Is Burchett a traitor to Australian journalism? A cultural historiographical approach to why this may not matter

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Abstract: More than 25 years after his death, Wilfred “Peter” Burchett continues to excite debate. He is a figure that, as historian Robert Manne notes, is possibly “the most controversial and influential communist in Australian history” (Manne 32). To many, Burchett is a traitor, but to others, he stands as a representation of Australian journalism’s Enlightenment-informed value and belief system. This article offers a theoretical and methodological cultural-historiographical framework within which it is possible to reinterpret Burchett as an allegorical narrative. This reinterpretation suggests Burchett can be read as a metaphor and, as such, continues to have a fundamentally essential position within Australian journalism culture, despite apparent uncomfortable “realities”.

Keywords: Australian Journalism History; Australian International Politics; Australian Journalism Culture; The Cold War; World War II.

Introduction
As a journalist, Wilfred “Peter” Burchett is most famous for his coverage of Hiroshima’s devastation in 1945, and for his writing from behind “enemy” lines during the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts. Such dissidence during Australia’s prevailing Cold War paranoia saw Burchett subject to decades of personal and professional attack and, essentially, ex-communication from his country of birth. Subsequently, some see Burchett as a symbol of martyrdom in championing Australian journalism’s traditional Enlightenment-informed norms and practices.

However, there are others who believed (and still do believe) Burchett was nothing but a traitor. And there is evidence of this—Burchett was clearly a communist sympathizer. In 1974, Burchett sued Democratic Labor Party senator, Jack Kane, for defamation. Although a jury found Burchett had, indeed, been defamed, evidence against him suggested his close relationships with the KGB, and Communist leaders Chou En Lai and Ho Chi Minh. Further, the court heard Burchett had been involved in the antithesis of Western journalism’s value and belief system—partisan communist propaganda and forced confessions from prisoners-of-war about germ warfare in Korea (Perry 18). Whether these accusations are true is, to this day, under contention. Biographer Tom...
Heenan’s work certainly claims Burchett was merely reporting the “truth” (2006). And yet evidence against Burchett has since emerged periodically. In 2008, a seemingly reliable source, Hungarian Communist journalist, and colleague and friend of Burchett, Tibor MeRay (2008), published that Burchett had indeed been on the KGB’s payroll, and employed to liaise with top officials, and POWs, on behalf of the communist cause. Considering the dubious nature of Burchett’s objectivity—at the very least sympathetic to the communist cause—his supporters may find themselves questioning their belief in him as a champion of the public sphere.

However, if we view the Burchett narrative through cultural historiography, we can see his position in Australian journalism transcends historical “realities”, to function as a type of allegorical comment on Australian journalism’s public responsibility and its underlying philosophies inherited from Enlightenment principles. In short, the Burchett narrative may act as a type of cultural conduit of Enlightenment principles so famously noted by Immanuel Kant (1784): that journalists are charged with responsibility to have “the courage to use [their] own reason”, including the determination to “make public use of [their] reason” (in Beck, Anchor & Fackenheim 3 & 10).

Inherited from Enlightenment antecedents, journalism’s fundamental responsibility is, essentially, towards the facilitation and protection of the public sphere, where social and political authority is held accountable to the public. It is where individuals, or groups of individuals, with little or no economic or political power, can redress this imbalance by communicating with authority and the wider public. The public sphere is, then, where people both contribute to, and access, diversity of opinion, including what may be deemed as “wrong” opinion.

In the United States, freedom to publicise diversity within the public sphere is enshrined in its Constitution’s first amendment. Although Australia has no such constitutional guarantee, Australian society still expects its media to provide and protect the public sphere—an expectation given substance in 1992, when the Australian High Court discovered an implied right of freedom of speech within the Australian Constitution (Schultz 189).

Although today’s Australian social institutional authorities may agree with journalism’s public responsibility in principle, this agreement does not necessarily translate into practice. In other words, as Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance President, Christopher Warren reiterated in 2005, a free media “never emerges as a gift” from those in authority: It needs to be fought for. It never attains a state of perfection, but rather sits on that uneasy fault line of power between government’s desire for control and continuing pressure from society. Above all, it depends on the preparedness of the media, itself, to push back that line away from governmental regulation and towards a freer media (Warren 3).

In 1859, John Stuart Mill argued that the “struggle” between “liberty and authority” was “the most conspicuous feature” throughout history (1859/ 1910 65). Although not constitutionally enshrined, or indeed, overtly stated in any official document, journalism’s public responsibility, arguably to fight on the side of “liberty” against
“authority”, is embedded within its professional culture, a culture that stretches back to Enlightenment antecedents.

It is here that we can see the Burchett narrative transcending historical “realities” to function as an allegorical comment on journalism’s Enlightenment-informed public responsibility. Viewed through cultural historiography, the legacy of the Burchett narrative can function as a type of cultural “compass” for Western journalism to rise to the challenge put forward by Warren to “push back that line”. In other words, journalism has a responsibility to facilitate and protect the integrity of the public sphere, but, because the public sphere is in a constant state of vulnerability, cultural narratives such as that of Burchett’s need to be recalled to vouchsafe a professional ethos capable of maintaining journalism’s self-declared responsibility to—in the words of Australian journalism’s union and professional association, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance—“inform citizens” and “animate democracy” (MEAA, accessed 2014).

**Cultural Historiography**

To use cultural historiography to interpret the allegorical significance of the Burchett narrative, we need to first acknowledge that Australian journalism exists as a micro-culture within the wider Australian media and national cultures.

Theorising journalism as a distinct micro-culture is particularly significant considering that journalism’s norms and practices are, by necessity, not written down in any official document, but are understood by journalists through cultural values and beliefs that are passed on from one journalist to the next. As journalism academic, Angela Romano (2003 9) says, journalistic practice is “imbued with a distinct sense of journalist collectivity”; Jeffrey Brand and Mark Pearson (2001 10 - 11) observe there exists among journalists a “strong common cultural mindset”; Barbie Zelizer (1993 221) finds journalists absorb “rules, boundaries and a sense of appropriateness about their actions without ever actually being informed of them by their superiors”. Similarly, John Hurst (1988) recognises the existence of a journalistic micro-culture in his anthology of Walkley Award winners: “They’re [journalists] an interesting tribe, with their own strange totems and taboos, a close fraternity apart from, yet part of the crowd” (Hurst 6).

Cultural theory scholar, Raymond Williams (1966 & 1976) could quite easily have had Hurst’s concept of “tribes”, “strange totems” and “taboos” in mind when he defines culture as a “description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values”, in art and learning, in institutions and ordinary behaviour (1966: 57) According to Williams, analysis of culture—in this instance, specifically Australian journalism micro-culture—starts with “tradition”. According to Williams “tradition”, or the construction of meaning at specific historical moments, is one of the main indicators of prevailing cultural values and beliefs:

> Tradition is always more than an inert historicized segment; indeed, it is one of the most powerful practical means of incorporation. What we have to see is a selective tradition: an internally selective version of shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification (1976: 115).
Importantly, tradition does not necessarily equate to historical accuracy, but is rather the norms and practices that members of a community inherit. Tradition, in no small part, is formed by interpretations of various significant narratives that are constructed by communities around shared experience from existing verifiable facts. As Williams contends, “tradition” can be considered as a version of contemporary culture: “It is a version of the past, which is intended to connect with, and ratify the present. What it offers … is a sense of predisposed continuity” (1976: 116).

So, tradition, or the interpretation of historical narratives significant to journalism—in this case, the Burchett narrative—is fundamental in investigating culture—in this case, Australian journalism culture, or the “interesting tribe” and its “strange totems and taboos”.

To start investigating the Burchett narrative’s significance to the “interesting tribe” known as journalists, we turn to historian, R G Collingwood’s theory of a priori imagination. In The Idea of History (1993), Collingwood says the analysis of cultural history always begins with “mere theory”, albeit a theory informed by “indications” and capable of being tested. Furthermore:

The historian’s picture of his subject, whether that subject be a sequence of events or a past state of things, thus appears as a web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by the statements of his authorities; and if these points are frequent enough and the threads spun from each to the next are constructed with due care, always by the a priori imagination and never by merely arbitrary fancy, the whole picture is constantly verified by appeal to these data, and runs little risk of losing touch with the reality it represents (242).

Here, the “authorities” noted by Collingwood are the documents and other source materials used by the historian to test the cogency of his or her a priori thesis—in this case, on the advice of Williams, Australian journalism’s cultural products which act as conduits of its tradition, such as autobiographical and biographical material about Burchett, including television documentary, and newspaper and magazine products.

Using such material, we can start to examine how the Burchett narrative may function as an allegorical vehicle for the journalistic culture’s Enlightenment-informed normative value and belief system. We can start to examine Burchett, not as a literal figure, but as a personification of abstract qualities, such as championship of the underdog, defiance of prevailing ideology, and inherent idealism. We can examine how, in the Burchett narrative, there are continuous parallels between two levels of meaning: Burchett’s actual pro-communism activities, and the metaphorical Enlightenment-spirit that underpins journalistic values and beliefs. In other words, the Burchett narrative can be interpreted as an extended metaphor for the “strange totems and taboos” which bind that “interesting tribe” called journalists.

**Burchett as an allegorical narrative**

Our a priori imagination of Australian journalism’s cultural values and beliefs can be derived from what Australian press historian Clem Lloyd calls the “cultural storehouse” of Australian journalism: the Enlightenment philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries (in Tanner 3). More specifically, Denis Cryle identifies John Milton’s Areopagitica
(1644) and John Stuart Mill’s *Freedom of the Press* (1825) as seminal texts for Australian colonial journalism’s ideological penchant for freedom of thought and the role of the press in scrutinising, censuring (Cryle 1) and, according to Lloyd, “even challenging” rulers and the state (in Tanner 3). And it is in the works of Milton and Mill that we can hear dissident echoes, providing us with our a priori imagination for constructing our “web” from the “threads” that may be found in Australian journalism’s socio-cultural interpretations of Burchett.

In his foreword to *Memoirs of a Rebel Journalist* (2005), the first uncensored autobiography of Burchett, high-profile journalist Phillip Knightley recalls a topic of conversation he and Burchett had ‘every time’ the two friends met: “What are journalists for? Whose side are they on? Can they tell the truth or are they hopelessly compromised by all the cultural and political and patriotic baggage they carry?” (in Burchett & Shimmin xvi).

It is a central and timeless question about Western journalism’s role, and its very core can be discerned in Burchett’s pre-journalism narrative. Growing up in the small Victorian country town of Poowong during the Great Depression, Burchett knew the harsh realities of the working class. He was seventeen years old when the banks took his family home and, joining the ranks of the unemployed, Burchett took to the road. For Burchett, the system had failed, and capitalism was completely discredited. As biographer, Gavan McCormack describes it, Burchett’s political leaning was a “peculiar type of bush socialism” (in Shimmin xvi) and, as high-profile journalist John Pilger points out, was both “instinctive” and shaped by the “harsh poverty” of his upbringing, more than by “intellectual fashion” (in Shimmin x).

The metaphor for the “hopeless compromisation” of journalistic objectivity continues in the Burchett narrative, when he leaves Australia for Europe in 1936. In Berlin, Burchett quickly sees the way events were moving. Here, he helped smuggle Jewish people out of the Nazi state, an act that could be interpreted as a representation of journalism’s championship of the underdog. But it was his letters to British and Australian newspapers that start to indicate Burchett’s representation as an Enlightenment figure.

These letters were written during a time when Australian social and political life was marked by prevailing anti-communist sentiments, appeasement of dictators such as Hitler and what historian Russel Ward calls “a strong tendency towards isolationism” with “conciliatory and appeasing noises towards Fascism” were resounding through the public sphere (145–147). Despite the pervading public opinion of appeasement, Burchett’s letters displayed anti-fascist sentiment, and provoked thought about the degradation of the German state:

I became aware of what was going on in Germany, but the atmosphere in Australia was that Germany [was] the most civilised country in Europe, Hitler was a man of peace … and the stories of persecution of the Jews was propaganda. This was a bit more than I could stomach, so I started writing letters to newspapers describing the Germany that I had seen (in Bradbury).

In being “unable to stomach” the contradiction between appeasement policy and his own reality, the Burchett figure not only represents journalism’s dedication to eye-witness accounts (something that is becoming increasingly significant in the digital
world), but also begins its existence as an extended metaphor for “truth-telling” in a public sphere that may not embrace such realities.

Here we can see our “threads” and “indications” starting to weave a “web” between Burchett and Enlightenment philosophy on the nature and significance of “truth”. According to Milton, freedom of opinion, and freedom to discuss it, leads to knowledge, understanding and truth. “Truth”, says Milton, “needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensing to make her victorious; those are the shifts and defences that error uses against her power: give her but room and do not bind her where she sleeps” (in Maynard Hutchins 409). Truth and knowledge, according to Milton, emerge naturally through diversity of opinion including, on an equitable basis, “wrong” opinion:

Many there be that complain of divine providence for suffering Adam to transgress. Foolish tongues! When God gave him reason, He gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had been else a mere artificial Adam, such an Adam as he is in the motions (in Maynard Hutchins 394–395)

Here, Milton can be seen as his own “transgressive Adam”, a personification who continuously and compulsively strives towards a higher virtue, despite society’s conviction that his actions are delinquently criminal, and which punishes him accordingly. It is this figure that is paralleled in the Burchett narrative, and the protagonist’s determination to “transgress” prevailing ideology to provide “truth” in the public sphere.

Burchett seems to have been an anti-appeasement “transgressive Adam” because of his leftist convictions; a political penchant that manifested quite early in his personal musings. The “transgressive Adam” personification appears in Burchett’s diaries, written during his time in British inter-war India. Here, Burchett recalls thinking it would be “interesting” to take time off to study a colonial system at the “peak of its decadence” and heading for a “catastrophic” fall. “But it was degrading to seem part of it”, he notes of a land where Indians were made to feel “inferior … just by the way the Westerners treated them” (Burchett & Shimmin 177).

Burchett’s descriptions of the imperialist ruling class contrasts their rich-mannered ways with the suffering of the Indian poor:

It was the same “dress for dinner, business as usual, stiff upper lip” atmosphere … Dinner jackets or uniforms were obligatory for males, and evening gowns for the mem sahibs in the restaurant of the Great Eastern Hotel … A four-course breakfast was almost mandatory, although Indians were literally dying of starvation in the streets (Burchett & Shimmin 176).

Again we discern Burchett’s championship of the underdog, but this time using mockery of the somewhat pompous mindset that marked Mill’s concept of both the “tyranny of the magistrate”, as well as the “tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling”. Indeed, Burchett’s mockery, as we can hear, could well echo the tone of Mill’s warnings:
To refuse a hearing to an opinion because they are sure that it is false is to assume that their certainty is the same thing as absolute certainty (original italics). All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility. Its condemnation may be allowed to rest on this common argument, not the worse for being common (in Lindsay 65).

Here it is interesting to briefly compare Burchett’s pre-cold war “transgressions” with those of post-Hiroshima. Although his personal memoirs—such as those above—illustrate his personal penchant for “transgressing” Imperial rule, his public persona was, at the time, indeed pro-Empire. For example, if we look at his coverage of the second Chindit campaign in Burma, we could quite easily interpret him as a champion for the Imperial cause, particularly his 1944 publication, The Wingate Adventure. In this publication, the Chindit campaign to re-take the Burma Road—which was in fact catastrophic—is painted as an overwhelming success, and the operation’s eccentric commander—a personal friend of Burchett and somewhat of an idol, Orde Wingate—is portrayed as a brave, all-round British hero. Burchett would even help Wingate concoct a glowing official report that was certainly pro-Empire (Heenan, 2006: 56 – 57).

We can almost interpret interwar and World War II as Burchett’s chrysalis, in which he evolves from trade journalism, focussed on an editorial ideology of scoops, by-lines and deadlines, to emerge as an Enlightenment-informed global citizen with a sense of personal responsibility to “have the courage” to make “public use” of his “own reason”. In doing this, Burchett can be interpreted as a personification of Milton’s “transgressive Adam”, determined to “protect” society from Mill’s “tyranny” of the “magistrate”. This metaphor is particularly evident in the narrative of what has been described as the “scoop of the century”; Burchett’s 1945 reportage on Hiroshima for the London Daily Express. At the time, Burchett’s colleagues were rushing to cover the signing of the Japanese surrender on the US Naval vessel, The Missouri. But Burchett, defying the “tyranny” of the US military “magistrate” and, seeing the possibility of what he himself described as a “scoop” (in Bradbury, 1980) defiantly took the dangerous 22-hour train journey to the A-Bombed Hiroshima—a city from which all Westerners had been banned (Bradbury, 1980). Burchett was the first journalist to report on Hiroshima’s devastation, producing a front-page story that even critic, Robert Manne regards as “of world historical importance” (32). In short, without Burchett’s metaphorical and literal defiance of the US military “magistrate”, it is doubtful whether he could have contributed so significantly to the (international) public sphere with his “scoop” that began with a sentence that is today used as a textbook illustration of journalistic responsibility: “I write this as a warning to the world” (Burchett, “The Atomic Plague”, The Daily Express, September 5, 1945).

The metaphorical representation of the “transgressive Adam” figure’s penchant for defying the “tyranny of the magistrate” again appears in Burchett’s performance during the post-bombing press conference. An “uninvited” Burchett, just back from Hiroshima, refused to let go of a line of questioning about the A-Bomb’s “atomic plague” effects. The conference was held by an American scientist dressed, in contrast to the “grimy, unshaven and dishevelled” Burchett, in a Brigadier-General’s uniform (Burchett & Shimmin 246). In Burchett’s account of this, we can almost hear the “transgressive Adam” taking on the “magistrate”, as the uniformed figure (striving to officially establish just one version of events), and the dissident journalist (insisting on his eye-witness account of Hiroshima) contested the “truth” in a free and open encounter.
marked by Milton’s “instructor that comes to me under the wardship of an overseeing fist” (in Maynard Hutchins 398).

He [the scientist] remained standing, and I [Burchett] remained standing. [According to the scientist] those I had seen in the [Hiroshima] hospitals were victims of blast and burn, normal after any explosion … Eventually the exchanges narrowed down to my demand for an explanation as to why fish were dying in the stream that ran through the city centre … The spokesman looked pained. “I’m afraid you’ve fallen victim to Japanese propaganda”, and with that Parthian shot he sat down (Burchett & Shimmin 246).

As a witness to the devastation of Hiroshima, Burchett was appalled at the post-war deterioration of relations between the Western powers and the Soviet Union. In 1945, Burchett arrived in Berlin to report for London’s Daily Express (Shimmin 31), and was convinced that what would become the “Cold War” would result in worldwide nuclear annihilation. It is at this point that we can see Burchett maturing from a trade journalist to a citizen of the world with responsibility to “make public use” of his “reason” and, from this time onwards, Burchett appears to consider it his personal duty, where possible, to interfere in any apparent belligerency: “my duties as a journalist go beyond my responsibilities to an editor or publisher and my duties as a citizen of the world go beyond my responsibilities only to my own country. In other words, I reject the ‘my country right or wrong’ doctrine” (in Bradbury, 1980).

Burchett’s interventions could be interpreted as propaganda, perhaps even “traitorous”. But in his actions, one cannot help but hear echoes of Socrates’s comment more than 2400 years ago: “I am not Athenian or Greek, but a citizen of the world” (in Goodwin 19). Much later, Enlightenment philosopher, Thomas Paine declared: “The world is my country, all mankind my brethren and to do good is my religion” (in Johnston 87). Here, we can see our “threads and indications” beginning to “weave a web” that constructs parallels between Burchett’s apparent “propaganda” and Paine’s “global citizenship”, something that today’s social media provides journalism with an increased opportunity to do.

And yet, there remains the indelible problem that Burchett’s work is undoubtedly pro-communist. In 1949, he moved to Budapest, and discovered the apparent seed of what he considered a future Utopia in the countries in the Soviet sphere of influence—Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and even Tito’s Yugoslavia. From his writing of this time we can see he was mesmerised by an apparent “new spirit” among workers, peasants and intellectuals, enthusiastically reconstructing their war-devastated societies. Nowhere is this more evident than in Peoples’ Democracies (1951), an at the very least optimistic account of the new socialist order emerging in Eastern Europe, and at the very most, an accusatory thesis against an apparent Anglo-American plot to return the capitalist, land owning classes, secretly backed by the Catholic Church, to power. Here, Burchett even attempted a positive spin on the Stalinist show trials. Even his most staunch supporters recognise the propaganda qualities of Peoples’ Democracies. Says co-editor of Burchett’s memoirs, Nick Shimmin: “In other words, Burchett had swallowed the Stalinist line and happily parrots it in a book that, to this day, is used by his critics to present him as a Stalinist hack” (32).
Yet, we need to remember this was a time when, as Shimmin says, the “propaganda war”, on “both sides of the Iron Curtain” was “increasingly shrill” (44). Post World War II saw swelling Cold War paranoia across the Western world, and the relationship between the Enlightenment spirit and journalism’s public sphere role was interpreted as left-wing ideology by the right, represented by the Liberal/Country Part coalition (Perry 43) and as by being driven by those who were sympathetic to leftist causes. Indeed, there is some evidence that this perception was not totally misconceived.

According to journalist David McNicoll, “as with most newspaper staffs”, *The Telegraph* during the 1950s contained a “preponderance of Labour supporters” (130). This appeared to worry proprietors, who tended to be at the other end of the political spectrum. Soon after World War II, Keith Murdoch wrote to Frank Packer, warning him about his staff’s political affiliations. Murdoch was shocked to discover *The Herald and Weekly Times* had been nurturing “Reds” in its bosom. He claimed publicity and pressure had flushed most of them out of Flinders Street, leaving them to go to Sydney to work for Packer’s outlets, such as *The Telegraph* (130).

John Pilger’s account of post World War II Australian journalism concurs with McNicoll’s. According to Pilger, when he joined *The Telegraph* as a cadet in the 1950s, proprietor Frank Packer was Prime Minister Robert Menzies’s “most powerful press patron” and, accordingly, his publications were “extremely right wing”. However, according to Pilger, the majority of Packer’s journalists were “vociferous supporters” and members of left-wing causes (41).

With the benefit of hindsight, however, this so-called left-wing penchant may hold more allegorical significance than political ideology. It could be interpreted as a manifestation of the “transgressive Adam” cultural gene “inherited” from Enlightenment antecedents long after journalism’s forefathers had been forgotten. That is, the “transgressive Adam” figure may be interpreted as a “strange totem” of the “interesting tribe” known as journalists, that was, at the time, manifested in “vociferous support” for left-wing causes.

Even so, the Cold War context in which they operated saw intensified pressure on Australian journalists to conform to a widespread anti-Communism driven by Menzies. Here, despite Australian journalism’s political leanings, many media outlets conformed to the Menzies line (Ward 165). Within this testing climate of prevailing social conservatism, the “strange totem”, the “transgressive Adam”, may have had a democratic effect insofar as its manifestation constituted a form of journalism that had Kant’s “courage to use” its “own reason”, thereby arguably protecting freedom in the public sphere from authority in a manner consistent with the Enlightenment tradition.

Ever the “transgressive Adam”, Burchett came home in 1950, where he was branded “Communist” for his coverage of Eastern Europe. Burchett was home to give public speeches about the dangers of Menzies’s anti-Communist bill and nuclear proliferation. Organised by intellectuals and trade union leaders, the “Democratic Rights Council” invited Burchett to speak at town halls and factory gate meetings. The fact that “some stalwart wharfies” were always on hand to protect him from police (Burchett & Shimmin 339), reinforced the perceived affiliation between left-wing ideology and journalism.
However, in Burchett’s behaving so publically with his apparently dissident arguments within a national atmosphere of prevailing anti-communism, one cannot help but interpret sub-textual echoes of Milton’s freedom of thought principle:

Though all the winds of doctrine be let loose to play upon the earth, Truth is in the field and we do injuriously, by licensing and prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter? (in Maynard Hutchins 409).

Indeed, it could well have been this same principle that helped persuade a majority of Australians to reject, in the 1951 referendum, a Menzies-driven proposal to amend the Australian Constitution so that it would allow the Australian Communist Party (and suspected Communists like Burchett) to be declared illegal (Ward 164–166). It certainly would not have been out of place in the arguments used, by Burchett and others, against the Menzies proposal in the 1951 referendum.

It may have also been in the name of “truth”, and “free and open encounters” in the public sphere, that Burchett took up the offer from the left-wing French paper Ce Soir to cover negotiations in Korea (Shimmin 51). Leaving in 1950, with one pair of underpants, Burchett expected the assignment to last for about two weeks. But such was the story’s apparent urgency that he was not to leave for a further two-and-a-half years (Bradbury).

The story would have easily tantalised Burchett. Five years earlier Japanese armies, according to post-war Soviet-American agreements, were disarmed north of the 38th parallel by Russia and south of the line by the United States. Lengthy conferences had failed to unify the nation; neither the Soviets nor the Americans wanted to chance the possibility of a unified Korea moving into the other’s camp (LaFeber 99). Effectively, Korea was set up as two separate states; in the South, every pro-communist group was eliminated, and in the North, every non-communist group was rendered impotent. Burchett, again personifying the “transgressive Adam”, covered the belligerency from the communist side. In doing so, he enjoyed the hospitality from his own country’s enemies. In July, 1951, Burchett, accompanied by the London Daily Worker’s Alan Winnington and six Chinese journalists, arrived in Kaesong, where they were to cover the peace negotiations from the North Korean/ Chinese side. In effect, they were to act as publicists for the communists on the peace talks and later in the germ warfare campaign (Perry 118).

It is here that Burchett earned himself the label “traitor”. He was accused of fabricating a story about the US waging germ warfare against North Korea and China, and of brainwashing American and Australian POWs – accusations an Australian court would later find convincing (Perry, 1988), but of which Burchett biographer, Tom Heenan, could find no clear evidence in 2006 (Heenan, 2006). As historian Jamie Miller argues:

The perception that Wilfred Burchett, as a communist agent, interrogated, brainwashed or tortured POWs, has been revealed through painstaking research to be one of the great myths of Australian history, a con pulled by Australian Governments on the public sphere of the day (14).
However, given Burchett’s “interventions” in diversifying the public sphere, it is unsurprising that much research has largely suggested that Burchett spent most of his career actively reporting from an ideologically biased point-of-view. Even Burchett’s most staunch defenders acknowledge his political leanings. When journalist Russell Spur was asked to present evidence as a pro-Burchett witness in the 1974 trial, he described Burchett as “the last of the revolutionary romantics and true believers of the extreme left” (in Perry, 1988 173).

But Burchett’s “peculiar kind of Australian bush socialism”, as biographer Gavan McCormack described it (in Shimmin xvi), can also be seen as parallel with the Enlightenment’s zealous optimism about human reason’s destiny to triumph and its ability to perpetuate social progress. Indeed, Burchett’s “bush socialism” and the Enlightenment spirit share the idealistic core assumption that all humankind has potential to hold collective goals of freedom and equality, rather than conflicting ideological interests. It is also this emotionally innocent belief that is often at the heart of journalism’s self-justification for the repercussions arising from facilitating and protecting the integrity of the public sphere. And it is the same almost naive spirit that suggests self-sacrifice can render social and political change, both of which are at the heart of journalistic ambition.

Burchett’s naivety as a Communist dissident is even tacitly acknowledged by critic Robert Manne when he writes that it would be unreasonable to “suggest that Burchett’s germ-warfare journalism was consciously mendacious or insincere”: “In ideological politics”, Manne concedes, “people generally believe what suits them” (29). If we are to believe Heenan (2006), however, Burchett’s reportage of US germ warfare in Korea, to take one example, was valid. Drawing on the papers of Cambridge University scientist Joseph Needham, who investigated the allegations against Burchett, Heenan reveals there are solid grounds for suspecting the United States Airforce did conduct the apparent raids. Hence Burchett was merely reporting the truth as he saw it, and so was not a simplistic propagandist, as claimed (Heenan, 2006: 11).

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, even as late as the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century—almost 30 years after Burchett’s death—assessments and reassessments over his role as a journalist (or, as those such as Manne argue, as an “agent of influence” who sought to use journalism to advocate communism) continues. Such (re) assessments, however, cannot erase the Burchett narrative’s cultural significance as a metaphor for Enlightenment principles. In fact, it could even confirm him as the epitome of Milton’s “transgressive Adam”. After all, even if Burchett’s coverage in Korea was (as Manne supposes) an “error of judgment” (29), albeit arguably grounded in Enlightenment idealism/ naivety, it did, paradoxically, “inform citizens and animate democracy” and generate “truth” in the public sphere during those Cold War times, by helping Australians to approach what Milton calls “the confirmation of the truth” through contests of freely expressed ideas, unrestrained by censorious authority, or “trial by what is contrary” (in Maynard Hutchins 391).

However, in his exploration of evidence presented at Burchett’s 1974 defamation trial, Roland Perry (1988) suggests Burchett and Winnington’s idealism was “shrewdly” manipulated by the Chinese. Here, Perry says Burchett was “particularly invaluable” in “winning the information war”: “He knew most of the western press, and they respected him because of his professional record in Asia, the Pacific and Hiroshima, and his shock
appearance from the communist side was, in itself, a PR coup for Moscow and Peking” (118).

Part of Burchett’s reputation came from his access to high officials in both Communist and Western diplomatic circles. Here, Burchett can be seen as much a political as a journalistic figure. This is problematic, considering journalistic ideology demands isolation from the political process. Even Burchett’s champion, John Pilger, admits that “at times” he “seemed more diplomat than journalist”. According to Pilger, however, Burchett explained his diplomatic role as a “useful” and “honourable thing to do” (in Shimmin x), again extending the Enlightenment’s somewhat naïve “global citizen” metaphor.

In the film documentary, *Public Enemy Number One* (1980), however, an elderly and reflective Burchett justifies his diplomatic role in more pragmatic terms: “The Western journalists accredited to the UN were being lied to by the American Military PR authorities, and they knew this, so they’d come to me [because] I had the actual documents, and these were completely contradictory to what they were being told” (in Bradbury, 1980).

It was during this decade that Burchett’s writing started to achieve a wider Western audience. From 1962 to 1974, he wrote seven books supporting the communists in Indochina (Perry 179). He also continued writing for newspapers, but now he was making front-page news as the mainstream Western media started connecting the growing popularity of the anti-war movement with ratings and circulation figures. It may have been because of his growing influence—his list of supporters ranged from Jean-Paul Sartre to Jane Fonda (Perry 16)—that Australia refused to reissue his passport when it was mislaid in 1955. Hanoi issued him with a *Laissez Passez*, but this effectively restricted his movements to those countries with which it held diplomatic relations (Bradbury, 1980). In other words, Burchett was exiled to within the Communist world.

In 1957, Burchett moved to Moscow, where he was correspondent for the left wing New York weekly, *The National Guardian*, recruited for *The Daily Express* and later for *The Sunday Express* and *National Times* (Shimmin 115). He was there to cover the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, where Nikita Khrushchhev denounced Stalin, resulting in a period of greater openness and tolerance within the Soviet Union and detente with the West. But Burchett was less interested in Kremlinology, and more concerned with the pioneering concepts related to the conquest of space and the population of, what he described as the “virgin lands” (Burchett, 1962 1) of Siberia, Kazakhstan and the Altai territory—themes reverberating from his rugged childhood in the country Victorian bushland of Gippsland.

The two major books resulting from this period were *Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin: First Man in Space* (1961) and *Come East Young Man* (1962). Admittedly, for those who believe the Soviet Union was an evil empire, the books are pure propaganda. But for others, the books can be viewed as alternative assessments of the post-war and post-Stalin USSR. Again paralleling the Enlightenment spirit of somewhat naïve optimism, or even foolish zeal, these publications demonstrate Burchett’s genuine belief that the new regimes offered a viable alternative to what appeared to be a failing capitalism.
Despite the clear, and bordering on naïve, glorification of the communist ideal, these publications offered some alternative in the Western public sphere otherwise dominated by McCarthyite anti-communism. In other words, in these books, Burchett was defying the “tyranny” of the Western “majority” in order to provide some sort of diversity in the public sphere. Here, it is salient to note that the only Westerners permitted to interview Gagarin were Burchett and his colleague, Anthony Purdy (Shimmin, 2007: 124). But for them, arguably, Western audiences would have little knowledge of the apparent pride the USSR had in achieving the first man in space.

If offering diversity of opinion is part of the journalist’s responsibility, then Burchett can be seen as fulfilling it by his determination to inform the Western world of life behind the Iron Curtain in Communist societies. This he continued to do when, in the first half of 1962 Burchett visited Indochina and returned convinced that the US was preparing for full-scale military intervention (Shimmin, 2007: 151). For the next two decades he would defy the “tyranny of the majority” in America and his Australian home by denouncing US imperialism and the Vietnam war from behind enemy lines in countless books, articles, pamphlets, films, interviews and speeches.

Burchett’s determination to defy the “tyranny of the majority”, and publish “wrong” opinion in the Western public sphere, despite demonization and ostracisation, parallels that of Milton. Burchett’s “majority” support for the capitalist system could be interpreted as metaphor for Milton’s theocratic society, where he was seen as a lecher, but was determined to write pamphlets on divorce (in Knight & Wilding, 1977: 123). Similar to Burchett, Milton was a “transgressive Adam”, who advocated freedom from censorship of the written word, including that which challenged society. These public assertions endangered Milton’s life – the Attorney General was instructed to institute proceedings against him and, in 1660, he was arrested. Despite being granted official pardon a month later, several of his works were burned by the hangman (Knight & Wilding, 1977 123). Yet official punishment did not quench Milton’s defiance. Seven years later, when he came to write Paradise Lost, he declared that he still “[sang] with mortal voice, unchanged”:

On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues:/ In darkness, and with dangers
compassed around (1667/ 2001: 13).

Not unlike Milton in 17th century Britain, Burchett also defiantly continued his legally dubious activity in order to provide an alternative voice in the public sphere. During the early 1960s, he entered Cambodia with false identity papers and twice illegally crossed the Cambodia-South Vietnam borders (Burchett & Shimmin, 2005: 545). From November 1963, he travelled for six months with Vietcong guerrillas through the jungles controlled by the National Liberation Front. Describing the journey as the “greatest scoop since Hiroshima”, Burchett lived with the NLF, marched with them, used their networks of tunnels and dodged US aerial attacks (in Burchett & Shimmin, 2005: 183) - albeit supported, according to Manne, by two battalions and accompanied by two bodyguards (Manne, 2008: 28). Here it may be problematic to argue Burchett was pushing a more “truthful” line, given that it was admittedly one-sided and sympathetic to his NLF hosts. But there is no doubt that Burchett was redressing a serious imbalance and providing more diversity than what was on offer in the Western public sphere of the day. After all, Burchett was highly atypical in his unique access to NLF life – most Western journalists who covered the conflict did so only with approval.
from the Government, and from the side of South Vietnam soldiers (ARVN) or American troops (Manne, 2008 28).

Burchett was therefore different from other Western journalists. National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) cadres had briefed him on the situation in South Vietnam, and on exactly how the armed struggle started. Again personifying journalism’s dedication to eye-witness accounts, Burchett wanted to see the war’s effects on the “enemy” for himself:

> It was all fascinating material but I wanted to get closer to the heart of things – much closer to where the NLF leadership was located. The fact that I represented no one but myself favoured my enterprise (in Burchett & Shimmin, 2005 523 – 524).

During this time, Burchett wrote articles and the book, *Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerrilla War* (1965), propelling him back onto the front pages of newspapers and publishing houses in the West. *Guerrilla War* may be a slogan-soaked text, but it also provides an alternative viewpoint through the eyes of mountain tribespeople and ordinary Vietnamese lowlands civilians. Despite its propaganda overtones, *Guerrilla War* clearly stands as a product of diversity next to the jingoism of the Western public sphere.

Similarly, in 1964, Burchett adapted a series of articles for the *New York National Guardian* into narrative form. The result was *My Visit to the Liberated Zones of South Vietnam* (1964). Among other things, the publication provided an insight into the plight of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities during the US’s “Special Warfare”, a policy of moving peasants and minority groups into strategic hamlets away from the guerrillas’ political influence. As such, this publication went some way towards redressing the imbalance between those with, and those without, political power in the public sphere.

Again representing the Enlightenment spirit’s somewhat naïve conviction that philosophy can render equality, Burchett himself was determined that his public sphere role included championing the underdog:

> If ever there was a clear case of justice versus injustice, it was there in Vietnam. For over 2000 years the Vietnamese people had been on the receiving end of injustice and if ever people deserved support from a friendly typewriter, it was the Vietnamese people (in Burchett & Shimmin, 2005 549).

So convinced was Burchett that he was quite open about where his compassion lay:

> My sympathy was with the Vietnamese people, they had been fighting for independence for literally hundreds of years against the Chinese and Mongols and Japanese and French … it was natural for me to go see the NLF side of things, enough people were covering that war from the Saigon side. … Because I considered they were the genuine nationalists, they were the ones who were fighting for the country’s true independence (in Bradbury, 1980).
And yet, according to Burchett, he never was a member of or provider of donations to a Communist, or indeed, any other political party (in Bradbury, 1980). Burchett’s denials indicate that, at least in his own mind, his actions did not constitute propaganda, but merely fulfilled journalism’s Enlightenment-informed responsibility to provide the public sphere with alternative opinion, including that which is deemed as wrong by the “tyranny of the majority”.

In 1970, after fifteen years of refusing Burchett’s appeals for a replacement passport, the Australian government watched as its exile, quite publically, flew into Brisbane airport on a plane chartered by the Melbourne paper, the Sunday Observer. As Australia’s most infamous “transgressive Adam”, he was met by boos and jeers (Bradbury, 1980). The few-hundred-strong crowd waved placards: “Burchett back to Hanoi”; “Burchett traitor”; “Burchett better red and dead” (Perry, 1988: 16).

He was in town to argue his case for a new passport. But when Australian Democratic Labor Party senator Jack Kane accused Burchett of being a KGB agent, the trip turned into a roller-coaster court case, with Burchett suing Kane for defamation. What the case turned into, however, was effectively a trial for treason. Although the jury found that Burchett had, indeed, been defamed, they also found that the article in question was a “fair report” of parliamentary proceedings, and therefore protected by privilege, leaving the verdict to Judge Taylor. With the expanse of evidence entered against Burchett, Judge Taylor entered a verdict for the defence (Kane) and ordered Burchett pay legal costs. Kane’s costs approached $100,000. Burchett, with very little cash of his own, managed to raise $4,700. In effect, he was again exiled until able to raise the funds (Perry, 1988 233).

In 1980, Burchett, now aged 67, was in Cambodia covering Pol Pot’s murderous Khmer Rouge regime. In Public Enemy Number One (Bradbury: 1980), Burchett’s bewilderment and confusion over unfolding events are almost palpable. He thought he had seen his Utopia realised when the US left Vietnam and Cambodia in 1975 but, without an enemy to unite them, the communist Asian neighbours had started to attack each other. In his autobiography, At the Barricades (1981), we can almost hear Enlightenment idealism disillusioned:

Now my Asian friends were at each other’s throats – each waving a banner of socialism and revolution … it was a shattering blow for a vision of things acquired during the previous four decades, including my certainty as to the superior wisdom and morality of Asian revolutionaries (1981 12).

Three years later, Burchett collapsed into a coma with the edited proofs of his new book – Shadows of Hiroshima – in his hands. He died in September 1983. Opinion is divided over whether he had died from a lifetime of excessive drinking, or the after-effects of the radiation sickness he first described in Hiroshima in 1945 (Perry, 1988 239). Like his life, his death was shrouded in controversy.

But Burchett’s death did not mean the death of the debate that surrounds him. Miller goes as far as to describe it as the “forgotten history war” (2008), with high-profile historians, Bob Santamaria and Ben Kiernan, Robert Manne and Gavan McCormack “sparring” over the “truth and legacy” of Burchett’s life (2008 2). Even as late as 2010, Heenan came out fighting with an animated rebuttal to Manne’s claims (2010). Burchett
was clearly pro-communist, but whether he was a traitor is another question. According to Miller, since Burchett’s death, it has emerged that, despite ASIO Director-General, Charles Spry having been given free rein in the early 1950s to investigate Burchett, it could find neither legal nor evidentiary foundation to charge him with treason (2008: 1).

Conclusion
But for the Australian journalism culture specifically, the debate over whether Burchett was a traitor to Australia is almost moot. Viewed through Cultural Historiography, the historical “reality” of Burchett is transcended by his significance as a metaphorical personification of Milton’s “transgressive Adam”, who continuously defies Mill’s “tyranny of the majority” in order to deliver “truth” in the public sphere. Our “threads” and “indications” from our “authorities” (the cultural narratives about this era of Australian journalism tradition) would appear to “clothe” the a priori imagination (the Enlightenment spirit of anti-authoritarianism, non-conformity, mockery of pomposity and idealism that is universal and fundamental to Australian journalism’s value and belief system) to support the contention that Burchett is a figure that rises far above any supposed “reality”. In Burchett we find a pivotal “thread” that supports the intricate “web” that forms journalism’s professional culture of Enlightenment principles.

As such, the Burchett narrative’s importance is in its telling and retelling, so future generations of journalists, with neither Constitutional guarantee nor any official document outlining their public responsibility, understand the “strange totem” that binds them to the “interesting tribe” known as journalists. The “transgressive Adam” cultural figure reminds journalists that their fundamental role is to consistently strive for Kant’s “courage to use [their] own reason”, including the determination to “make public use of [their] reason”, and keep “pushing back that line” towards a “freer media”.

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