WILFRED BURCHETT
1911-1983
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OBITUARY

It was not just the Australian left which was saddened by the recent death of Wilfred Burchett. During a lifetime of committed and courageous struggle, Burchett won the respect of socialists throughout the world, and earned the hatred of conservatives in similar proportions. ALR here pays tribute to the man who took an unshakeable stand with the world’s oppressed and those struggling for freedom and change — a true internationalist.

Wilfred Burchett grew up in Gippsland, Victoria. He was born in 1911. The date is significant. It meant, for example, that Burchett was 19 in 1930, that in the first years of his manhood, he experienced all the rigors of the Great Depression.

The experience marked him for life — but not in the sense of embitterment, or anything of the kind. On the contrary, it seems to have strengthened him.

Writing in his autobiography At the Barricades of his gruelling experiences behind the lines with the National Liberation Front forces in South Viet Nam in the early 1960s, Burchett revels in telling how strong his legs were proving, and goes on to “thank his lucky stars” for his experiences trudging around Australia looking for work 30 years before.

Another important characteristic of the man dates from those early years. Throughout his life as a journalist, it was common for Burchett to be up and at his typewriter as early as three or four o’clock in the morning. He attributed this, quite simply, to his habit of getting up in time to milk the cows when he worked as a live-in farm hand on a Gippsland dairy property during the depression.

I had reason to be grateful for Burchett’s early-morning ways when we were together in Paris in 1968. I’d given him a list of questions for an interview for Australian Left Review, and he still hadn’t given me his replies when we wound up at a party together the evening before he was due to take off from Paris on an overseas trip. We were both determinedly knocking back large quantities of Ricard, a fearsomely strong yellow potion flavoured with aniseed, like Ouzo. Parting at one o’clock, we were both quite drunk. But I still remembered the interview, which I mentioned to him. “You’ll have it in
the morning," he said. I knew his flight left at noon, and mentally wrote the whole thing off.

But there he was at the office next morning, his replies neatly typed. "You’re bloody lucky to get this," he said, tossing the typescript on my desk. "After last night I overslept, and didn’t wake up till five o’clock .... "

I have another, rather idle, recollection of Wilfred which is closely associated with booze. In Peking in 1959 for the 10th anniversary of the revolution, Gavin Greenlees, Wilfred and I were drinking in my hotel room. After days spent in an excess of banqueting, Wilfred lay down on my bed for a rest. He was soon fast asleep, firmly clutching his near-full whisky glass. Gavin and I watched enthralled as the liquor lapped the side of the glass, and we started laying bets as to how long it would be before he spilled some. He slept for just a few minutes short of two hours, woke, sat up, and carefully placed the glass — with its contents intact — on the bedside table. Greenlees and I were amazed. We’d always known Burchett as a steadfast character, but this was something else.

Even after decades in journalism, Burchett’s hands still looked like those of a working man, large and strong, moulded by the millions of movements they had made during his years of manual labour of various kinds during the depression years.

Of course, the depression left marks of a moral and political kind as well. He developed a spirit of identification with the underdog, and a healthy scepticism about a social system capable of producing economic cataclysm such as Australia was enduring at the time. These characteristics never left him either.

One final point about his formative years: as well as milking cows early in the morning, he studied until late at night. His brother Winston, who ran a lending library at the time, had given him books. These he proceeded to devour, in particular devoting himself to the study of foreign languages. Indeed, it was his grasp of German, acquired from the study of Winston’s books, that got him his first break in London in the mid-1930s, and set him on the first great adventure of his career, helping Jewish families to escape from Hitler’s Germany.

The rest of his story is better known: World War II in Rangoon, Delhi, China, reporting with the US Pacific fleet on MacArthur’s island-hopping campaign, and then the event that was the highlight of his career until that time, perhaps of his whole career: becoming the first non-Japanese into Hiroshima after the dropping of the atomic bomb in August 1945. He thus became the first person in history to write on the mysterious radiation sickness that afflicted survivors of the bombing.

Let one of his colleagues of that time, Jim Vine, of the Brisbane Courier-Mail, tell the story. I certainly couldn’t tell it as well. Harry Gordon printed Vine’s report in his remarkable 1976 book on Australian journalism, An Eye-Witness History of Australia. Gordon introduced it as follows:

Once in a while, a reporter becomes a figure of news himself. Such reporters included Ernest Morrison, William Donald, Banjo Paterson; and much later, for various reasons, Douglas Wilkie and Alan Ramsey.

There is justification, occasionally, for one journalist to take a published look at another — as Paterson once did at Morrison. Here Jim Vine, the Courier Mail war correspondent, wrote about Wilfred Burchett.

Burchett had a flair for making news even in 1945 when he became the first newspaperman to enter Hiroshima, and later “liberated” five prison camps. Years later, reporting the Korean war from the communist side, he made news again. And again, in his long and finally successful battle to win back his Australian passport.

Jim Vine’s report was published in Australian newspapers on 11 September 1945.

Jim Vine’s report said:

A pocket handkerchief-sized 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.

Burchett, a Sydney Daily Telegraph correspondent, was told by his office to get to Hiroshima somehow, but quickly.

The quickest and only way was by train, a 21-hour journey, but he got there, after standing all the way, six hours before a special batch of correspondents landed in a Super-Fortress.

For those six hours he was the only white man in Hiroshima, which had had a quarter of its population wiped out in a single bomb raid. The Japs did not exactly strew his path with flowers.
and the situation at times was tense. Before leaving Tokio, Burchett had arranged with the Japanese news agency, Domei, to receive his copy, which was to be transmitted on the Japanese telegraph, but the plans came unstuck when MacArthur placed the capital out of bounds.

With the roads blocked, Henry Keys, of the Daily Express, London, also an Australian who was teamed with Burchett, tried three times in a day to get to Tokio from Yokohama by train, but was thrown off each time by provosts.

Burchett and Keys solved the problem by hiring an English-speaking Japanese to act as runner between Tokio and Yokohama, but the delay cost Burchett his scoop.

As it was, he broke even with the Super-Fortress group, who had flown their stories back.

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.

When I first read Vine's report in Gordon's book back in 1976, I immediately sent a photocopy to Wilfred in Paris. He wrote back ecstatically, saying he'd been hunting for a copy of Vine's report not only for years, but for decades, and here I'd sent it to him just when he needed it most (for a book he was writing for a London publisher). He went on to pay quite unwarranted tribute to my "telepathic powers ...."
Hiroshima, which was atomic bombed on August 6, looks as though a monster steam-roller had passed over and squashed it out of existence.

In this first testing ground of the atomic bomb I have seen the most terrible and frightening desolation of four years of war reporting.

Thirty days after the atomic bomb destroyed the city and shook the world people are still dying mysteriously and horribly from its effects.

People who were not injured in the explosion are dying from something unknown which could only be described as the atomic plague.

Hiroshima does not look like a normally bombed city at all.

The damage is far greater than any photographs can show.

After you find what was Hiroshima, you can look around for about 25 square miles, and there is hardly a building standing.

It gives you an empty feeling in the pit of your stomach to see such man-made devastation.

I picked my way to a shack used as a temporary police headquarters in the centre of the vanished city.

Looking south, I could see about three miles of reddish rubble.

This is all that the bomb left of dozens of blocks of city buildings, homes, factories, and human beings.

Nothing stands except about 20 factory chimneys without factories.

Looking west, there are half a dozen gutted ruins, then nothing for miles.

The Bank of Japan is the only building intact in the entire city, which had a population of 310,000.

I saw people in hospitals who apparently suffered no injury, but are dying uncannily from the effects of the bombing.

For no obvious reason their health seems to fail.

They lost their appetites, their hair fell out, and bluish spots appeared on their bodies.

They then began bleeding from the ears, nose and mouth.

Doctors first diagnosed them as sufferers from general debility, and gave them vitamin injections.

The results were horrible.

Their flesh began rotting away from their bones, and in every case the victim died.

Minor insect bites developed into great swellings, which would not heal.

Slight cuts from falling brick or steel splinters caused acute sickness.

The victims began bleeding from the gums, then they vomited blood and died.

Nearly every scientist in Japan has visited the city to try to relieve the people’s sufferings, but they themselves became victims.

A fortnight after the bomb was dropped they found that they could not stay long and suffered from dizziness and headaches.

In the day I stayed in Hiroshima — nearly a month after the bombing — 100 people died.
They were some of the 13,000 seriously wounded who are dying at the rate of 100 daily, and will probably all die. Forty thousand people were slightly injured. Counted dead number 53,000 and another 30,000 are missing, which means they are certainly dead. That is one of the effects of the first atomic bomb man ever dropped and I don't want to see any more.

While walking through this wilderness of rubble I detected a peculiar odor unlike anything I have ever smelled before. It is something like sulphur, but not quite. I could smell it where fires were still smouldering or bodies were being recovered from wreckage. I could also smell it where everything is still deserted. Japanese say it is given off by gas still issuing from the earth soaked with radio-activity released by the split uranium atom.

The people of Hiroshima are still bewildered and afraid. They walk forlornly through the desolation of their city with gauze masks over their mouths and noses. From the moment this devastation was loosed on Hiroshima the people who survived it have hated the white man.

The intensity of their hatred is almost as frightening as the bomb itself. Japanese authorities thought that the Super-Fortress which dropped the bomb was leading in a normal attack. When the plane passed out of sight thousands came out of shelters and watched the bomb descend by parachute. It exploded when nearly everyone in Hiroshima was in the streets. Hundreds and hundreds of people were so badly burned in the terrific heat generated by the bomb that it was impossible to distinguish their sex.

There is no trace of thousands who were near the centre of the explosion. The theory in Hiroshima is that they were burned to ashes instantly by atomic heat.

The water in the city has been poisoned by chemical reaction. The Imperial Palace at Hiroshima, once an imposing building, is a heap of rubble three feet high. Scientists have noted a great difference in the effects of the bombing of Hiroshima and that of Nagasaki, attacked two days later. When the bomb dropped on Hiroshima the weather was bad, and a big rainstorm developed soon afterwards. Scientists believe the uranium radiation was driven into the earth, causing this man-made plague. At Nagasaki the weather was perfect, and scientists believe the radio-activity was dissipated into the atmosphere more rapidly.... Death came swift and sudden at Nagasaki, and there have been no after-effects like those at Hiroshima.

**Wilfred Burchett,**

*Sydney Daily Telegraph,*

*6 September, 1945.*