

Wilfred Burchett

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Wilfred Burchett was a seminal figure in World War II journalism. He was the first Westerner to witness the aftereffects of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, getting to the city 30 days after the event.<sup>1</sup> His story there was one of hostility, evasion of censorship, and complete dismissal of military authority. His article, "The Atomic Bomb" published September 5, 1945, opened the world's eyes to what was really going on in Hiroshima. Burchett was a peculiar journalist in that he often did not hesitate in disclosing his own ideas; it was very much clear as to what his opinions were. When he saw injustice, he would not hesitate to criticize those that brought it about.<sup>1</sup> Burchett was a thoroughly unconventional journalist, and his journey to Hiroshima certainly reflected that. In the story of his travel there, he literally broke away from the pack to cover this crucial event. While the group of journalists he was with was off witnessing the signing of Japanese surrender on the USS Missouri, Burchett slipped away to take a train to Hiroshima. He consistently refused to listen to authority, somehow never getting into any major trouble for it; he defied higher powers on multiple occasions. And after covering the event, Burchett took a detour notifying Allied troops at POW camps in Japan of the end of the war. Burchett was an illustrious figure in journalism, who, while he is not necessarily the best model for a journalist to aspire to become, certainly is an interesting character that deserves to be remembered. His most notable contribution to journalism, his coverage of post-atomic bomb Hiroshima, displayed an immense courage in the face of adversity from those who did not want the terrible human aftereffects of the bomb to be publicized.

Burchett was born in the Australian countryside in 1911.<sup>2</sup> Before he became a reporter and foreign correspondent, he worked as a dairy farmer, carpenter, cane cutter, and vacuum cleaner salesman.<sup>1</sup> In addition to his memorable Hiroshima coverage, he also covered many historically significant events and time periods including Nazi Germany and the Korean War peace talks.<sup>1</sup> His work carried him through China, Burma, Germany, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and revolutionary Africa. Says (at the barricades book), there was hardly a war or revolution during Burchett's career at which he was not present, or a left-wing movement with which he did not sympathize.<sup>2</sup> For much of his life he was exiled from his own country.<sup>1</sup>

While he was covering Japan's war against China, Burchett joined the Daily Express, the newspaper for which he wrote "The Atomic Plague."<sup>3</sup> Burchett was in the midst of covering island hopping in the Pacific. During his time there, he alternated between traveling with Marines doing assault landings, and aircraft carriers engaged in support and divisionary operations.<sup>3</sup> He covered battles at the Marianas and Carolina Islands, landings at Leyte in the Philippines, the assault at Iwo Jima, and kamikaze fighters in Okinawa. Burchett was in Okinawa when the news of an atomic bomb came out.<sup>3</sup>

The first time Burchett had ever heard anything remotely related to the atomic bomb, which had been kept very secret by the U.S. government, was a conversation he had with Robert Sherwood, a notable American playwright who was a member of Roosevelt's "brain trust," a group of advisors. Sherwood was accompanying Navy Secretary James Forrestal on a quick tour of Pacific fronts, and was with Burchett on a ship.<sup>4</sup> According to Burchett, Sherwood "managed to direct every conversation towards a consensus as to how people would react if some terrible lethal new type of weapon were to be used to speed the end of the war in Japan."<sup>4</sup>

Burchett was lining up for hamburgers and mash at a U.S. Army canteen when he first heard about the drop of the A-bomb.<sup>3</sup> While he was in line, he could hear snatches of the radio announcer talking about a new type of bomb dropped on Hiroshima. He asked a cook's aide what was going on and "shuffled down the line none the wiser."<sup>3</sup> Later that evening, he received more information when he was at an officer's mess;<sup>3</sup> he learned it was an atomic bomb. He made a mental note to make getting to Hiroshima his top priority if he ever got to Japan.<sup>3</sup>

And get to Japan he did, on a freighter converted into a troop transport ship called the USS Millett.<sup>3</sup> After the Japanese announced their surrender, the Americans gave accreditation to several hundred journalists for them to report on the signing of the surrender documents on the USS Missouri.<sup>1</sup> Burchett traveled as a part of a vanguard marine unit that was one of the first to land at the Yokosuka naval base near Tokyo.<sup>2</sup>

Burchett then made his way to Tokyo with fellow journalist Bill McGaffin. Burchett recalled his journey to the city was accompanied by a view of the devastation the war had wrought upon the area, due to firebomb raids by General Curtis "Killer" LeMay's Saipan-based B-29s. The houses here were mostly made of wood and paper, resulting in the destruction. However, he noted their fellow Japanese passengers showed no hostility.<sup>4</sup>

Once they got to the city, Burchett and McGaffin searched for shelter. The only hotels standing at the time, were the Dai Ichi and the Imperial. When the two got to the Dai Ichi, the manager said the hotel was "full and uncomfortable", which Burchett found strange. Eventually it was determined the manager's strange excuses were because they would be the only foreigners in the hotel, and he was afraid there would be trouble. In the end, they were able to secure a room, and no trouble ended up befalling them.<sup>4</sup>

Burchett then went to the Tokyo office of Domei, the official Japanese press agency (now known as Kyodo) to explain what he wanted to do. The receptionist warned him that “no one goes to Hiroshima”, and that everyone was dying there. After consulting with his colleagues, the receptionist told Burchett a train left from Tokyo at 6 a.m. every day that would stop at Hiroshima. He then agreed to buy Burchett a return ticket if he would bring the Domei man in Hiroshima, Nakashima, cigarettes and food.<sup>3</sup> Next, Burchett returned to Yokosuka. A U.S. Navy public relations officer gave him with a week’s rations for himself and a month’s rations for the Domei representative in Hiroshima . The officer was delighted because Burchett was a Navy-accredited journalist, and he wanted one of his own to get to Hiroshima before an Army-accredited reporter.<sup>4</sup>

Burchett only told his plan to these people and to his colleague Henry Keys, who would remain in Tokyo. Keys promised to maintain contact with Domei in Tokyo and to relay Burchett’s report about Hiroshima to London, where the Daily Express was located.<sup>3</sup>

The press was woken up very early the next morning to get to the USS Missouri signing. Burchett feigned diarrhea and pretended he was too sick to attend. Before he left, Henry Keys gave Burchett his Colt 45 millimeter just in case.<sup>3</sup>

Burchett’s train ride to Hiroshima on September 2 1945<sup>1</sup> was a tense affair. His train was packed with Japanese demobilized troops and officers. “The officers still wore their long swords with samurai daggers tucked into their belts,” he wrote.<sup>3</sup> When he got on the train, it was standing room only, so he had to stand with some Japanese GIs wearing marine jungle greens. At first, he observed the GIs chatting in what he thought was a hostile way, but after he handed out his packet of cigarettes, the atmosphere became less threatening. (What he would learn later is that the price of cigarettes had risen dramatically since the news of the surrender.) The GIs gave

him sake, bits of dried fish, and hardboiled eggs. As time went by, people started getting off and Burchett managed to secure a seat. He sat amongst the Japanese military officers, where he was met with “total hostility.” He sat by an American in priest’s clothing with an armed escort, who warned him that the situation was tense and that a mere handshake could be perceived as gloating over the surrender, and might cost them their lives. The American got off at Kyoto. Burchett recalled the tunnels on his train ride being extremely dark and long, and the possibility that he could be decapitated in the dark by one of the officers was not out of the question for him. He later learned that he was on a train full of “hotheads” who were transported out of Tokyo as not to cause any trouble during the surrender ceremony. Not knowing any Japanese, Burchett had to keep asking in broken Japanese using his phrasebook what station it was. He didn’t want to say the word “Hiroshima” as to not draw negative associations, so he kept asking “What station is this?” at every stop. Eventually he got there, and the train at that point was so crowded that he had to get off through the window. At this point it was two in the morning. As Burchett passed through the ticket gate, two guards who assumed he was an escaped POW accosted him. He was taken to an improvisational jail and locked up. The journalist was too tired to argue, and so in the morning he showed the guards his typewriter and a letter the Domei receptionist in Tokyo had written to Nakamura, the Domei man in Hiroshima. Nakamura eventually showed up with a Canadian-born Japanese woman who spoke excellent English.<sup>3</sup>

The impression Burchett got of post-A-bomb Hiroshima was “of having been transplanted to some death-stricken alien planet.”<sup>4</sup> He thought it looked less like the aftermath of a bomb than “destruction by pulverization followed by fire.”<sup>4</sup>

WAS NAKAMURA HAPPY TO KNOW HIS THINGS HAD GOTTEN THROUGH?  
WHAT THE FUCK IS THE ORDER OF EVENTS. The three of them walked through the rubble

to the Fukuoka department store, where on the third floor police had set up their headquarters. The police were hostile to them. 35 years later, Burchett learned that the police had been arguing whether or not to shoot all of them. After much tense deliberation, senior officer of the “Thought Police”<sup>1</sup> Kuniharo Dazai<sup>4</sup> accepted their explanation and arranged for a police car to drive them to the Communications Hospital, one of the city’s two standing hospitals. Apparently they were spared because the officer wanted to “show him what his people have done to us”, mistaking Burchett for an American.<sup>3</sup>

At the hospital, he would witness the human tragedies that would form a basis of what he wrote about in his article to the Daily Express. The hospital had an odor that nearly halted Burchett at the door<sup>4</sup> He saw people with “halos of hair” because chunks of their hair would fall out onto their pillows. The doctor that showed him around, Dr. Katsube, the acting director and chief surgeon of the hospital, told him about the downward spiral of health that would later be accredited to atomic radiation. He described failures of health that would occur for no apparent reason, gradual loss of appetite, falling out of hair, bluish spots on bodies, and eventual bleeding from the ears, nose, and mouth. He told him when they tried to give the patients Vitamin A shots to try to counteract whatever was killing them, the places where the patients received the shots would fester and rot. And in the end, they would all die.<sup>1</sup> There were no nurses to treat the patients, as they had either died, became sick, or gone home. Patients were taken care of by their relatives.<sup>2</sup> Burchett noted he was looked at with a burning hatred by the patients at the hospital, and eventually was told by Dr. Katsube that he had to go, that he could not be responsible for Burchett’s life if Burchett stayed any longer.<sup>3</sup> Katsube then pleaded with Burchett to “ask people to send specialists...with necessary medications”<sup>2</sup> The assistant city health officer explained that

nearly all of those who became sick after the A-bomb was dropped had been digging in the ruins for the bodies of their relatives or their belongings.<sup>4</sup>

For all the desolation he witnessed of the structural demolition of Hiroshima, it was the human toll that struck Burchett the most. He wrote, “If the evidence in the material destruction of the city was horrifying, the effects on humans I saw inside the hospital wards were a thousand times more so.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, when he finally sat down on a chunk of rubble<sup>3</sup> to write about Hiroshima, it was on humanity that he focused on. “I packed as much as possible into that one report, having no guarantee of getting another chance of instant transmission, and having no idea what awaited me on my return journey,” he noted in a later book he wrote about Hiroshima.<sup>3</sup>

Just as Burchett was writing his article, some handpicked American journalists arrived where he was. They had come by plane by special Air Force plane from Washington,<sup>4</sup> and arrived at the site via bus. They chatted with Burchett, and took pictures. Burchett said he told them the real story was in the hospitals. They left as soon as they had come.<sup>3</sup>

The story of how Burchett’s story made it out of Hiroshima is almost as interesting as the story of how he got to Hiroshima. “It was miraculous that the story got through as quickly and completely as it did,” wrote Burchett later.<sup>2</sup> Nakamura had to tap out his story via Morse code for it to be sent to Tokyo.<sup>2</sup> After Burchett left for Hiroshima, General MacArthur declared Tokyo off-limits to Allied journalists. That meant Keys could not go out and see if Burchett’s report had arrived from Hiroshima.<sup>2</sup> Keys tried twice to get out of Yokohama but was hauled out of train by U.S. military police both times. To make sure Burchett’s report was received, Keys hired a Japanese journalist to wait at the Tokyo Domei office for it to come. He paid the journalist in cigarettes and rations. Finally, in the late evening on September 3, the message came, and the Japanese journalist rushed it to Keys’ hotel room in Yokohama. Keys retyped it and took it to the

Press Center for transmission. The clerk on duty there said the story needed to be passed through censorship. Keys' insisted "the war's over and censorship abolished." When the clerk still wouldn't give in, Keys phoned and woke up high-ranking officers until someone with high enough authority yielded. He allegedly stood over the telex officer to make sure every word was being transmitted and a confirmatory "well received" message came through from the Daily Express.<sup>3</sup> The story was published on September 6, 1945 in the Daily Express.<sup>4</sup>

Although the report he originally wrote was not exactly the same as the one that eventually got published in the Express, for the most part there was not much difference. One thing that got omitted was a anecdote of Nakamura, his Hiroshima Domei buddy. Nakamura had given Burchett a firsthand account of what he was doing when the bomb went off. He was on his bicycle. Burchett believed Nakamura omitted his account when he was transmitting the report to Domei headquarters in Tokyo.<sup>3</sup> Also, Burchett said a science editor added some scientific information that wasn't in the original report. The science editor inserted that the Hiroshima doctors thought the cause of the "plague" was radioactivity, when in reality the doctors had absolutely no idea what the cause was. Burchett went on to criticize the science editor, saying he "clearly wanted to show his erudition on atomic matters, but it was highly unethical to do this under my name."<sup>3</sup> However, Burchett was happy that the editor of the Daily Express, Arthur Christiansen, used his phrase "warning to the world" as part of the headline. "It was not easy for the editor of Britain's largest circulation daily to deflate the euphoria with such a warning," he wrote.<sup>3</sup>

Burchett's story was the first firsthand witness account of the devastation the atomic bomb had wrought on Hiroshima because the group of journalists he ran into at Hiroshima thought they would have enough time to get their stories in before him. They didn't know that



Burchett had a way of getting his story to Tokyo; they thought he would have to travel back to the city in order to transmit it. They didn't know Morse was functioning in Hiroshima.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Burchett had the time advantage over these mouthpiece journalists.

On his way back to Hiroshima, Burchett ran into two Australian POWs in Kyoto. They were in Kyoto to seek information on the war and to get food. They at this point did not know the war was over (?? Check this). Although his notes from Hiroshima were burning in his pocket, Burchett went with them to their camp to let the others know of the news, after stopping at the Domei office in Kyoto to receive word that his story to the Daily Express had gotten through. Burchett then went on a morale-boosting tour of the POW camps, notifying prisoners the war was over (the Japanese guards had neglected to tell them, and General MacArthur didn't have sufficient reinforcements.)<sup>4</sup>

Burchett returned to Tokyo once it was no longer out of bounds for journalists. Tired and dirty, he arrived just in time to catch the end of a press conference held at the Imperial Hotel just to discredit the article he wrote about the human consequences of the atomic bomb.<sup>1</sup> It was only at the press conference that he learned the Daily Express had not only made his story the front page story, but had made it available worldwide gratis.<sup>3</sup> The press conference was held by some high-ranking American officers; a scientist in a brigadier general's uniform explained there could be no possibility that atomic radiation could be the cause of the "atomic plague" because the bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been dropped at an altitude that would eliminate any risk of "residual radiation." He attributed the sickness to effects of blast and burn. The officer claimed Japanese doctors lacked medical care and were incompetent. Burchett had a dramatic moment in which he stood up and asked the officer if he had been to Hiroshima, which he hadn't.<sup>2</sup> The officer informed Burchett "I'm afraid you've fallen victim to Japanese propaganda"<sup>3</sup>

After the press conference, Burchett was rushed to the hospital. It was found there had been a drop in his white blood cells, which was written off by the hospital authorities as due to a knee infection that had been treated by antibiotics. Later, he learned that the knee infection should have increased the amount of white blood cells fighting off the infection. “A falling-off in white corpuscles, on the other hand, is a typical phenomenon of radiation sickness,” he wrote.<sup>3</sup>

Burchett had his accreditation withdrawn and was issued with an expulsion order from Japan<sup>1</sup> by General MacArthur<sup>2</sup> Burchett later had the expulsion order rescinded because he was able to prove, with support from the Navy, (who were “tickled” that one of their accredited journalists had gotten the scoop<sup>3</sup>) that he had landed as an accredited correspondent to the U.S. Pacific Fleet, which had set no restrictions on correspondents’ movements.

There were two figures whose stories kind of ran parallel to Burchett’s, but for two very different reasons never reached the same kind of heroism Burchett did. Those two people are George Weller and William L. Laurence. Weller could have easily been Burchett, and Burchett could have easily been Weller. Weller, after covering the USS Missouri signing ceremony, pretended he wanted to visit an island south of Kyushu, and took a boat from that tiny island to Kyushu, from which he took a three-hour train ride to Nagasaki with a Japanese-speaking American sergeant. He went to hospitals, made analyses, and sent his material to Tokyo. However, MacArthur’s press headquarters rejected the story and it was never published.<sup>3</sup> Had Burchett’s story fallen into the wrong hands, there is a definite possibility it could have met a similar fate. Laurence was the science writer for the New York Times who, it was later found out, was “wearing two hats”; one for the Times, and the other as a member of the inner circle of the government’s nuclear weapons directorate. “Few of his fellow journalists...were aware of his real plenipotentiary status as the US War Department’s nuclear propagandist,” wrote Burchett.

Three months before Hiroshima was bombed, Laurence had been recruited by General Leslie R. Groves, commander of the Manhattan Project, to act as a super public relations officer and “news manager.” Laurence became a “virtual oracle” for Allied reporters, given their lack of scientific expertise and that journalists were in a time of voluntary press censorship of any mention of atomic energy. On August 10, Laurence himself flew in one of the three bombers that dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki. He later received both a Pulitzer Prize and a War Department commendation.<sup>3</sup> The credibility of Burchett’s story was somewhat compromised by Laurence’s writing, then more widely accepted, which obviously extolled the virtues of atomic energy. However, it seems years later Burchett’s story is more widely accepted, and he has emerged as being closer to the truth. Although Burchett was clearly not unbiased, he ushered in new era in which the moral ethics of atomic, and later, nuclear powers were questioned.

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2 Burchett, Wilfred. At the Barricades. New York: Times Books, 1981.

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