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RESEARCH REPORT

On The Technique of Working-Class Journalism

Rowan Cahill

For close to 30 years, during the 1940s through to the late 1960s, Rupert Lockwood (1908-97) was one of Australia’s best-known communists; he left the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in 1969. As a journalist he was ‘highly intelligent, articulate and gutsy’; he was also a powerful orator, pamphleteer, broadcaster, commentator. Amongst rank-and-file Australian communists, Lockwood was well regarded; according to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation agent, Dr Michael Bialoguski, in Sydney communist circles it was sufficient to say: “but Rupert Lockwood said so” to settle an argument beyond doubt. Lockwood’s name is inextricably linked to the Royal Commission into Espionage in Australia (1954-55) as a high profile witness, author of the controversial and notorious Exhibit (Document).1

Lockwood began his lifelong immersion in journalism during childhood, working on his father’s small rural newspaper in western Victoria, the West Wimmera Mail. He joined Keith Murdoch’s Melbourne Herald in 1930. Between 1935 and 1938 Lockwood travelled through South East Asia and Europe, working for a variety of journalism outlets, including the Herald for which he reported from the front lines of the Spanish Civil War in 1937.2 On the eve of World War II, Lockwood joined the CPA. This climaxed a leftist revolutionary process in which his experiences overseas, particularly in Spain, and the anti-fascist role of the CPA during the 1930s, were key factors. Therefore, the bulk of Lockwood’s journalistic career was with the Australian labour movement and communist presses. An active member of the Australian Journalists Association (AJA), he was one of three journalists responsible for drafting their Code of Ethics in 1942 (adopted nationally in 1944).3

Context and Comment

Rupert Lockwood’s article, ‘The Technique Of Working Class Journalism’ (reproduced below), was published in the working-class literary ‘small magazine’ the Realist Writer in 1960.4 It is described editorially as ‘notes from a lecture by Rupert Lockwood ... delivered at a recent Realist Writers Group discussion’ in Sydney. The article combines elements of lecture notes and the report of a lecture. The extent to which the notes are those used by Lockwood, and/or notes made by someone else, is unclear. Lockwood tended not to use scripts, relying on thorough preparation, his prodigious memory and power of recall – addressing audiences in a way more akin to an actor/performer, with room for improvisation, rather than as a script bound lecturer.

The first Realist Writers Group formed in Melbourne in 1944; other branches formed across the nation during the 1950s and early 1960s, constituting a national movement by 1964 ‘with close, but not necessarily formal, links with the CPA’. The
Sydney Group formed in 1952, ‘faltered’, then reformed in 1954. Drawing together ‘communists and worker-writers’, the Groups struggled to create ‘space in the cultural sphere’ for left-wing writers and aspirant writers. The Realist Writer began life in Melbourne in 1952, becoming the literary and cultural journal Overland in 1954; the title was revived by the Sydney Group in 1955 with 200 renoed copies. Early issues were characterised by a ‘distinctly unpolished format, that bore the marks of its makers’ mistakes and self-education’. The journal, titled The Realist, since 1964, ceased publication in 1970. The ‘notes from a lecture by Rupert Lockwood’ are reprinted as published, complete with errors of punctuation and spelling, and other literary lapses.

In discussion and analysis relating to the Cold War, the term ‘communist journalist’ is often applied to Lockwood. The lecture reproduced below is the only account found to date of his thoughts specifically on the technique of working-class journalism. It provides a glimpse not only of the views of a leading practitioner of the genre (and by 1960 he was a 20-year veteran), but also of what is not, in at least one significant case, immediately visible or evident in the term ‘communist journalist’.

The editorial introduction to the lecture describes Lockwood as a journalist and author. The term ‘author’ requires comment because Lockwood was, at the time, primarily associated with a literary genre, often overlooked in discussion of Australian literary and political history, the political pamphlet. By 1960 he had published two books, Guerrilla Paths to Freedom (1942), and America Invades Australia (c. 1955). Since 1941 he had also published at least 17 pamphlets (see Appendix). Generally ranging in length between 4,000 and 6,000 words, priced either threepence or sixpence, these were well written and researched leftwing expositions, pitched at a wide readership, and generally devoid of rhetorical references to any Marxist theoretical canon. Subject matters were discussed with particular regard to history, economics, and geo-politics. References in Lockwood’s lecture to historical matters and to literature (Shakespeare, the Bible, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, the allusion to Dickens/Bill Sykes) were commonplace in his political pamphleteering. A characteristic of Lockwood’s pamphlet work was his apparent assumption that readers were, wanted to be, or should be, familiar with a wide, general background of history and culture, readers whose lives and educations had been disturbed by Depression and War.

The focus of the lecture is the writing process, with a view to encouraging aspirant working-class journalists. It reflects the mission of the Realist Writers movement: to train and encourage writers, to mobilise them politically, and ‘strengthen their common commitment to peace and socialism’. To be a writer, Lockwood asserts, a person does not have to be ‘well educated’. In the context, ‘well educated’ refers to ‘formal education’. This was not necessarily comforting pretension or affectation intended to flatter a working-class, and not ‘well educated’, audience. While Lockwood had, for his time, significant formal education, beginning at the Natimuk State School in his rural hometown, and later at Melbourne’s elite Wesley College (February 1924 – May 1926), he also credited the role of his hometown Mechanics Institute in facilitating his youthful self-directed reading and education. Moreover, through his father, a ‘hemp printer’ who became a newspaper proprietor, Lockwood’s family roots were in a printing trade tradition which valued self-improvement and
avid reading, and which regarded knowledge as power. Lockwood’s mother had been a scholarship student at Presbyterian Ladies College (Melbourne), and prior to marriage had been a school teacher in rural Victoria.13

Lockwood’s account of capitalism, the mass media, and the role of the working-class journalist is not associated with theoretical debate about capitalism and class struggle. He posits a cultural role for the journalist, one in which humanist and socialist ideas are advanced in whatever cultural spaces exist or can be created. This reflects the political role of writers envisaged by the Realist Writers Groups, the nature of society accepted as a given.12 Lockwood had been doing this sort of cultural work from the time he joined the CPA, but now it had an increased urgency. After 1945, Lockwood developed an understanding of capitalism as a complex social, economic and cultural phenomenon; the American variant threatened Australian culture and life. The political power struggle had a cultural front and there was a cultural imperative. In his book America Inades Australia (c. 1955), he examined American monopoly capitalism and its role in the erosion of Australia’s economic, political, and cultural autonomy, an analysis that preempted the work of later political economists.14 Within a few years of giving this lecture, Lockwood was publicly criticising the economic simplicities sponsored by the CPA leadership through its support for the best-selling 287-page book by E.W. Campbell, The 60 Rich Families Who Own Australia (1963).15

The lecture reference to the typewriter as ‘an ensel’ is not an affectation; Lockwood had been trained to think, write, and produce clean copy quickly and under pressure as a journalist with the capitalist press, a skill common amongst journalists of his generation. In his personal life he tended to avoid handwriting; he wrote at the typewriter with a minimum of drafting, and corresponded via the typewriter until late in life. During the period 1900-40, mechanisation gradually modernised journalism, with the typewriter replacing longhand as the most important feature. As historian Paula Hamilton has observed, typewriters became personalised, the extension of the journalist’s persona, the noisy symbol of the writer.16

Traditional journalism as a form of public information, and its staple ‘who, what, when, where’, are apparent in Lockwood’s ‘How, why, when, where, what’, reflecting his traditional training.17 Except Lockwood in this document has changed the ‘who’ to ‘how’, and added ‘why’, breaking away from the traditional with its emphasis on specific facts about a situation, adding subjective and interpretational dimensions to the role of journalism. It was during the period 1935-58, while working as a journalist in Asia and Europe, well before he became a communist, that Lockwood began to develop a style of journalistic practice in which he was a participant/observer, blending reporting with analysis and comment – the ‘how’ and the ‘why’.18

Lockwood refers his audience to the book by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, On The Art of Writing, specifically Chapter 5 titled ‘Interlude: On Jargon’, variously anthologised as ‘On Jargon’.19 Lockwood’s lecture makes considerable use of this chapter, his discussion mirroring Quiller-Couch’s use of the terms ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’.20 According to Quiller-Couch, ‘Jargon’ describes both words and a style of writing that achieves, or aims to achieve, ‘circumlocution rather than short, straight speech’;21 ‘Jargon’, as a rule, ‘is by no means accurate, its method being to walk circumspectly around its target’;22 it ‘wraps a man’s thoughts round like cotton wool’;23 Jargon ‘comes of timidity’;24 to write Jargon is to be perpetually shuffling around in the fog and cotton wool of abstract terms’.25
Quiller-Couch exhorts the use of the active voice in writing as the way to avoid writing ‘Jargon’ and argues that our use of language frames our reason, such that ‘the Style is the Man’. In the last paragraph of the ‘lecture notes’, Lockwood endorses the active voice, then gives it a political twist; the active writing voice becomes synonymous with an active daily political life. Arguably this paragraph, with its injunction to ‘write from life’ and about what is known and understood to be true, could be regarded simply as an expression of socialist realism, then being vigorously debated within Australian leftist intellectual and cultural networks. However, ‘writing from life’ had been a focus of Lockwood’s journalism well before he became a communist in 1939, and the socialist realist emphasis on the here and now, the active/activity/activation, the ‘real’, neatly meshes with the exhortations of Quiller-Couch.

When, and under what circumstances, Lockwood became acquainted with On the Art of Writing, is unknown. But in the world of political letters, it was not an isolated or eccentric encounter. The oft anthologised essay by George Orwell, ‘Politics and the English Language’ (1946), which similarly railed against use of jargon and the abstract, owed a significant debt with regard to content and method to the Quiller-Couch ‘Jargon’ chapter, a debt that deserved, but did not receive, acknowledgement. The following document – notes from a lecture given by Rupert Lockwood – is reproduced from an early issue of the Realist Writer.

THE TECHNIQUE OF WORKING CLASS JOURNALISM BY RUPERT LOCKWOOD

(We print below notes from a lecture by Rupert Lockwood, Journalists (sic) and Author and Editor of the Maritime Worker, delivered at a recent Realist Writers Group discussion. This lecture was arranged with special reference to members beginning to write articles and stories for the working class press and factory bulletins but our more experienced writers also benefited from it.)

We can all be writers. None of us are apt to be Shakespeares but all can convey ideas to workmates, associates and audiences by the written word. Writing is a trade, but requires more creative effort than most modern trades. Just as some people make better motor mechanics than others, some make better writers.

The starting point is interest, conviction that ability to write is useful to yourself and others. Some may develop as short story writers, some as poets, some as Journalists.

Some people think a man must be well educated to be a good writer, but some of the best writers in history were poorly educated. Shakespeare did not have a high educational standard. (sic) Mr. Lockwood pointed out he wouldn’t have reached Intermediate standard. Even if you can’t spell or punctuate correctly you needn’t worry. Mr. Lockwood cited cases of famous journalists who couldn’t spell, whose work had to be sub-edited.
The capitalist class has a virtual monopoly of the printing presses, publishing houses, radio, TV, press, pulpit, cinema and theatre. Much vicious (sic) and reactionary propaganda remains unanswered or insufficiently answered. The working class badly needs all kinds of propaganda (sic), spoken, written, painted, pictured, short stories, verse, novels, economic research, factory bulletins. And above all, written works with humanist ideas, peace, democracy, higher culture, socialism.

Perhaps the most important thing in writing is to be concrete, not abstract. To write of living things that you can feel, touch, see, hear and easily recognise.

Man’s first writings were pictures on a cave wall. Egyptian murals and Chinese ideographs maintained the spirit of the picture. Modern alphabets, streamlined and rationalised writing, took the pictures out of it. Try to keep the pictures in your words.

People prefer TV to radio, a coloured poster to a printed manifesto.

The art of writing is to paint pictures with words, using a pen instead of a paint brush, a typewriter instead of an easel.

Give concrete shape to abstraction; breathe life into dead words. The difference between a good writer and a bad writer, between a master and a mediocrity, is often the difference between concrete and abstract writing.

How, why, when, where, what.

It is important to know your audience.

Abstract words like situation, condition, circumstances, education, degree, persuasion, definition, etc., and terms like in connection with, in association with, should be avoided where possible.

Concrete words are better—table, chair, sun, moon, eyes, hair, boy or girl, wheel, trees, grass.

(When newspapers wish to obscure a meaning, for legal purposes, they deliberately use the abstract. Lawyers are very fond of the abstract, to give double meanings, to wriggle out and say they meant something else. If the police know Joe Blow murdered Bill Sykes but can’t say so, the report might read: ‘Police are anxious to interview Joe Blow in connection with the case. It is believed he can give the police useful information’.)

In political, economic and scientific theory, jargon is hard to avoid, but it can be avoided in all other writing.

Mr. Lockwood referred his audience to the chapter on jargon in Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch’s book ‘On the Art of Writing’.

Shakespeare was a master of the concrete. Mark Anthony’s (sic) speech breathed life into the corpse of Julius Cesar (sic), made it an inciter to tears, shouts, revolt and battle. Mr. Lockwood quoted several passages
from Shakespeare and advised a study of his work.

Our doubts are traitors (sic)....made such a sinner of his memory...a wretched soul, bruised with adversity. He wears his faith but as a garland in his hat.

Oh, withered is the garland of the war (an abstract writer might have written 'some depression exists in the country over the war situation').

Adverse climatic conditions (Rain).

Transported home in an intoxicated condition (landed home as full as a boot).

His attire was in a shabby condition (he was down at heel).

('The hand that rocked the cradle has kicked the bucket' example).

Mr. Lockwood referred to the concrete writing in the Bible. (Try to imagine a Public Servant writing the Sermon on the Mount). Jesus wept. (Tears it is reported, were shed by Jesus, who felt the necessity of a display of emotion.)

Terms such as, it is reported, in connection with, having regard to, in consideration of, in respect to, as a result of, etc., should be avoided.

We should write from life, Mr. Lockwood concluded, about what people know and understand to be true, from our own day to day experiences. We should be active, not passive in our life and work, in our Unions and political parties, so let our writing reflect the active not the passive, the concrete not the abstract.

(This lecture was one of many delivered recently at the Sydney Realist Writers. Subjects covered a wide range of literary subjects including The Technique of the Realist Novel, short story, verse, plays, the Australian Tradition, etc. [bracket enclosed in the original])

Conclusion

Rupert Lockwood was 52 years old in 1960. For 20 of those years he had been a member of the CPA. Since birth he had been shaped by his family's rural typesetting, printing, and newspaper business. From the age of nine he had helped his father produce the family newspaper and it became a full-time job during the ages of 14 to 22, interrupted by a little over a two-year term at Wesley College. When he did leave the family business, it was to join the Herald in Melbourne. While the report of the Lockwood lecture above promises insight into a working class 'technique of journalism', in essence there is little to indicate anything uniquely 'working class'. Lockwood, the lecturer, who, it can be assumed, was well known to his Realist Writers Group audience as a journalist and author, speaks from a position of skill and experience, sharing aspects of these, not as an ideologue, but as a craftsman. When he joined the CPA, Lockwood deserted his class, but not his craft.
Rowan Cahill has worked as a teacher, historian, journalist, and agricultural labourer. He is currently a PhD student at the University of Wollongong, researching a thesis on Rupert Lockwood. <rjc291@uow.edu.au>

APPENDIX

Pamphlets written by Rupert Lockwood:

Scorched Earth, N.S.W. Aid Russia Committee, Sydney, 1941;

Timoshenko, N.S.W. Aid Russia Committee, Sydney, n.d. [194-?];

Guerilla, N.S.W. Aid Russia Committee, Sydney, n.d. [1942?];

Why the Red Army is Winning, N.S.W. Aid Russia Committee, Sydney, n.d. [1942?];

Japan's Heart of Wood, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1943;

Invaide Europe, N.S.W. Aid Russia Committee, Sydney, n.d. [194-?];

Wall Street Attacks Australia, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, n.d. [1947?];

Bankers Backed Hitler, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1948;

Macarthur, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1950;

China: Our Neighbour, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1951;

The Story of Jim Healy, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1951;

Malaya must cost no more Australian blood, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1951;

Persian Oil, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1951;

Unconquerable Korea, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1951;

Crisis in Egypt, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1952;

What is in Document 'J', Freedom Press, Canberra, 1954;

No War for Oil Monopolies! Hands off Middle East, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1958.

# Locating and identifying all of Lockwood’s pamphlet work is an ongoing project.
Endnotes

1. This article has benefited from comments by Anthony Ashbolt, Damien Callahil, Terry Irving, and Di Kelly.
2. For an acknowledgement of Lockwood’s power as an orator, see John Sendy, “Remember Conroy Rally,” Recollections of an Australian Communist, Nelson, West Melbourne, 1978, p. 54.
4. As well as contributing feature articles to the Herald during this period, Lockwood also worked, at times simultaneously, for the Sydney Free Press, the Sydney Times, Reuter, the Australian Newspaper Service, and Australian Associated Press.
16. For an account of Lockwood’s struggle, see J. Playford, Myth of the Sixty Families, Avenir, no. 3, 1970, pp. 31-32. Campbell was a member of the CPA’s Central Committee.
18. On this traditional aspect of journalism see David McKitrick, The Investigative Tradition in Australian Journalism 1945-1965 in Curthoys & Shultz (eds), Journalism, p. 166.
19. Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (1863-1944); academic (English Literature), author, poet, anthologist. I have quoted from an anthologised version of the text in Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch,

20. Ibid., p. 93.
21. Ibid., p. 93.
22. Ibid., p. 92.
23. Ibid., p. 96.
24. Ibid., p. 96.
25. Ibid., p. 100.
26. Ibid., p. 103.
27. For a discussion of this debate see John McLaren, Writing in Hope and Fear, pp. 33-34.
30. Maritime Worker was the national journal of the Watersides Workers Federation; Lockwood was either associate editor or editor of this journal from 1952 until his retirement in 1963.
31. For the CPA tradition of factory, trade, industry, locality, bulletin and their extent, see Beverley Symons, Andrew Wells, and Stuart Macintyre (compilers), Communism in Australia: A Resource Bibliography, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1994, pp. 115-126.
32. Lockwood developed sub-editing skills during childhood and youth, working on the family’s newspaper, and later on Keith Murdoch’s Melbourne Herald. As a member of the CPA, Lockwood either wrote or sub-edited speeches/articles, pamphlets, and leading CPA figures.
33. The Shakespeare references are to Julius Caesar, specifically Antony’s Forum speech to the Roman citizens following the assassination of Caesar (Act 3, Scene 2); Measure for Measure (I.4); The Tempest (I.2); The Comedy of Errors (III.1); Much Ado about Nothing (I.1), which has been misquoted either by Lockwood or the writer and should read ‘he wears his hat’ as the fashion of his hat’; Antony and Cleopatra (4.15).