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Temper democratic, bias Australian

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The very notion of a free press in a democratic society is gradually being eroded, not by overt censorship but by one that is hidden, and to some extent voluntary, at times unconscious. It has to do with increasing monopolisation within the media generally, and the high tech. efficiency/profit bullies who create and administer the monopolies; it has to do with advancing media technology and journalists' fears of losing well-paid jobs; it has to do with the increasing tendency to serve up distortions, violence, soft porn and non-news as general fare.

Journalists report and investigate within parameters set by the media owners, parameters established with an eye to circulation, profit, empire building, and by the idiosyncratic quirks that make the exercise of great power a potent drug. So journalists can be bold and courageous in the pursuit of stories and details but, when it comes to standing back, assessing, questioning, challenging motives, morality and accepted versions of the truth, and engaging in polemic, they may be putting their careers at risk. This is a path few are prepared to take.

Those who break free of the entertainment treadmill, who seek to do something serious with their typewriters and VDTs, can be, and are, shunted off into inconsequential backwaters. If they are plagued with an overdose of principle, and free from the constraints of debts and mortgage, they resign.

This is especially so in Australia where the meshing of the Hawke consensus-Labor machine with the corporate establishment has led to an Australian print media dominated by three companies with fingers in dozens of other business pies.

John Pilger, now based in Britain, is one Australian journalist who has, over the last twenty years, developed political journalism as a popular form. He blends polemic, anger and conscience with intellect, and his style of reporting looks beyond the labels and cliches of the press handouts to the raw events and the victims, the heroes of his semi-autobiographical Heroes.

As a journalist and film maker Pilger has, since the early 1960s, reported from the heartlands of world conflict: Vietnam, Africa, India, Central America, the Middle East, Cambodia, worlds where small nations are regarded as expendable and where 'truth' reflects the propaganda initiatives of the dominant power.

Pilger has reported too from Britain, Thatcher-divided, a nation of rich and poor, where racist abuse is rampant; from Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, where heroes struggle for basic civil liberties; and from Australia where he became aware of the hidden history of the Aboriginal people, the dispossession and extermination and resistance, that was not part of his education as a schoolboy in the 1950s.

If that was all there was to Heroes it would not warrant comment beyond that it is an interesting, humane, principled, combative and at times breathless read. But Pilger is also writing about the craft of journalism in the modern world: the classic concerns of George Orwell, media manipulation of thought and language, and therefore perceptions of reality, which in turn determine how we react and relate to ourselves and others. He discusses censorship in the BBC, American journalism's reaction to the Vietnam War, and to Cambodia, the trivialising impact of Rupert Murdoch (News Corporation) and Robert Maxwell (the Mirror group newspapers) on British journalism, how increased monopolisation and technological advances have undermined the truth-seeking traditions of journalism and replaced them with the propagandas of authority.

Such journalism can have a human cost, and amongst the honorable journalists Pilger lists are those who have been variously harassed, smeared, persecuted, and censored. Pilger himself has even made it to an assassination hit list (courtesy of the Khmer Rouge, for it was he who drew world attention to the
plight of the Cambodian people at the bloody hands of the Pol Pot regime, he who tried to organise humanitarian help at a time when other journalists were simply rehashing American lies in the form of CIA releases downplaying the dimensions of the tragedy.

Important in *Heroes* is Pilger's account of his adolescence in the Menzies era:

Because so much was taken for granted in Australia then, few of us knew that Menzies was selling off our post-war industries to great foreign-based companies: the motor industry in its entirety, oil refineries, minerals. Few of us knew he had conspired with the British to explode nuclear weapons on our soil, to kill and maim and poison our environment. Few of us knew he was not at all a 'brilliant man' or even a 'great orator' but a rather petulant, insecure and ruthless figure who smeared and ruined his victims, notably Herbert Vere Evatt, the opposition leader, with bogus allegations at the time of the defection of the Soviet 'spy' Vladimir Petrov. Indeed, in our innocence, we hardly knew that during the 1930s Menzies had regarded Hitler as an inspired leader from whom the democracies had much to learn and whose misdeeds, especially his discrimination against the Jews, had been exaggerated.

Pilger describes a time when to be 'Australian' was to be regarded as un-Australian, even anti-Australian; a time when being like the 'English' was admired, when 'world history' was the history of the British Empire, when Australia's own history was regarded as inconsequential (if not a joke), when Asia was a land-and-people-mass to be simultaneously afraid and ignorant of, when the desire for 'great and powerful friends' led to obsequiousness as a national trait.

Two Australian journalists who came to blows with the cultural climate of the Menzies era, and suffered as a consequence, were Wilfred Burchett and Rupert Lockwood.

Burchett (1911-1983), a pre-war anti-fascist, began his journalistic career in 1939. Working for Australian and British newspapers during the war, he made a name for himself as a reporter who managed to be on the spot when history was happening. Over the next four decades the scoop, whether telephoned, smuggled out by sympathisers, or personally bicycled through war-torn jungles, became his trademark. His sympathies for the communist-led national liberation movements, with America seen as a foreign presence intent on suppressing genuine nationalism, consolidated a reputation earned during the second world war as a troublemaker of considerable magnitude.

Burchett's well-known coup, of being the first journalist to enter Hiroshima after the atomic bomb, and his reports of the massive devastation and consequences the American military and government were trying to cover up, made world news. Burchett came to realise that humanity had entered a new and perilous age, a realisation that led him to combat simplistic Cold War views of a world where communism was a source of evil that had to be destroyed, if necessary by nuclear arsenals.

Fifteen academics and journalists have, in *Burchett: Reporting the Other side of the World 1939-1983*, collaborated to produce a study of Burchett's career and writings, and the allegations and smears that hounded him down through the post-war decades. These included accusations that he had engaged in the interrogation and brainwashing of Allied prisoners of war in Korea and, from the 1960s, he was a KGB agent. The Australian government denied him and his family Australian passports for seventeen years, until the decision was reversed by the Whitlam government in 1972.

Burchett was a suitable target for victimisation; his writings had a huge international readership, his was a powerful voice that challenged Cold War assumptions, and American security authorities had a score to settle with him dating back to 1945.

This is not to say Burchett had no faults, and the authors of this book take him to task for reporting from Eastern bloc countries while ignoring the tensions within communist society, for his praise of Stalin, and for a readiness "to repeat official explanations uncritically". But he was prepared to admit his mistakes: he had courage, humanity, and a sympathy for the underdog; his on-the-spot reporting was, as in the case of the Korean War, one of the few means Western readers (and fellow journalists who plagiarised his work) had of knowing what was really going on behind the facade of official press releases and briefings. Generally his writings (thirty-five books on top of his regular bread and butter journalism) provided insights into events and places inaccessible to conventional journalists.

Rupert Lockwood commenced his career in journalism as a boy, working on his father's country newspaper in Western Victoria. During the 1930s, via the Melbourne Herald, the Singapore Free Press, the Straits Times, and Reuters newsagency, he became a respected and admired Australian journalist.

An anti-fascist, having reported on the spot from Germany after the Hitler takeover, and from the front lines of the Spanish Civil War, and alarmed by Japanese militarism having witnessed it in action in China, Lockwood joined the Australian Communist Party in 1939. As a communist he had a high profile and was a widely read and quoted journalist, lecturer, broadcaster, orator and pamphleteer; because of this he became the victim of a campaign to destroy him politically. Hauled before the Petrov Royal Com-
mission in 1954 he was one of the main communist
identities hounded in the Commission’s quest for in-
dividuals who threatened Australia’s security.

Through the 1950s and into the early 1960s Lock-
wood’s journalism attempted to alert Australians to
the realities of the Menzies era; amongst his themes
were the threat posed to Australia’s independence by
the emerging American multi-nationals, the selling off
of Australia’s resources, the nuclear politics of Britain
in central Australia, the dangers of Australia being
drawn into adventurous American foreign policy, the
emergence of Japan as an economic power, the
dangers involved in the increasing Australian reliance
on Japan as a major trading partner and the false
premises of the ‘domino theory’.

He had no time for Menzies and a constant theme
in Lockwood’s writings was the man who had been an
apologist for, and an
admirer of, Hitler, the man who had been an
apologist for Japan, the man who had jeopardised the security
of Australia in the opening stages of the second world
war by hitching his band wagon to the military
strategies of Great Britain in disregard to Australia’s
needs. While Lockwood’s concerns are now accepted
as part of everyday political, economic, and historic
discussion, during the Cold War they were regarded
as dangerous and subversive.

A Commonwealth Investigation Branch (IB) dossier
on Lockwood shows that, from the late 1930s, his mail
was tampered with, his speeches recorded, his financial
situation monitored, his personal habits and sex life
pried into, his writings systematically scrutinised, his
associates noted. The first “suspicious” thing that drew
him to the attention of the IB was the help and
assistance he gave to Jewish refugees from Nazism
as they attempted to come to Australia; when the war
actually got under way, what really alarmed the IB
guards were Lockwood’s sophisticated personality,
his worldly experiences, and his ability to communicate
with ordinary people. As one agent reported in
January 1941, “he possesses qualities above the usual
labour enthusiast and are to be reckoned with” (sic).

Lockwood’s War on the Waterfront is a detailed
account of the November 1938 refusal by Port Kembla
waterside workers to load the steamer Dalfram with
scrap-iron for Japan. At the time Japan had an acute
steel shortage and Australia’s metal industry was
enthusiastically meeting the demand for pig- and
scrap-iron to help overcome this shortage. So far as
the Port Kembla wharfies were concerned the iron was
war material, and their boycott was in reaction to
Japan’s full-scale assault on China in 1937, and the
perceived future threat to Australian security posed
by Japanese imperialism.

The ban was maintained for two months and
became a major political issue. The Lyons government
and its Attorney General Robert Menzies retaliated
with draconian legislation, the ‘Transport Workers’
(Dog Collar) Act, which introduced licences to work
on the Port Kembla waterfront—to those prepared to
scab on the Dalfram. Menzies personally went to Port
Kembla to try to break the ban, was met by angry
crowds of thousands, and earned the scathing epithet
“Pig Iron Bob”.

In January 1939 the dispute ended. The Dalfram
was loaded under duress, while a settlement involving
the lifting of the Dog Collar Act, and a review of the
pig-iron trade by the government, was agreed to.
Former Governor General Sir Isaac Isaacs wrote at
the time, in defence of the boycott: “I believe that Port
Kembla . . . will find a place in our history beside the
Eureka Stockade as a noble stand against executive
Dictatorship and against an attack on Australian
Democracy.”

Lockwood has written here more than a study of
a boycott. In an effort to describe the social forces
the Port Kembla wharfies were up against, he spends
half the book detailing and analysing the strength and
extent of pro-German and pro-Japanese mindedness
in Australia during the 1930s, sentiment that was
widespread but hidden by the World War Two Australian
propaganda machine. The sentiment was firmly
entrenched in the upper echelons of government,
commerce, industry, the rural sector, academia and
journalism, a fact conveniently ignored during the
Cold War which some of these same people helped
shape and promote.

The irony of being smeared as a subversive by people
whose own patriotic credentials were less than
honorable is not lost on Lockwood. Throughout War
on the Waterfront there is an undercurrent of con-
trolled anger.

Implicit in Lockwood’s book is the belief that had
Australia been invaded by Japan during the war there
would have been no lack of collaborators to help run
a Vichy-style government on its behalf. In an appendix
he discusses Japan’s plans for, and expectations of,
this eventuality.

His main sources here are statements made in 1946
by the Japanese Civil Administrator-elect for
Australia, Kennosuke (Ken) Sato, leading journalist,
goodwill missioner to Australia in 1934 (he remained
for eight months), honorary Lieutenant-General in the
Japanese Army, member of the Japanese Navy special
department known as the Kaigun Tokumun Bu, and
interrogator of Australian POWs.

The Vichy scenario is not new, nor a wild flight of
conspiratorial fancy. It has been suggested before by
historians Humphrey McQueen and Drew Cottle.
During the darkest hours of the war in the Pacific
many, like Vance Palmer, believed in the existence of
an Australian collaborationist element. There are
reasons for believing that official planning for the
defence of Australia, in the event of Japanese
invasion, took into account opposition by pro-
Japanese fifth columnists. In the Australian Archives documents taken from Japanese consular sources at the outbreak of war in 1941, even though culled and sanitised by the Japanese and, later, Australian authorities, demonstrate the depth and extent of Japanese intelligence activity in Australia prior to Pearl Harbor, and suggest the Japanese expected to conquer and rule Australia with the aid of collaborators. This is a point convincingly made in 1946 by the patriotic Major R. F. B. Wake of the Commonwealth Security Service (later a deputy to the first Director-General of ASIO, Mr Justice Reed) in a report to Federal Attorney-General Dr H. V. Evatt, following a preliminary examination of the consular records. 2

What is surprising, in the consular documents and in Lockwood's book, are the identities of the pro-Japanese and pro-Germans, people whose support, in the case of Japan, went beyond ordinary politeness and interest in an intriguing foreign culture. These were more distinguished, influential and powerful people than the pathetic eccentric bunch of Australia First members, interned during World War 2 for their pro-Japanese sympathies.

This pro-Japanese quiescent theme of War on the Waterfront is an old one for Lockwood, and formed a central part of the notorious document he partly authored in the early 1950s, now known to history via the Petrov Commission as Document J. His information then was based on personal sources within the Commonwealth public service and the naval intelligence community. In the Cold War days his pro-Japanese data was dismissed out of hand by anti-communist spooks and legal luminaries intent on ferreting out Soviet agents and destroying both Evatt and the Labor Party.

This time it is not so easy. Australian naval intelligence records, and the Japanese Consular records referred to, make abundantly clear Japanese espionage in Australia commenced on a systematic basis in the late 1880s, that real estate sites permitting monitoring of naval and merchant shipping movements were purchased through front organisations and individuals, that detailed land and sea intelligence was conducted in strategic areas of Australia and that, during the years leading up to the 1941-45 Pacific War, Japan cultivated an eager and willing fellowship of Australian apologists, informants and helpers who, had the nation been invaded by Japan, would have had little trouble in deciding where their true loyalties lay. 3

In these twilight years of the century, when a new society seems to be crystallising within the shell of democracy, one that has much in common with Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four but which, instead of containing the smells of boiled cabbage, seedy squalor, and ersatz rations, is colorfully decked out in the consumer trappings of yuppiehood, we need the touchstone talents of journalists like Pilger, Burchett, and Lockwood.

Burchett is dead; Lockwood is nearly eighty; Pilger, in his late forties, still has a way to go. The risks of their sort of journalism being what they are, it is to be hoped Pilger can stay ahead of the assassin's talents, the intelligence community frame-up, the bureaucrat's insidious paper work, the politician's cobra venom.

Rowan Cahill, a teacher, lives at Bowral, New South Wales. He is completing a biography of Rupert Lockwood.

2. Humphrey McQueen, Gallipoli to Petrov (Sydney, 1984), p. 156; Drew Cottle, "The Commanding Heights of Treachery: Sydney's rich appeasers 1938-1942", paper presented at the "Wrong Way – Go Back" conference, Sydney University, February 1979, and "What is in Document J?", paper presented at the Marxist Summer School, Sydney, January 1984; Vance Palmer writing in Meanjin Papers, no. 8, March 1942, extract in Ian Turner, The Australian Dream (Melbourne, 1968), pp. 305-306. Japanese consular documents, Australian Archives: Investigation Branch, Security Service; CRS C443, NA 1983/293, Consular Investigation Files, alpha numeric series. Report by Major R. F. B. Wake, Special Investigation Branch, N.S.W. Correspondence files (Japanese Activities), 1942-1946, Australian Archives, N.S.W., ST 1604/1, Item N 40344. I am indebted to Drew Cottle for drawing my attention to the Japanese consular material. Following the election of Robert Menzies as Prime Minister, in 1950 there was a shake-up in ASIO: Mr Justice Reed was moved aside and replaced by Colonel Charles Spry, and ASIO was taken out of civilian control. Major Wake was dismissed from the organisation during this political manoeuvring.