This book is an anthology of the writings of Wilfred Burchett, perhaps the greatest journalist and war correspondent Australia has ever produced. He was also one of the most controversial figures of the Cold War, both here and overseas. Burchett published more than 30 books, and this volume brings together extracts from most of these, spanning the entire breadth of his career, from World War II, through Hiroshima, Eastern Europe, Korea, Russia, Laos, Cambodia, China, Vietnam, Angola, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and other areas from which Burchett reported. The book presents these documents of reportage mostly in chronological order, and thus serves not only as a significant historical overview of the period, but also as a reader in Cold War journalism.


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Acknowledgements

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The photograph of Wilfred Burchett with Allied pressmen at Panmunjom, Korea, 1952 is reproduced with the permission of Norman McSwan. All other photographs are courtesy of The Estate of Wilfred Burchett.

And our thanks to everyone else who has supported us in promoting Wilfred’s work and legacy.
Foreword
by John Pilger

In the late spring of 1980, shortly before I was due to leave for Cambodia, I received a phone call from Paris. A familiar, husky voice came quickly to the point. ‘Can you postpone?’ he said. ‘I’ve heard about a Khmer Rouge list and you’re on it. I’m worried about you.’

That Wilfred Burchett was worried about the welfare of another human being was not surprising; the quintessence of the man lay in what he did not say. He neglected to mention not only that he was on the same ‘list’, but that a few weeks earlier, at the age of seventy and seriously ill, he had survived a bloody ambush laid for him by Khmer Rouge assassins, who wounded a travelling companion. (Wilfred’s intelligence was as reliable as ever; I narrowly escaped a similar ambush at the same place he was attacked.) I have known other brave reporters; I have not known another who, through half a century of risk-taking, demonstrated as much concern for others and such valour on behalf of others.

He took risks to smuggle Jews out of Nazi Germany, to drag American wounded to safety during the Pacific war, and to seek out prisoners of war in Japan in 1945, to tell them help was coming; the list is long. He sustained a variety of bombardment, from Burma to Korea, to Indochina, yet he retained a compassion coupled with an innocence bordering at times on naïveté. None of these qualities were shared with the vociferous few who worked to bring him down.

Wilfred’s politics were both instinctive and shaped by the harsh poverty of his upbringing more than by intellectual fashion. Shortly before he died he told me he had never become a communist. ‘How could I be a communist?’ he said. ‘There were so many parties, each drawing on different circumstances, different conditions. Which one was I to choose? I chose none, because I wanted to remain just me . . .’ If anyone made real the romantic notion of the Australian iconoclast it was Wilfred Burchett. And although his innate decency and affable personality eschewed doctrine (many of Wilfred’s friends were non-socialists, even anti-socialists) at times he seemed more diplomat than journalist. Wilfred would have explained this as being part of the ‘icebreaker’, or go-between, role he adopted and which was, as he put it, ‘a useful and honourable thing to do’. If he repeated official explanations uncritically (as during the disastrous land-reform campaigns in North Vietnam in the 1950s), the instances of him going against the doctrines of those he supported are numerous; in any case, he was seldom as close to governments on the ‘other side’ of the Cold War as many Western journalists are to governments and institutions, almost instinctively. Perhaps, like all originals, Wilfred Burchett was also something of an enigma.

What is beyond question is that the abiding strength of Wilfred’s character – courage – allowed him to surrender commitment to a ‘cause’ when that cause no longer deserved his support. Although this withdrawal sometimes suffered from delayed action, as in the case of the Khmer Rouge, he would not hesitate to say that he had been wrong. ‘You’ve got to be able to look your children in the eye and look at yourself and not be ashamed,’ he said. ‘You have to know when to let go . . . The question journalists, and politicians, have to ask themselves is, “Do you get off in time, or do you follow a line out of blind loyalty?” It takes courage to say, “Look, I’m wrong on this; I’m letting go.”’

In China his friendship with foreign minister and later premier Zhou En-lai and other vintage revolutionaries was ‘let go’ with much heart-searching and sadness when he perceived the Chinese leadership’s hostility to the Vietnamese at the very climax of Vietnam’s struggle for independence. He was forced to abandon his old confrere Prince Sihanouk, whom he had supported for twenty-five
years, when Sihanouk allied himself with the forces of Pol Pot: ‘The wrench,’ as the historian Ben Kiernan has written, ‘must have hurt’. I remember well his agonizing over Sihanouk who, he felt, had betrayed him personally, not to mention his own people.

At the end of his life it was the Vietnamese who remained alone in his pantheon. Having shared something of the Vietnamese experience, I can understand that. ‘They have never let me down,’ he once said in a mellow mood, allowing a glimpse of his vulnerability.

Paradoxically, Wilfred was vulnerable because he was, in the strictly professional sense, such a fine journalist. His two greatest ‘scoops’ left no doubt about that, while adding a precarious dimension to his life. The first was Hiroshima. He was the first Western reporter to reach Hiroshima after the atomic bomb had been dropped on 6 August 1945. He had been warned by an official of the Japanese press agency that ‘no one goes to Hiroshima: everyone is dying there’. He ignored this of course. He feigned illness at Allied press headquarters in Yokohama, in order to slip away from the press ‘pack’, and with his beef ration he bought a ticket to Hiroshima.

The journey, mostly in darkness, demonstrated the Burchett courage. Here was a European alone in a train filled with soldiers, armed and sullen and almost certainly bitter at the moment of defeat. At two o’clock in the morning he reached Hiroshima and was promptly thrown into prison. ‘There was some shouting by the police and the interpreter became pale as she translated my rare interventions,’ he wrote. The ‘shouting’, he later learned, was about whether or not he was to be shot. It was only a senior officer of the ‘Thought Police’ who decided the foreigner should live. ‘Show him,’ he said, ‘what his people have done to us.’

What Wilfred saw was published all over the front page of the London Daily Express beneath the headline, I WRITE THIS AS A WARNING TO THE WORLD. ‘In Hiroshima, thirty days after the first atomic bomb destroyed the city and shook the world,’ he reported, ‘people are still dying mysteriously and horribly – people who were uninjured in the cataclysm – from an unknown something which I can only describe as the atomic plague . . .’

In comprehending and identifying an ‘atomic plague’, he had rumbled the experimental nature of this first use of a nuclear
weapon against people. ‘It was a considerable ordeal to reach Hiroshima,’ wrote the distinguished American journalist T.D. Allman in his eulogy for Wilfred, ‘but it was an infinitely greater accomplishment, back then, to understand the importance of Hiroshima.’

Wilfred returned to Tokyo in time to attend a press conference especially convened to deny and discredit his story. He later wrote,

A scientist in brigadier-general’s uniform explained that there could be no question of atomic radiation or the symptoms I had described, since the bombs had been exploded at such a height as to avoid any risk of ‘residual radiation’. There was a dramatic moment as I rose to my feet [Wilfred’s sense of the ‘dramatic moment’ was highly tuned], feeling my scruffiness put me at a disadvantage with the elegantly uniformed and be-medalled officers. My first question was whether the briefing officer had been to Hiroshima. He had not . . . He discounted the allegation that any who had not been in the city at the time of the blast were later affected. Eventually the exchanges narrowed down to my asking how he explained the fish still dying when they entered a stream running through the centre of the city . . . The spokesman looked pained. ‘I’m afraid you’ve fallen victim to Japanese propaganda,’ he said, and sat down.

Wilfred had blown a momentous cover-up. Reporters flown to Hiroshima were kept away from the hospitals he had seen and where there was clear evidence of the ‘atomic plague’. Burchett had his accreditation withdrawn and was issued with an expulsion order (from Japan), although it was later rescinded. Strict censorship was introduced. Japanese film of the victims of the ‘atomic plague’ was confiscated, classified ‘top secret’ and sent to Washington; it was not released until 1968. Three times as many people died from the effects of radiation in the five-year period after the two atomic bombs fell on Japan than on the days of the explosions; and the victims continue to die from it at a rate of at least a thousand a year. Wilfred Burchett was never forgiven for understanding and telling this truth, and telling it first. Moreover, as Phillip Knightley has pointed out, he ‘went totally against everything else being written from Japan at that time, the “they-had-it-coming-to-them” and “I-saw-the-arrogant-strutting-Japs-humbled” type of story’.
He was, for a brief time, a universal hero. This is Jim Vine reporting in the Brisbane *Courier Mail* on 11 September 1945:

A pocket-handkerchief-size Australian, Wilfred Burchett, left all other correspondents standing in covering the occupation of Japan. Armed with a typewriter, seven packets of K rations, a Colt revolver, and incredible hope, he made a one-man penetration of Japan, was the first correspondent into atomic-bomb-blasted Hiroshima, and ‘liberated’ five prison camps . . .

After Hiroshima, Burchett embarked on his one-man liberation tour of prison camps, visiting two on the West Honshu coast and three on the inland sea, before official rescue parties reached them.

At Tsuruga camp he sprang a masterly piece of bluff which caused hundreds of Japanese to lay down their arms and gave the inmates their first steak dinner in three and a half years.

Here the inmates were alarmed at the increasing concentration of Japanese soldiers, all fully armed. Burchett sent for the camp commandant, known as ‘The Pig’, refused to answer his salute and bow, and, with delighted American marines for an audience, upbraided him soundly for not seeing that the surrender terms were carried out . . .

However, Western establishment forces never forgave him for his revelation of the truth of an ‘atomic plague’; and he was to pay a high price for reporting from the ‘other side’ during the Cold War. For seventeen years, he and his children were denied passports by the Australian government. No charges were brought against him; no ‘crime’ was ever stated. In a letter in April 1956 to Brian Fitzpatrick of the Australian Council for Civil Liberties, Harold Holt, then Minister of Immigration and later Australian Prime Minister, wrote that Wilfred Burchett ‘left Australia fifteen years ago. He has not since returned, his wife is not an Australian . . . in addition his activities since his departure forfeited any claim he might have had to the protection he would receive as the holder of an Australian passport.’ When later, an Australian judge described the smearing of Wilfred as a ‘miscarriage of justice’, he spoke the truth.

In his eulogy to Wilfred, T.D. Allman posed the question, ‘What is objectivity?’ He answered this by saying that objective journalism ‘not only gets the facts right, it gets the meaning of events right and
is validated not only by “reliable sources” but by the unfolding of history’. He then asked whether or not Wilfred Burchett was being objective

when he perceived a great threat to civilization in Nazi Germany, when he perceived a great moral test for the whole world in the persecution of the Jews . . . when he saw Hiroshima as the gravest threat to the survival of humanity itself . . . when he refused to see the Cold War as a clear-cut battle between Western good and Communist evil . . . when he said the Communist Chinese were not the pawns of Moscow . . . when he said that the revolutionary ferment of Asia and Africa after World War Two was not the product of some conspiracy to take over the world, but the product of the legitimate yearnings of the Third World for freedom, dignity and progress . . . We all, I think, know the answers to these questions.

I never discerned in him any bitterness, although God knows he must have felt it at times. He was almost always broke, yet he laboured at his work, ‘pounding on my ancient typewriter’, as he used to say, with unflagging cheerfulness and optimism which endeared him to so many people in so many countries – countries where, until shortly before he died, he had followed his old-fashioned dictum of being ‘on the spot’.

I once asked him about his optimism and the scars that did not show.

We were in Vietnam at the time and he was pounding on that ancient typewriter, surrounded by screwed-up balls of paper (I think he was writing his thirtieth book at the time), festoons of washing and cans of beer cooling on equally ancient air-conditioners.

‘To be happy,’ he said, ‘you’ve got to learn to slay only one bloody dragon at a time.’ This was followed by a burst of impish laughter, and a beer, and another, and another . . . Wilfred was kinder to his ‘bloody dragons’ than he was to himself. Alas.

John Pilger, July 2007
Foreword
by Gavan McCormack

One of the paradoxes of 20th century Australia was that the man who stirred greater public hatred and abuse than any other should also have been one who embodied its supposed core values: independent-mindedness, multiculturalism (long before the word became familiar), pragmatism, love of argument and of food, and a preference always for the common man and the underdog against authority.¹

Born into a family of dissenting, cosmopolitan farmers and laborers, Wilfred Burchett grew up in an atmosphere of deep respect for learning and self-improvement. Before he became reporter and foreign correspondent, he was a cow cocky (dairy farmer), carpenter, cane cutter and vacuum cleaner salesman. He educated himself, learned languages, and travelled widely, keeping his eyes and mind open. He mixed easily and in later life earned the gratitude and respect of people from Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh and Cambodia’s Prince Sihanouk to American General William Dean (when Dean was a prisoner in Korea), and Henry Kissinger (who sought his advice and help in negotiating an end to the war in Vietnam). But in Australia he was Public Enemy Number One, for much of his life subject to the unique sanction of exclusion from his own country.

His was a peculiar kind of Australian bush socialism, not informed by any formal ideology or membership of any party but grounded in a moral sense of the dignity of the common man and of the righteousness of struggle against oppression. ‘Authorities’ are uncomfortable with such people, and the family attracted their attention long before Wilfred ventured onto the world stage. In the 1920s, the Ballarat sermons of Wilfred’s father George were reported as subversive (of the empire) for their references to human equality, and the same term was applied in the 1930s to Wilfred’s Poowong Discussion Club (comprised of poor farmers, the local butter factory manager, a blacksmith and a school teacher in ‘back-block’ rural Victoria) when it began hosting discussions with visiting speakers on subjects including life in the Soviet Union.

In 1938, Wilfred journeyed to Nazi Germany. The experience of fascism so horrified him that he mobilized his Poowong group to become immigration sponsors, opening a rescue line for German Jews that was in due course responsible for funnelling thirty-six of them to Poowong and Melbourne. But suspicions were stirred, and surveillance initiated, for what was an ‘uneducated’ Australian farmer doing in Berlin? One letter he wrote describing the horrors of Nazism, confiscated by the Australian censor, was not delivered until 47 years later, in 1985.

Few people – perhaps none – accumulated so voluminous an intelligence file across so many government departments, and no such file could be more revealing of the foibles, obsessions, cruelty, and petty-mindedness of a generation of Australian politicians and bureaucrats. He was accused of:

a. being a paid agent of the KGB, and of the Chinese, North Korean, Vietnamese and possibly other intelligence or military organizations;
b. of interrogating and/or brainwashing and/or torturing Australian and/or British and American POWs in Korea during the Korean War (1950–1953);
c. of cooperating in, or actually masterminding, a campaign by China and North Korea during the Korean War falsely alleging the American use of germ warfare;
d. of being a blackmarketeer, an alcoholic, and attractive to women [sic].
The charges were unproven, contradictory and improbable, when not positively absurd. Or – as in the alleged attractiveness to women – hinting at deep personal bitterness or jealousy on the part of those campaigning against him.

After long pleading with the Australian government to let him know details of the charges against him so that he could rebut them and return to his own country, in 1974 Burchett launched a court action for defamation. He won, but it was the most Pyrrhic of victories. The court of first instance held that he had been defamed, but that the defamation was protected by parliamentary privilege, and the Court of Appeal then ruled that although he had suffered ‘a substantial miscarriage of justice’ he was not entitled to any redress because his counsel had failed to protest in the appropriate way and at the appropriate time. Since costs were awarded against him, and he could not pay, his attempt to clear his name in effect made his exile permanent.

His gravest offense may have been his refusal to toe any official or government line. Such was the fear and loathing this inspired that, on a 1951 visit to his home town, Melbourne, the Lord Mayor cancelled a Burchett lecture on world developments, expostulating that ‘the letting of the town hall for a meeting in support of peace would be against the principles of the United Nations’. Later, when some of the family chose to live alongside Port Phillip Bay in a Melbourne suburb, government spies speculated that the choice might have been designed to facilitate communication with ‘the enemy’ (by submarine).

No single episode in his life caused him such trouble as the decision to report the Korean War (1950–1953) peace talks and the POW issues from the other side, as a journalist whose accreditation came from the press department of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. What he reported was diametrically opposed to the way the political and military leadership of the West saw the war and tried, falsely, to present it. When the false, garbled, and malicious stories of his activities in Korea are discounted, what remains is the portrait of an honest man who tried to tell the truth, who was almost alone in seeing the war primarily from the viewpoint of the suffering Korean people rather than of great powers or his own or any other government, and who, by helping to crack the censorship and lies propagated by other journalists when they were told to by
‘responsible military authorities,’ may well have helped shorten the war.

My attempt just over twenty years ago to reopen the debate on Burchett in Australia was dismissed with characteristic Cold War smear – that I was teaching ‘a neo-Stalinist version of post-war Asian history’ to my students and ‘doctoring history.’

Prize-winning opinion leaders and media groups showed no sense of the fair play that was supposed to be embedded in the national character. Hopefully, with the publication of the present collection of essays, together with the recent publication of a new edition of Wilfred Burchett’s autobiography and a new critical biography, those Cold War prejudices can be transcended at last and a new generation will take a dispassionate look at the life and work of the 20th century’s Public Enemy Number One.

Professor Gavan McCormack
Canberra, 25 June 2007

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Introduction

In the 21st century it is perhaps harder than ever to operate as a good investigative journalist. The age of ‘embedded’ correspon-
dents and massive government and corporate advertising produces writing which is influenced or controlled to a greater or lesser extent by the powers which dominate world events. So for journalists in both the corporate and public sector it is often a case of toeing the editorial or government line or losing their jobs. Likewise, for broadcasters and newspapers it is often necessary to promote or be silent about the policies and ideology of the incumbent gov-
ernment and its institutional supporters or lose public funding or political advertising revenue. The internet has countered this by giving genuinely independent investigative journalists a platform, but it remains, as yet, a small one.

In this environment it is instructive to have access to a body of work from a genuinely independent reporter, one who had his own ideas and politics which were clearly expressed throughout his career. The writing of Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett looms large in any history of 20th century reportage, and not just as a result of one of the great scoops of the century, his solo journey to Hiroshima after the first bomb was dropped. Burchett covered most major world conflicts over four decades from World War II onwards, and this book attempts to represent this immense breadth of reporting by including chapters from most of his published books over the entire period of his working life. The chapters are presented chronologically according to the events being described, but the selection is bookended by Burchett’s two discourses on Hiroshima: his first celebrated scoop and his reflection on nuclear war in his last book.
The fact that Burchett travelled the world covering so many of these extraordinary world-changing events means that such an overview of Burchett’s writing can serve as a reader in the Cold War and its journalism. Such an idea would be anathema to Burchett’s critics, however, because he did not report these events dispassionately. When he saw injustice and hardship, he criticised those he believed responsible for it. He was never shy about expressing preference, and readers are left in no doubt that Burchett preferred his revolutionaries in sandals rather than in boots, in tropical jungles rather than on the frozen banks of the Yalu River, and that his heroes – Ho Chi Minh, Chou En-lai, Sihanouk of Cambodia, Souphanouvong of Laos, Castro and a few others – were men he had met in the flesh and with whom he established a close personal rapport. He could be highly subjective, but he was never ideological. His political choices were his personal choices, not dictated by allegiance to a political party.

Inevitably though, his support for many of the socialist and Communist regimes who were being characterised as ‘evil’ by the mainstream Western media led to Burchett himself being demonised by those same media. Nevertheless, much of what Burchett reported, which was dismissed by his opponents at the time, has since proven accurate, and though his political sympathies led him to mistakes and errors of judgement, he admitted most of these and moved on to correct the record (a clear example of this is his writing about the Khmer Rouge and China – see Chapters 28 and 29). This book naturally includes examples of Burchett’s more polemical and misguided work, but the overwhelming majority of the chapters here demonstrate an accurate insight into current events sadly lacking in so many of his contemporaries. The presence of errors and revisions in no way discredits his work; it simply highlights the difference between the vulnerable immediacy of journalism as opposed to the relative security of historical distance.

The insight on display partly explains the resonance of Burchett’s work with new audiences. The recent publication of the unexpurgated version of his autobiography provoked strident responses in the press and on the internet, reminiscent of the Cold War-era reactions Burchett encountered during his life. The reasons for
this continued impact are not hard to find. Readers of the present volume will be startled by the similarities between much of what Burchett describes and many of the events they are reading about in the news. Parallels with the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq are immediately apparent while reading his accounts of the Vietnam War (Chapter 19, for example, in describing the motivations of the Vietnamese, gives as good an insight into the attitudes of the Iraqi resistance as any contemporary account). Issues such as military abuse, government censorship, imperialist intentions, public perceptions of military conflicts, attacks on civilians, corruption and many more are as crucial in this book as they are in the more informed coverage of the Iraqi occupation. This too confirms the relevance of the present volume as a contribution to the study of journalism and the issues it confronts, which are ongoing and not confined to any one historical period.

Nick Shimmin, June 2007
On 6 August 1945, as I shufled along in the ‘chow line’ for lunch with fifty or so weary marines at a company cookhouse in Okinawa, a radio was spluttering away with no one paying attention to it as usual . . . I strained my ears to pick up a few snatches from the radio – enough to learn that the world’s first A-bomb had been dropped on a place called Hiroshima.¹

Wilfred Burchett’s international reputation as a journalist and war correspondent was built upon one of the great scoops of 20th century reportage. After the second atomic bomb was dropped on Japan in August 1945 and the Japanese had announced their surrender, the Americans issued accreditation to several hundred correspondents to report on the signing of the surrender documents. All the accredited journalists dutifully made their way to the USS Missouri, but Burchett ‘slipped the leash’ and in the small hours of the morning of 2 September 1945, he boarded a train for Hiroshima.

The story of his journey to the bomb site and his efforts to get the despatch to London is one of the epic tales of modern journalism. General MacArthur had not yet sent official US Army journalists to the bomb site to manufacture a propaganda story (they arrived while Burchett was there), and so the following report was the first independent account of the results of the nuclear attack to appear anywhere in the world.

The impact of the following article on world opinion and the subsequent debate about nuclear weapons cannot be overestimated.

∗ ∗ ∗
The Atomic Plague
‘I Write This as a Warning to the World’

Doctors Fall as They Work

*Poison gas fear: All wear masks*

*Express* Staff Reporter Peter Burchett [*sic*] was the first Allied staff reporter to enter the atom-bomb city. He travelled 400 miles from Tokyo alone and unarmed carrying rations for seven meals – food is almost unobtainable in Japan – a black umbrella, and a typewriter. Here is his story from –

HIROSHIMA, Tuesday.

In Hiroshima, 30 days after the first atomic bomb destroyed the city and shook the world, people are still dying, mysteriously and horribly – people who were uninjured by the cataclysm – from an unknown something which I can only describe as atomic plague.

Hiroshima does not look like a bombed city. It looks as if a monster steamroller had passed over it and squashed it out of existence. I write these facts as dispassionately as I can in the hope that they will act as a warning to the world. In this first testing ground of the atomic bomb I have seen the most terrible and frightening desolation in four years of war. It makes a blitzed Pacific island seem like an Eden. The damage is far greater than photographs can show.

When you arrive in Hiroshima you can look around and for 25, perhaps 30, square miles you can hardly see a building. It gives you an empty feeling in the stomach to see such man-made devastation.

I picked my way to a shack [*sic*] used as a temporary police headquarters in the middle of the vanished city. Looking south from there I could see about three miles of reddish rubble. That is all the atomic bomb left of dozens of blocks of city streets, of buildings, homes, factories and human beings.

**Still They Fall**

There is just nothing standing except about 20 factory chimneys – chimneys with no factories. I looked west. A group of half a dozen gutted buildings. And then again nothing.
The police chief of Hiroshima welcomed me eagerly as the first Allied correspondent to reach the city. With the local manager of Domei, a leading Japanese news agency, he drove me through, or perhaps I should say over, the city. And he took me to hospitals where the victims of the bomb are still being treated.

In these hospitals I found people who, when the bomb fell, suffered absolutely no injuries, but now are dying from the uncanny after-effects.

For no apparent reason their health began to fail. They lost appetite. Their hair fell out. Bluish spots appeared on their bodies. And the bleeding began from the ears, nose and mouth.

At first the doctors told me they thought these were the symptoms of general debility. They gave their patients Vitamin A injections. The results were horrible. The flesh started rotting away from the hole caused by the injection of the needle.

And in every case the victim died.

That is one of the after-effects of the first atomic bomb man ever dropped and I do not want to see any more examples of it. But in walking through the month-old rubble I found others.

The Sulphur Smell

My nose detected a peculiar odour unlike anything I have ever smelled before. It is something like sulphur, but not quite. I could smell it when I passed a fire that was still smouldering, or at a spot where they were still recovering bodies from the wreckage. But I could also smell it where everything was still deserted.

They believe it is given off by the poisonous gas still issuing from the earth soaked with radioactivity released by the split uranium atom.

And so the people of Hiroshima today are walking through the forlorn desolation of their once proud city with gauze masks over their mouths and noses. It probably does not help them physically. But it helps them mentally.

From the moment that this devastation was loosed upon Hiroshima the people who survived have hated the white man. It is a hate the intensity of which is almost as frightening as the bomb itself.
‘All Clear’ Went

The counted dead number 53,000. Another 30,000 are missing, which means ‘certainly dead’. In the day I have stayed in Hiroshima – and this is nearly a month after the bombing – 100 people have died from its effects.

They were some of the 13,000 seriously injured by the explosion. They have been dying at the rate of 100 a day. And they will probably all die. Another 40,000 were slightly injured.

These casualties might not have been as high except for a tragic mistake. The authorities thought this was just another routine Super-Fort raid. The plane flew over the target and dropped the parachute which carried the bomb to its explosion point.

The American plane passed out of sight. The all-clear was sounded and the people of Hiroshima came out from their shelters. Almost a minute later the bomb reached the 2,000 foot altitude at which it was timed to explode – at the moment when nearly everyone in Hiroshima was in the streets.

Hundreds upon hundreds of the dead were so badly burned in the terrific heat generated by the bomb that it was not even possible to tell whether they were men or women, old or young.

Of thousands of others, nearer the centre of the explosion, there was no trace. They vanished. The theory in Hiroshima is that the atomic heat was so great that they burned instantly to ashes – except that there were no ashes.

If you could see what is left of Hiroshima you would think that London had not been touched by bombs.

Heap of Rubble

The Imperial Palace, once an imposing building, is a heap of rubble three feet high, and there is one piece of wall. Roof, floors and everything else is dust.

Hiroshima has one intact building – the Bank of Japan. This in a city which at the start of the war had a population of 310,000.

Almost every Japanese scientist has visited Hiroshima in the past three weeks to try to find a way of relieving the people’s suffering. Now they themselves have become sufferers.

For the first fortnight after the bomb dropped they found they could not stay long in the fallen city. They had dizzy spells and
headaches. Then minor insect bites developed into great swellings which would not heal. Their health steadily deteriorated.

Then they found another extraordinary effect of the new terror from the skies.

Many people had suffered only a slight cut from a falling splinter of brick or steel. They should have recovered quickly. But they did not. They developed an acute sickness. Their gums began to bleed. And then they vomited blood. And finally they died.

All these phenomena, they told me, were due to the radio-activity released by the atomic bomb’s explosion of the uranium atom.

**Water Poisoned**

They found that the water had been poisoned by chemical reaction. Even today every drop of water consumed in Hiroshima comes from other cities. The people of Hiroshima are still afraid.

The scientists told me they have noted a great difference between the effect of the bombs in Hiroshima and in Nagasaki.

Hiroshima is in perfectly flat delta country. Nagasaki is hilly. When the bomb dropped on Hiroshima the weather was bad, and a big rainstorm developed soon afterwards.

And so they believe that the uranium radiation was driven into the earth and that, because so many are still falling sick and dying, it is still the cause of this man-made plague.

At Nagasaki, on the other hand, the weather was perfect, and scientists believe that this allowed the radio-activity to dissipate into the atmosphere more rapidly. In addition, the force of the bomb’s explosion was, to a large extent, expended into the sea, where only fish were killed.

To support this theory, the scientists point to the fact that, in Nagasaki, death came swiftly, suddenly, and that there have been no after-effects such as those that Hiroshima is still suffering.

*[The Daily Express, London, 5 September 1945.]*
In 1937 Burchett boarded a ship to England and in 1938 he travelled to Nazi Germany and experienced first hand the horrors of fascism while helping Jews escape its terror. On returning to Australia he bombarded the newspapers with letters warning against the danger posed by German and Japanese militarism, but they were ignored. The mood at the time was one of appeasement and conciliation, but when Hitler attacked Poland and Chamberlain declared war on Germany, Burchett was suddenly in demand as ‘one of the last Australians to leave Germany before the war’.

Then on New Year’s Eve 1940 he set out to investigate Japanese activities in New Caledonia, recognising the French colony’s strategic importance in the event of war with Japan. *Pacific Treasure Island* is the result of this trip. It was also Burchett’s first book and he was obviously enjoying himself and his newly discovered writing talents, making the most of the exotic locations and colourful locals. The following chapter demonstrates this, but it also displays Burchett’s acute sensitivity to geopolitical circumstances.

By the time this book was published, Burchett was on his way to Burma and China, and the start of his career as a war correspondent.

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Mick Griffith is one of the best known mining characters in New Caledonia – and one of the best liked. Mick admits that he likes a drink or two – or more – but always hastens to tell you that when he’s in the bush he’s ‘off the likker.’ With his brother he came to New Caledonia in the early 1900’s – as a timber-getter – helping to deplete the giant kauri forests which existed in the early days of the colony. When timber-getting began to be played out, Mick turned his attention to prospecting and mining, and found that one can have much more luxurious debauches from the results of
a successful prospecting tour, than after years of toil as a timber-getter.

Thus when he returned to Sydney and Melbourne in 1939 after having sold his nickel mine to Krupps’ representative he was able to go through £1,500 in six weeks with the greatest of pleasure. He borrowed his fare back to Noumea, and regarded his new situation quite philosophically. ‘There’s plenty more holes in the ground where a man can pick up a few more quid when he wants them,’ said Mick, and promptly went bush again for a few weeks. The result of this trip caused a well-known Australian mining engineer to rush across to New Caledonia, and caused another even better-known industrial concern to send over their expert a few weeks later to check up on the report brought back by the first engineer.

When I met Mick he wasn’t very sober, but he had such an open, likeable face that it was difficult not to take notice of what he said, even if his language was a little thick.

‘So yer’n Australian journalist are yer, hic?’ he asked.

‘Well, I can show yer something that’ll make yer ****** eyes pop right out of yer ****** head . . . We’ll get a car, shove a bit of kai kai in a bag.

‘Uve yer got any blankets?’ he demanded suddenly. ‘Well it don’t matter, Priday and I’ll get enough of ’ern.’ (Mr. Priday, by the way, is Reuter’s and United Press’ correspondent in New Caledonia, and formerly well known in West Australian journalistic circles.)

‘Yer don’ mind sleepin’ on the ground? Good. We’ll get the ****** car to Plum, to the Forestière if we can, an’ I’ll ring the Jap so’s he’ll have the choot-choot motor ready for us to go up to the 23 kilometre.’

All these directions meant nothing to me, but as Priday nodded to me every now and again to agree, I made intelligent noises of assent. Without having the slightest idea of where we were going or what we were going to see, I agreed to be ready at 5 o’clock next morning for a three days’ excursion – somewhere.

At 5 a.m. I was sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for a motor car to hoot, as arranged. At 6 a.m. I was still sitting there. At 6.15 I went down and had coffee, and commenced searching for Mick. Arrived at his hotel – everybody in New Caledonia who hasn’t a home lives in a hotel – I found Priday vainly trying to remind Mick