General Vo Nguyen Giap (April 13, 1964)	175
18	A Fortified Hamlet [1965]	183
19	Patriots and Mercenaries [1965]	190
20	At Ground Level [1966]	202
21	A Spurned Olive Branch [1967/1977]	216
22	Personal Leader [1968]	225
23	The Tet of Peace [1973/1977]	230
24	'Something from Nothing' Township [1976]	242
25	Evaluating the Past [1976]	252
26	Mercenaries: British Export Model [1977]	262
27	The Geneva Conference [1978]	271
28	How to be a Good Khmer Rouge [1981]	286
29	China Prepares to Attack Vietnam [1981]	296
30	Afterword [1983]	303
	<i>Notes</i>	306
	<i>Bibliography</i>	309
	<i>Index</i>	310

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*List of Photographs*

1. Wilfred Burchett as war correspondent in 1943 (Chapter 3)	<i>page 30</i>
2. With Allied pressmen at Panmunjom, Korea, 1952. From left to right: Norman McSwan – Reuters; unnamed INS correspondent; Wilfred Burchett; unnamed AP correspondent. [Courtesy Norman McSwan] (Chapter 6)	68
3. President Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, 1966 (Chapter 9)	103
4. Wilfred Burchett visiting the Laos front in Sam Neua province (Chapter 10)	111
5. Yuri Gagarin with Wilfred Burchett, Moscow, 1961 (Chapter 11)	123
6. Pyotr Maximov, one of the tens of thousands of Soviet youth who answered the call: ‘Come East, Young Man!’, 1962 (Chapter 13)	138
7. General Vo Nguyen Giap, Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief of Vietnam’s People’s Army, Hanoi, 1965 (Chapter 17)	181
8. ‘Blossom’ and ‘Lissom’, 1964 (Chapter 18)	188
9. Wilfred Burchett with a member of a Vietnamese village self-defense corps, 1964 (Chapter 20)	201
10. Anti-aircraft defence: village girls in training (North Vietnam, 1966) (Chapter 20)	215
11. Wilfred Burchett and his wife with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong and President Ho Chi Minh, 1965 (Chapter 21)	223
12. A US jet plane goes to the airplane cemetery, Hanoi, 1966 [photo Wilfred Burchett] (Chapter 23)	240

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

This book is a further acknowledgement of those few remaining journalists who are still prepared to make huge sacrifices to deliver what they believe to be the truth.

It is dedicated to Vessa Burchett (1919–2007), Wilfred's wife, companion, colleague and first reader, a witness to many of the events covered in this book, mother of three of his four children (including one of the editors), a remarkable woman, of great courage and spirit, the *yin* to Wilfred's *yang*.

We would also like to acknowledge the support of the following people who have assisted or promoted Wilfred's work and the development of this project:

Deborah Franco, Ilza Burchett, Graham Burchett, Cambridge University Press in Australia (particularly Paulina de Laveaux, Adam Ford, Sandra McComb), Ragnar van Leyden, Simon Nasht, Penny Allen, Jon Rose, Hollis Taylor, Lady Borton, John Maynard, Dr Nguyen Thi Tinh, Stephen Sewell, John Pilger, Trinh Ngoc Thai, Ben Kiernan, Gavan McCormack, Christopher Reed, Kelly Gaudry, Stuart Macintyre, Tom Heenan, Stephanie Alexander, David Bradbury, Mark Davis, Kate Barton, Brendan Doyle, Steve Mori, Rainer Burchett, Peter Burchett, Anna Burchett, Patrick Griffiths, Thao Griffiths, Amanda Jane Duthie, Gerry Herman, and UNSW Press in Sydney.

The photograph of Wilfred Burchett with Allied pressmen at Panmunjom, Korea, 1952 is reproduced with the permission of Norman McSwan. All other photographs are courtesy of The Estate of Wilfred Burchett.

And our thanks to everyone else who has supported us in promoting Wilfred's work and legacy.

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword

by John Pilger¹

In the late spring of 1980, shortly before I was due to leave for Cambodia, I received a phone call from Paris. A familiar, husky voice came quickly to the point. ‘Can you postpone?’ he said. ‘I’ve heard about a Khmer Rouge list and you’re on it. I’m worried about you.’

That Wilfred Burchett was worried about the welfare of another human being was not surprising; the quintessence of the man lay in what he did not say. He neglected to mention not only that *he* was on the same ‘list’, but that a few weeks earlier, at the age of seventy and seriously ill, he had survived a bloody ambush laid for him by Khmer Rouge assassins, who wounded a travelling companion. (Wilfred’s intelligence was as reliable as ever; I narrowly escaped a similar ambush at the same place he was attacked.) I have known other brave reporters; I have not known another who, through half a century of risk-taking, demonstrated as much concern for others and such valour on behalf of others.

He took risks to smuggle Jews out of Nazi Germany, to drag American wounded to safety during the Pacific war, and to seek out prisoners of war in Japan in 1945, to tell them help was coming; the list is long. He sustained a variety of bombardment, from Burma to Korea, to Indochina, yet he retained a compassion coupled with an innocence bordering at times on naïveté. None of these qualities were shared with the vociferous few who worked to bring him down.

¹ This foreword is a revised version of the author’s essay in B. Kiernan (ed.), *Burchett: Reporting the Other Side of the World 1939–1983* (London: Quartet Books; Sydney: Australasian Publishing Company, 1986).

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)**x Foreword**

Wilfred's politics were both instinctive and shaped by the harsh poverty of his upbringing more than by intellectual fashion. Shortly before he died he told me he had never become a communist. 'How could I be a communist?' he said. 'There were so many parties, each drawing on different circumstances, different conditions. Which one was I to choose? I chose none, because I wanted to remain just *me* . . .' If anyone made real the romantic notion of the Australian iconoclast it was Wilfred Burchett. And although his innate decency and affable personality eschewed doctrine (many of Wilfred's friends were non-socialists, even anti-socialists) at times he seemed more diplomat than journalist. Wilfred would have explained this as being part of the 'icebreaker', or go-between, role he adopted and which was, as he put it, 'a useful and honourable thing to do'. If he repeated official explanations uncritically (as during the disastrous land-reform campaigns in North Vietnam in the 1950s), the instances of him going against the doctrines of those he supported are numerous; in any case, he was seldom as close to governments on the 'other side' of the Cold War as many Western journalists are to governments and institutions, almost instinctively. Perhaps, like all originals, Wilfred Burchett was also something of an enigma.

What is beyond question is that the abiding strength of Wilfred's character – courage – allowed him to surrender commitment to a 'cause' when that cause no longer deserved his support. Although this withdrawal sometimes suffered from delayed action, as in the case of the Khmer Rouge, he would not hesitate to say that he had been wrong. 'You've got to be able to look your children in the eye and look at yourself and not be ashamed,' he said. 'You have to know when to let go . . . The question journalists, and politicians, have to ask themselves is, "Do you get off in time, or do you follow a line out of blind loyalty?" It takes courage to say, "Look, I'm wrong on this; I'm letting go."'

In China his friendship with foreign minister and later premier Zhou En-lai and other vintage revolutionaries was 'let go' with much heart-searching and sadness when he perceived the Chinese leadership's hostility to the Vietnamese at the very climax of Vietnam's struggle for independence. He was forced to abandon his old confrere Prince Sihanouk, whom he had supported for twenty-five

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)Foreword **xi**

years, when Sihanouk allied himself with the forces of Pol Pot: ‘The wrench,’ as the historian Ben Kiernan has written, ‘must have hurt’. I remember well his agonizing over Sihanouk who, he felt, had betrayed him personally, not to mention his own people.

At the end of his life it was the Vietnamese who remained alone in his pantheon. Having shared something of the Vietnamese experience, I can understand that. ‘They have never let me down,’ he once said in a mellow mood, allowing a glimpse of his vulnerability.

Paradoxically, Wilfred was vulnerable because he was, in the strictly professional sense, such a fine journalist. His two greatest ‘scoops’ left no doubt about that, while adding a precarious dimension to his life. The first was Hiroshima. He was the first Western reporter to reach Hiroshima after the atomic bomb had been dropped on 6 August 1945. He had been warned by an official of the Japanese press agency that ‘no one goes to Hiroshima: everyone is dying there’. He ignored this of course. He feigned illness at Allied press headquarters in Yokohama, in order to slip away from the press ‘pack’, and with his beef ration he bought a ticket to Hiroshima.

The journey, mostly in darkness, demonstrated the Burchett courage. Here was a European alone in a train filled with soldiers, armed and sullen and almost certainly bitter at the moment of defeat. At two o’clock in the morning he reached Hiroshima and was promptly thrown into prison. ‘There was some shouting by the police and the interpreter became pale as she translated my rare interventions,’ he wrote. The ‘shouting’, he later learned, was about whether or not he was to be shot. It was only a senior officer of the ‘Thought Police’ who decided the foreigner should live. ‘Show him,’ he said, ‘what his people have done to us.’

What Wilfred saw was published all over the front page of the London *Daily Express* beneath the headline, I WRITE THIS AS A WARNING TO THE WORLD. ‘In Hiroshima, thirty days after the first atomic bomb destroyed the city and shook the world,’ he reported, ‘people are still dying mysteriously and horribly – people who were uninjured in the cataclysm – from an unknown something which I can only describe as the atomic plague . . .’

In comprehending and identifying an ‘atomic plague’, he had rumpled the *experimental* nature of this first use of a nuclear

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)**xii Foreword**

weapon against people. ‘It was a considerable ordeal to reach Hiroshima,’ wrote the distinguished American journalist T.D. Allman in his eulogy for Wilfred, ‘but it was an infinitely greater accomplishment, back then, to *understand* the importance of Hiroshima.’

Wilfred returned to Tokyo in time to attend a press conference especially convened to deny and discredit his story. He later wrote,

A scientist in brigadier-general’s uniform explained that there could be no question of atomic radiation or the symptoms I had described, since the bombs had been exploded at such a height as to avoid any risk of ‘residual radiation’. There was a dramatic moment as I rose to my feet [Wilfred’s sense of the ‘dramatic moment’ was highly tuned], feeling my scruffiness put me at a disadvantage with the elegantly uniformed and be-medalled officers. My first question was whether the briefing officer had been to Hiroshima. He had not . . . He discounted the allegation that any who had not been in the city at the time of the blast were later affected. Eventually the exchanges narrowed down to my asking how he explained the fish still dying when they entered a stream running through the centre of the city. . . The spokesman looked pained. ‘I’m afraid you’ve fallen victim to Japanese propaganda,’ he said, and sat down.

Wilfred had blown a momentous cover-up. Reporters flown to Hiroshima were kept away from the hospitals he had seen and where there was clear evidence of the ‘atomic plague’. Burchett had his accreditation withdrawn and was issued with an expulsion order (from Japan), although it was later rescinded. Strict censorship was introduced. Japanese film of the victims of the ‘atomic plague’ was confiscated, classified ‘top secret’ and sent to Washington; it was not released until 1968. Three times as many people died from the effects of radiation in the five-year period after the two atomic bombs fell on Japan than on the days of the explosions; and the victims continue to die from it at a rate of at least a thousand a year. Wilfred Burchett was never forgiven for understanding and telling this truth, and telling it first. Moreover, as Phillip Knightley has pointed out, he ‘went totally against everything else being written from Japan at that time, the “they-had-it-coming-to-them” and “I-saw-the-arrogant-strutting-Japs-humbled” type of story’.

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)Foreword **xiii**

He was, for a brief time, a universal hero. This is Jim Vine reporting in the Brisbane *Courier Mail* on 11 September 1945:

A pocket-handkerchief-size Australian, Wilfred Burchett, left all other correspondents standing in covering the occupation of Japan.

Armed with a typewriter, seven packets of K rations, a Colt revolver, and incredible hope, he made a one-man penetration of Japan, was the first correspondent into atomic-bomb-blasted Hiroshima, and 'liberated' five prison camps . . .

After Hiroshima, Burchett embarked on his one-man liberation tour of prison camps, visiting two on the West Honshu coast and three on the inland sea, before official rescue parties reached them.

At Tsuruga camp he sprang a masterly piece of bluff which caused hundreds of Japanese to lay down their arms and gave the inmates their first steak dinner in three and a half years.

Here the inmates were alarmed at the increasing concentration of Japanese soldiers, all fully armed. Burchett sent for the camp commandant, known as 'The Pig', refused to answer his salute and bow, and, with delighted American marines for an audience, upbraided him soundly for not seeing that the surrender terms were carried out . . .

However, Western establishment forces never forgave him for his revelation of the truth of an 'atomic plague'; and he was to pay a high price for reporting from the 'other side' during the Cold War. For seventeen years, he and his children were denied passports by the Australian government. No charges were brought against him; no 'crime' was ever stated. In a letter in April 1956 to Brian Fitzpatrick of the Australian Council for Civil Liberties, Harold Holt, then Minister of Immigration and later Australian Prime Minister, wrote that Wilfred Burchett 'left Australia fifteen years ago. He has not since returned, his wife is not an Australian . . . in addition his activities since his departure forfeited any claim he might have had to the protection he would receive as the holder of an Australian passport.' When later, an Australian judge described the smearing of Wilfred as a 'miscarriage of justice', he spoke the truth.

In his eulogy to Wilfred, T.D. Allman posed the question, 'What is objectivity?' He answered this by saying that objective journalism 'not only gets the facts right, it gets the meaning of events right and

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)**xiv Foreword**

is validated not only by “reliable sources” but by the unfolding of history’. He then asked whether or not Wilfred Burchett was being objective

when he perceived a great threat to civilization in Nazi Germany, when he perceived a great moral test for the whole world in the persecution of the Jews . . . when he saw Hiroshima as the gravest threat to the survival of humanity itself . . . when he refused to see the Cold War as a clear-cut battle between Western good and Communist evil . . . when he said the Communist Chinese were not the pawns of Moscow . . . when he said that the revolutionary ferment of Asia and Africa after World War Two was not the product of some conspiracy to take over the world, but the product of the legitimate yearnings of the Third World for freedom, dignity and progress . . . We all, I think, know the answers to these questions.

I never discerned in him any bitterness, although God knows he must have felt it at times. He was almost always broke, yet he laboured at his work, ‘pounding on my ancient typewriter’, as he used to say, with unflagging cheerfulness and optimism which endeared him to so many people in so many countries – countries where, until shortly before he died, he had followed his old-fashioned dictum of being ‘on the spot’.

I once asked him about his optimism and the scars that did not show.

We were in Vietnam at the time and he was pounding on that ancient typewriter, surrounded by screwed-up balls of paper (I think he was writing his thirtieth book at the time), festoons of washing and cans of beer cooling on equally ancient air-conditioners.

‘To be happy,’ he said, ‘you’ve got to learn to slay only one bloody dragon at a time.’ This was followed by a burst of impish laughter, and a beer, and another, and another . . . Wilfred was kinder to his ‘bloody dragons’ than he was to himself. Alas.

John Pilger, July 2007

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword

by Gavan McCormack

One of the paradoxes of 20th century Australia was that the man who stirred greater public hatred and abuse than any other should also have been one who embodied its supposed core values: independent-mindedness, multiculturalism (long before the word became familiar), pragmatism, love of argument and of food, and a preference always for the common man and the underdog against authority.¹

Born into a family of dissenting, cosmopolitan farmers and laborers, Wilfred Burchett grew up in an atmosphere of deep respect for learning and self-improvement. Before he became reporter and foreign correspondent, he was a cow cocky (dairy farmer), carpenter, cane cutter and vacuum cleaner salesman. He educated himself, learned languages, and travelled widely, keeping his eyes and mind open. He mixed easily and in later life earned the gratitude and respect of people from Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh and Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk to American General William Dean (when Dean was a prisoner in Korea), and Henry Kissinger (who sought his advice and help in negotiating an end to the war in Vietnam). But in Australia he was Public Enemy Number One, for much of his life subject to the unique sanction of exclusion from his own country.

¹ For details and documentation, see my essays: Gavan McCormack, 'An Australian Dreyfus? The Strange Case of Wilfred Burchett, Journalist,' *Australian Society* (Melbourne), Vol. 3, Number 8, 1 August 1984, pp. 6–12; Gavan McCormack, 'The New Right and Human Rights: "Cultural Freedom" and the Burchett Affair,' *Meanjin* (Melbourne, University of Melbourne), 1986, No. 3, pp. 389–422; Gavan McCormack, 'Korea: Wilfred Burchett's Thirty Years' War' in B. Kiernan (ed.), *Burchett: Reporting the Other Side of the World 1939–1983* (London, Quartet Books; Sydney, Australasian Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 162–211.

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)**xvi** Foreword

His was a peculiar kind of Australian bush socialism, not informed by any formal ideology or membership of any party but grounded in a moral sense of the dignity of the common man and of the righteousness of struggle against oppression. ‘Authorities’ are uncomfortable with such people, and the family attracted their attention long before Wilfred ventured onto the world stage. In the 1920s, the Ballarat sermons of Wilfred’s father George were reported as subversive (of the empire) for their references to human equality, and the same term was applied in the 1930s to Wilfred’s Poowong Discussion Club (comprised of poor farmers, the local butter factory manager, a blacksmith and a school teacher in ‘back-block’ rural Victoria) when it began hosting discussions with visiting speakers on subjects including life in the Soviet Union.

In 1938, Wilfred journeyed to Nazi Germany. The experience of fascism so horrified him that he mobilized his Poowong group to become immigration sponsors, opening a rescue line for German Jews that was in due course responsible for funnelling thirty-six of them to Poowong and Melbourne. But suspicions were stirred, and surveillance initiated, for what was an ‘uneducated’ Australian farmer doing in Berlin? One letter he wrote describing the horrors of Nazism, confiscated by the Australian censor, was not delivered until 47 years later, in 1985.

Few people – perhaps none – accumulated so voluminous an intelligence file across so many government departments, and no such file could be more revealing of the foibles, obsessions, cruelty, and petty-mindedness of a generation of Australian politicians and bureaucrats. He was accused of:

- a. being a paid agent of the KGB, and of the Chinese, North Korean, Vietnamese and possibly other intelligence or military organizations;
- b. of interrogating and/or brainwashing and/or torturing Australian and/or British and American POWs in Korea during the Korean War (1950–1953);
- c. of cooperating in, or actually masterminding, a campaign by China and North Korea during the Korean War falsely alleging the American use of germ warfare;
- d. of being a blackmarketeer, an alcoholic, and attractive to women [*sic*].

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword xvii

The charges were unproven, contradictory and improbable, when not positively absurd. Or – as in the alleged attractiveness to women – hinting at deep personal bitterness or jealousy on the part of those campaigning against him.

After long pleading with the Australian government to let him know details of the charges against him so that he could rebut them and return to his own country, in 1974 Burchett launched a court action for defamation. He won, but it was the most Pyrrhic of victories. The court of first instance held that he had been defamed, but that the defamation was protected by parliamentary privilege, and the Court of Appeal then ruled that although he had suffered ‘a substantial miscarriage of justice’ he was not entitled to any redress because his counsel had failed to protest in the appropriate way and at the appropriate time. Since costs were awarded against him, and he could not pay, his attempt to clear his name in effect made his exile permanent.

His gravest offense may have been his refusal to toe any official or government line. Such was the fear and loathing this inspired that, on a 1951 visit to his home town, Melbourne, the Lord Mayor cancelled a Burchett lecture on world developments, expostulating that ‘the letting of the town hall for a meeting in support of peace would be against the principles of the United Nations’. Later, when some of the family chose to live alongside Port Phillip Bay in a Melbourne suburb, government spies speculated that the choice might have been designed to facilitate communication with ‘the enemy’ (by submarine).

No single episode in his life caused him such trouble as the decision to report the Korean War (1950–1953) peace talks and the POW issues *from the other side*, as a journalist whose accreditation came from the press department of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. What he reported was diametrically opposed to the way the political and military leadership of the West saw the war and tried, falsely, to present it. When the false, garbled, and malicious stories of his activities in Korea are discounted, what remains is the portrait of an honest man who tried to tell the truth, who was almost alone in seeing the war primarily from the viewpoint of the suffering Korean people rather than of great powers or his own or any other government, and who, by helping to crack the censorship and lies propagated by other journalists when they were told to by

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii Foreword

‘responsible military authorities,’ may well have helped shorten the war.

My attempt just over twenty years ago to reopen the debate on Burchett in Australia was dismissed with characteristic Cold War smear – that I was teaching ‘a neo-Stalinist version of post-war Asian history’ to my students and ‘doctoring history.’² Prize-winning opinion leaders and media groups showed no sense of the fair play that was supposed to be embedded in the national character. Hopefully, with the publication of the present collection of essays, together with the recent publication of a new edition of Wilfred Burchett’s autobiography and a new critical biography, those Cold War prejudices can be transcended at last and a new generation will take a dispassionate look at the life and work of the 20th century’s Public Enemy Number One.

Professor Gavan McCormack

Canberra, 25 June 2007

² Robert Manne, *Left Right Left, Political Essays 1977–2005*, (Melbourne, Black Inc, 2005).

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

In the 21st century it is perhaps harder than ever to operate as a good investigative journalist. The age of ‘embedded’ correspondents and massive government and corporate advertising produces writing which is influenced or controlled to a greater or lesser extent by the powers which dominate world events. So for journalists in both the corporate and public sector it is often a case of toeing the editorial or government line or losing their jobs. Likewise, for broadcasters and newspapers it is often necessary to promote or be silent about the policies and ideology of the incumbent government and its institutional supporters or lose public funding or political advertising revenue. The internet has countered this by giving genuinely independent investigative journalists a platform, but it remains, as yet, a small one.

In this environment it is instructive to have access to a body of work from a genuinely independent reporter, one who had his own ideas and politics which were clearly expressed throughout his career. The writing of Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett looms large in any history of 20th century reportage, and not just as a result of one of the great scoops of the century, his solo journey to Hiroshima after the first bomb was dropped. Burchett covered most major world conflicts over four decades from World War II onwards, and this book attempts to represent this immense breadth of reporting by including chapters from most of his published books over the entire period of his working life. The chapters are presented chronologically according to the events being described, but the selection is bookended by Burchett’s two discourses on Hiroshima: his first celebrated scoop and his reflection on nuclear war in his last book.

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)**xx Introduction**

The fact that Burchett travelled the world covering so many of these extraordinary world-changing events means that such an overview of Burchett's writing can serve as a reader in the Cold War and its journalism. Such an idea would be anathema to Burchett's critics, however, because he did not report these events dispassionately. When he saw injustice and hardship, he criticised those he believed responsible for it. He was never shy about expressing preference, and readers are left in no doubt that Burchett preferred his revolutionaries in sandals rather than in boots, in tropical jungles rather than on the frozen banks of the Yalu River, and that his heroes – Ho Chi Minh, Chou En-lai, Sihanouk of Cambodia, Souphanouvong of Laos, Castro and a few others – were men he had met in the flesh and with whom he established a close personal rapport. He could be highly subjective, but he was never ideological. His political choices were his personal choices, not dictated by allegiance to a political party.

Inevitably though, his support for many of the socialist and Communist regimes who were being characterised as 'evil' by the mainstream Western media led to Burchett himself being demonised by those same media. Nevertheless, much of what Burchett reported, which was dismissed by his opponents at the time, has since proven accurate, and though his political sympathies led him to mistakes and errors of judgement, he admitted most of these and moved on to correct the record (a clear example of this is his writing about the Khmer Rouge and China – see Chapters 28 and 29). This book naturally includes examples of Burchett's more polemical and misguided work, but the overwhelming majority of the chapters here demonstrate an accurate insight into current events sadly lacking in so many of his contemporaries. The presence of errors and revisions in no way discredits his work; it simply highlights the difference between the vulnerable immediacy of journalism as opposed to the relative security of historical distance.

The insight on display partly explains the resonance of Burchett's work with new audiences. The recent publication of the unexpurgated version of his autobiography provoked strident responses in the press and on the internet, reminiscent of the Cold War-era reactions Burchett encountered during his life. The reasons for

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)Introduction **xxi**

this continued impact are not hard to find. Readers of the present volume will be startled by the similarities between much of what Burchett describes and many of the events they are reading about in the news. Parallels with the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq are immediately apparent while reading his accounts of the Vietnam War (Chapter 19, for example, in describing the motivations of the Vietnamese, gives as good an insight into the attitudes of the Iraqi resistance as any contemporary account). Issues such as military abuse, government censorship, imperialist intentions, public perceptions of military conflicts, attacks on civilians, corruption and many more are as crucial in this book as they are in the more informed coverage of the Iraqi occupation. This too confirms the relevance of the present volume as a contribution to the study of journalism and the issues it confronts, which are ongoing and not confined to any one historical period.

Nick Shimmin, June 2007