

OBITUARY

John Pilger

A maverick globe-spanning journalist

9 October 1939 – 30 December 2023

Abstract: The breadth of Australian-born British-domiciled investigative journalist John Pilger's journalism was staggering. Over five decades, he covered wars and/or social conflicts in Australia (frequently) Burma, Cambodia, Chagos Islands, Chile, China, Czechoslovakia, Iraq, Japan, Mexico, Nicaragua, Okinawa, South Africa, Timor Leste, Vietnam, the UK and the US etc. He produced powerful documentaries about these issues. He was truly a globe-spanning journalist. He died aged 84.

Keywords: Australia, documentary, investigative journalism, journalism, journalists, John Pilger, Julian Assange, obituaries, United Kingdom

JOHN JIGGENS

Independent journalist, Byron Bay

IN A SPEECH he made in Sydney in 2011, defending WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, John Pilger recalled how it was always impressed upon him when he was young that Australia was a brave country: that it stood up to authority, and it stood up for justice. Such national myths were at best half-truths, Pilger said, but in the country's political life, there was scant evidence of this. But now and then, an Australian came along who made such myths seem true. Julian Assange was such an Australian, he said.

'I find him an extraordinarily brave Australian. And I can't say that about many of my compatriots in the same way. I'm not saying that there aren't brave Australians, but I can't think of any that has really been so unusually brave by his standing up to a superpower. Brave in starting a project like WikiLeaks that he knew would get him into trouble.

'One of the things that of course almost has never come out of the generally appalling media coverage of Julian and WikiLeaks is the reason for WikiLeaks. It had a moral base. It was about justice. He nailed his colours and the colours of WikiLeaks to that mast. This was going to be about justice. It was about seeking justice through letting people know what is going on, to letting people know what those who have power over their lives are saying, I can't tell you

how brave this is. Many people have tried to do this and failed. Julian succeeded actually, because the information that he has got out to people all over the world has made a difference.’

Those same moral qualities that Pilger admired in Julian Assange underpinned Pilger’s own journalism. Like many Australians, I have read numerous Pilger articles, a few of his books, and watched several of his more than 60 documentaries. I stand in awe of his enormous output over six decades of what he called ‘maverick’ journalism.

Most of his documentaries and scores of his articles are available on his website, johnpilger.com, which is an enormous journalistic treasure trove, a contrarian archive of the history of our times.

The breadth of John Pilger’s journalism was staggering. Over five decades, he covered wars and/or social conflicts in Australia (frequently) Burma, Cambodia, Chagos Islands, Chile, China, Czechoslovakia, Iraq, Japan, Mexico, Nicaragua, Okinawa, South Africa, Timor Leste, Vietnam, the UK and the US etc. He produced powerful documentaries about these issues. He was truly a globe-spanning journalist.

His first documentary, *The Quiet Mutiny* (1970), was about US soldiers in Vietnam who were ‘fragging’ their officers, which was slang for throwing grenades into the tents of the commanding officers they didn’t like. Many of the conscripted US soldiers were rebelling against the Vietnam war. His most impactful documentaries were *Year Zero: The quiet death of Cambodia* (1979) about the *Khmer Rouge* and *Death of a Nation: The Timor Conspiracy* (1994). His final documentaries were *The Coming War on China* (2016) and *The Dirty War on the National Health Service* (2019).

It is worthwhile visiting his website, not only for these documentaries, but for a series of interviews he did of other journalists, called *Outsiders*. Pilger interviewed two other great war journalists from the generation before him who covered the Second World War: Wilfred Burchett, who talked about being the first Western reporter into Hiroshima after the atom-bombing, who wrote a powerful piece of journalism, ‘The Atomic Plague: I write this as a warning to the world’ (Burchett, 1945), and Martha Gellhorn (1945), who described walking into the Dachau death camp at the end of the Second World War and documenting the horrors she saw; two revelatory and astonishing pieces of journalism.

As Herman and Chomsky argue in *Manufacturing Consent* (2002), the mainstream media rarely give you the truth. Instead, they give you what powerful people want you to believe. As a rare truth teller in the mainstream media, like Wilfred Burchett before him, and the man he saw as his successor, Julian Assange, Pilger presented Australians with powerful counter-narratives to the warmongering of our mainstream media and the ASPI-inspired propagandists of the ABC.

DAILY MIRROR LEGEND JOHN



CONFLICT John Pilger in Vietnam

BY JESSICA BOULTON AND NICK WEBSTER

TO many, he is the greatest Mirror man ever - a journalistic legend who fought injustice, exposed the horrors of war and held power to account all his life.

John Pilger was feet from Robert F Kennedy when he was assassinated, the first into Cambodia to reveal the genocide by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, and an unwavering supporter of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Yesterday, it was announced Pilger died on Saturday, aged 84. His family said: "His journalism and documentaries were celebrated around the world, but to his family he was simply the most amazing and loved Dad, Grandad and partner. Rest in peace."

After six decades of reporting, he was a campaigner until the end. In his last published piece, he called on everyone to speak up to authority. He said: "The Palestinians are Spartacus. People who fill the streets with flags and principle... are Spartacus. We are all Spartacus if we want to be."

His belief in the power of honest journalism to expose uncomfortable truths was the bedrock of his unrivalled award-winning career.

He was a feature writer, war correspondent and chief foreign correspondent at the Daily Mirror.

He also worked on investigative ITV programme World in Action. He went on to write for papers around the world, penned books and made dozens of documentaries including The Dirty War on the NIS, in 2019.

Daily Mirror Editor Alison Phillips said: "He was most likely the greatest of all Mirror men. He believed in journalism with purpose and its power to change the world."

"As a Mirror sub-editor then reporter for almost

quarter of a century spanning the early 60s to the 80s, and with guest appearances over the past decade, he instinctively understood great storytelling. He also believed in the journalist's responsibility to use their trade for good.

"Pilger was instrumental in shaping the conscience and values of our title during [editor Hugh Cudlipp's] Mirror of the 60s. We remain perpetually grateful to him for instilling those ideals we still hold dear today."

Julian Assange's wife Stella said: "John awoke the world to the greatest

He awoke the world to great injustices

Journalist's decades of brilliance



“ He believed in the power of journalism to change the world ”
DAILY MIRROR EDITOR ALISON PHILLIPS

RESPECT in documentary *Return to War Zero* in 1993

injustices." Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary of the National Union of Journalists, said: "John Pilger was a giant of journalism." Pink Floyd founder Roger Waters said of Pilger: "What a great man." Pilger was born in Boods in Sydney, Australia, in 1939. He recalled being happy as a child, but it was, by no means a comfortable start in life.

His parents - miner Claude and French teacher Elsie - raised John and his brother in a tiny tin-roofed home.

John launched The Messenger, the first student newspaper at his high school, before landing an internship at Australian Consolidated Press.

On his second day as a reporter, aged 18, he was sent to cover a swarm of attacking bees, only to be stung between the eyes and pictured as 'a victim' on his rival's front page.

Aged 23, in 1962, he left for London and joined the Mirror as a sub-editor. He apparently got the job after

boasting of his cricket skills and promising to help the Mirror in an inter-newspaper tournament. It wasn't long before he was reporting.

In 1967 in Hiroshima, Japan, 22 years after the atomic bomb was dropped there, he saw the shadow on some steps of 'a man sat eating his breakfast, until he was burnt into the granite, name, body, soul and all'.

He was in the US for the 1968 election year when he witnessed the murder of Robert Kennedy in L.A. Pilger wrote: "He had just acknowledged his victory in the California

primary... 'He's the next President Kennedy', said the woman next to me. She then fell to the floor with a bullet wound to the head. (She lived.)"

In 1971, Pilger produced a world exclusive for the Mirror as the first Western reporter in Bangladesh to report on mass starvation and atrocities as the country fought for independence from Pakistan.

In 1979, under the headline "Death of a nation", he revealed in the Mirror the genocide by the Khmer Rouge. He wrote: "An incredible human disaster has happened in Cambodia. Perhaps

WE ARE ALL SPARTACUS IF WE

Figures 1 & 2: To many, John Pilger was the greatest *Daily Mirror* reporter of all—a journalistic legend who fought against injustice, championed the underdog, exposed the horrors of war, and held power to account all his life.

Since Pilger was an important supporter of Julian Assange, and had spent his last decade defending Assange, I interviewed Julian Assange's father, John Shipton for Bay FM about his memories of his good friend John Pilger.

The two met when Julian Assange sought asylum at the Ecuadorian embassy. Assange used to host Christmas dinner there and John Shipton would go over to England every Christmas and stay ten days. He first met John Pilger when they

PILGER DIES AT THE AGE OF 84

TRUTH SEEKER
John Pilger reporting for ITV in 2001

DAILY Mirror
WORLD EXCLUSIVE
JOHN PILGER
ERIC PIPER
Death of a Nation

The E11 million ransom mistake

DAILY Mirror
THIS WAR IS A FRAUD

DAILY Mirror
John Pilger
His most damning verdict on Tony Blair
BLOOD ON HIS HANDS

HEADLINES Pilger's 1979 Cambodia expose in *Mirror*, and articles opposing 2001 Afghanistan war and 2003 Iraq invasion

A voice for those silenced

BY PAUL ROUTLEDGE

JOHN Pilger was a writer in the finest tradition of the *Daily Mirror*: passionate, articulate and always on the side of people who needed a voice like his.

And more than any of his generation, he appreciated that a columnist had to know the story before he aired his views.

Aussie-born Pilger was an outstanding war and foreign correspondent long before he took up the cudgils as a commentator.

His desire to expose uncomfortable truth took him not just to war-torn regions like Vietnam

but to conflict at home, with the Tory treatment of the NHS.

Nothing escaped his withering eye for lying, hypocrisy and cant. Critics complained that he was too anti-American, too unremittingly hostile to western leaders like Tony Blair and Barack Obama, and there was some truth in that verdict.

But this awkward, brilliant, award-winning journalist brought to *Mirror* readers a genuine zeal for understanding the reality behind the political and military propaganda that cloaks the actions of oppressors.

We can no longer hear his distinctive voice, about Palestine, or refugees fleeing to Europe, or any of the other crises affecting humanity today.

Others seek to fill the gap, but there was only one Pilger.

more than two million people – a third of the population – have been killed by a fanatical regime whose apparent aim was to wipe out anything connected with the modern world and to return a nation to 'Year Zero; the dawn of a new age of slavery, without families and sentiment, without machines, schools, books, medicine, music.'

He left the *Mirror* in 1986 but returned in 2001 to condemn the invasions of

Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11. In his first piece back, he wrote: 'The war against terrorism is a fraud. After three weeks' bombing, not a single terrorist implicated in the attacks on America has been caught or killed in Afghanistan.'

Pilger made documentaries for BBC and ITV on topics such as Vietnam.

For a 1998 film on apartheid, he interviewed South Africa's president Nelson Mandela. ITV boss Kevin Lygo said: 'John was a giant of campaigning journalism. He offered a radical, alternative approach on current affairs and a platform for dissenting voices.'

Pilger married twice; firstly to journalist Sarah Flett, with whom he had a son, Sam, 50, and then to journalist Yvonne Roberts, mother of their daughter Zoe, 39, an art critic.

In a preface for one of his books, Pilger recently wrote: 'The responsibility... is clear. It is to expose the lies of those who control the narrative, warmongers especially, and never to collude with them. If we remain silent, victory over us is assured.'

LEADING THE WAY
Talking to Nelson Mandela in 1990s

Jessica Boulton
X@jessicaboulton

GRIM Exposing genocide in Cambodia

shared Christmas dinners with Assange at the Ecuadorian embassy.

Like many Australians, John Shipton had followed Pilger—the written works more than the film documentaries. In particular, *A Secret Country* (1993) had a big effect on his understanding of Australia. Recently he rewatched Pilger's documentary *Palestine Is Still the Issue* (1977), in light of Israel's 2023-24 war on Gaza, which he thought held up well.

Pilger's earliest documentaries had David Munro as director and the pair had a long-term partnership which ended when Munro died in 1999 after making 20

documentaries with Pilger. Pilger wrote the scripts, was the interviewer, and the narrator. His scripts were exemplars of modern journalism, adorned with an abundance of the most viscous irony and a passionate desire to expose the deceits of the mainstream narrative. As the front man, Pilger was handsome and his camera voice, though occasionally over-preachy, was magnificent even then, sounding like Moses descended from the mountain to chastise the worshippers of the Golden Calf.

‘He was a chronicler of the world of the late-20th century,’ said John Shipton, who praised his bravery. ‘He chronicled it all, and he feared nothing. In particular, he had the amazing capacity to maintain virtue and moral integrity, and extraordinary energy in chronicling the depravities of empire. You know, in the sense that he bore the unbearable weight of all this depravity, he managed to hold his head high and work his way through it and bring to us a truthful description of the actions of these depraved people that rule this empire.

‘He reported on everything: the vigour of the man was extraordinary; he was immensely productive. Having been on the road now for 11 years myself, you know, you get frazzled, and I mean that psychically, not physically. It did wear John out physically. In the last five years he had a series of sicknesses.

‘I don’t know the origins of his relationship with Julian, but he was publicly and privately a defender of Julian. What I mean by privately is that he introduced lawyers who he thought were competent.

‘John and Julian, their virtues seem to me to be an absolute hunger to seek justice, to believe that justice can come as a result of truthfulness. They didn’t say that to me. However, that is what I continued to observe. John had a greatness of soul you know; a magnificent human being in every and all respects: interpersonally, truthfully; a capacity to write, a capacity to speak, a capacity to absorb facts and information and bring it forth into a justice-seeking narrative. You know, there’s certain greatness of soul you require. He was an Australian Dostoyevsky, distinctly Australian, but he wrote in a Dostoyevskian tone.’

An interesting example of mainstream media invention of ‘facts’ was the claim made in one of Pilger’s UK obituaries that Pilger had lost money when Julian Assange broke bail and went into the Ecuadorian embassy. The same false claim can be found in Wikipedia’s article about Pilger. It must be true, of course, because it has a footnote that references a UK tabloid!

‘This wasn’t true,’ John Shipton contradicted. Not only was the story not true, but the tabloid misinformation also covered up an astonishing act of bias by the English judiciary. John Pilger had indeed volunteered to post bail for Assange, but the judge refused to allow Pilger to post bail, calling Assange and Pilger ‘peripatetic Australians’.

Pilger described this incident too.

‘My own high point was when a judge in the Royal Courts of Justice leaned across his bench and growled at me: “You are just a peripatetic Australian like

Assange.” My name was on a list of volunteers to stand bail for Julian, and this judge spotted me as the one who had reported his role in the notorious case of the expelled Chagos Islanders. Unintentionally, he delivered me a compliment.’

Said John Shipton, ‘I argued with John Pilger about that matter that the establishment in the United Kingdom holds Australians in contempt for our origins; that we were populated by what were called convicts. They were actually slaves. They regard us a relic of empire.’

Julian Assange, who has suffered a life-endangering overdose of ‘British justice’, is due to find out whether he will be extradited to their US overlords. There will be protests around Australia.

John Shipton organised a seminar in Melbourne on March 9 at Storey Hall, RMIT called *Nightfalls in the Evening Lands: The Assange Epic*. John Pilger was to have been one of the speakers, but the list of speakers remains impressive. The website is at: nightfalls.info.

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