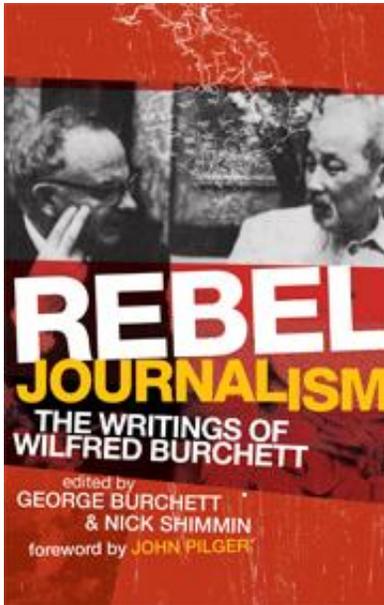


***Rebel Journalism: The Writings of Wilfred Burchett*** edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 314, AUD \$37.95, Paperback ISBN: 9780521718264.



Books by and about Wilfred Burchett continue to be published. *Memoirs of a Rebel Journalist* – a large scale posthumous autobiography – appeared in 2005. Tom Heenan’s thorough biography in which he carefully picked his way through the minefield of conflicting opinions and partisan attitudes about Burchett, appeared in 2006. Now we have a collection of extracts from Burchett’s books and journalism ranging in time from his 1940 trip to New Caledonia to his last work in 1983.

The publishers claim that Burchett was one of Australia’s greatest war correspondents. That claim is only justified in terms of his reporting on Indo-China in the 1960s and early 1970s. For the most part Burchett’s Second World War journalism, especially that produced while with the Americans in the Pacific, was run-of-the-mill with an emphasis on descriptions of bombardment and general rejoicing in destroying Japanese. None of the

Pacific material is included in this book. What is included is Burchett’s pen portrait of Orde Wingate which is an early example of Burchett’s tendency to hagiography and hyperbole. Far better is the famous article on the effects of the bombing of Hiroshima, “The Atomic Plague”, which originally appeared in the *Daily Express* in September 1945. This is undoubtedly one of the most significant articles produced by an Australian journalist.

In “The Microbe War”, an extract from a 1953 book, Burchett argued strongly that the United States had practised bacteriological warfare during the Korean War. The editors of this volume state that the jury is still out on this claim. I have argued elsewhere that recently released documents, especially from Soviet archives, show that this claim is almost certainly spurious. What the jury is still out on is whether Burchett knew that the germ warfare claims were manufactured, or whether he naively went along with what the Communists were pushing.

Burchett was an indefatigable traveller and writer and built up an amazing list of contacts, especially amongst Asian communist leaders. Given the dewy-eyed guff he was capable of writing about such people as Kim Il Sung (see “Personal Leader” from 1968) this is perhaps not that surprising. He gained access to people and places which other western journalists did not achieve. Australian journalists in the Korean War, frustrated at being blocked from the armistice negotiations, often relied on Burchett for accurate information about what was going on. Some, of course, like veteran Australian war correspondent Noel Monks would cheerfully have escorted him to the gallows and would have nothing to do with him. Others like Norman Macswan disagreed with Burchett’s political stances but found him a source of reliable information.

During the Indochinese wars, especially in Vietnam, Burchett really did gain important interviews with Communist leaders. Here I suspect Burchett was at his professional best. The interview with General Giap from 1964 is a good example of Burchett letting the subject give their point of view without the journalist getting in the way.

This is a very useful volume, especially for students of the Cold War. It guides readers to the key issues of the period and provides insights into the paradigms and polemics that dominated the world for over forty years. Many of these attitudes now look dated but reading Burchett helps show why they were once so bitterly divisive.

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