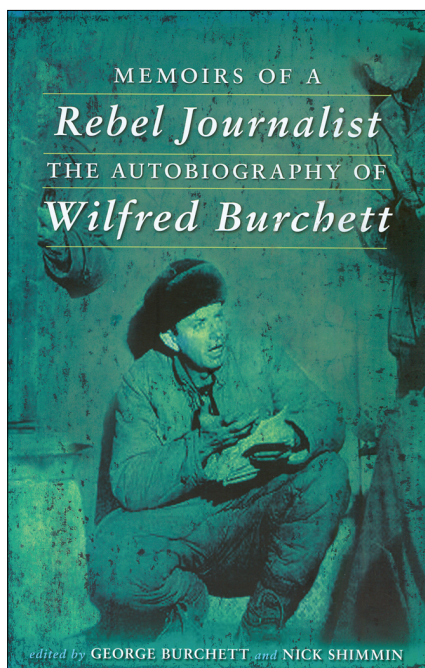




DAVID ROBIE was editor of the *Melbourne Sunday Observer* (1969-1970)—the newspaper that flew Burchett home to Australia.

## Behind the bitter attacks and propaganda—a remarkable Cold War talent



*Memoirs of a Rebel Journalist: The Autobiography of Wilfred Burchett*, edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin. Sydney, UNSW Press, 2005. 785 pp. ISBN 0868408425 (cloth).

Over the next few years the pair saw each other on several occasions, and Knightley grew to ‘know and like him’. Knightley recalled:

WHEN Phillip Knightley was researching *The First Casualty* (1975), controversial fellow Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett was at the top of his list of war correspondents in the Pacific theatre whom he needed to interview. But he was at a loss over how to find him.

He seemed to be always short of money. If he were in the pay of the KGB—as his enemies claimed—then the KGB must have been the tightest employer in the intelligence world. (p. xvi)

Was Burchett then living in Paris, Sofia, Moscow or Beijing? Or where? Ironically, Knightley bumped into Burchett at a party in the London suburb of Battersea.

Burchett’s ambiguous relationship with the socialist bloc during the Cold War was the source of bitter and prolonged attacks from his right-wing critics, including his nemesis Denis



Warner, of the now-closed Melbourne *Herald*, who was himself reputed to be linked to Australian intelligence services.

Warner and other opponents of Burchett constantly alleged he was a communist, KGB agent, alcoholic, womaniser, brainwasher and torturer. Burchett repeatedly denied these allegations, although he did write for communist newspapers such as *l'Humanité* (France) and the *National Guardian* (USA).

Their bitter struggle contributed to one of Australia's most infamous libel trials in what many regard as 'kangaroo justice' when a jury found Burchett had been defamed by ex-senator John Kane but the attack on him had been a 'fair' representation of Senate proceedings. The Supreme Court of New South Wales ordered costs against Burchett—some \$100,000, which ensured he would never again set foot in his homeland.

In 1976, the federal Appeals Court ruled that Wilfred Burchett was of international repute, he had been seriously defamed and there was a miscarriage of justice, but a technicality prevented the judges calling for a new trial.

For many people, myself included, Burchett was one of the finest journalists produced by Australia. But he was a victim of Cold War paranoia and the Machiavellian activities

of Western bureaucrats and intelligence services.

His international travels began in the South Pacific (see *Pacific Treasure Island*, 1941), but his first serious journalism began with dispatches from inside Nazi Germany about the strategic military significance of the autobahn and other pre-war developments. He also reported on the 'Free French' revolt against the Vichy regime in New Caledonia.

After becoming a Fleet Street foreign correspondent, initially by air-mail from Chungking, when covering the Burma Road lifeline to Chinese resistance against Japanese aggression in September 1941, his career was punctuated by many journalistic coups.

Burchett reported from the jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia, interviewed and profiled Nehru in India, and wrote the first book about the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin. He provided a unique, insightful and independent perspective to the post-colonial struggles in the developing world—often conflicting with the 'facts' peddled by the Australian and US governments (and other colonial administrations).

While the Western press corps were witnessing the signing of the Japanese surrender in 1945, Burchett slipped into Tokyo and headed for Hiroshima as the first foreign jour-



nalist to report on the tragedy of that nuclear-bombed city. At that stage, four weeks after the US devastation, the true horror was still unknown in the West.

This autobiography was the last of Burchett's remarkable 31 books (but was incomplete when he died from cancer in 1983, aged 72). His titles including one co-authored with New Zealand Chinaphile Rewi Alley (1976). *Memoirs* records fascinating accounts of the *realpolitik* of the era as well as insights into Burchett's own diverse life.

His narrative about the 20-hour train ride to Hiroshima as a *shimbun kisha* (journalist)—the only European in a carriage full of Japanese troops—is evocative.

The soldiers were very sullen at first, chattering away obviously about me in what seemed a hostile way. But they brightened up when I produced a pack of cigarettes ...

A major breakthrough came when I showed them the impressive scars on my leg, managing to get across to them that the wounds came from a Japanese plane in Burma and that I was a journalist. I had a battered Hermes typewriter with me as evidence. From then on it was smiles and friendship as the train bumped and thumped its way along, crawling at a snail's pace over bombed bridges but hurtling down slopes at fearsome

speed. The Japanese all had enormous bundles with them and I found later that they had just been demobilised and were allowed to take away from their barracks as much food and drink as they could carry—as well as their rifles wrapped up in blankets (p. 234)

Burchett was unprepared for the scenes of devastation he faced in Hiroshima where some 100,000 people had died in the bombing and the immediate aftermath: 'If the evidence of the material destruction of the city had been horrifying, the effects on humans as I saw them inside the hospital wards was a thousand times more so'. The doctors had no idea of what they were dealing with. In the first hospital ward that he visited, Burchett found a dozen or so people stretched out on mats in 'various stages of mortal disintegration, from what I later learned to be atomic radiation' (p. 240).

Amid the stench and images of destruction, Burchett typed out the story that was splashed on the front page of the London *Daily Express* on 6 September 1945:

THE ATOMIC PLAGUE:

'I Write This As A Warning To The World'

DOCTORS FALL AS THEY WORK  
Poison gas fear: All wear masks  
(p. 241)



This was the devastating experience that turned Burchett into a dissident journalist. The US government was so angered by the radiation sickness revelations that he was barred from Japan.

As a journalist, I crossed paths with Burchett in Melbourne some 25 years later, in 1970 while I was editor of the *Sunday Observer* (which became *Nation Review*). I hosted dinner for him at my terraced home in Carlton after my newspaper had hired a Piper Navajo to fly him from Noumea, New Caledonia, to his homeland. The mission defeated an Australian government vendetta that had kept him out of Australia for more than two decades. Prime Minister 'Pig Iron Bob' Menzies had barred Burchett from returning home after his passport had been allegedly stolen by the CIA (see *Passport*, 1969). The conservative Australian government under John Gorton had even refused to allow Burchett to visit his dying father in September 1969 and then his dying brother Clive

In an *Observer* editorial at the time, I wrote that the disgraceful and petty actions of the Australian government were reminiscent of a Kafkaesque novel, but sadly true:

The government has clearly shamed Australia in this protracted and blatant example of victimisation...

When Burchett finally arrives back in Australia our leaders should do all in their power to rectify a situation of their own making. For it has already made it a laughing stock in the eyes of the civilised world (The long road home, 1970).

The *Observer's* proprietor, Australia Party convenor and transport industry magnate Gordon Barton, funded the flight to Brisbane. Burchett was already well-established as the newspaper's Southeast Asian correspondent, part of our campaign against the Vietnam War. And he later continued writing for *Nation Review*.

The coeditors of Burchett's autobiography, his second son George and Nick Shimmin, both subtitling editors at SBS TV, Australia's multicultural broadcaster, have done an admirable job. They have restored important material slashed by the cautious publishers from the 'sanitised' earlier autobiography *At the Barricades* (1982). They began work on the typescript, preserved by Wilfred's widow Vessa in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 2003. Notable among the restorations is a chapter titled 'The bug offensive', a damning exposé about US biological warfare experiments during the Korean war.

I found the concluding chapter 'Kangaroo justice', about Wilfred's sham court proceedings and media



hysteria during his defamation action to clear his name, particularly revealing. In fact, it is rather ominous in the post-9/11 climate of paranoia with dissenting journalists again facing vilification and worse.

As George notes in his preface, 'The real Wilfred, the man who broke the mould of sycophantic journalism, is found in the dynamic pages of this book' (p. xi). Two boxes of documents released by Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and other government departments contain the vendetta fodder.

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## Crucial Pasifika achievement in an era of intense political consciousness

*Polynesian Panthers*, edited by Melani Anae with Lautofa Iuli and Leilani Burgoyne. Auckland: Reed Books, 2006, 144pp. ISBN-139780790010014

IT WAS the early 1970s, they were just teenagers, and the first generation of Pacific Island migrants to be born in New Zealand. Home and church were the circles that kept culture alive, but outside its boundaries was a world many faced alone.

This book is the story of the Polynesian Panther Party, a political group of inner city Pacific Island and Maori youth brought together through the shared experience of racism and, more importantly, the shared determination to fight it and the marginalisation in its wake.