

Laurie Aarons

The Life and Times of Wilfred Burchett

For daring to tell the story of Hiroshima, the Korean and Viet Nam wars from the "other side", Wilfred Burchett was often the centre of public abuse. But time has not lessened the controversy regarding his reputation as one of Australia's most distinguished journalists. In reply to Robert Manne's virulent attack in *Quadrant*, Laurie Aarons writes about the man and the allegations.

Q*uadrant* and Robert Manne certainly don't believe in spoiling the ship for a ha'porth of tar. *Quadrant* published Manne's 15,000-word article, "The Fortunes of Wilfred Burchett: A New Assessment" in its August 1985 issue, and followed up with the trivial reminiscences of a certain Edwin Morrisby in its October issue. Both articles are vicious assaults on Burchett's memory, as could be expected from *Quadrant* which has been honoured by financial subsidies from the CIA for its commitment to far-right ideology and vigorous pursuit of the Cold War.

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This pursuit of Burchett, two years after his death, is a sort of left-handed tribute to the man whose work is in itself an effective answer to the calumnies. It would scarcely merit a reply were the attacks confined to *Quadrant*, but they were blazoned much more widely. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, for example, reported the appearance of Manne's article, sensationalising it on a billboard which asserted bluntly "Burchett a KGB Agent", although its article added a question mark to the headline. Murdoch's *Australian* jumped on the bandwagon by publishing Morrisby's meanderings, headlined "Wilfred Burchett and the Question of the KGB".

Mr. Morrisby's contribution adds little but malicious gossip to Manne's longer piece and therefore merits little

attention, since its substantive "evidence" boils down to what the author calls a "gut feeling". This turns out to be based on some alleged pillow talk with an unnamed Bulgarian woman journalist who, Morrisby claims, told him that not only was Burchett working for the Russians but his wife Vessa worked for the Bulgarian secret service.

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This, from a man who then tells us that he sent condolences to Vessa on Wilfred's death; a fine sort of hypocrite if he really believed this tale!

Apart from this, Morrisby's article is padded out with self-advertisement, name-dropping and carefully selected anecdotes designed to put Burchett in as unfavourable a light as possible. A classic example is his claim that Burchett liked dogmeat, apparently hoping that this depraved taste which he shares with such peoples as the Chinese, Vietnamese and the Bataks of Sumatra will lend much-needed substance to his weak support for Manne's central charge.

Manne's long article throws everything, including the kitchen sink, into blackening Burchett's memory. His indiscriminate enthusiasm for throwing the book at Burchett reveals both personal venom and addiction to overkill. His ideological spleen cannot be assuaged merely by proving (to his own satisfaction) that Wilfred Burchett was a traitor who "had been giving 'aid and comfort' in Korea to the enemies of his country at time of war". (*Quadrant*, August 1985, p. 34; later quotes from Manne's article give only the page numbers.)

Just as the British ruling class damned Roger Casement as traitor and homosexual, so Manne condemns Burchett



for both "great crimes" and minor peccadilloes. Unable to hang a dead man, Manne wants to exhume the bones of Burchett's reputation as Cromwell's skeleton was exhumed and hung on the gibbet to satisfy Restoration avengers of his "treason" and regicide.

Scuttlebutt and Dossiers

This posthumous character assassination, masquerading as a reply to Gavan McCormack's article, "An Australian Dreyfus: A re-examination of the strange case of Wilfred Burchett, journalist" (*Australian Society*, August 1984), uses every adverse comment the author can dredge up. He draws avidly on the recollections of Burchett's enemies and critics, whether this be mean-spirited scuttlebutt garnered from envious journalistic colleagues, "evidence" from sworn ideological foes, or the "objective" dossiers gathered by ASIO and its predecessors on the Burchett family for over 40 years. As well, Manne rummages through the Burchett Papers in the National Library to select a few quotes from letters which, he claims, sustain his accusations.

Mr. Manne's objectivity may be judged by those whose help he acknowledges: Jack Kane of the Democratic Labor Party, who appears later in this article; Peter Samuel, who attacked Burchett in May 1985 in *The Australian*; Richard Krygier of the Association for Cultural Freedom; Peter Coleman, the Liberal MHR who tried to procure the services of journalist Robert Mayne to write articles against the left, based on ASIO dossiers to be supplied (illegally) by Ernest O. Redford of that organisation. But

his main helper is Denis Warner, longtime rival and bitter political enemy of Wilfred Burchett. With such helpers, Manne is not short of accusations to hurl indiscriminately at Burchett and his family.

Manne begins at the beginning, with Wilfred's father, "a progressive minded lay preacher and auto-didact who raised a leftwing family at Poowong in Southern Gippsland. One local gossip reported to the authorities during the war that on Anzac Day 1934 George and son Wilfred had appealed to the local Methodist congregation to 'show tolerance of that great country Russia.'" (p. 27)

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Having begun with tittle-tattle passed to ASIO's predecessor, strongly reminiscent of Senator Joseph McCarthy's later method of dredging "evidence" from the past to condemn the "traitors" who "lost us China", Manne repeats *ad nauseam* similar inane but malicious gossip to buttress his allegations. From this sensible appeal, proven correct soon after it was reported, as the Soviet Union turned the tide of war, Manne moves on to sterner stuff.

He informs us that Burchett was strongly influenced by Egon Kisch's defiance of Menzies' effort to keep him out of Australia by jumping from his ship at Melbourne (not Fremantle, as Manne asserts). Then we find Burchett listening ".... with great attention as Robeson told a huge rally at Albert Hall in 1937 of racial persecution in the United States and racial equality in the Soviet Union" (p. 28). The point of this is unclear: is Manne suggesting that Robeson was lying when he spoke of racial persecution in the United States? After all, Robeson experienced plenty of it then and later; it continues to this day as the Ku Klux Klan still rides and Blacks are still persecuted, along with even anti-communist Vietnamese.

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Second-hand Scandals

Burchett was, for example, "unscrupulous": "Stories circulated of the tricks he played on colleagues to advance his career, of Don Juan sexual adventures and of occasional blackmarketeering" (p. 28). Much of this scandalmongering comes from Denis Warner, who suffers from a disease endemic among journalists, the retailing of scandalous stories about colleagues, whether true or false.

Warner differs from others so infected only in his willingness to relay his second- and third-hand scandals to ASIO and other intelligence services. He is the source of one such story, stupidly irrelevant even were it true, that "Soviet officials were also aware that Burchett was drinking like a fish" (p. 40), sourced as "Private information from Denis Warner who spoke with a Novosti official in the early 1960s when passing through Moscow" (p. 45). The point of this scandalising is hard to see but, having repeated it gleefully, one wonders why Manne refrains from quoting the more damning Paul Kniss, former American POW in Korea, whose blasts against Burchett he repeats enthusiastically on other issues.

Kniss swore to the US authorities that

Burchett was drunk every time I saw him. I believe he is a chronic alcoholic. He always sat and drank glass after glass of straight cognac, vodka and wine. He could have been a drug addict because the pupils of his eyes dilated and looked like pinpoint. (ASIO papers A6119 XR1, item 15.)

Possibly not even Mr Manne risked retailing this absurd allegation, realising that too many well-known people, from Harrison Salisbury to Henry Kissinger, knew Burchett well and noticed neither alcoholism nor drug addiction.

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Warner's more restrained but second-hand evidence seems more respectable, given as it was in "most cooperative fashion" to ASIO's "Principal Section Officer B1" on 2 November 1953, during which he promised to "dig out the most incriminating examples" of Burchett's reports and send them back to ASIO from Singapore (ASIO papers A6119/XR1, item 13).

This interview produced another prize piece of gossip concerning an American correspondent who, according to Warner, "consistently annoyed Burchett and Winnington by accusing them of an unnatural relationship" (*ibid*)². Shades of Casement! Of course, Mr Manne is unworried at a minor contradiction or two: "Don Juan sexual adventures" sit alongside "unnatural relationships" just as Burchett allegedly performed the remarkable feat of being a double agent paid by the KGB and the Chinese when the two were at ideological loggerheads.

Warner's charges are detailed in ASIO's bulky Burchett dossier, which includes material refuting Manne's major accusations against Burchett, as we shall see. Before dealing with these, let us document Manne's other repetitions of scandalous scuttlebutt, beginning with "blackmarketeering". We are solemnly treated to 1943 reminiscences from Ronald Monson retailed to ASIO, that "he noticed that Burchett was carrying with him a full case of cosmetics and other luxury articles which were in short supply in Asia and made no secret of the fact that he intended to trade them for personal profit" (page 43 from ASIO document dated 26 October 1953). This is reinforced



by gossip from an unnamed source who told the *Christian Science Monitor* that "during his Berlin period he (Burchett) engaged in selling automobiles to Soviet officials" (p. 28). Manne at least admits he cannot vouch for the accuracy of this piece of scandal but then triumphantly asserts "but certainly he was involved in the German automobile trade, sending home to Melbourne a 1930s Mercedes Benz registered in the British zone". Such moral turpitude is obviously only a step from treason.

Damning with Faint Praise

Aware of, though not practising academic objectivity, Mr Manne occasionally makes obeisance to impartiality by grudging admissions that Burchett had a few good qualities, but hastily adds a bitter qualification each time. Thus, he concedes that Burchett was a "talented journalist" (p. 29) but "a journalist without the power of social observation and an ideologue without the saving grace of imagination" (p. 27). Famous American correspondent, Harrison Salisbury, whose reputation towers above Burchett's detractors, answers such damnation in his foreword to Burchett's book *At the Barricades*:

Burchett had done epochal reporting from China, had survived and written about an incredible 'long march' with the British fleeing Burma into India ahead of the Japanese, and had scored a sensational scoop by being the first correspondent to enter Hiroshima and bring to the world the story of the A-bomb and the horrors it left in its wake — the first details of radiation

illness (denied for a long time by official US sources). It was the best of a lifetime, and Burchett's almost taconic account of how he achieved it by boarding a train jam-packed with hysterical Japanese is a classic. (At the Barricades, p. vi.)

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I believe that no impartial observer reading Burchett's prophetic account of the meaning of Hiroshima, written from the site, could possibly accept Manne's accusation that he lacked imagination, nor that his report could have been written by someone "lacking imagination" (The report can be read in Burchett's book *Democracy with a Tommygun*.)

Similarly, Salisbury effectively answers Manne's earlier charge of "unscrupulous behaviour" towards colleagues:

Burchett's conventional journalistic companions have found him a well-informed, useful source and a warm and decent friend. They almost always could check out a report or a rumour regardless of whether it fitted Communist ideology or party propaganda. On most occasions they got a straightforward answer, one which was trustworthy and which stood the test of time.

All of which goes to show that not only beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. However, Salisbury has the advantage over Manne since he knew and worked with Burchett. Manne, instead, relies solely on biased witnesses handpicked for their prejudices.

Courageous — but a Coward

The case is similar when Manne grudgingly admits that Burchett had "a reputation among hispeers for physical courage", only to go on to suggest that, nevertheless, he was a bit of a coward. It is hard for Manne to ignore Burchett's reputation, for even Warner told ASIO that he was very courageous, having been "Machine-gunned 'as full of holes as a sieve' when crossing the Irawaddy on a raft, and was the first newspaperman in Hiroshima He had also taken great risks when ne was a correspondent in Germany before the war, when he worked with an underground movement to assist Jews to escape from Hitler's persecution." (ASIO dossier A6119/XR), item 13.)

Having admitted Burchett's reputation for courage, Manne then draws on ASIO's questioning of a New Zealand correspondent who knew Burchett in Korea to show the opposite, as a lead-in to his central charge that Burchett was a traitor, in the following manner:

McDonald told him (Burchett) of a conversation he had had with a RAAF captain who had expressed a desire to drop Burchett from his aircraft Burchett made light of all this but apparently took it seriously. Six months later ASIO was told that Burchett was 'contemplating returning to Australia but is somewhat afraid of members of 77 Air Squadron' (p. 36)



Manne then continues:

Burchett had, of course, much more to worry about, in regard to his homecoming, than defamatory articles or air force heavies. He knew that for two years he had — in the classic words of the English treason law — been giving 'aid and comfort' in Korea to the enemies of his country at the time of war. Perhaps his conscience was clear but nothing in his nature equipped him for the role of martyr in a treason trial. Having crossed the Rubicon, Burchett now tried to find some means of crossing back. (p. 36)

Manne thus comes to perhaps the most bizarre of his absurd charges: that Wilfred Burchett was prepared in September 1953 to "redefect" and "buy his way back to the

West" by supplying "useful information to American intelligence" (page 36) Manne admits that this is a "strange and hitherto unknown episode in the life of Wilfred Burchett" which he "stumbled upon in the ASIO files on Burchett released in early 1985 under the thirty-year rule". (p. 36).

This writer also came across ASIO's Burchett dossiers when examining, for quite other reasons, newly-released ASIO materials (which are still full of great gaps because of ASIO censorship). In a querulous footnote (78 on p.44), Manne writes "For reasons best known to the Australian Archives access to the first part of this telegram (about the alleged redefection) has been withheld." But it is ASIO, not the Archives, which withheld this page of the telegram, as it has withheld many thousands of its dossiers and thousands of pages from what material it has released.

"... his prolific output of books which often sold well in the West precisely because they dealt with issues of world concern, presenting new insights into events often clouded by partisan pro-American reporting which only too often proved to be wishful thinking."

Yet the available ASIO material, despite this paranoid self-censorship, still provides ample evidence to make nonsense of Manne's most serious charges against Burchett. Manne did not see these, apparently; he was too intent on picking up only those pieces of gossip or information which suit his case. This methodology is very apparent in his treatment of accusations made by some US prisoners of war against Burchett, retailing every allegation possible while completely ignoring the warm praise for Burchett coming from the highest-ranking American captured in Korea, General William Dean.

Soon after his release, Dean wrote an article for the *Saturday Evening Post* in which he says: "For nearly two years he (Burchett) made my life liveable by treating me as a human being. So I don't think it can be surprising that I like him and am grateful to him", adding that he "liked Burchett more each time although the Australian remained a mystery" (quotes from Dean's article are taken from the Melbourne *Herald* of 26 February 1954).

Dean devoted a whole chapter to his relationship with Burchett in the book he wrote about his Korean experience, expressing warm regard for the Australian, but Manne mentions not a word of this. Perhaps he did not know of Dean's book and its praise? Unfortunately not; he refers to Dean's book in a footnote (78 on p. 44): "The reference to Burchett's Czech wife is an error. The same error occurs in the book on Korea by the highest-ranking American POW, General William Dean, who refers to Burchett's wife as Bohemian". But not a word of Dean's attitude to Burchett; that would weaken Manne's case.

Dollars and Defection

We now examine Manne's bizarre redefection claim, absurd because Burchett had never "defected" from the Americans who wanted to

get him back.

Manne does not name the source of this report, probably because ASIO suppressed it; there is nothing but the US Military Intelligence assertion that Burchett wanted to redefect. But there is hard evidence to the contrary, showing that the American authorities sought to get him to defect to them and that they placed a very high value on winning him over.

The *New York Times*³ published a long and detailed report of its investigation into the Central Intelligence Agency's links with and use of the American media. The report includes details of the CIA's effort to buy Burchett's defection during the Korean Armistice talks, the same period in which we are told that Burchett wanted to buy his way back with some information!

The reporters wrote in the *Times*:

At least once, the agency even used an American reporter in an unsuccessful attempt to induce another reporter to 'defect'.

During the Armistice talks in Korea, sources said, the CIA persuaded Eddie Hymoff, then a correspondent for International News Service, to offer \$100,000 to Wilfred Burchett, the Australian journalist who had formed a close relationship with the North Korean Communists.

Mr Hymoff said that he argued with CIA officials that Mr. Burchett could not be won over, and that proved to be the case.

Putting this never-denied report into today's terms, the CIA wanted Burchett's defection badly enough to pay him a sum worth at least a million dollars today. But the unscrupulous Australian blackmarketeer and used car dealer, according to Manne, now appears as a foolish idealist who turns down a fortune offered for his defection, only to then allegedly seek a "way back" by giving information!

Burchett was never mercenary; indeed, money meant less to him than to most, as even Mr. Manne admits grudgingly:

I do not wish to be misunderstood here. Burchett obviously did not decide to work for the Chinese Communist Party for monetary gain. As a talented journalist he could have fared far better financially if he had remained in the West (page 29).

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It is hard not to misunderstand Manne, despite his earnest protestations, when he makes accusations of blackmarketeering, being a paid agent living in comfort in Peking, Moscow and Hanoi, raking over idle scandalising to blacken Burchett's name. The only way to understand his indiscriminate mixing of trivia with baseless charges of crimes like treason and redefection is that he seeks to buttress the latter, for which his evidence is so thin, by throwing in malicious trivia to build up his own case.

I met Burchett in his allegedly luxurious Moscow apartment in Vissotny Dom, in 1965, and at two domiciles in Paris, in 1972 and 1977, staying at his home on the latter occasion. His lifestyle was scarcely sybaritic; he was certainly not rich, though not poverty-stricken either. He earned his living through reporting (for both the orthodox Western press and for leftwing papers) and his prolific



Burchett at a meeting with Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi, 1964.

output of books. These often sold well in the West, precisely because they dealt with issues of world concern, presenting new insights into events often clouded by partisan pro-American reporting. Burchett's choice of life work was motivated by his beliefs, by a lifelong commitment to reporting events he saw as decisive to world history, from on the spot. He was never concerned with money-grubbing or even the search for fame, still less or plaudits from Establishments anywhere, whether in Washington, Moscow, Peking or Canberra.

Burchett's life shows that neither economic well-being or his own safety took precedence over his lifelong passion for reporting great world events with a proudly asserted bias to the cause of peoples fighting for national liberation from colonial oppression. He demonstrated this by his second journey, in his late fifties, deep behind the USSouth Vietnamese lines to report progress of the liberation war at an age when few people would try to squeeze through even one of the many small tunnels he traversed to within sight and sound of an enemy who would prize his capture or death as a great victory.

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The Major Charges

Having examined most of Manne's minor allegations, we turn to his more serious charges and the evidence he produces for them. His major witness is Yuri Krotkov, alias George Karlin, a Soviet defector who appeared before a sub-committee of the US Senate in 1969 and mentioned Burchett. Krotkov met Burchett in 1947 when he (Krotkov) was "formally a representative in Berlin of the Soviet Information Bureau but actually working with Soviet Intelligence" (p. 38).

Krotkov says he next saw Burchett in Moscow in mid-1956 when Burchett phoned him and sought his help in

becoming a paid agent of the KGB while working as a journalist in the USSR. This unlikely story was certainly elicited from Krotkov by his CIA "debriefers" who had long pursued Burchett and, as we saw, tried even to buy him over, unsuccessfully. In fact, Burchett had decided that Moscow was a most interesting place to observe world events after the CPSU's 20th Congress and he sought help to establish himself there. What more logical step than to contact a journalist he had known in Berlin, working for the Soviet Information Bureau, for such help?

Krotkov claimed, 22 years after he first met Burchett, that he knew him as a man "very experienced in espionage", another unlikely story considering Burchett's action-packed life as a war correspondent spent solely in Asia and the Pacific and always with British and American forces, never with Soviet armies. But Krotkov's unreliability as a witness is best illustrated by the so far unpublished outcome of a libel action launched by Australian communist, Alec Robertson, against the Democratic Labor Party's NSW secretary, Jack Kane.

The action arose from an article in the November 1971 issue of the DLP newspaper *Focus*, which retailed Krotkov's testimony before the US Senate hearing in 1969 much as it appears in Manne's article 14 years later, with one crucial exception. This exception follows Krotkov's statement that the KGB hesitated about putting Burchett on the payroll, which Manne reports as "a hitch; Krotkov's KGB chief had changed and details of the agreed arrangement misplaced" (p. 38).

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Manne then writes that "From what Krotkov could make out, Burchett went in high dudgeon to see a representative of the Australian Communist Party then in Moscow" (page 38). The *Focus* version was much more specific: "Finally, the deal was clinched by some visiting Australian Communist Party delegates understood to be Alex Robertson and none other than Ted Hill" (*Focus*, November 1971).

Kane settled Robertson's action out of court, paying the damages of \$10,000 because this statement was demonstrably false. Alec Robertson had never been a member of a Communist Party delegation to Moscow, with or without Ted Hill, and could prove that he had not been in Moscow at any of the times that Krotkov alleged he had discussed the matter with the KGB.

Either Mr Kane omitted to tell Manne that he had been forced to make a costly climbdown and settle out of court, when helping with his *Quadrant* article, or the latter deemed it prudent to leave out this piece of the Krotkov story which includes a crucial falsehood that could not possibly be a mistake.

The Treason Trial That Never Was

We come now to the allegations of Burchett's "treason" and his cowardice when faced with the threat of a trial for that alleged offence. The central fact of this matter is that two Liberal governments, Menzies' and Gorton's, far from seeking to get hold of Burchett to charge him with treason, **were desperate to keep him out of Australia.** Mr. Manne could have discovered this when researching ASIO's records, which contain many proofs of this concern by the Menzies government in 1953 and 1954. One is stated clearly in a cable from the External Affairs Department to the Tokyo Embassy which includes the following statements:

*Personal for Walker from Watt
Your telegram 443 Burchett*



Burchett at the jungle headquarters of the NLF in South Viet Nam in 1965.

Matter has been considered at highest level here. For your background information, Thornton's recent return to Australia raised storm as to why Government allowed him to return If a second and even more notorious Communist sympathiser returned there would be public outcry

2. Specific answers to questions in your paragraph 5 are as follows: a) Government has not the least desire that Burchett should return, may have no legal power to exclude him; but will do what it can

The same viewpoint was put even more clearly in a letter which ASIO's Director General, Colonel C.C.F. Spry, wrote to Attorney-General Spicer on 17 December 1953 canvassing the whole issue. The final paragraph of this eight-page letter reveals his thinking:

*I may say that I feel that some advantage would be served if a public pronouncement were made to the effect that criminal proceedings will be instituted against Burchett if he comes within the jurisdiction. I do not know whether he intends to return to Australia, but I believe that it is his boast that it is open to him to do so. On the other hand, I understand that he becomes disturbed when it is suggested that he would be unwelcome in this country. There is considerable speculation among those who have had recent dealings with him as to whether or not he desires to get away from the Communists — but it is all speculation. My own guess is that Burchett does not know himself. It may well be that an announcement that he will be prosecuted if he returns to Australia, backed up, perhaps, by the issue of a warrant for his arrest, would effectively deter him from returning. Furthermore, such an announcement would assure the world of the disapprobation with which the Australian government views him and his activities. However, I realise that there are other considerations requiring to be weighed in this connection, and I shall hope to have the advantage of discussing the problem with you. (ASIO dossier A6119/XR1, Item 14, p. 8, emphasis added.)
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While admitting that it was "all speculation" about the alleged wish to "redefect", adding his own penn'orth of guesswork, the hawkish colonel nevertheless finds the main merit in announcing prosecution is that this "would effectively deter him from returning". Further, there was never any possibility of an effective treason charge, for the existing Crimes Act made no provision for alleged acts of treason outside Australian territory, while a prosecution under the 1351 English Treason Act presented insuperable difficulties. Both these points were clearly stated in letters from ASIO's own principal legal officer, "B.G.T." to Colonel Spry, as we shall see later.

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In the event, there was not even an announcement of intention to prosecute Burchett in order to deter him from returning home, although the Gorton government did its damndest to keep him out 16 years later. But neither Liberal government had the stomach to prosecute him, and not mainly because of deficiencies in the law. That distinguished arch-conservative jurist, Sir Garfield Barwick, tidied up the law to make sure future "traitors" would be caught when he introduced draconian amendments to the Crimes Act in 1960, including the principle of "extra-territoriality". But when Burchett returned to Australia in 1970, having compounded what Manne claims were his "crimes" in Korea by doing the same things in Viet Nam — condemning American aggression against that country and the Liberal government's complicity in that aggression — the Gorton government did all it could to keep him out. And when he defied them and came back, the Gorton government had no more stomach for trying him than did Menzies in 1954.

Gorton threatened to fine the French airline UTA \$1,000 should it carry Burchett from New Caledonia to Sydney without a passport. Defying this ban, flying back by chartered plane, Burchett told *The Age* (20 February 1970): "I wouldn't welcome a treason trial but I'd gladly face one". So much for Manne's assertion that nothing in

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Burchett's "nature equipped him for the role of martyr in a treason trial". Indeed, Burchett went further, suggesting to the Gorton government that it set up a special court of inquiry into the allegations made against him, as Gorton admitted in answering a question from Labor MP, Les Johnson, on 4 March 1970. "Mr. Burchett has asked for a court of inquiry into some charges against him", Gorton said (*Hansard* p. 25), but he rejected Burchett's offer. Attorney-General Tom Hughes later that day spelled out why the Gorton government was more interested in

keeping Burchett out than trying him for treason.

Answering a question from Opposition leader Whitlam, who asked whether Burchett had broken any laws of the Commonwealth or whether any investigation was under way now Burchett was in Australia, Hughes replied:

I do not propose to give any opinion as to whether Mr. Burchett has broken any laws of the Commonwealth. What I will say, however, is that I, as principal law officer of the Crown, do not propose, as at present advised, to bring any charge against him. (Hansard, 4 March 1970, p. 31.)

"Attorney-General Hughes made it clear that Burchett could not even be charged because the Menzies government had sent Australian forces into America's war against the Vietnamese people without declaring war."

Hughes amplified that statement in speaking to the adjournment later that night, revealing the reason why no charge would be brought: "The answer is that under the law as it presently stands — that is, the Crimes Act which now has an extra-territorial operation — a prosecution for the offence of treachery or for the offence of treason cannot be mounted unless the war is a proclaimed war and there is a proclaimed enemy." (*Hansard*, p. 193, emphasis added.)

This is much more than a legal quibble, going to the heart of the political issues arising from both the Korean and Viet Nam wars waged by the United States which dragged its unwilling allies into both conflicts, using the United Nations in the first one. The knotty legal problems reflected the basic political reality which led the Menzies and Gorton governments to deprive Mr. Manne of what he claims would have been "the most important Australian 'political' trial of the century" (page 37). Attorney-General Hughes made it clear that Burchett could not even be charged because the Menzies government had sent Australian forces against the Vietnamese people without declaring war, without "proclaiming" it a war and without proclaiming either the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam or the National Liberation Front as "enemies".

Undeclared, Unwinnable, Unnecessary

This was no oversight, of course; the Menzies government failed to make these proclamations by deliberate intent, just as it sheltered behind the alleged request from the puppet government of South Viet Nam for Australian troops in 1965. The alleged letter was never produced, despite repeated requests; historians must wait until 1995 to find out the truth. But whatever remains hidden in the archives, the fact remains that Australian troops were sent into action long before 1965, as advisers and instructors under Brigadier Serong, that proud exponent of going down into the gutter to fight a dirty war which included formation of assassination squads. Viet Nam was a disastrous as well as a dirty war, for the United States and Australia, incalculably more so for the Vietnamese. The tragedy of it all was that it was an unnecessary and unwinnable war, as many people had

warned. Prominent among these was Wilfred Burchett, who never tired of warning against foreign intervention and publicising the unshakeable determination of the Vietnamese to fight for their national liberation, as shown in his despatch of April 1954 describing the hopeless position of the French Army besieged at Dien Bien Phu: *The two serious lessons for the French to learn from the actions at Dien Bien Phu and the Red River Delta, if they do not draw the correct conclusions from these lessons is only because of their slavish obedience to the American interventionists: the VPA has now grown into a modern army, equipped with modern weapons and troops which have mastered the technique of handling these weapons. The type of desperate action which the French troops are forced to fight at Dien Bien Phu because of Navarre's folly is one which they will have to fight repeatedly at their isolated outposts throughout Vietnam and the rest of Indochina.*

History records that the French did learn these lessons, however reluctantly. But the "American interventionists" did not, unfortunately for millions of Vietnamese, many thousands of Americans and hundreds of Australians who died in an unwinnable war which ended only in the US defeat and hasty withdrawal in April 1975. The Australian government, in similar "slavish obedience" to the Americans, joined in the war they never proclaimed. Naturally, they ignored the Burchett warning although it was available to them, having been "monitored" by the US military and passed to ASIO and can be read in their Burchett dossier (A6119XR1, item 15, folio 36) along with others just as spot-on!

"Burchett reported most effectively and prophetically on both the Korean and Viet Nam wars, which inflicted deep traumas on United States imperialism and some of its most powerful leaders, from Macarthur to Johnson and Nixon and beyond."

The Korean War also presented similar problems for ASIO and the Attorney-General in considering the Burchett issue. It would be very difficult to prosecute under the ancient English Treason Act, as the Attorney-General's Department told ASIO: "I therefore imagine that the Solicitor-General will first devote his mind to the question whether the Communist forces are the Queen's enemies. If they are not, there is an end to the matter from the point of view of any prosecution" (letter from "B.G.T." to Colonel Spry, Burchett dossier A6119 XR1, item 14, p. 3). This was doubtless a major reason for Attorney-General Hughes to rule out a prosecution under the Treason act of 1351 during the debate in the House of Representatives in March 1970, in these words: "The Leader of the Opposition asked me about the common law of treason I have formed the view that the hurdles, obstacles and legal difficulties are of such a character as to make that particular form of procedure quite impracticable in the circumstances" (*Hansard*, 4 March 1970, p. 194).

The problem arose because the US war in Korea masqueraded as a United Nations "policing" operation; the United States did not declare war and neither did Britain

nor Australia.

Colonel Spry, writing to Prime Minister Menzies on 8 September 1953, underlines the dilemma facing the authorities in considering Burchett's reporting from Korea in which he had never criticised Australia but always directed his attacks against the United States war machine. Spry said in this letter: "I find his criticisms of the Korean war are directed against the United States of America, not against Australia."

Potential Threat

The Menzies Cabinet, in considering the possibility of prosecuting Burchett, adopted this view expressed by Spry and decided there was no basis for such a charge. Its main concern remained to keep Burchett out of Australia because they saw him as a potential threat to their tulsome support for the US war in Korea.

That this was the basic motive driving the authorities is again confirmed by ASIO's legal officer, "B.G.T.", who sent Colonel Spry a memo suggesting that the Menzies government should announce its intention to prosecute Burchett for treason. The memo, dated 8 January 1954, after suggesting such an announcement, explains why:

2. *The advantages which may be served by such a pronouncement are —*

(a) *to deter Burchett from returning to Australia; and*
(b) *to indicate the disapprobation with which the government regards him*

He then discusses the possibility that the pronouncement would fail to deter Burchett:

Tenable views that it would not be so effective are — (1) that he might regard it as a challenge to be accepted (he has a modicum of vanity and some self-confidence in his make-up); and (2) that the Communist leaders in China might direct him to accept the challenge (assuming they regard him as expendable) (A6119 XRI, item 14).

"Manne may believe that he can dismiss McCormack's work by hurling an emotive but really meaningless phrase like 'neo-Stalinist reading of post-war Asian history' at him."

This rather idle speculation seems futile since successive Liberal governments went to great lengths to keep Burchett out of his homeland and deprived him of his passport until Labor won office in 1972, precisely because they were so sensitive to the nature of the wars in Korea and Viet Nam.

This determination to keep Burchett out, not let him in to face a treason trial which would make them a laughing stock, which Mr Manne ignores in the ASIO dossiers, raises the issue of why he pursues some clues to possible reasons for flogging a horse that was already dead 31 years ago.

Burchett reported most effectively and prophetically on both the Korean and Viet Nam wars, which inflicted deep traumas on United States imperialism and some of its most powerful leaders, from Macarthur to Johnson and Nixon and beyond. Viet Nam was a crushing and humiliating defeat of the United States and for all those who believe it



is the capitalist super-power which must be supported because it is the bastion of the "Free World" as amply demonstrated in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Argentina Uruguay, Haiti, South Africa, not to mention Grenada and a dozen other such examples.

This is the position taken by many *Quadrant* writers, expressed by Peter Coleman and Frank Knopfelmacher in the issue carrying the Manne diatribe against Burchett. Coleman asks rhetorically: "But the point remains: we want America to be a great and powerful friend. What else have we got?" (*Quadrant*, August 1985, p. 7). Knopfelmacher echoes this: "America is the only great power we have" (p. 75). The best of good luck to them in having Ronald Reagan as intellectual and political inspiration; as the shade of Ngo Dinh Diem could tell them, they'll need it.

This attitude of "all the way" with LBJ, or Nixon, or Reagan, or whoever heads the great and powerful friend is the point of Manne's bitter attack on Burchett, as it is of his other target, Gavan McCormack, whom he attacks on general grounds of political ideology, interpretation of history and gratuitous bitter personal hostility. Manne makes this hostility obvious very early in his article, for example in this extract: "To remain silent in the face of various efforts to lionise Wilfred Burchett is to accede, without quarrel, to the caricature of the history of the Cold War and to a neo-Stalinist reading of post-war Asian history being taught in our universities by academics like Dr. McCormack" (p. 27).

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Mr. Manne may believe that he can dismiss McCormack's work by hurling at him the pejorative but meaningless phrase "neo-Stalinist reading of post-war Asian history". I have never met Gavan McCormack and know only of his book *Cold War Hot War* and his co-authorship of a book on Japan, but even this small acquaintance with his work suggests that the task of demolishing his historical work is far beyond Mr. Manne's capacities. That is obviously why he shirks the task of trying to demolish McCormack's historical work by making, for example, a serious critique of his opponent's most impressive book about the Korean War, instead choosing to spend months on a futile attempt to blacken Wilfred Burchett's name, using the same weapons of character assassination and abuse against McCormack in the process.

The choice of such ignoble means in controversy is forced by his abject inability to make such a critique of McCormack's interpretation. This would require an explanation of why American policy has failed so lamentably in Asia ever since the original decision to support the corrupt Chiang Kai Shek regime in China. It would require explanation for the absurdities of America's China policy in keeping that country out of the United Nations for almost a quarter-century, for its reverses in Korea and Viet Nam. Equally, it would be necessary to explain some of the US "successes" in Asia; for example, its CIA-inspired overthrow of Sihanouk in Cambodia and the million or more victims of the Suharto coup in Indonesia.

Above all, it would require rationalisation of the irrational, Australia's slavish support for American policies throughout the barren years of foreign policy under Menzies, Holt, Gorton and McMahon. Manne found this task too daunting; it seemed easier to attack a dead man.

But he fails miserably in this also. It is safe to say that Wilfred Burchett will be remembered long after Manne's diatribe against him is forgotten. It is not necessary to claim that Burchett was invariably correct in his reportage on every occasion or from every place to prove that his body of work, including both on-the-spot reportage and his many books, will prove invaluable for future historians and for those who seek to understand Asia's role in the second half of the 20th Century, especially those historical events in Asia which the *Quadrant* school finds impossible to explain and galling to accept.

FOOTNOTES

1. Had Mr. Manne not been so one-eyed in perusing ASIO's records to sniff out the traitor Burchett, he could have read the Australian Security Report detailing the bitter conflict between Black and white American servicemen during the Second World War, precisely because of racial persecution. This appears in the ASIO papers (e.g., A373, item 2837).
2. Alan Winnington was a British leftwing journalist also covering Korea. Winnington and Burchett jointly wrote several pamphlets at this time.
3. *New York Times*, 27 & 28 December, 1977.

Laurie Aarons is a former national secretary of the Communist Party of Australia who has concentrated on research and writing since retiring from that position in 1976.

1. Of course, if the New Right was not basically different from traditional conservatism, it would be hard to explain why its emergence in Australia (and Britain) has been preceded by savage fights within the Liberal (and Tory) parties.

2. The question of a parallel development, the growth of narrow self-interest based on locality, craft, grading and so on, which profoundly subverts class solidarity is a related phenomenon given too little attention on the left. The days when the words "left" and "militant" were synonymous in the trade union movement are long gone, and this is an indication of this shift.

3. A market obviously does have a kind of (ruthless) efficiency and few would want to completely shield public enterprises from its operation. Such a shield can mean that, to a degree, ordinary consumers' views and freedom to choose can easily be disregarded. This is most obvious in the economies of the USSR and Eastern Europe in which the market plays no appreciable role (except in Hungary and Yugoslavia) and its place is taken by bureaucratic planning.

4. A "wet" Liberal, Senator Chris Puplick, who replied to Carlton, characterised the debate as that between "mechanists and moralists" — too much of Jim Carlton's analysis is preoccupied with a commitment to systems: systems management and systems efficiency. There is a belief that, provided we have the mechanics of the system right, then the outcomes, whatever they are, will be satisfactory and acceptable. Liberalism to me requires a far higher moral content and purpose ... "

"The market is not an end in itself," he argues. "At all times the ultimate test must be whether or not systems, policies or practices actually contribute to or restrict the development of individual growth and freedom." (*Bulletin*, 4 June.) Economic growth and increasing personal deprivation can occur at the same time, he argues, despite the free marketeers' blithe assertions to the contrary.

5. The alternative to the New Right renewal is, of course, the clearer emergence of a liberal-democratic strand within the establishment, on social issues at least. In a neat way this is symbolised by the politics of the *Australian*, which consciously propagandises for the New Right day after day; and *The Age/Sydney Morning Herald* axis which represents a more liberal, relaxed attitude.

6. See *Quadrant*, March 1985 for an example of the clashes within the Right. Robert Manne virtually accuses Blainey of racism; another *Quadrant* writer, Patrick O'Brien, challenges some of the looper attitudes of "Mad Dog" Morgan to Australian history and to the environment. John Stone attacks traditionalist economist Colin Clark for being soft on wage cutting and deficit slashing.

7. *Marxism Today* (Britain, July 1983) gives the following breakdown of Thatcher's vote

Group	Tory	Alliance	Labour
Semi-skilled and unskilled manual	29	28	44
Skilled manual	39	27	35
Unemployed	30	26	45

(The most recent poll at the time of writing shows that 65% of blue collar workers support the Hawke Labor government, with just over a quarter (28%) supporting Howard and the Nationals.)

8. *Financial Review*, 6 August, 1985.

9. Craig McGregor had this to say in the *SMH* (7 September): "Extremist positions are not generally popular in the pragmatic desert of Aussie politics. But what the Hawke-Keating axis has done, for all its electoral success, has been to detach the ALP somewhat from its traditional union-reformist-Left base. In the United States a similar process has been the emergence of a hardhat, working-class conservatism which has detached itself from its traditional party (the Democrats) and swung over to the Reagan brand of the New Right."

10. See *Tribune*, 23 October, 1985 for the BWIU delegates statement; see 6 November for interview with John Devereaux, ETU president, taking a different view, and also the CPA activists statement.

11. For a fuller development, see my recent booklet *Socialism in Australia — Toward Renewal?* (From PO Box A716, Sydney South 2000 for \$3.)

David McKnight is a Sydney journalist and a former co-ordinator of *Tribune*.