

COUNTERPUNCHER

WITH THE POSTHUMOUS publication of *A Colossal Wreck*, the triptych for which Alexander Cockburn will be remembered is complete. *Corruptions of Empire* offered a scintillating frieze of American politics and culture from the mid-seventies to the late eighties. *The Golden Age Is In Us*, more reflective and personal in form, is an intricately constructed album and journal that continues to the mid-nineties. *A Colossal Wreck*, a narrative mosaic, ends in the second decade of this century. Moving depictions of Alexander were written by Robin Blackburn and JoAnn Wypijewski when he died.¹ *A Colossal Wreck* opens and closes with two others from his family, his brother Andrew and his daughter Daisy. Better portraits will not be written. No attempt will be made here to write about him in comparable fashion. But each of his friends will have their own memories of Alexander. In my case, biographical chance brought us together along the curve of his life, from Ireland to England, from New York to California. Maybe that allows some contribution to framing it.

No other person I have ever known was so deeply and productively marked by family background. The relationship of sons to fathers is rarely without conflict; and where there is none, the effect is more typically disabling than empowering, or neutral. For a father to be object of once of adoration, emulation and emancipation would seem a contradiction in terms. Yet so it was in the case of Alexander. Throughout his life Claud was a model for him—he once said he thought of him every day—and his career would follow an arc often uncannily like that of Claud's. Yet far from being a psychological shackle, reducing him to imitation, it was as if the intensity of the bond was the condition of an individuality out of the ordinary. The paradox, of course, says much about the parent who made it possible.

Claud Cockburn recounted his own life—up to the age of fifty-seven—in an artful and entertaining trilogy that records a remarkable career.² Born in Peking in 1904, where his father was secretary to the British Legation during the Boxer Uprising, as a youth he spent much of his time, during breaks from education in England, in Budapest, while his father sorted out Allied war claims on Hungary. After Oxford, Claud first worked freelance for the *Times* in Berlin, before becoming a correspondent for the paper in New York. Arriving in the US on the eve of the crash of 1929, he resigned his post in early 1932, returning first to Central Europe again, and then to England. There he created *The Week*, a confidential newsletter, exposing intrigues and scandals in high places, read and feared not only in the clubs and country houses of the British oligarchy, but their counterparts across the Continent. In 1934 he started writing for the *Daily Worker*, while contributing concurrently to *Time* and *Fortune*. After 1936 he reported on Spain for the *Worker*, and England for *Pravda*. During the War, he was diplomatic correspondent for the *Worker*, but in 1947 quit for a life in Ireland with his wife Patricia. There he wrote his three volumes of memoirs; five novels, one of which was made into a film by John Huston; contributed to *Punch*; and became an inspiration and collaborator of *Private Eye*.³ He died in 1981.

For the richness of this trajectory and the personality behind it, there is no substitute for Claud's own reminiscences. But retrospectively, certain strands of particular moment for Alexander can be indicated. Claud was the most brilliant journalist of his generation to hold a UK passport. But his career was at a sharp angle to British society, with which his connexions were never that close. Central Europe, America and Ireland were

¹ 'Alexander Cockburn, 1941–2012', NLR 76, July–Aug 2012; 'Remembering Alex', *Nation*, 13–20 August 2012.

² *In Time of Trouble*, London 1957; *Crossing the Line*, London 1958; *View from the West*, London 1961. Mysteriously, in keeping with its author, the American edition of the first volume of the trilogy, which appeared a year earlier under the title *A Discord of Trumpets*, includes one chapter and a good part of another that were cut in the English edition, where a vivid account of Claud's near-execution by Durruti in Aragon is for reasons unknown missing.

³ Richard Ingrams explains that when he co-founded *Private Eye*, he had 'Cockburn's example very much in mind'. See his memoir of Claud, introducing the 1985 re-edition of *The Years of the Week* (published, no doubt to thwart a bailiff, in Patricia's name), which originally came out in 1968, and can be regarded as a fourth volume parallel to Claud's autobiographical trilogy. Patricia's own memoirs, fully as remarkable as her husband's, appeared as *Figure of Eight* in 1985.

more congenial to him than Ukania. *The Week*, one of the great original inventions of twentieth-century journalism, was foreign in conception: borrowing technically from the mimeographed attacks of Oswald Schuette, a friend in Washington, against the big radio companies in the US, and cyclostyled bulletins of Kurt von Schleicher, the last Chancellor of Weimar Germany; and journalistically from *Le Canard enchaîné* in Paris. So, too was the pool of London-based reporters—American, German, Polish, French—on whose tips it drew. An international correspondent, Claud disclaimed any feel for domestic affairs. England was a country too small for its boots, as he once put it.⁴

Together with this sense of distance from national life went his independence of spirit. As a young man with no fixed employment, he three times turned down offers of a job at the *Times*, then at the pinnacle of its global prestige, before eventually accepting one on his own terms, specifying New York as the only post he would consider. Within a couple of years he astonished his employers by quitting his privileged perch in Manhattan for an impoverished cubby-hole of his own devising at *The Week*. Enjoying the pleasures of the world as much as anyone, he was never an economic captive of them, living most of his life in debt and much of it in straitened circumstances. Exposed to the Hungarian inflation after the First World War, money was a notional quantity for him.⁵ But while that was a condition of his decision to jettison the *Times* in 1932, its motivation was political. In Austria, five years earlier, a love affair had led him to the polemics of Lenin and Zinoviev against the First World War, for him a political *coup de foudre* in the wake of the emotional one.⁶ From that time on, whatever his organizational links or otherwise, about which he was characteristically discreet, he was by conviction a revolutionary.

But he became a Communist after his own fashion, outside the precincts of the national party, and little in keeping with its ways. For their part, its leaders distrusted *The Week*, over which they had no control. In

⁴ *View from the West*, p. 82.

⁵ 'Those early years in Budapest during the inflation time, when the value of money in your pocket could be halved between breakfast and lunch, and halved again before dinner, had made it hard for me to focus at all steadily on financial problems, or to treat such problems otherwise than as entirely fluid and impalpable': *In Time of Trouble*, p. 83.

⁶ *In Time of Trouble*, pp. 106–22.

the thirties he was personally much closer to international operatives of the Comintern—Otto Katz, Egon Erwin Kisch, Willi Münzenberg, Mikhail Koltsov—than to local stalwarts. When the British party and its newspaper rallied to the war effort after 1941, the slogans of patriotic unity under which they did so had little appeal for Claud. Formed in the twenties before the arrival of the Popular Front, his political temperament was more radically oppositional, leaving him uncomfortable with the brief transformation of the CPGB from ‘hated sect to high-powered bandwagon’, not to speak of its delusions about Labour in 1945.⁷ Two years later, seeing the futility of his work for the party, he had had enough: a timely ulcer allowed him to retire with his family to Youghal without any public break with it. When the Hungarian Revolt came in 1956, the fact of the rising itself—before even its repression—was sufficient condemnation of what had become of Communism in Eastern Europe. But to the end, he remained loyal to the revolutionary tradition to which he had committed himself, in the same free-form style. Typically, the high-point of his war-time journalism had been a colloquy with De Gaulle in Algiers, for whom, sensing the independence of spirit that would make him so disliked by Washington and London, he acquired an immediate admiration.

Sixties London

Attitudes to country, career, money, politics: in one way or another, all these would connect father and son. But to anyone who knew them both, the most obvious link was temperament. Claud’s first wife, the American writer Hope Hale—also a Communist, who left the Party after the Nazi–Soviet Pact—wrote much later of her time with him that what charmed her was his combination of an irrepressible gaiety, mischief and wit with his utterly serious commitment to sweeping away capitalism.⁸ Just that combination found a second embodiment in Alexander. We grew up about forty miles apart in south-east Ireland, the Cockburns living across the county line between Cork and Waterford, where

⁷ *Crossing the Line*, pp. 104, 140–3.

⁸ *Great Day Coming: A Memoir of the 1930s*, South Royalton 1994, p. 2 ff, which contains the best independent portrait of him—affectionate, restrained, not uncritical—at that time. Some forty years earlier, she wrote a review of the first volume of his memoirs, to some extent inflected by a rebound from communism, but in the Cold War context of the time by no means hostile: ‘From Pollitt to “Punch”’, *The New Leader*, 20 August 1956.

Youghal lay at the edge of an Anglo-Irish society along the Blackwater, more rackets but grander than that by the Suir. There were military and Far Eastern connexions in both families—one of the Cockburn forebears sacked Washington, another governed Hong Kong—and comparable experiences of childhood in Ireland and boarding school in Britain. After finishing at Oxford, Alexander's first publication was a review of *Catch-22* in *NLR*,⁹ and for a time we shared a flat in Lexham Gardens, off Earl's Court. Even in the general exuberance of youth in that period—the London of *Blow-Up* in the mid-sixties—his dash and high spirits stood out.

His first job was with the *Times Literary Supplement*. He was impecunious, and pay was modest, if topped up with sale of review copies of books with which the shelves of the flat were soon groaning. But intellectually, it was a glamorous post. In those days, under the editorship of Arthur Crook, the *TLS* had a cutting, continental edge—presiding influences were John Willett, the foremost Brechtian scholar of the time, and John Sturrock, covering French structuralism—that it would lose under the Cold War incumbency which followed. Here, anonymously like every other contributor, Alexander copy-edited and wrote about novels.¹⁰ His longest piece was a lead essay, 'Sounding the Sixties', behind a cover by Hockney, surveying the politics, education, literature, theatre, cinema, press, criticism and historiography of the decade at mid-point.¹¹ Not long afterwards, in the spring of 1966, he gave up a post everyone else regarded as highly desirable, without having found, or even sought, a new one. I was astonished, and deeply impressed, by his freedom of spirit. Pending anything else, he took over the running of *NLR*, boxing our ears stylistically to rid the journal of its tics and clichés. Unlike his father, Alexander started out as a literary journalist: it was his time at *NLR*, at the height of the revolutionary ferment of the later sixties, that made him a political writer. In his obituary, Robin Blackburn has recalled their joint work in producing two books for the journal, one on the national rise of trade-union militancy, the other on the international student revolt of the time—the latter, a best-seller, fronted by a trenchant

⁹ 'Catch 22', *NLR* 1/18, Jan–Feb 1963, pp. 87–92.

¹⁰ Fifty years later, his most striking contribution, 'In Carcinoma City', a review of Mailer's *American Dream*, which appeared in its issue of 29 April 1965, was re-excerpted by the paper on 23 December 2013.

¹¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 July 1965.

overview from Alexander, one of the first pieces in England to speak also of the society of the spectacle, that continues to read well today.¹²

In due course, he was picked up by the *New Statesman*, then edited by Paul Johnson, later a hysterical neo-conservative caustically remembered by Alexander as ‘the only man I know with clenched hair’.¹³ But he did not write a great deal for it, with the exception of a long reportage of early 1969 on Ulster, in which readers could get a glimpse of his political teeth.¹⁴ But through it he met and befriended its US correspondent, Andy Kopkind, and contributed to the modest sheet that Kopkind and Jim Ridgeway were producing in Washington, first title *Mayday*, then *Hard Times*.¹⁵ Restless, he also joined forces with Bruce Page and Neal Ascherson to create a Free Communications Group that produced a few issues of a slender vertical tract, *Open Secret*, attacking the condition of the media. In the autumn of the following year, a more youthful group—Anthony Barnett was a prime mover—started planning a weekly that would transform this scene, with a style of revolutionary journalism that would not be narrow, formulaic or catechistic, but aimed at a mass readership of the young, educated and critical, who were demonstrating in tens of thousands against the war in Vietnam. All decisions would be taken collectively, with no staff hierarchy. But when the first number appeared in October 1971, Alexander was effectively its editor. Title, conception and presentation were his.

In the third volume of his memoirs Claud had described his extended involvement in the late fifties in a project for a new weekly with the Hulton Press, publishers of *Picture Post*, to be called *Seven Days*, in which he had high hopes but which was scuppered by the proprietors. This was the name Alexander chose for the paper he would now produce. In hindsight, beside the paternal precedent, another strain in his inheritance is visible. Unlike Claud, Patricia had a highly developed visual sense, becoming late in life a successful shell-painter in Ireland. In Alexander,

¹² *The Incompatibles: Trade Union Militancy and the Consensus*, Harmondsworth 1967 and *Student Power*, Harmondsworth 1969.

¹³ *Corruptions of Empire*, London and New York 1998, p. 386. Henceforward CE.

¹⁴ ‘Ulster: History’s Blind Alley’, *New Statesman*, 3 January 1969, pp. 8–12, where ‘We Shall Overcome’, sung on a civil-rights march, is ‘that wet anthem of hope’.

¹⁵ See ‘Cool in the Street’, *Mayday*, 8–15 November 1968; ‘Armed Struggle in Ireland’, *Hard Times*, 17 April–4 May 1970; ‘England Swings’, *Hard Times*, 29 June–6 July 1970. Ridgeway merged *Hard Times* with *Ramparts* in 1972.

who bought paintings even in his TLS days, this extended into a love of photography that he brought to the weekly in prospect. The dummy on which funding for it was raised declared: 'In the whole history of left, radical or even liberal journalism, only *Picture Post*, in this country, used the opportunities offered by really good photographs, to back up stories, or tell stories on their own.' *Seven Days* would make good this gap, dramatizing its stories and articles with pictures exploding the banalizations of the image-drenched consumer world. Handling covers, lay-out, typography and contents, Alexander gave to a common project a round-the-clock energy and panache all his own. Appearing at the height of the conflict in Northern Ireland, during the first—victorious—miners' strike in Britain, and the final stages of the war in Vietnam, *Seven Days* sought to combine social reportage, political investigation, discussion of ideas, coverage (more intermittent) of films or books, in a style at once uncompromisingly militant and intellectually accessible. Editorially, it fell little short of the aims it set out to achieve.¹⁶ But commercially, it was of no avail. The paper lasted for six months before money ran out and the receivers moved in.

To this dispiriting blow in the spring of 1972 were added a marriage gone awry and debts to rival Claud's, not a few incurred—like his father's—on synopses for works that for one reason or another didn't materialize. In later years, Alexander's buoyancy often seemed indestructible. But in that season he was in low water. In *A Colossal Wreck*, he makes of his pass an entertaining legend:

One day in the late summer of 1972 I had occasion to be in the portion of south London known as Balham. It was hot, and the streets infinitely dreary. I must get away, I muttered to myself, like Razumov talking to Councillor Mikulin in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*.

¹⁶ Among contributors also writing for NLR at the time were Peter Wollen, Tom Nairn, Fred and Jon Halliday, Gareth Stedman Jones. Besides extensive coverage of industrial struggles and popular resistance to the military occupation of Northern Ireland, the paper took up issues of gay and women's liberation, mental health and prison conditions that were widely raised only later. In retrospect, its section on ideas—a series dealing in turn with capitalism, patriotism, internationalism, materialism, Keynesianism, surrealism, etc.—stands out, along with its commitment, with very limited resources, to photojournalism. After it closed in March 1972, a special issue hailing the Vietnamese offensive in Easter of that year came out, nevertheless, in May.

I turned in the direction of the subway station. A dingy sign caught my eye, in a sub-basement window. I knocked, and the sybil, in Indian saree, greeted me. She had Tarot cards and a parrot, a method of divination with an ancient lineage in India. She dealt the cards. The parrot looked at them, then at me, then at the fortune teller. Some current of energy passed between them.

A forecast of what would become New Labour was enough: ‘Within a week, obeying the promptings of the parrot, I had booked a flight to New York and a new life. Ahead of me lay a vast political landscape, seemingly of infinite richness and possibility. Never for a moment have I regretted my journey westward.’¹⁷

Stateside

He arrived in America on the eve of Nixon’s re-election. There, on the strength of an article about chess, he persuaded the publisher of the *Village Voice* to let him run a projected books division while contributing to the paper.¹⁸ His next two pieces, appearing in December 1972, were about photography: a critical review of a show by Diane Arbus, and an obituary of *Life*, which had just expired. ‘Press Clips’, the column on the media that would make him famous in the States, started to appear in September 1973, as Allende was overthrown and Watergate moved towards its climax. By the following year, he was co-writing with Jim Ridgeway another column in the *Voice* on the economy, ‘Surplus Value’, later expanding across the political scene as ‘The Greasy Pole’ and finally ‘The Moving Target’. Soon he was appearing in the *New York Review of Books*, *More*, and a raft of other publications. Coming to Manhattan for the first time in the summer of 1976, and staying in the capacious apartment that by then he occupied in Central Park West, bohemian Art Deco in feel, was a revelation for me: streaking like a literary—and social—meteor across the cityscape, he had entered into the plenitude of his gifts. As soon as I read copies of the *Voice* that were littered around the sitting-room overlooking the park—I was scarcely

¹⁷ *A Colossal Wreck*, London and New York 2013, p. 351. Henceforward ACW.

¹⁸ The only title to appear under the *Voice* imprint was his own *Idle Passion: Chess and the Dance of Death*, which came out in 1974, and is notable especially for its chapter on the successes and ironies of chess—an art-for-art’s sake activity if there ever was one—as a pastime promoted by the state in the Soviet Union for the masses: pp. 146–55. The book is written in what is still closer to a classical English than a naturalized style.

aware of its existence till then—I realized that he had developed a style of attack journalism of pure exhilaration. Its mixture of elegance and insolence, at once savage and hilarious, was unlike anything I had ever seen before. In the self-important press of mainstream America, one bloviating conformist after another was being taken apart. On arriving at his ‘How to be a Foreign Correspondent’, on C. L. Sulzberger,¹⁹ I suggested he photocopy everything he had produced since getting to the States, and assemble the columns he was carelessly dumping or scattering about him for a future collection. Much later, he would draw on them for *Corruptions of Empire*.

Over time, an American legend grew up that Alexander had hit local journalism like a bolt of lightning by introducing an English fashion of polemical writing, unknown in the US, but familiar in Britain. I lost count of the number of Stateside obituaries that repeated this notion. Nothing could be further from the truth. In point of style, Alexander himself did not write like this in London: his pieces in the TLS were often quite stilted, in keeping with the conventions of the paper and the period. Of his father Alexander observed: ‘He wrote fast, with a beautifully easy style’, but Claud was himself the first to say this was not always so, remarking that in his mid-twenties, ‘I wrote slowly and my style was erratic.’²⁰ The incomparable zing of ‘Press Clips’ was not imported from the UK; it was invented in the US. Still less had its object anything to do with British example. In Ukania, criticism of the press in the press has long been taboo, governed by the Fleet Street maxim that dog does not eat dog—a rule breached only where crime rather than ideology or politics is at issue.²¹ Murdoch can offer a good conscience to all, but even in the most independent of venues—say, the *London Review of Books*—treating *belles âmes* of the *Guardian* or *Independent* along Cockburn lines would be unthinkable.

In New York, the *Voice* of the time was generally regarded as the most radical weekly in the country. But Alexander’s columns were well to the left of its centre of gravity, and in due course the distance between them

¹⁹ For which see CE, pp. 187–92.

²⁰ Compare ACW, p. 269, with *In Time of Trouble*, p. 158, where Claud supplies a lively enumeration of assorted affectations and failings in his early prose.

²¹ *Private Eye*, of course, has long targeted ‘the Street of Shame’. But its darts are mostly sub-political—gadfly gossip picking at scandal rather than demolishing cant or mystification.

led to his departure over the most predictable of local flash-points, Israel. In early 1984, the editor of the *Voice*—a former stalwart of the *New York Times*—suspended him for having two years earlier received a grant to write a book on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon from an Institute of Arab Studies, by then extinct for want of funds. Overwhelmingly, readers of the paper expressed incredulity and anger at the decision. But the upshot was never in doubt: Zionism was not to be trifled with. Prompted by Andy Kopkind and seeing an opportunity, Victor Navasky hired Alexander for the *Nation* on the spot.²² The move was a boon to both paper and author. The column that Alexander negotiated with Navasky, named ‘Beat the Devil’ after Claud’s most successful novel, gave him two facing pages each fortnight, a space in which he could vary his palette and amplify his register beyond the *staccato* of ‘Press Clips’. For his discovery of America had been not only of a political landscape vaster and more energizing than Britain, but of a literary landscape wilder and more liberating. Of himself he said, much later, that the prose stylists who had attracted ‘an Anglo-Irish lad hopelessly strapped into the corsets of Latinate gentility’ were always ‘American rough-housers’; and once across the Atlantic, though he never tried to imitate them, ‘they all taught me that at its most rapturous, its most outraged, its most exultant, American prose can let go and teach you to let go’,²³ releasing him for writing of the kind he perfected in these years.

He was much in demand. By the turn of the eighties, he had a political column in the *Wall Street Journal*, covered restaurants for *House and Garden*, could be read in *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Vanity Fair* and *American Film Institute*, and—at his most accomplished—in *Grand Street*. But his main impact was on the *Nation* itself, whose circulation doubled from a lowly 24,000 the year after he moved to it, and nearly doubled again the following year. Navasky attributed the increase to his

²² For his eviction from the *Voice* and arrival at the *Nation*, see the editorial by David Schneiderman and Alexander’s reply in the *Voice*, 18–24 January 1984—followed by the protests of the paper’s readers, 1–7 February—and the editorial by Victor Navasky in the *Nation*, 18 February 1984. Many years later, Alexander would recall that the first item he ever wrote for the *Voice* about Palestinians, around 1973, was censored by it: see ‘Palestine Down the Decades’, in *End Times: The Death of the Fourth Estate*, co-edited with Jeffrey St Clair, Petrolia and Oakland 2007, p. 327.

²³ ACW, p. 296—after which Alexander proceeds to mordant judgement of the ‘pell-mell bluster’ of gonzo journalism in general and Hunter S. Thompson in particular—‘like Evel Knievel, Thompson’s stunts demanded that he arc higher and further with each successive sentence’s outrage to propriety’.

direct-mail campaigns, but few doubted a Cockburn effect. ‘Beat the Devil’ changed the face of the *Nation*, not least in the brim-full Letters Pages it elicited, where Alexander delighted in riposting *con brio*: no one in the history of the *Nation* ever received or replied to so many challenges from readers. He had found his best audience.

Yet at the height of his success as the funniest and fiercest columnist in New York, a stylish man about town as well as of letters, what had lured him to the States, and made him the writer he became, was slipping away. He had arrived amid the high drama of Nixon’s fall from power, and thrived during the lachrymose Carter years, as the Democrats ushered in the reign of neo-liberalism and its footstool in human rights. A mocking fable about the President of malaise and a pioneering exploration of political ecology, both co-authored with Ridgeway, were the fruit of this turn.²⁴ But in a clairvoyant piece as early as 1976, Alexander saw that the future lay with Reagan, who was setting the political agenda to come. Once in power, Alexander gave him no mercy, in one blistering entry after another in a sequence that would make up ‘Annals of the Age of Reagan’ in *Corruptions of Empire*, as his Presidency came to a close. Nor did he spare the nominal opposition to it. Shortly after joining the *Nation*, Alexander could still co-sign with Andy Kopkind an oblique suggestion that a vote for Mondale was necessary in 1984, soon retracted, and four years later retain some hope in the Rainbow Coalition behind Jackson, fading almost as quickly.²⁵ By the end of the decade he had concluded of America’s two parties, along with popular wisdom, that if you insist on choosing the lesser of two evils, you are liable to end up with both.

²⁴ *Smoke: Another Jimmy Carter Adventure*, New York 1978, and *Political Ecology*, New York 1979, notable for Alexander’s dantesque description of the New York subway of the period, ‘Cattlecar Civilization’, pp. 159 ff, and the editors’ concluding reflections on the ambiguous implications for women’s liberation of mass female entry into the work-force, under the reign of capital: pp. 396–402 ff.

²⁵ Compare the ending of ‘The Left, the Democrats and the Future’, of 21 July 1984, CE, pp. 374–5, with his remarks two months later: ‘They keep saying that the best reason to vote for Walter Mondale is Ronald Reagan. But since Mondale filed to change his name and political identity to Reagan halfway through September, this argument doesn’t carry quite the weight that it once did’: CE, p. 378. For Jackson, see his interim judgement at the Atlanta Convention of the Democratic Party in the summer of 1988, and definitive one of the left Jackson came to represent, much later: ‘Its national champions—Bernard Sanders, Jesse Jackson, Michael Moore, Jim Hightower—are all phonies’: *Imperial Crusades*, London and New York 2004, p. 52.

In the eighties, too, the shift to the right was not just political, but social and cultural; the self-professedly liberal mainstream abetting the conservative turn across the board, and once radical outliers reduced to feeble squeaks. It was the time of *The New Criterion*, ‘the only magazine of its kind that arrives at the bookstore covered in cobwebs’, when *Rolling Stone* had become a fanzine, and *The Voice* was ‘so spavined with Democratic reform politics that it needs crutches to get out of the paddock’.²⁶ As the country was going, so went the city. In the seventies, much of New York was unsafe, most of the town was hideous, Manhattan was leaking industry, and the municipality teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. But culturally and politically, the city continued to pulse with a ramshackle vitality. In the following decade, with the lift-off of the Reagan boom, stock and real-estate prices soared, and the era of Trump and Boesky set in—developers ‘swarming all over New York like cockroaches, seeking out, with intent to destroy, any structure with the least pretensions to dignity and grace’,²⁷ and a social polarization that has since turned Manhattan into a reservation of the rich. Alexander had always enjoyed buccaneering raids into the *beau monde*. But like his father, he never fell captive to it. Increasingly coarsened into a cityscape of bloated plutocrats, servile intellectuals and shivering homeless, the metropolis lost its allure. For all his debonair swathe through so many of its milieux, his only close friends in New York were in one way or another marginal to it: Edward Said, Palestinian in a fastness of Zionism; Andy Kopkind, gay out of New England; Ben Sonnenberg, cripple amid a forest of gyms. By mid-decade, Alexander was spending increasing time elsewhere, Vermont or Key West. Eventually, turbulence in his personal life brought Central Park West to an end. By the time *Corruptions of Empire* came out in 1987, he was on the road across the country.

To the Lost Coast

The book, a hugely popular success, brought him into direct contact with his readers, as he travelled through the nation, talking about it in small towns, campuses and independent bookstores, lugging battered

²⁶ CE, p. 399.

²⁷ CE, pp. 136–7: ‘If it were the Pentagon threatening such destruction by aerial bombardment, there might be a shred of hope. In all likelihood the projectiles would fall far from their targets and merely disintegrate an unoffending hospital or school. But with real-estate developers, we do not even have the comfort of this uncertainty. Comes the demolition order and the wreckers march at dawn.’

suitcases awash with his papers along with him, often in one of the classic cars of the fifties and sixties he was soon collecting. The solidarity movements with Central America, Palestine, South Africa, in which he was deeply involved, provided the rolodex for these meetings across the country. By the time the second, enlarged edition of *Corruptions* appeared in 1988, he was resident in a cheap motel in Aptos (population 6,000), just south of Santa Cruz, drawn there by friendship with Frank Bardacke, political activist and historian of the United Farm Workers, who lived in nearby Watsonville; also close enough to keep a fond eye on his daughter Daisy, installed at UCSC. Soon he was often down in Topanga, not far from UCLA, working with Susanna Hecht on the book they brought out in 1990 on the Amazon, *The Fate of the Forest*, a landmark in the literature. In December, he noted laconically:

It will be goodbye next year to Aptos and the Adobe. It looks as though I will be able to buy the house in Petrolia on the Mattole River, in Humboldt County, just south of Cape Mendocino. It must be the genes. My father quit the city life for rural life in Ireland when he was in his early forties. I'm forty-nine, but I haven't really lived in a big city since the middle eighties. Motel life is okay, but the drug trade here at the Adobe is getting dangerous.²⁸

By the following summer, he was writing from Petrolia, a hamlet of 350 souls on the Lost Coast, five to six hours drive north of San Francisco.

There he rebuilt the shack he had bought into a low-slung ranch house, its back to a steep wooded hill, with the river running under a majestic limestone bluff a hundred yards in front of it, just beyond the modest road threading along the valley. In this lovely, unassuming setting he added a library, a dark-room, stables, a garden, an orchard, a cider-house and a turret on the hill above. Decorated with murals, sculptures, banner, bower, friezes in appliqué plaster of rural life or guerrilla struggle, these outworks came to surround the house itself, of which he made a nonchalant *Wunderkammer* of objects, drawings, photographs, paintings, bibelots out of every epoch of colloquial American taste from the twenties to the seventies, picked up in auctions or junk-shops across the country. In moving to this retreat, he invoked the example of his father, but if genes were at work in its creation, they came from the artistic gifts and rustic sensibility of his mother. A craftsman with words, Alexander

²⁸ *The Golden Age Is In Us*, London and New York 1995, p. 186. Henceforward GA.

was—quite unlike Claud—a craftsman with things, too, designing anything from a wooden sink or wash-basin to a retractable bed or a muslin bunk-veil, and collaborating with local artisans in the growth of the strange *Gesamtkunstwerk* that over time his home in Petrolia became, complete with horses, cats, parakeets, dog and cockatoo.

All of this cost money. In his dealings with it, Alexander differed little from Claud, as he was aware: ‘My father’s Micawberish struggle, pursued with heroic tenacity to virtually the very moment he died . . . to keep clear of financial disaster greatly conditioned my attitude to credit.’²⁹ His love of all that is tangible being much greater, however, his tastes—automobile, sartorial, architectural—though never grand, were more expensive, and the debts he ran up larger, from an income that was mostly higher, but not necessarily steadier or more secure: a columnist can be terminated from one day to the next. So he too could be careless, or ruthless, in fiduciary matters: cause of the only tensions—political differences aside—I ever observed in his many friendships, though ruptures were in the end usually healed. It was the other side of his style of independence, in its fashion the opposite of any ordinary self-interest: he could walk away from a debt others would respect as he could from a position others would covet. Something not dissimilar was true of his relations with women. Few men have been more attractive to them. Refusals of him must have been rare. It was sometimes said he had a weakness for the well-off, and it is true that among his partners were a number of surnames known for wealth or birth. But the gamut of his affections knew no class distinction: from London to Petrolia, he could be as readily épris of a working-class girl as of a millionaire’s daughter, and often more lastingly so. With few exceptions, he remained on good terms with former lovers, typically still with fond memories of him. But he never committed himself wholly to any woman. In part, I think, the reason may have lain in the intensity of his love for his father, with which no other human being could compete. But it was a function of his way of being independent too. The life of the senses and their passions was central to him. But he resisted the rhythms of cohabitation, which never suited him. The remoteness of Petrolia was a guard against them: few women would sue to share it.

Sonnenberg might compare the Lost Coast to Kamchatka, but its remoteness was not isolation: if the *Wall Street Journal* ceased to publish him

²⁹ CE, p. 14.

in 1990, the NYRB long before, he continued into the mid-nineties to delight and appall readers of the *Nation*, gained a column in the *Los Angeles Times*, and appeared in syndicated form in many a smaller outlet across the land, not to speak of the country's most radical local newspaper, the *Anderson Valley Advertiser* in adjoining Mendocino county. More significant was a further spiral downwards in the political environment. The eighties had seen a rightward shift in the centre of gravity of the American political system under the Reagan Presidency, but in the margins outside it there had been a vigorous movement of solidarity with the Central American revolutions that Washington was determined to strangle. The nineties opened with the pay-off for bi-partisan support for the Contras. By the time Alexander was on the West Coast, the Sandinistas had been brought down in Nicaragua, and the movement was over. A year later came triumph over the Evil Empire, and the victory of Operation Desert Storm. Worse followed, with the installation of Clinton: a course correction of the ruling order whose demobilization of opposition more than outweighed any of the weak palliatives it offered to the grip of neo-liberalism at home, let alone its escalation of imperial swagger abroad.

It was in this lowering context that Alexander composed the most achieved of all his works, *The Golden Age Is In Us*, its very title—and epigraph from Lévi-Strauss—a defiance of the time. Presented as a record of 'journeys and encounters' between 1987 and 1994, each entry accorded time and place, it is a beautifully designed retro-construction of his life and his writing in these years, interspersed with letters—indignant, amused or elated—from enemies, friends, readers at large. Assembled and dated into a narrative after the fact, the book switches register effortlessly from the literary to the historical, the existential to the polemical, the anecdotal to the analytical, the satirical to the biographical, under the overarching sign of the political.

From the start, long before Clinton was elected, Alexander foresaw what the governor of Arkansas, mired in state-level malfeasance and connexions to the Contra programme, would mean as a ruler of the country: Walmart jobs for the many and Marc Rich pardons for the few. Within five months of the new Presidency he was writing: 'The Clinton administration is over. Oh, it will drag on in a thickening twilight of new beginnings and fresh tomorrows', under a ruler whose language bespoke his vision: 'Clinton's sloppy, tired phrases limp through the reality of America like

an obese Sunday jogger waddling down the road.³⁰ Of his claim to diplomatic fame, Alexander, abandoning mockery, wrote in words that are no less implacably actual today:

It would take the pen of Swift to evoke the nauseating scenes of hypocrisy, bad faith and self-delusion on the White House lawn today, crammed as it was with people who for long years were complicit in the butchery and torture of Palestinians and the denial of their rights, now applauding the 'symbolic handshake' that in fact ratified further negation of those same rights. In the shadow of an American President with the poise and verbiage of the manager of a McDonald's franchise, Arafat produced oratory so meagre it made Rabin sound like Cicero.

Right now, Palestinians get the right to manage the world's largest prison, the Gaza Strip, plus one cow town. It's as though the Irish in 1921 got Tralee plus a few acres in West Cork, with the British holding the entire eastern half, Belfast, Dublin, Waterford, plus all the resources, with its army free to roam at will across the Irish enclaves, themselves fragmented by British highways and drained of water. There will be no Palestinian sovereignty and an economy completely subordinated to Israel's.³¹

Abroad, the travesties of the French Revolution at its bicentennial—all those economic royalists mustered behind their bulletproof glass on the Champs Elysées, gazing at Mitterrand's march-past of strobe-lit kitsch—were followed by the cremation of the Russian Revolution, in Gorbachev's 'cubic metres of hot air' and the hopeless nostalgia of those who tried to bring him down.³² *The Golden Age Is In Us* ends with the death of Andy Kopkind, and the memory of Patricia's five years earlier. But its effect is the opposite of a threnody: from the first page to the last, it is entertaining, inspiring, uplifting. The opening entry from Key West sets the tone:

There was a funeral in the graveyard across the street this morning; an old-fashioned black one, with a drummer out in front of the coffin. Thump thump thump. I find myself sketching out the music for my own funeral: the aria at the start of *Così fan tutte*, sung by the flirty girls.

Leftists' funerals can be a trial: too much sententious linking of the expired human with the forward, though mostly thwarted, march of history.³³

Punching back

By the time *The Golden Age* appeared in 1995, Alexander had joined Ken Silverstein, who had been one of his interns at the *Nation*, as co-editor

³⁰ GA, p. 330; ACW, p. 73.

³² GA, pp. 110–1, 77, 223–4.

³¹ GA, p. 346.

³³ GA, p. 5.

of *CounterPunch*, a fortnightly newsletter Silverstein had created in Washington, roughly on the model of *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, focussing on the scandals and corruptions of the nation's capital. A year later, the two collaborated on a book scything through the tundra of political hacks, pundits, lobbyists, fawners, fixers and ranters in and around DC. In its portraits of leading journalists and commentators of the day, *Washington Babylon* is an afterlife of 'Press Clips'.³⁴ But the inspiration for the project came from much further back, in the work Claud wrote to pay his passage back to Europe, *High Low Washington*, published under the *nom de guerre* of '30-32'. Witnessing close-up the American political system under the Hoover Administration, Claud harboured few illusions it would be much altered by the advent of Roosevelt, who would probably be carried to power by 'the resentment, bewilderment, and an imbecile belief in easy solutions to gigantic contradictions' of voters in a country whose future was that of 'a great military and naval power irrevocably launched on a career of financial and commercial imperialism'. With adjustments for period style, Claud's judgement of the role of Democrats and Republicans in the political firmament could have been written by his son. The last sentence of *High Low Washington* reads: 'There are times when the American public, in its attitude of mingled cynicism, indulgence and devotion to its two historic parties, recalls to mind that old man of Khartoum, who, it is recorded:

Kept two black sheep in his room,
They remind me, he said,
Of two friends that are dead,
But I cannot remember of whom.³⁵

In the wake of *Washington Babylon*, and perhaps not unconnected with it, Alexander's space in the *Nation*, which had always formed a sort of liberated territory within its normal regimen, shrank. Under its new

³⁴ Rush Limbaugh 'the dirigible of drivel', Sidney Blumenthal that 'notorious Clinton brown-noser', Michael Kinsley 'entering holy orders at the Cathedral of St Microsoft in Seattle', Thomas Friedman 'maturing in the cask of self-importance at the *New York Times*'. More clearly even than in *Corruptions of Empire*, a chronological line is drawn between the early to mid-seventies and what followed: 'The story of *Washington Babylon* is of how a moment of optimism in American political life, in the immediate aftermath of Watergate and the exposure of that scandal, was betrayed and destroyed. What's remarkable, indeed, is how the Nixon era, when contrasted with the current state of affairs, seems like an age of enlightenment and promise': *Washington Babylon*, London and New York 2000, pp. 11, 7, 25-6, vii-ix.

³⁵ *High Low Washington*, New York 1932, pp. 267-8.

editor, Katrina vanden Heuvel, a redesign of the magazine at the end of 1995 had downgraded his two-page facing spread to overleaf status, and in 1997 he was cut to one page. Energies undiminished, the following year he co-produced with Jeffrey St Clair *Whiteout*, an investigative study of the CIA's long-standing uses of the narcotics trade across the world for the financing of its undercover operations, and when Silverstein left *CounterPunch* to write a book of his own, St Clair joined Alexander on the paper as co-editor in early 1999. It was still a modest newsletter of six to eight pages, published out of Washington, appearing once every two weeks with a month of closure during the summer, whose circulation had not risen greatly above an initial thousand or so readers, to all intents and purposes existent only in print form.

Overnight, 11 September 2001 changed this. That morning *CounterPunch* was online with its editors' reaction. The response was electric. From then on, it went out daily, and its readership soared. By February 2002 it was being published from Petrolia, its infrastructure—material and financial—run by Alexander's valiant friend and neighbour Becky Grant. For a few years, the website traffic of *CounterPunch* exceeded that of the *Washington Post* or *Los Angeles Times*. By 2007, Alexander and Jeff could write: 'These days, at the end of each month here at *CounterPunch*, we can look at the daily breakdown of our 3 million or so hits, 300,000 page views and 100,000 unique visitors and see that we've had some 15,000 regular readers on US military bases around the world. For the time being, the old David vs Goliath struggle of the left pamphleteers battling the vast print combines of the news barons has equalled up.'³⁶

Alexander's life in Petrolia, as Jeff's in Portland, was transformed by the demands of this take-off. For Alexander, *CounterPunch* became what *The Week* had been for Claud: a self-produced publication run on a shoe-string, in which he and his co-editor enjoyed a freedom of complete independence that no journalist working for a proprietor ever knows.

³⁶ *End Times*, pp. 1–2. 'David and Goliath' was the title Claud gave to his chapter on Otto Schuette's use of the 'humble mimeograph machine' in his successful battle with the radio combine in *High Low Washington*: pp. 161–2, 21. Alexander, celebrating the internet as a successor, cautioned against imagining it made up for other deficiencies: 'For now, at least, we have the web. We're infinitely better off than we were thirty years ago. The only trouble is, the left hasn't got too many ideas. We should stop whining about the corporate press and get on with a new programme': *End Times*, p. 108.

Computer had replaced mimeograph, and commentary now capped inside story (with which Alexander's brothers Andrew and Patrick kept the paper well supplied from Washington and the Mid-East). But the passion behind the project, the impetus of its attack, and—not least—the international range of its readership, unlike that of any other radical publication in the States before or since, were the same.

In one regard, however, there was a difference. As a journalist, Claud was—temperamentally, if not always circumstantially—a singleton ace. Alexander was, strikingly, the opposite. Few writers of prose have been as inimitable, but extreme individuality of style did not spell any individualism of practice. His natural element was, on the contrary, collaboration. Of the seventeen books he published, thirteen were co-authored or co-edited. From Robin Blackburn to Jim Ridgeway, Andy Kopkind to Susanna Hecht, Ken Silverstein to Jeff St Clair, not to speak of JoAnn Wypijewski, without whom *The Golden Age* could never have taken the shape it did, he was continually engaged in common endeavors with companions of the left.³⁷

Connexion with the *Nation* had dwindled before *CounterPunch* took off. Once it did so, the tie became increasingly tenuous. In 2008, 'Beat the Devil'—halved since 1997³⁸—was halved again, its appearance cut to once a month. The result was a relationship unhealthy on both sides: a contributor writing largely—perhaps only—to make ends meet, editors resenting the appearance of his best writing in his pages, not theirs. For the *Nation* he had been a magnet so long as there was a Republican Presidency. Once a Democrat was installed, he was inevitably less welcome. Navasky, who had hired Alexander, appreciated his circulation value, and was tolerant by disposition. But an indefatigable glad-hander, as affable with bankers, senators, industrialists, film stars and corporate lawyers as with staffers and interns, he could never be comfortable with what he called Alexander's 'vicious putdowns' of so many amiable liberals—friends or contributors.³⁹ His memoirs make it clear how much

³⁷ For recollections of their time working together with him, see Jeff St Clair, 'Farewell, Alex, My Friend', *CounterPunch*, 23–25 July 2012; James Ridgeway, 'Remembering Alex Cockburn: Sharing a column, plenty of arguments, and even more laughs with one of America's sharpest poison pens', *Mother Jones*, 23 July 2012; and Ken Silverstein, 'A Brilliant Life: Remembering Alexander Cockburn', *Harper's*, 25 July 2012.

³⁸ For his dignified reaction to the change, see 'Satan Lite', *Nation*, 5 May 1997.

³⁹ 'Alexander Cockburn: He Beat the Devil', *Nation*, 13–20 August 2012.

he preferred the company of Christopher Hitchens, to whom he devotes four times the space, regretting affectionately that he should eventually have left the *Nation* over his support for the war on Iraq, when the paper would have been happy to keep him.⁴⁰ By that time, Alexander was by and large on sufferance, the Letters pages he had once lit up long gone, his fans preferring to find him elsewhere. When he died, he had become the longest-running columnist in the history of the magazine, in some sense a tribute to the forbearance of its editors; but as a relationship with any meaning the link had gone dead much earlier.

Landscapes of decay

A Colossal Wreck is, as it was designed to be, a sequel to *The Golden Age Is In Us*. But by reason of the changes in Alexander's life once he moved to Petrolia, and its premature end, the book differs from its predecessor in a number of ways. How long he had been envisaging something of the sort is uncertain. When he faced death, in 2010, he told only his family. One could not have guessed it. Before he died, two years later, he worked on his voluminous files with the help of Daisy, reducing and arranging them for the book to come. He got about two-thirds of the way through this; the rest still to be done. Missing too is the way he would have integrated and framed the work as a whole. Yet the book has been edited with great intelligence and skill, and with this proviso, can be taken as close to what he would have wanted. It covers a much longer stretch of time than *Golden Age*—eighteen years rather than eight—and its entries are more serried, less meditative, reflecting altered rhythms of existence. In Petrolia, Alexander's prodigious creative energies were directed not only to constructing, managing (and continually expanding) a kind of total micro-environment along the Mattole, but above all to running a far more intensive journalistic political enterprise than he had ever done before—daily, not weekly or fortnightly, in its demands. In its published form, the place of *CounterPunch* in the composition of *A Colossal Wreck*—the source, in one guise or another, of probably the larger part of it—is not to be seen; absent even from the index. That would certainly have been remedied had Alexander lived to frame the book. The tempo of the periodical can be felt in it.

⁴⁰ Compare *A Matter of Opinion*, New York 2005, pp. 246 and 189–91, etc. Of himself, Navasky writes disarmingly: 'I was, I guess, what would be called a left-liberal, although I never thought of myself as all *that* left': p. 111.

Politically, there was no let-up. In their *User's Manual* of him in 2000, Cockburn and St Clair demolished Gore—yet more evangelical for foreign adventures than Clinton, lugging the ball and chain of Arkansan odium to his defeat. In 2004, ‘Anybody but Bush?’ exposed the hollowness of the claim that Kerry, flaunting his medals in Vietnam, while his spokesman explained he would not have changed his vote to attack Iraq even had he known it possessed no weapons of mass destruction, was a serious alternative to the incumbent: ‘The central political issue in America today is the decay of the political system, and of the two prime parties that share its spoils. Wherever one looks, at the gerrymandered districts, the balloting methods, the fundraising, corruption steams like vapours from a vast swamp.’⁴¹ Instead of focussing relentlessly on which, the left would make itself ridiculous with indignation over Karl Rove’s ‘treason’ in leaking the identity of a CIA agent, as if this would not have been a benefaction. The reality was that ‘Rove and Cheney are the White House’s answer to Bouvard and Pécuchet, counselors who have driven George W. Bush into the lowest ratings of any American President. Yet the left remains obsessed with their evil powers. Is there any better testimony to the vacuity and impotence of the endlessly touted “blogosphere”?’⁴²

As early as 2006, before Obama was even a Presidential candidate, Alexander knew what to make of ‘the slithery junior Senator from Illinois’ and his ‘pulp of boosterism about the American dream’, remarking: ‘I used to think Senator Joe Lieberman was the man whose words I’d least like to be force-fed top volume if I was chained next to a loudspeaker in Camp Gitmo, but I think Obama is worse.’⁴³ A week before he was elected President in 2008, he wrote: ‘Those who claim that if he were white he would be cantering effortlessly into the White House do not understand that without his most salient physical characteristic, Obama would be seen as a second-tier Senator with unimpressive credentials.’ His one achievement was to amass a campaign treasury comprising ‘a vast hogswallow that, if it had been amassed by a Republican, would be the topic of thunderous liberal complaint’.⁴⁴ That anyone could be disappointed in his tenure was risible.

Such judgements of the nation’s political system spelt no alienation from the country itself. Rather the opposite: as the panorama of power

⁴¹ NLR 29, Sept–Oct 2004, p. 23.

⁴² ACW, p. 344.

⁴³ ACW, pp. 357–8.

⁴⁴ ACW, p. 411.

and its fauna became ever more repellent, Alexander's attachment to the physical and human landscape of America became, if anything, even stronger. His love of the interior, and respect for the ordinary people who live there, breathes through *A Colossal Wreck* from beginning to end. 'He could get interested in anyone or anything, which is why he could get on so well with children', Andrew remarks in his introduction, rightly singling out description of a passage through Midland, the small oil town in Texas where Bush Jr grew up, as characteristic of his brother's extraordinary sense of persons and places.⁴⁵ On eventually acquiring US nationality in late 2009, Alexander could observe: 'I've lived in every quadrant of the United States and driven across it maybe forty times—not hard when you live in the west and buy old cars from a friend in the southeast. I know the place as well if not better than many.'⁴⁶ He was completely at ease with everyone he met—his description of Claud no less true of himself: 'He was learned but never overbearing, cultivated but never patronizing. He respected and enjoyed people at all social levels and ages.'⁴⁷

What did this feeling for *l'Amérique profonde*, as Robin Blackburn has called it, mean for his politics? Writing from the Adobe motel in Aptos in November 1989, in the last piece he ever published in the TLS, Alexander commented on a year-long strike of agricultural packing workers in Watsonville: 'America is far more radical than many people imagine.'⁴⁸ Wherever there was resistance to the order of capital, he responded at full pitch to it. A decade later, he celebrated a high-water mark:

Beyond the wildest hopes of the street warriors, five days in Seattle brought us one victory after another. The protesters—initially shunned and denounced by the respectable 'inside strategists', despised by the press, gassed and bloodied by the cops and national guard—shut down the opening ceremony, prevented Clinton from addressing the WTO delegates at the Wednesday night gala, turned the corporate press from prim denunciations of 'mindless anarchy' to bitter criticisms of police brutality, and forced the WTO to cancel its closing ceremonies and to adjourn in disorder and confusion, without an agenda for the next round.

In the annals of popular protest in America these were shining hours, achieved entirely outside the conventional arena of orderly protest and white-paper activism and the timid bleats of the professional leadership of big labour and environmentalists. This truly was an insurgency from below

⁴⁵ ACW, pp. ix–x.

⁴⁶ ACW, p. 444.

⁴⁷ ACW, p. 269.

⁴⁸ 'Convulsions in California', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 November 1989.

in which all those who strove to moderate and deflect the turbulent flood of popular outrage managed to humiliate themselves.⁴⁹

But after Seattle? Earlier that year, he had observed: ‘As a force capable of reinvigorating our political DNA the left is in terrible shape.’⁵⁰ In the new century, matters worsened: after its disastrous failure to bring the Democratic administration to book in the nineties, there was a steady decline in the political confidence and ambition of the left; absence of any coherent strategy or theory under Bush; fading even of mobilization against the war in Iraq. The Democrats had recaptured Congress in 2006 in the wake of its setbacks: ‘The irony is that this sharp disillusion of the voters owes almost nothing to any anti-war movement. To say the anti-war movement is dead would be an overstatement, but not by a large margin.’⁵¹ It was enough to compare its drip-feed with opposition to the wars in Vietnam and Central America. Non-profit foundations had reduced most of the ‘progressive sector’ to dependency on corporate philanthropy, while most of the sectarian groups that once provided ‘a training ground for young people who could learn the rudiments of political economy and organizational discipline, find suitable mates, and play their role in reproducing the left’ had collapsed.⁵² With the deaths of Said and Sonnenberg, losses he felt as acutely as of Kopkind, fellow spirits had thinned too.⁵³

But jeremiads were alien to him. Throughout his life, Alexander was affirmative in every instinct. As a polemicist he was savage, but never bitter. It was a maxim of Claud’s, which he would often repeat: ‘You don’t get far by making people feel bad.’⁵⁴ A left that was a continual bearer

⁴⁹ ACW, pp. 159–60. This passage comes from the work of vivid reportage and analysis on the rising and its aftermath, co-authored with Jeff St Clair, *5 Days That Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond*, London and New York 2000, p. 113.

⁵⁰ ACW, p. 148. Among its deformations, he had noted already in the nineties, was an obsession with conspiracy theories, from Kennedy’s assassination to the attacks of 9/11. Of the former, he incurred the ire of Oliver Stone for his famous dictum: ‘Whether JFK was killed by a lone assassin or by a conspiracy has as much to do with the subsequent contours of American politics as if he had tripped over one of Caroline’s dolls and broken his neck in the White House nursery’: GA, p. 253.

⁵¹ ‘Whatever Happened to the Anti-War Movement?’, NLR 46, July–Aug 2007, p. 29.

⁵² ACW, p. 456.

⁵³ He wrote elegies for all three: Andy Kopkind in GA, pp. 420–4, Edward Said in ACW, pp. 242–4, Ben Sonnenberg in ACW, pp. 470–4.

⁵⁴ CE, p. 402.

of dire tidings was self-defeating. As he himself put it: ‘You can’t go through life just holding your nose.’⁵⁵ He would rebuke anyone culpable of what he regarded as a needless pessimism—more than once myself (I naturally denied the charge).⁵⁶ In his last years, that warmth and confidence of outlook, expression of both temperament and conviction, did not disappear with the enfeeblement of the left, but under its pressure, a displacement occurred. Who now was harnessing ‘those vital, idealistic energies that always move through the American firmament, awaiting release’?⁵⁷ Increasingly, radicalism had migrated to the right. For two decades, though no less impotent than the left, it was thence that 80 per cent of the political energy in the country had come. Contrary to the contemptuous diatribes of the left, the Tea Party was a genuine popular movement—if only of ‘the fury and frustration of a huge slab of white Americans running small businesses’—such as it had failed to generate. Elsewhere ‘abandoned constituencies’ written off as uneducable were falling back on the Bill of Rights and Second Amendment.⁵⁸ They had his sympathy.

In this frame of mind, he parted company on two issues with those who most admired him. Fire-arms he defended as a patrimony of the American Revolution, whose rifle shows were vibrant displays of anti-government strains in popular culture. The price for gun control, in handing more power to the state, would be greater than any gain in safety. Global warming he dismissed as fear-mongering. The two positions, often taxed with a common know-nothing populism, differed. The first was in tune with a popular constituency of real depth, on a relatively marginal question in the larger scheme of American capitalism, about which no politician in the country called for more than tinkering. The second, on a fundamental question where popular feeling was by and large a bemused indifference, had corporate backing from the extractive and chemical industries. What prompted Alexander’s quixotic attacks on ‘warmism’, as he called it? A craftsman’s suspicion of big science; over-reliance on friends felt to speak with authority on the subject; attachment to barouches predating catalytic converters; perhaps an element of *épater*—he refused political correctness in any form.⁵⁹ Aware of his

⁵⁵ GA, p. 300.

⁵⁶ Inter alia, *5 Days That Shook the World*, p. 4.

⁵⁷ ‘Anybody but Bush?’, p. 25.

⁵⁸ ACW, pp. 476, 23.

⁵⁹ In the nineties, ‘suddenly we were in the wastelands of Political Correctness’, he noted, where ‘sexual preference (non-heterosexual) became LGBTQ, though another capital may have been added while my back was turned’: ACW, p. 533.

isolation on the topic, he was sensitive about it, resigning from NLR in 2010 over Mike Davis's essay on the Anthropocene, though returning not long afterwards.⁶⁰ In each of these quirks of his last years, he was personally at variance with himself. The defender of hunting culture was a lover of animals, who so far as one knew never loosed off a weapon in his life; the denier of climate change was a passionate campaigner against logging and champion of wild-life.⁶¹

Qualities of freedom

How then are Alexander's politics best described? There was a seemingly paradoxical, in reality dialectical, tension in them. He was at once a libertarian and a Leninist. In his make-up, the balance between the two could shift—a libertarian Leninist at the beginning, was he closer to a Leninist libertarian at the end?—but their delicate interplay marked him throughout. The last burst of left activism in his life-time was the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011. How did he react to it? 'The strength of the OWS movement lies in the simplicity and truth of its basic message: the few are rich, the many are poor. In terms of its pretensions the capitalist system has failed', he commented. 'But for all its simplicity and truth, how much staying power does the OWS message have as presently deployed? In terms of its powers of repression, the system has not failed. To date, the OWS movement has not even confronted the moneyed elite with a threat on the scale of the 1999 protests in Seattle.'⁶² OWSers, as he called them—read: political browsers—were certainly better than pwogs—another coinage—of the liberal establishment. But they lacked much historical memory or coherent strategy. In his best mocking—not annihilating—vein, he concluded:

It must be the dratted Leninist in me, even after years of therapy. Surfeited with somewhat turgid paeans to the democratic gentility of the OWSers, I clamber up to the dusty top shelf, furtively haul down Vladimir Ilyich's 'April Theses' of 1917 and dip in: end the war, confiscate the big estates,

⁶⁰ For the position that provoked him: Mike Davis, 'Who Will Build the Ark?', NLR 61, Jan–Feb 2010, pp. 29–46. Alexander had been a great admirer of Mike's *City of Quartz*, of which he wrote certainly the finest notice: see 'The Power of Sunshine', *London Review of Books*, 10 January 1991.

⁶¹ For this radical, anti-capitalist environmentalism, see one of his most eloquent essays: "'Win-Win" with Bruce Babbitt: The Clinton Administration Meets the Environment', NLR 1/201, Sept–Oct 1993, pp. 46–59.

⁶² ACW, p. 513.

immediately merge all the banks into one general national bank . . . The blood flows back into my cheeks, my eyes sparkle. Then, hearing my daughter's footfall outside the library, I shove Lenin back into place, scuttle back down the ladder and pluck a copy of E. F. Schumacher, even though I'm not at all sure what is on the owners' reading lists or Twitter menu.⁶³

Zuccotti Park was a far cry from Syntagma Square, but it was early days. For opposition to the system to have a future, it would have to be less *bon enfant*. After addressing one of the few, small rallies against the war in Afghanistan, he noted: 'There's no sign of populism in any energetic form. The anger is formulaic.'⁶⁴ Alexander loved America, but as the title of *A Colossal Wreck* makes clear, it was without an iota of complacency about it. On taking US citizenship in the end, thirty-seven years after arriving in New York, he wrote: 'I have plenty of positive thoughts about America and am very happy to be stepping aboard a sinking ship.'⁶⁵

As an individual, one is tempted to say Alexander came about as close to Marx's image of an existence emancipated after capitalism had passed away, and with it money and marriage, as perhaps anyone could. He drove, phoned, read, cooked, courted, gardened, decorated, photographed and wrote with the same combination of grace and élan: a revolutionary *sprezzatura* all his own. Mental and manual labour, the skills of the hand and the arts of the mind, were undivided in him. He was like a three-dimensional materialism come to life. Exceptional temperaments like his are beyond imitation. Yet though they cannot offer existential models, they may suggest regulative ideals: 'by the quality of life, art and freedom that radicals commend, so will radicals prevail'.⁶⁶

Politically, on the other hand, the example Alexander set retains full force. The newest levies of the American left are in better shape, intellectually at any rate, than he may have realized. There, energy and imagination are not in short supply. It is enough to consider the three

⁶³ ACW, p. 512. For how seriously Alexander took questions of organization and strategy, in no formulaic spirit, see the series of reflections on the short-term power of demonstrations, the rarity of catching the state by surprise, the long-term requirements of building a movement, and the need for tactics of 'publicity, harassment, obstructionism', in *5 Days That Shook the World*, pp. 9–10, 117.

⁶⁴ ACW, p. 450. ⁶⁵ ACW, p. 444.

⁶⁶ For this credo of Alexander's, see the full passage: 'By Way of an Introduction', *Serpents in the Garden: Liaisons with Culture & Sex*, co-edited with Jeff St Clair, Petrolia and Oakland 2004, p. ix.

most impressive publications to emerge in the Bush–Obama era, *n+1*, *Jacobin* and *Endnotes*, each in its own register—respectively: cultural, social and economic—expressing a clear-cut rejection of the established order. Every generation has to find its own way to that break, be it by *Kulturkritik*, protest report, or value-theory. Striking, however, is the paradox of a common sensibility: what can be described as an apolitical anti-capitalism—deeply hostile to the system of capital, but largely mute before the embodiments of its power, and operations of its empire.⁶⁷ *CounterPunch* makes no such nicety. In directing it with an inexpugnable refusal of any paltering or temporization, Alexander put politics in command. *A Colossal Wreck* stands as an inspiration to do likewise.

⁶⁷ *Jacobin*, dedicating its summer issue of 2012 to Alexander, managed to publish in the same number an inconspicuous summons to its readers to vote for Obama, containing scarcely a mention of the world beyond America, let alone—not a single word—about the role of his administration in it. So too, with varying degrees of reserve or enthusiasm, in blogs rather than printed articles in the journal, the editors of *n+1* curtsied bashfully to the Lord of the Drones. American self-absorption accounts, of course, for some of this, as if only what happens to US citizens really matters. *Endnotes*, which is considerably further to the left and has British origins, does not suffer from the same blindness, but engagement with the American political order or imperial system does not feature among its concerns. It would be wrong to make too much of this pattern, bantam-weight enough—not to be equated with the congenital parasitism of traditional liberal organs on the Democratic Party. The merits and interest of all three periodicals are much more significant than their failings.