

Journalism 2004 Conference

“Tales of the Century”

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Merlyn Theatre CUB Malthouse

Matthew Ricketson and

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(Untaped beginning of session describes the project to assemble a collection of the best Australian journalism of the 20th century).

RICHARDSON: The end result of their deliberations might surprise you. Not every Walkley Award winner is there, for example, and that's perhaps as it should be. Not every Walkley winning story echoes down the years. But there are plenty of non-Walkley stories that still speak to us. So the criteria for inclusion on this list evolved into several key areas. Excellence, both in terms of writing and production; perseverance and diligence in hunting out the story; initiative in finding ways to elicit the information and make that information good; the impact of the story and its originality of both the thinking and presentation. Now if you could put all those elements into one story every editor in the country would put in on page one or lead their bulletins with it every day, every night. But the list that eventuated from these deliberations doesn't rank stories – it's not like our list of the 10 worst dummy spits in sport. To attempt to rank 100 stories is a well nigh impossible task. Instead the judges concentrated on a chronological list that reflected the history of our nation.

This list in essence provides an interesting function which was first identified by the *New Yorker* who helped establish a list in 1999 the list provides us with models which we can use to understand what's happened. Such a list of excellence helps us to avoid mistaking what might be an interesting feature in one publication or a particularly good piece of reporting in another publication, for something that is better, for something that is the best that journalism has to offer. A list sets a standard. It sets the standard in terms of what makes outstanding journalism and what makes an outstanding journalist. A list helps to celebrate the foundation virtues of the journalistic profession - the vibrant and unquenchable curiosity, the remorseless pursuit of every telling detail, the commitment to telling as much of the story as it's possible to get. And a list ennobles those who are in the list because their journalism has made a difference.

Now those of you with a sharp ear and a penetrating mind will have deduced that a list compiled in 1999 and resuscitated five years later must have something new about it – and indeed it does. On November the 25th and 26th, the RMIT journalism program celebrates 100 years of the best Australian journalism with a special kind of conference that will draw together some of Australia's finest journalists to discuss many of the issues inherent in this list. There'll be award-winning broadcaster Chris Masters talking about changes to police and journalism since his groundbreaking *Moonlight State*. Gideon Haigh, the polymath who thankfully for the rest of us still happily calls himself a journalist - he will talk about book-length journalism. And Peter Ellingsen, *The Age's* former Beijing correspondent, will talk about the journalist as the eye witness to history. Gary Hutchison, noted footy spectator and all-round sports writing guru, will discuss the preeminent role sport has played in Australian journalism. Neil McDonald will celebrate the brilliance of our own war

correspondent Chester Wilmott and the reputation he forged internationally as one of the finest practitioners of his craft. The conference will kick off with a public forum on the future of journalism on November the 25th and is accompanied with an exhibition at the State Library that includes examples of many of the hundred best – some of which you are seeing replayed on the screen behind me.

But we're not here just to spruik the conference or the list. What we're actually doing is raising an issue about something that's so fundamental, so intrinsic to good journalism that it deserves every opportunity we can get to celebrate it – and that is journalism's role in documenting our history and contributing a level of understanding to actually what happened. Now the best way perhaps of appreciating this is to for a moment think about what we would know of Australian history without our journalists. How much would be known about the state of Queensland politics and police without Chris Masters' work? How much more did we learn about the passion to explore the frozen land of the south without Frank Hurley's picture of Shackleton's *Endurance* trapped in the Antarctic pack ice? What did we learn about our nation at a particular time in our history when Donald Horne, journalist, editor and academic, released *The Lucky Country* in 1964? What did we find out about how our political parties operated when Laurie Oakes broke the story about Gough Whitlam's plan to get the DLP Senator Vince Gair to Ireland and gain control of the Senate as a result? The common thing about all these pieces of journalism and all of the journalism on the list is that they told us more than just the facts. And that is when journalism goes beyond the ephemeral and that is when the journalist becomes more than just a recorder of information. It's when he or she actively documents history.

So let's go back 30 years to Canberra when Gough Whitlam was in power, desperately trying to win control of a hostile Senate and Laurie Oakes was the chief political reporter for *The Sun*. Oakes and his colleague John Lombard had heard that something was going on. A source told him 'it's big, big, big. But I only wish it was half as big'. Could it be a diplomatic appointment? An appointment that reduced the numbers in the Senate and provided Whitlam with the opportunity to get a Labour man in the Upper House? Oakes tried to work it out. Labor wanted control of the Senate. There was a looming half-Senate election. Some of Oakes' sources had hinted that the secret might lie in Queensland. Oakes started to run through the Queensland members of the Senate. He fastened on Vincent Gair, former leader of the Democratic Labor Party that had been the ALP's bitter internal enemy for so long. Oakes backed his hunch. He called the Gair household. Senator Vincent Gair wasn't in attendance at that particular fateful moment. But his wife Nell was. Nell asked Oakes why he was calling. Oakes said that he understood her husband had been offered a significant overseas position. He offered his congratulations. Mrs Gair replied "thank you". Laurie Oakes had his story. How easy it all seems in retrospect.

The next day the splash of *The Sun* read "The Federal government has offered the former DLP leader Senator Gair a diplomatic post". Simple, clean and history-making. As Harry Gordon later wrote: "The story was the first link in a chain of events which sent the country to the polls". Gair took up the post in Ireland as some of you will remember, was expelled from the DLP for doing so, and Whitlam subsequently went to a double dissolution. But the story itself has remained emblematic because it showed a certain kind of desperation from the Whitlam government about the state of the Senate, that reached its peak in the events of the

following November. Oakes' reporting was history in the making. The early stages of a saga that remains the sensation of our constitutional history.

Now it's routinely accepted that journalism and history have a relationship but it could be best described as somewhat dysfunctional. No one is quite sure at any given time when journalism is recording history or maybe just telling a good story. But as Mitchell Stevens, the New York journalism teacher, points out the ultimate justification for celebrating the great works of journalism is that they must stand as something much more than the mere ... first drafts of history. And we instinctively know it when we see it. We know that once the words, the images and the visions are committed to the page, the screen or the airwaves, we know when we hear it, or see it, that there is something special happening. It is at that moment then journalism becomes an instant archive of our times. And no one and no one story illustrates that better than Wilfred Burchett's reporting of the dropping of the atom bomb. I'd like to introduce Matthew Ricketson from the RMIT Journalism program to explain the story behind one of the world's most extraordinary stories.

Thank you.

RICKETSON : If you mention the words Hiroshima and Nagasaki today, what comes to mind? Atomic bombs, death, the end of World War II. The United States was the first nation to use an atomic bomb in a war. It dropped the first one on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on the 6th of August 1945, and the second one on the city of Nagasaki three days later. Around 100,000 people were killed instantly at Hiroshima. By the end of 1945 a further 40,000 had died from radiation sickness. Within five days the Japanese government surrendered bringing to an end six years of global conflict.

The words Hiroshima and to a lesser extent Nagasaki became totems for a staggering new level of destruction that had the potential to destroy the entire planet. World politics has been defined by the fact of this threat ever since. This is worth emphasising because at the time the bomb was dropped it was portrayed in the news media, and understandably so, as very much contained within a continuing struggle to win the war. It's worth emphasising too because this is the context in which the Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett came to the event. In this light his efforts to be the first allied journalist to report from Hiroshima about the effects of the bomb can be seen as not less but more remarkable. The story behind his worldwide scoop which is on the list of the best Australian journalism of the 20th Century, and if any story on that list has a claim to be number one, I would say it's probably Burchett's. It illustrates this point. Burchett's story underscores the value of journalism in a democracy and it also raises important questions about the practice of journalism.

Wilfred Burchett was born in 1911 and died in 1983. He wrote 35 books and was a journalist most of his working life. He's probably best known today though, not for his journalism but for the bitter controversy that surrounded his reporting from the other side of various conflicts, including the Korean and the Vietnam wars. When he tried to return to Australia in the 1950's, the Menzies Liberal government refused to issue him a passport. He was regarded by many, particularly ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen, as a traitor to Australia because he seemed to be siding with the enemy even to the extent of interrogating Australian prisoners of war. Now these were

allegations that Burchett vehemently denied. The controversy surrounding Burchett's later work is not the subject of this talk. But it has coloured some writings about his Hiroshima report which makes it in my view doubly important to be as clear as possible about exactly what Burchett did do at Hiroshima.

Burchett's entry to journalism is little remarked on, but in retrospect it's illuminating. Though raised in rural Victoria, in Poowong, Burchett traveled to Nazi Germany in 1938 and was appalled at the treatment of the Jews. At this point, a year before the outbreak of World War II, many were not appalled and numerous people actually admired Adolf Hitler and his policies. Burchett acted on his sense of outrage, sponsoring at least 36 Jewish people to escape Germany and settle in Australia. Burchett wrote numerous letters to Australian newspapers about the plight of the Jews, and when the war began various editors, remembering his well informed letters and knowing the scarcity of credentialed foreign affairs writers, commissioned him to write for them. This led to his becoming a war correspondent.

Burchett first heard the news of the first atomic bomb while standing in a chow line alongside American troops in Okinawa with whom he was traveling while reporting on the war. He decided then and there that he wanted to get to Hiroshima. When he reached Yokosuka in Tokyo Bay in late August, he met up with Henry Keys, another Australian correspondent. Both were then working for London's *Daily Express*. Keys had received a telegram from the newspaper's editor, Arthur Christianson, on which he said "I set the greatest store by *The Daily Express* being the first in the world to run the full story of Hiroshima". Burchett and Keys argued over who would travel to the bomb city. You see, Keys had already conducted several interviews with eyewitnesses and he'd been gathering material diligently from the *Domai*, that is, the Japanese newsagency. Eventually the correspondents decided to flip a coin. Burchett won.

Now we could spend a lot of time speculating about what would have happened if Keys had won the toss. But it's more important to note the impact of Burchett and Keys putting the need to get an eyewitness account of Hiroshima ahead of the signing of the surrender on board the *USS Missouri* that was scheduled for the 2nd of September. Around 250 correspondents covered that event and it's a staple of newsreel footage, mainly because General Douglas MacArthur stood, relaxed, hands in pockets, while the Japanese military leaders signed their surrender in the war.

Covering the surrender is the journalist fulfilling their role, and it's a valuable role, as a recorder of news. Getting to Hiroshima is the journalist uncovering the news, especially news that as Lord Northcliff's definition goes "is what someone somewhere doesn't want published", as we shall see. This takes enterprise and it often takes courage because remember at this stage most correspondents, mindful of the recent massive bombing of Japan, thought the railway system had been destroyed. Details of the effects of the atomic bomb were scant. But the representative of *Domai* had warned Burchett that no one was visiting the city. "Everyone is dying there," he said.

To get to Hiroshima, Burchett had to engage in subterfuge as General MacArthur had declared it off limits to correspondents. On the morning of the surrender signing, Burchett lay in his bed pretending to be ill with gastro while Keys ran in and out of his cabin putting hot towels on his stomach. The military fell for it but one canny

Kiwi correspondent, Lachie McDonald, was suspicious. "Where's Burchett?" he asked. And he laughed disbelievingly when Keys told him Burchett was ill. At six o'clock in the morning, wearing his jungle greens and carrying Keys' service revolver, an unloaded service revolver, I should add, Burchett boarded a train to Hiroshima that was brim full with Japanese soldiers. He broke the mood by offering round food and showing the soldiers a long scar on his leg that had been caused, he told them, by a Japanese shell earlier in the war. This seemed to cheer them up.

After some time he managed to get into a compartment which was occupied by angry, resentful and still armed soldiers of the defeated Imperial Army. And by good fortune an American priest, who warned Burchett not to smile as it would be seen to be gloating. The trip south to Hiroshima took 21 hours, much of it in the dark as the train swept through long tunnels. At each stop Burchett needed to ask the name of the station. He dared not mention the name Hiroshima as he was sure it would inflame the soldiers. He didn't speak Japanese, relying on a battered phrase book that he carried with him.

When he finally arrived in Hiroshima very early on the morning of the 3rd of September, Burchett was confronted by two sabre-carrying local policemen, and thrown into a makeshift jail overnight despite his protest that he was a journalist. In the morning he showed them his letter of introduction to the local *Domai* representative which improved his standing in their eyes. Burchett strapped on Keys' pistol and simply walked out of captivity. Nobody stopped him. He began walking around the city and was appalled at the level of destruction. He headed for the city's police headquarters, where officers found the *Domai* representative, Nakimora, who told Burchett the police wanted to kill him. Astonishingly it was a member of the *Kempertai*, the thought control police as they were known, who saved Burchett's life by accepting his pleas to be able to show the people around the world what the bomb had done to the city and its citizens.

Burchett went to see one of the local hospitals just over a kilometre from the epicentre of the blast and was sickened by the sight of men, women and children dying from what the doctors described as a "terrible wasting disease". He went outside and wrote his report on his battered baby Hermes typewriter, sitting among the ruins and ..critically ...Nakimora tapped it out on Morse code and transmitted it to Tokyo as arranged with Henry Keys. However by now Tokyo, too, had been declared off limits by General Macarthur and Keys was turned back twice by American military police as he tried to get into Tokyo by train.

He sent another local *Domai* representative in to pick up Burchett's copy which finally arrived late on the evening of the 3rd of September. Unfortunately only the first 200 words of a 2 to 3000-word dispatch had come through. Because sending Morse code is painstakingly slow, it may be that the *Domai* representative was able to send only 200 words. That's speculation. It was enough, though, for Keys as it was the all important journalistic eye witness confirmation of the effects of the bomb. Keys supplemented Burchett's material with his own but an American censor wanted to stop the story being transmitted. Keys insisted that as the war was over there was no censorship. And while the censor went to refer the matter to a higher authority, Keys stood over the telex operator to ensure that Burchett's story was sent to London under Burchett's byline. Burchett was distraught about the missing copy when he learnt this

on arriving back at Yokohama. And in all his published accounts of the story he's restored it to give readers as much information as possible.

In London the copy was reworked by the editor, Arthur Christianson, who put the story on page one and highlighted not only the newspaper's exclusive in getting to Hiroshima, but the reality of radiation sickness. Just have a look at that now, the original version in *The Daily Express*. It's from the document camera here. It says up there, the headline is "The atomic plague. I write this as a warning to the world", and I'll just read you the first two paragraphs of the news story as you may not be able to see them. "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 are uninjured in the cataclysm from an unknown something which I can only describe as the 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".

Now, you can see that the byline in this story is Peter Burchett. This wasn't a mistake on the newspaper's part. Earlier in the war when Burchett first came to the notice of *The Daily Express*, he was employing an assistant named Peter King who sent cables for him and signed them for the sake of brevity Peter Burchett. The story from *The Daily Express* was picked up around the world and it was aided by them because they passed it on free to anyone who wanted it. *The Daily Telegraph* in Sydney ran the story on the 6th of September 1945, the following day. We can go back to that one. There are some key differences between the original version in *The Daily Express* and in *The Daily Telegraph*; primarily that the phrase "the atomic plague" isn't in *The Telegraph* story and nor is the words "I write this as a warning to the world".

What happens next is that the American military angrily denied Burchett's account. At a press conference held in Tokyo the following day, senior US officials, including the Deputy Head of the Manhattan Atomic Bomb project, Brigadier General Thomas Farrell, denied the story and accused Burchett of falling victim to Japanese propaganda. Burchett then asked how the General explained the fish that were still dying when they entered the stream running through the city centre. He replied "Obviously they were killed by the blast or overheated water." Burchett said "Still there a month later?" Farrell said "it's a tidal river so they could be washed back and forth". Burchett replied "But I was taken to a spot in the city outskirts and watched live fish turning on their stomachs upwards as they entered a certain patch of the river. After that they were dead within seconds". At this point, a US spokesman said: "I'm afraid you've fallen victim to Japanese propaganda". Nonetheless, Hiroshima was promptly put out of bounds and Burchett was whisked off to a US Army hospital for tests.

Wilfred Burchett scooped his colleagues by getting to Hiroshima first, there's no doubt about that. But as John Pilger has written: "In comprehending and identifying an atomic plague, Burchett had rumbled to the experimental nature of the first use of a nuclear weapon against people." When Burchett died in 1983, the eulogy was delivered by an American journalist and author TD Allman and he made the perceptive point, and I quote: "It was a considerable ordeal to reach Hiroshima but it

was an infinitely greater accomplishment back then to understand the importance of Hiroshima”.

Now people who analyse the news media, whether they're academics or members of the public... they usually have only the published piece to work with but that provides only a glimpse at the work that preceded publication – where the idea for the story came from, how the journalist gathered the material, whether they faced ethical or legal difficulties, the role of the editor and so on. I hope you can see that by analysing how Burchett got the story we can now see much more clearly the rarity of his achievement. We can see that the story's appearance owed a good deal to Henry Keys and to the *Domai* representatives. We can see how Burchett engaged in subterfuge to get the story, we can ask whether that subterfuge was justified and we can see how the best story in the world is useless without the communications equipment to get it to readers. Too often, though, academics and the general public don't analyse the story behind the story and so they make ill-conceived assessments and deductions because of their ignorance about the way in which journalistic work is actually done. The work of enterprising and investigative journalists like Wilfred Burchett has always been important for society but increasingly it seems such work is suffocating beneath a snowdrift of lifestyle supplements and confected reality TV shows. While Burchett's report from Hiroshima is well-known and quoted regularly, less well-known and never quoted is the 25,000-word account of the bombing of Nagasaki by a journalist with *The Chicago Daily News*. He managed to get to Nagasaki on the 6th of September, also by subterfuge after evading military public relations officers soon after the bombing. And he spent three days looking at everything, interviewing eyewitnesses including doctors and other medical people. He wrote 25,000 words and, as he said, “as a good loyal correspondent he sent it back to General Macarthur's headquarters for forwarding and the censors killed the lot”. Now this to me is the answer to any questions there might be about Burchett's use of subterfuge to get to Hiroshima. He was not going to be able to get the story out through conventional means and there was unarguably a story of the highest public interest.

The meaning and implications of the dropping of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain many years later fiercely contested ground. On one side, some historians say it was essential for the bombs to be dropped to bring the war to an end and that the bombs in fact saved lives because they removed the need to invade Japan. Many other historians say there was no need to drop the bomb and that it was a war crime against innocent civilians. Dropping the bomb was driven partly by the enormous investment in scientific and military resources and because the American government looking past the war's end wanted to show the Soviet Union its military capabilities.

The context for the meaning of Hiroshima began the moment was dropped. The vast majority of people polled in the street a few days immediately after the bomb were ...by the then *Sun New Pictorial*, what we now know as *The Herald Sun*. They abhorred the dropping of the bomb. But *The New York Times*' science correspondent William T Lawrence reported Nagasaki from on board one of the B29 Superforts that dropped the bomb. To him the bomb was a gadget and I quote “a thing of beauty to behold”. The newspaper whose masthead, I remind you, bears the famous line ‘all the news that's fit to print’, reported the press conference that Burchett attended, and which I have just referred to, with a story headlined “No radioactivity in Hiroshima's

ruin”. In other words, it reported the government’s line uncritically. The following year William Lawrence, who’d been actually seconded to be official historian of the billion-dollar Manhattan project to build the atom bomb, received a Pulitzer Prize for his account of the dropping of the bomb in Nagasaki and for other articles that he had written about the development of the atomic bomb.

I think it’s worth noting, in closing, that on the 7th of August 1945 the day that *The New York Times* reported the dropping of the first atomic bomb at Hiroshima, it carried another article on its front page that noted the death of Senator Hiram W Johnson. Now for those of you who don’t know who Johnson is, I’m sure that you know the famous words that he uttered in the United States Senate in 1918 during World War I - “when war is declared, truth is the first casualty”.

Thank you.