The making of a communist journalist: Rupert Lockwook, 1908-1940

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Abstract
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Keywords
rupert, communist, lockwook, 1908, 1940, journalist, making

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The making of a communist journalist: Rupert Lockwood, 1908-1940 (1)

by Rowan Cahill *

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain’d the water clear…

Blake

Rupert Ernest Lockwood (10 March 1908 - 8 March 1997) was born in Natimuk, a small town in Western Victoria's Wimmera region. His father was Alfred Wright Lockwood (1867-1956), journalist and newspaper proprietor; his mother Alice, nee Francis (born 1873), a product of Melbourne's Presbyterian Ladies College -- musician, temperance campaigner, and former school teacher. Rupert was their third child; a fourth would follow before Alice's death from cancer in 1913.

Alfred had entered the newspaper industry at the age of thirteen, completing a six-year apprenticeship in typesetting and general printing, before going on the road in rural Victoria for two years as a travelling compositor, ‘tramp printer’ as they were colloquially known. Hard work, enterprise and ambition led him to the ownership of a provincial newspaper. He was a craftsman, proud of his trade, and retired at the age of eighty-three in 1950 with more than 3000 issues of his newspaper under his belt. (2)

Rupert was born in the family cottage, appropriately named Caxton. Much of his childhood took place in the context of his father's four-page weekly newspaper, the West Wimmera Mail (525 subscribers), produced on a hand operated press until 1937. The Lockwood children functioned as unpaid printing labourers; by the age of ten they could set type and operate the foot-pedal job-printing machine; by the age of fourteen Rupert was reporting local news.

Personal, cantankerous, combative, the West Wimmera Mail covered local events in detail. There was a litany of wrong doers - "town larrikins, 'flappers', 'shirkers' and 'socialists'". (3) The paper was anti-Boer during the Boer War; it mourned Queen Victoria's death; it ardently supported World War I. Alfred used his paper as a personal
instrument; there were scathing editorials; reportage fused with personal comment; the well being of the west-Wimmera community informed his concerns and activities. He was not afraid to be unpopular; the Mail was one of the few papers in the region to report the No Case during the 1916 Conscription Referendum. (4) While the emphasis and focus would change, these were all journalistic qualities Rupert Lockwood would later refine and develop as an adult.

Domestic and financial disorder and trauma followed the death of Alice, relieved in March 1916 when Alfred married Ida Dorothea Klowss, part of the local German-Australian Lutheran community. It was a union that restored domestic order, sound financial management, and added three more children to the Lockwood family.

Despite Alfred’s long record of community mindedness, Ida’s local birth, and the Mail's jingoism, the marriage attracted anti-German hostility, harassment that figures prominently in Lockwood's memories of childhood It was a traumatic and early exposure to the complexities of Australian society and culture, and an introduction to the sense of being an outsider. (5) both aspects of his later life. Lockwood, the journalist and historian, was fascinated by the workings of Australian politics and capitalism, his original researches bringing into play the hidden, the less well known, data missing from the public narrative. War On The Waterfront: Menzies, Japan and the Pig-iron Dispute (1987) is a good example of this, with Lockwood using the 1938 Port Kembla dispute to explore conservative politics on the eve of World War 2, with an emphasis on pro-Japanese sympathies and links. For thirty years a prominent communist, there is a sense in which Lockwood was an outsider in his own country, especially during the Cold War.

The Mail, and the newspaper environment of the household, formed a potent training ground; the majority of the Lockwood children would forge distinguished careers in Australian journalism and letters. Aside from Rupert, Douglas (born 1918) became a national award winning journalist and distinguished author of thirteen books; Frank (born 1919) and Allan (born 1922) took over the Mail following Alfred’s retirement, and with modernisation and expansion turned it into the largest circulation tri-weekly newspaper in Australia as the Wimmera Mail Times.

Rupert's education took place variously at the Natimuk State School, informally in the town's Mechanics' Institute where he read widely, and from February 1924 to May 1926 at Melbourne's elite Wesley College, a school with the tradition and expectation that its graduates would make names for themselves in adult life. (6) At Wesley Lockwood was a contemporary of future Prime Minister Harold Holt, gained the Intermediate Certificate (1925), and stayed on - also a tradition - to excel as a sportsman, in his case rowing (Number Four in the College Crew).

There was also a religious dimension to Lockwood's upbringing. His father was Anglican; his mother Church of Christ; his step-mother Lutheran. In the Lockwood household religion "was intense. Perhaps fervent would be a better word". (7) The mature Rupert is recalled as having had 'moral force', and of espousing 'moral socialism'. (8)
Following Wesley it was back to Natimuk, and the Mail: reporting “winners at the local show for the best lamingtons, cut flowers and Clydesdale mares, events at the picnic races or how they stopped the bolting breadcart horse in Main street Natimuk”; (9) sub-editing, typesetting, teaching himself shorthand, increasing his typing speed; reading geography and history in the Mechanics' Institute; secretary of the Tennis Club; playing golf and billiards. It was a sojourn that ended when the Depression strain on family finances, his own restlessness for broader horizons aroused by his Melbourne school experiences, and the social contacts of his elder brother Lionel (later Surgeon Rear-Admiral Lockwood, Medical Director-General, Royal Australian Navy, 1955-64), helped him secure a cadet journalist's job on Sir Keith Murdoch's Melbourne Herald in 1930.

The Melbourne Herald of the 1930s was, as Don Watson (1979) has described, “a hodgepodge of almost incredible banality, and intelligent, often liberal, social and political comment". Its young journalists were among "the best of their generation" (people like Brian Fitzpatrick, Douglas Wilkie, John Fisher, Clive Turnbull, Frederick Howard; and later Alan Moorehead and James Aldridge); they worked alongside notable older journalists. Murdoch had assembled "virtually the cream of Australia's journalists"; in spite of the owner, the culture of personal discourse was "a general left-of-centre liberal consensus". (10) By the outbreak of War in 1939, there was a “very, very strong Communist Party Branch in the Herald Office”. (11)

Lockwood thrived. Starting in the Murdoch service as a second-year cadet, his Natimuk journalistic background accelerated him through the four-year cadet system. By 1933 his cadetship period was behind him, and he served his first term as a galleryman, reporting Federal Parliament in Canberra, taking over from the senior Herald galleryman who defected to the newly launched rival evening daily Star.

Two close friendships developed at the Herald: with the impulsive John Fisher, son of former Labor Prime Minister Andrew Fisher; and with the urbane Douglas Wilkie, son of theatre pioneers Allan Wilkie and Frederiswyde Hunter-Watts. Fisher later worked in Europe with Egon Kisch, became part of the Popular Front era of intellectual anti-fascist ferment and was active in the Spanish Republican cause. He spent most of World War 2 as a journalist in Moscow, and later as the Australian legation press attache in Kuibyshev. (12) Wilkie took the credit for smoothing Lockwood’s rural “rough edges”; (13) during World War 2 he distinguished himself as a courageous and principled war correspondent on the India-Burma battlefronts. (14)

Melbourne's bohemian intelligentsia's hotel, restaurant and cafe life became part of Lockwood's environment and he associated with rationalist Bill Cooke, and leftists like Brian Fitzpatrick, Guido Baracchi, Noel Counihan, and Judah Waten - who became a lifelong friend. A stint as the Herald's 'unemployment roundsman' help radicalise his political sensitivities, as did the dramatic 1934 lecture tour by Egon Kisch, the anti-fascist Czech communist journalist and author providing a model for purposive journalism that would be variously taken up by Lockwood, Fisher, and Wilfred Burchett, (15) a friend of Lockwood in later life.
The Commonwealth government attempted to use the Immigration Act to block the entry of Kisch to Australia, and prevent his scheduled attendance at the second National Anti-War Congress in Melbourne (November 1934). Defying the ban, Kisch dramatically leapt ashore in Port Melbourne from the ship he was travelling on, and broke his right leg. Protracted legal action by supporters, thwarted the ban. Kisch captured the imagination of many Australians and drew a great deal of publicity to the anti-fascist cause. (16)

As young journalists, Lockwood and Fisher were drawn to Kisch. Aged forty-nine he was a successful international journalist and author who seamlessly blended his writing with political activism, and lived an exciting life. They became involved with Kisch, and supplied him with some of the Australian historical detail that later appeared in his classic Australian Landfall. (17) Publicly charismatic, personally charming, Kisch was an inspirational model: journalist as observer, analyst, and participant in the historical process; and a form of journalism that went beyond routine reportage, combining historical description with socio-economic interpretation. Fisher sailed for Europe with Kisch in March 1935, and helped translate the English language edition of Australian Landfall (1937) from the original German.

Lockwood also sailed from Australia in March 1935, bound for Singapore. His restlessness was not only due to Kisch and the departure of Fisher. Wilkie had preceded them in 1934, bound for Europe via the trans-Siberian railway, with “an introduction from the Australian (Communist) Party in one pocket, and in the other pocket a recommendation from Prime Minister Lyons”. (18) There was an adventurous restlessness amongst Melbourne’s younger journalists, heightened by news of the exploits from those who ‘got away’, confident in the knowledge their Australian training stood them in good stead abroad. A number of them would leave Australia during the mid-to-late thirties, including Noel Monks, John Hetherington, Alan Moorehead. The tumult of the outside world beckoned, along with the allure of international acclaim. (19)

In Singapore Lockwood worked a variety of jobs, often simultaneously - for the Singapore Free Press, the Straits Times, Reuters, the Australian Newspaper Service, Australian Associated Press, and contributed vigorous, self-assured feature articles to the Thursday and Saturday magazine sections of the Melbourne Herald. He visited the Netherlands East Indies, Siam, French Indo China, and Japan. His Reuters’ report on the Tokyo military mutiny (February 1936) was a world scoop, and he was rewarded with a flattering tribute in the Reuters in-house bulletin and a five guinea bonus. The report also brought him to the notice of the Kempei Tai (Japan’s secret police); whilst in Japan his room was searched and he felt under threat. His Reuters host in Tokyo was later killed during a Kempei Tai interrogation. During the 1930s Reuters work was often a tightrope walk between securing news and trying to avoid giving offence; it was not an easy task. (20)

Lockwood headed for London; he made his way to the China-Soviet border, witnessed Japanese militarism in action, and was harassed by Japanese soldiery. Travelling through Russia he was impressed by what he saw, like many idealists of his generation; the sense of progress, an apparent lack of destitution and degradation. But it was not enough to blind him to the prison trains he saw, the treatment of dissidents, Soviet censorship, and
he told his Melbourne readers that the methods of Stalinist repression were similar to “the methods of the Czars and the Grand Dukes”. (21)

Using London as his base, Lockwood joined the Australian Newspaper Service, a feature agency servicing the Herald, amongst other Australian newspapers; he travelled through the Balkans, Central Europe, Germany, and Italy, before going to Spain and reporting the Civil War from Republican lines. For Herald readers the realities and complexities of the war in Spain during 1937 were mainly provided by three by-lines--those of Ernest Hemingway, Arthur Koestler, and Rupert Lockwood.

A left liberal when he left Australia, Lockwood was radicalised abroad by the tumult in Asia and Europe. Spain marked the turning point: the experience of being under fire, and under aerial and naval bombardment; rows of “mangled, gutted” child corpses in the Madrid morgue disturbed him deeply, and aroused intense anti-fascist feeling; (22) he was impressed by the Spanish communists who “have shown more intelligence and reason than any other political party”. (23) Thought and action moved closer together: in Madrid he broadcast over Republican radio EAQ; in Britain he contributed anonymously to the communist Daily Worker and Claud Cockburn's left newsheet The Week.

Lockwood shed that journalistic chrysalis of spirit and being described by Alan Moorehead, writing about himself in London in 1936:

Like most nomads I hovered in the half-world of only partial commitment to religion, to causes, to women and to places, and thus, by definition, to life itself. This is not the stuff out of which you can make either traitors or heroes; it simply leaves you with sensations of frustration and of shallow guilt, which to avoid, you keep moving on. (24)

Recognised as a career path journalist, Lockwood was recalled by Murdoch in 1938. He came home via North America, giving pro-Republican speeches and interviews in Canada; about 1000 Canadians volunteers fought for the Spanish Republic. (25)

Lockwood returned to Melbourne, and the Canberra gallery, with a conception of the journalist as participant/observer, and a preference for journalism that fused reportage with comment.

Tensions with Herald management developed as Lockwood involved himself in the work of the Victorian International Refugee Emergency Council, and the Australian Council for Civil Liberties where he served on the Executive Committee. Well publicised court appearances by Lockwood (e.g. Herald, 8 July 1938), acting as a civil liberties observer on behalf of people arrested at anti-fascist demonstrations, exacerbated the rift. So too did his toast at a Canberra press gallery dinner at the end of 1938, with Deputy Prime Minister Menzies the guest of honour. Lockwood infuriated the politician and some of the other journalists by criticising the role of Menzies in encouraging BHP to ship pig-iron to Japan; a white-faced, intense Lockwood proposed that Menzies “had long realised the Chinese suffered a shortage of iron in their diet”. Arguments broke out between
journalists; there were scuffles; a bit of blood was spilt; and Menzies subsequently complained about Lockwood to Herald management. (26)

During 1939 Lockwood was assigned to junior journalistic tasks, the mundane, character building, skill development tasks of a cadet. This was known at the Herald as “the treatment”, a demeaning process of reining in and cutting down established journalists who strayed too far and independently from management’s vision of political-professional journalistic behaviour. In 1936 Noel Monks, for example, fresh from the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, had been assigned junior tasks; he responded by booking a return passage to Fleet Street. (27)

Lockwood looked for appropriate employment elsewhere. He continued his civil liberties work; he acted as guarantor for a family of refugees from Nazism, and in July 1939 a resulting security review, noting his assets, employment and wage, declared him "a first class type of guarantor". (28) Politically he was increasingly concerned about Japanese militarism and expansion in Asia, rooted in the quest for natural resources and markets, and what he regarded as Australia’s policy “of appeasement, based on supposed commercial needs rather than morality”. He was critical of the “Atlantic outlook” of “Pacific-dwelling Australians”; he was geo-politically aware of the military vulnerability of Singapore; he was certain that Japan was a future enemy of Australia, and that Australia could not depend on Britain for its security. Rather, hope lay with the Chinese communists, their resistance to Japan, bolstered by increased aid from Russia, and with the slim possibility of some form of social revolution developing in Japan. (29)

Former Herald editor Sid Deamer came to Lockwood’s rescue with an invitation to join him in Sydney as foreign editor and feature writer on the ABC Weekly, a new publication headed up by Deamer. The Weekly was to be a popular magazine, an eighty-page quarto cross between the BBC’s Radio Times and Listener. Deamer printed 335,000 copies of the first issue, 2 December 1939. (30)

Lockwood accepted the job. But before he quit Melbourne, the day Australia declared war on Germany, he joined the Australian Communist Party (CPA). Two Herald colleagues signed his nomination form. He kept his membership secret until late 1942 (the party was an illegal organisation, 1940-42); by June 1940 he was a “suspected communist” and under Commonwealth Investigation Branch surveillance. (31)

The decision to join the CPA, Lockwood explained in later life, was no spur of the moment decision. It climaxed an evolutionary process in which his experiences overseas (1935-1938), particularly in Spain, and the domestic anti-fascist role of the CPA during the 1930s, were key factors. (32)

Deamer’s ambitious plans for the Weekly were sabotaged by Australia’s newspaper proprietors who pressured advertisers not to support the publication, and newsagents to discourage sales. Circulation settled at a disappointing and expensive 40,000 copies by mid-1941. (33)
Lockwood’s job was short lived. The Weekly’s disappointing circulation resulted in the downgrading of his role, and he became a contributor. His official association with the ABC ended in April 1941 with the expiry of his contract, and following the intervention of Military Intelligence and its recently developed close liaison with the ABC. Military Intelligence had established “a special watch” on Lockwood and regarded his association with the Weekly as being “undesirable”. (34)

The twenty-four Weekly articles attributed to Lockwood reflect opinions that would now be regarded as far sighted, and which his employer apparently regarded as innocuous (35) --the future role of aviation in the development of international travel, the future development of “rocket planes”, the inevitability of the end of colonialism in Asia, the future centrality of the Middle East in world politics, the future eclipse of Britain as a world power, the inevitability of war with Japan.

While still contractually linked with the ABC, Lockwood secured alternate employment following his downgrading, beginning with a brief stint as news editor, in effect editor, of the labour paper Daily News, until its incorporation with Consolidated Press (July 1940). He would variously earn his income from labour movement journalism for the next forty-five years, establishing a niche as associate editor and editor (1952-1985) of the Maritime Worker, journal of the Waterside Workers’ Federation. In the process Lockwood became one of Australia’s best known communists, not only as a journalist, but as an orator, a prolific pamphleteer, intellectual, author, and a key figure in the Royal Commission into Espionage in Australia, 1954-1955. He remained a member of the Communist Party until he allowed his membership to lapse, and dropped out in 1969, following a long disillusionment which culminated during the Prague Spring with the Soviet Union’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

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ENDNOTES


(2) A. Lockwood, Ink In His Veins, Allan Lockwood, Natimuk, 1985, p.225.


(10) D. Watson, Brian Fitzpatrick: A radical life, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1979, p.46.


(31) AA, CRS A6119/1, item 40, folios 3-5.


(33) K. Inglis, *op.cit.*, p.93.

(34) AA, CRS A6119/1, item 40, folios 13-16; 23; 29-30.

(35) *ibid.*, folio 23.