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ALEXANDER COCKBURN

1941–2012

THE CLAIM THAT Alexander Cockburn practised a new type of radical journalism is one he would probably have disputed, perhaps pointing as precedent to his father Claud's remarkable exposés in his thirties newsletter, *The Week*. The machinations of the English ruling-class admirers of the Nazis who aimed to convert appeasement into alliance were first uncovered in *The Week*, and it was there that they were dubbed 'The Cliveden Set'. Claud Cockburn rose to tough challenges in a career that ran from *The Times* to the *Daily Worker*, from the Roaring Twenties to the height of the Cold War. Claud—and Patricia, Claud's wife and Alexander's mother—were certainly a constant source of inspiration to Alexander, as his readers were often reminded. Nevertheless, in the changed conditions of the sixties and seventies, innovation was required to reinvent the journalism of the *franc-tireur*, often roving behind enemy lines, alert to the infinite varieties of liberal claptrap, and unveiling the real world of Big Money and the National Security State. The Ages of Reagan and Clinton, Bush and Obama, were different from those of Roosevelt, Hitler and Stalin, or the high Cold War; but they bred their own corruptions, poisons and perils. Alexander's outlaw columns and newsletter, *CounterPunch*, held the new power elites to account and showed up the conformism of the serious organs of opinion.

Claud Cockburn had had to contend with two decades of fascist advance; but he saw the tide of history turn with organized labour, anti-fascist partisans, the Red Army and colonial independence. Alexander launched into radical journalism in the red sixties but soon had to confront the end of labour's forward march, Soviet collapse, the rise of the new right and

a species of progressivism that embraced the Atlantic establishment's goals. An extraordinary amnesia developed that allowed supposedly liberal or left-wing writers to become the cheer-leaders for NATO expansion and a new version of the West's civilizing mission. Prior to the crumbling of the USSR Alexander had frequently warned against neo-con 'threat inflation'; the exaggerations became even more ludicrous following the terrorist attack of 9/11, panicking the public into support for the occupation of Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq.

In these conditions, Alexander had to be the vanguard and the rearguard rolled into one: at the centre of what was going on, but at a great distance from the petty accommodations of many of his profession, too. He saw himself first and foremost as a working journalist. But though he was the author of some remarkable reportage, this was not his true distinction. Alexander took up his post as sentinel and outrider in an age when star columnists and self-important anchor men had eclipsed mere reporters and editors. The Big Feet distracted the audience from the crimes being perpetrated in full view. If the famous columnists were engineers of consent, Alexander was on hand to reveal their evasions and complicities. Together with a tiny band of brothers and sisters he held the armies of reaction at bay, allowing the forces of renewal time to regroup.

Alexander arrived in the United States in 1972, just about the moment that one sort of left peaked and a new left, based in the social movements, was struggling to be born. In the decade before that Alexander had helped in the early re-shaping of *New Left Review*, joining the editorial committee and becoming managing editor in 1966. At that point the journal was run by a rather intense collective of less than a dozen editors, meeting for several hours every fortnight. Alexander had a day job as assistant editor at the *Times Literary Supplement* and then, by about 1967, at the *New Statesman*. We at NLR were particularly grateful for Alexander's extraordinary gift for taking an important article and making it readable and memorable. Whether it was a minimal sub-edit or a wholesale make-over, Alexander knew what needed to be done; and did it with such tact and skill that the contributor was invariably grateful. There was something philosophical as well as technical in his approach as editor that foreshadowed his future as a writer.

Alexander did not invest in any opposition between the New Left and the Old; rather, he was pleased when the two were able to come together, as

he explained in *Seven Days in Seattle* (2000), co-written with Jeffrey St. Clair. Without subscribing to any labour metaphysic, he judged the self-proclaimed agents of change by their real impact on working people. In 1966 Alexander and I edited for Penguin and *New Left Review* a collection entitled *The Incompatibles: Trade Union Militancy and the Consensus*, which brought together trade-union organizers, leftwing journalists including Paul Foot, Marxist economists and two liberals—Michael Frayn and Philip Toynbee—who mocked the demonization of union activists by Labour as well as Conservative pundits. Jack Jones, the Transport Workers leader who, like Claud Cockburn, had fought in Spain, also contributed. Claud himself helped us to plan the book as well as contributing to it. After one strenuous debate on the limitations of the strike weapon he urged us to put the disagreement in the book rather than strive for a perfectly correct position. Sales were reasonable, not amazing; but the book did register a syndicalist militancy that was to upset three British governments, those of Wilson, Heath and Callaghan.

We followed up with another jointly edited collection, *Student Power*, which caught the wave in 1968–69 and sold 75,000 copies. In our own undergraduate days we had despised student politics for its frivolity and careerism, but the wave of student occupations in the late sixties, linked to anti-war and labour struggles, was a quite different matter. Alexander, though himself now unconnected to the academy, wrote up a student revolt at the LSE in 1967 for *NLR*. The May events in Paris the following year saw students taking their place in an international anti-colonial and anti-capitalist revolt. Alexander was happy to give this insurgency a helping hand, but university life had no appeal for him. He was after bigger game than was to be found in the seminar room.

In January 1968 Alexander and I attended the Congress of Intellectuals in Havana and jointly submitted a paper on bureaucracy and workers' control, which drew on an eclectic range of authorities from Weber and Marcuse to Lenin, Isaac Deutscher and Che Guevara. Our argument was that ill-equipped guerrillas in Vietnam were worsting the world's most advanced military establishment, falsifying Weber's claim for the superiority of bureaucratic organization. Unfortunately I had to leave the conference early, before we had had time to straighten out some theoretical passages I had drafted or to clinch our critique of Stalinism. As Alexander subsequently recalled, he was left alone to defend some tricky passages in the 'Blackburn–Cockburn theses', in which we

assailed Weber's blindness to the true dynamic of history and urged the need to break the suffocating embrace of Brezhnevite officialdom. With the fraternal delegates from the Soviet Writers' Union glaring at this challenge, Alexander liked to claim that I had thrown him to the mangy Russian wolves—but friends assured me that he defended our case with his customary panache. Five years earlier, Alexander's first article in NLR, a review of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, had already offered luminous ideas on bureaucratic militarism and the spirit of capitalism; the issue, NLR 18, also had pieces on both workers' control and guerrilla warfare. Heller's book is set in a US airbase during the Second World War, and Alexander highlights the figure of Milo Minderbinder, a quartermaster who, in the spirit of free enterprise, has accepted a lucrative offer from the Germans to bomb his own base, and offers his own account of the ideal relation between capitalism and war: 'Frankly, I'd like to see the government get out of war altogether and leave the whole field to private industry. If we pay the government everything we owe it, we'll only be encouraging government control and discouraging other individuals from bombing their own men and planes. We'll be eliminating their incentive.' Sixty years later, this has moved beyond parody.

New worlds

In the early seventies Alexander was pondering his move across the Atlantic to the country where the big decisions were being made and new movements being born. Of course Claud had also made this move in the twenties and, like many European leftists, found the US context refreshing. Alexander was long to appreciate the relative ease of communication across class lines in the United States. Even when based mainly in New York he travelled extensively in search of contemporary America. 'Press Clips', Alexander's column at the *Village Voice*, charted new territory in the skill and detail with which it engaged with the work of journalists in general and the new breed of opinion formers in particular. Alexander saw journalism as a craft or trade and brooked no excuses for those who out of laziness—or cowardice—endorsed the *idées reçues* of the age.

Alexander explained to me that his London days had taught him effective techniques of ridicule and rebuttal. The satirical fortnightly *Private Eye* had shown how to combine muck-raking with an ability to expose the grandees of Fleet Street. Claud Cockburn was again the link here; *The*

Week was revered by the *Eye*'s founders. Guest editing an issue of the *Eye*, Claud trained a steely focus on political misdeeds, business scandals and abuse of authority. This approach became the staple of the magazine's back half and—under the rubric of 'investigative journalism'—was to be emulated by other papers who wanted their readers' respect. For many years afterwards Claud had a column in the *Eye*, in which he showed how a deadly serious point could be rendered all the more memorable by a flash of wit. Alexander understood that a well-chosen nickname affixed to an enemy of the public good could help to drive home several paragraphs of finely tuned argument. Thus Samuel 'Mad Dog' Huntington or the 'laptop bombardiers', the military philosophers who called up massive air attacks to punish Middle Eastern dictators who had strayed from their allotted role. Alexander was keenly aware of the pitfalls of 'comedy'. Only someone as brilliantly entertaining and provoking as he was would dare to pour scorn on humour—but this he did, warning that the deeper meaning of every jest was very often reactionary, and that one should always be attentive to the real message of irony, which would anyway be taken literally by many. Alexander used wit in the service of observation and as a tool to spot incongruity. In her history of *The Week*, Patricia Cockburn explained that the impact of Claud's reportage and commentary lay in his possession of an 'alien eye', the stranger's ability to see what was really happening. This was a gift that Alexander inherited.

He saw the rise and rise of the deceptively amiable—or ridiculous—figure of Ronald Reagan as the story to focus on, as early as 1976. Discussing the impact of the California governor's speech to the Republican convention, Alexander observed that he was 'the one conspicuous ideologue of the campaign'. Reagan's signature attacks on Big Government and the 'evil empire' lacked the qualifications and concessions of mainstream Republicans, with their support for détente abroad and Social Security at home, but had an appeal even to many Democrats. Reagan offered a polished version of right-wing politics without 'the crankiness of Goldwater, the uncouthness of Wallace, the unctuous crookery of Nixon'. But the true menace was in the substance masked by the emollient style. Alexander was sure that, even if he missed the nomination, Reagan was the future. Already 'Democrats were dancing to his tune'. The threat to progressive taxation, welfare and détente was palpable, though the 'anti-government' line was bogus: what Reagan really wanted was 'a different use of the government power', one that would do the bidding of the 'corporations and banks'. There would be

much more to say, but Alexander was here firing his first prophetic shots at a phenomenon that was to remake US politics. This column was written with James Ridgeway for the *Village Voice*, but it became a leitmotif for Alexander's 'Beat the Devil' column in the *Nation*, which first appeared in 1984.

The further elaboration of his argument was to occupy much of *Corruptions of Empire: Life Studies and the Reagan Era*, a book published with great éclat in 1987, on which I was very pleased to work as its Verso editor. The book's cover presented a Heartfield-style collage of Reagan and Thatcher holding hands in front of the White House, while other figures discussed in the book, from Warhol to Hitler, throng around them. Claud Cockburn, Marx and Chomsky lurk in the foliage to the left; flames and smoke are rising from the White House, the work of black incendiaries led by the figure of a British admiral, Alexander's ancestor Sir George Cockburn. The back cover-flap noted that Sir George had freed three hundred Virginian slaves and captured the White House in 1814, in one of the last actions of the War of 1812. This little vignette might supply the book's reviewers with a helpful talking point, Alexander explained, if they didn't have the time to read it.

Many of the tributes to Alexander have saluted the achievement and influence of his columns in the *Voice*. It is worth stressing that his critique was as much external as internal. Making good use of his 'alien eye', Alexander catalogued tropes of disinformation and itemized the grotesque corruptions of the public sphere. His understanding of Reagan's politics was rooted in the realities of the Iran–Contra affair, the actual conditions in occupied Palestine; he was adept at uncovering AIPAC's modes of intimidation. His critique of the *New York Times* and *Commentary*, Norman Podhoretz and *The New Republic* was devastating and observant. However, Alexander did not confine himself to duelling with the pundits of Manhattan and the Beltway. Reaganism was not just an interesting new rhetorical style. His Administration and its progeny ushered in an age in which wages lagged far behind productivity and in which outsourcing destroyed millions of jobs. The new pattern bred de-industrialization and obscene inequality. The neo-liberals celebrated deregulation and financial scams, whose heavy price Alexander chronicled just as assiduously as the outrages of 'Mad Dog' and 'Poddo'. From 1984, Alexander's 'Beat the Devil' column rescued the *Nation*—at times

almost single-handedly—from being a Democratic rag, declining into the poodle status of the *New Statesman* in the UK.

Alexander's take on the spirit of the Clinton era was brilliantly displayed in *Washington Babylon* (1996), co-authored with Ken Silverstein, an ebullient lampoon of the human zoo that is the US capital, combining insider knowledge with devil-may-care disrespect for the powers that be. The book featured eighty-odd photographs of DC's denizens in characteristic and unwittingly revealing poses, each accompanied by an explanatory caption. Thus a photo of an ageing young man with flowing locks is captioned:

Leon Wieseltier: 'You let me flap this bug with gilded wings/This painted child of dirt that stinks and stings . . .' The Tartuffe of Babylon, stabled at *The New Republic* where he has led the life of a second-tier literary dilettante . . . paltering with the interns, whose duties included walking his dog. Fainéant, full of pathetic self-conceit, Wieseltier evokes London's Grub Street of the 1890s, whose Bohemian poseurs were so well recorded by Max Beerbohm (though Wieseltier would not have the courage to make a pact with the Devil, as did Enoch Soames). Cover story for a life of marked, though no doubt merciful, lack of productivity, is that he is at work on a 'book about sighing'.

The authors of *Washington Babylon* zero in on the city's movers and shakers, its 80,000 lobbyists and such paladins of financial 'reform' as Robert Rubin, the former chair of Goldman Sachs who became Clinton's Treasury Secretary; Senators Gramm, Dodd and Nunn; Alan Greenspan; Robert Bartley of the *Wall Street Journal*; and Thomas Friedman, 'maturing in the cask of self-importance as a registered pundit of the *New York Times*'. As early as 1996, *Washington Babylon* devotes half a dozen pages to detailing how Enron's scams had thrived thanks to its assiduous wooing and gifting of the Clinton Administration and US legislators. Cockburn and Silverstein were warning their readers of the new world of financialization and Clintonomics—with rampant insider dealing, perilous asset bubbles, deregulated banking, CEO skulduggery, job losses, shrunken welfare and degraded pensions. Equally prescient were their portraits of the National Security State, as the era of Iran–Contra and proxy wars gave way after 1990 to aerial bombardment and outright invasion in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq. The book was savage and accurate enough to become the target of several lawsuits—though many declined to make themselves ridiculous by explaining

which of the various allegations was mistaken, and those with more poise claimed to enjoy the barbs. Several reprints allowed the book to emerge shorn of only a few of its more exuberant captions.

Alexander was an early champion of the environmental movement, producing a very useful reader on ‘political ecology’ with James Ridgeway in 1979. *Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers, Defenders of the Amazon*, written in collaboration with Susanna Hecht in 1990, remains an environmental classic and sold a quarter of a million copies. The book’s concern for the forest-dwellers, its challenge to developmentalism and well-chosen illustrations all lent it a special quality. Alexander’s grasp of the hard detail of ecological politics was unmatched—as demonstrated by his critique of the mainstream environmentalist groups’ capitulation to the Clinton Administration, published in NLR in 1993.¹ Latterly, Alexander’s belief that global warming might not be principally due to human action has been much criticized. Obviously he had no credentials as a climate scientist, but it is difficult to see what objection there could be to his querying the scientific consensus and probing whether the nuclear-power lobby had the safer solution. The case for concern at climate change is palpable, and the prospect dire; yet if the topic has been sidelined, it is mainstream politics and not the tiny band of sceptics that has had this effect, with the issue quietly buried at Copenhagen and Rio. As Malcolm Bull has shown, effective measures to reduce climate change pose real problems for democracy—lay involvement in the debate will be essential if these are to be minimized.²

From Petrolia to the world

Being Alexander’s friend was a wonderful thing. His bracing salutation ‘What’s up, tiger?’ was invariably the prelude to something out of the ordinary. He could light up a room or take you on the most unforeseen adventure. You never knew what was going to happen or who you were going to meet next: an exponent of extreme dance, a researcher into the military, an Italian film director, a former speech-writer for Nixon, or a photo-journalist just back from Tehran. A stroll in London’s Green Park, or a visit to a pub in Youghal, could trigger the most startling discoveries.

¹ See “‘Win-Win’: The Clinton Administration Meets the Environment’, NLR 1/201, Sept–Oct 1993.

² Malcolm Bull, ‘What is the Rational Response?’, *LRB*, 24 May 2012.

His death brings the realization that these exploits with Alexander were amongst the best times in my life—the most enjoyable and most purposeful. If you had an area of expertise, you had to expect to be relentlessly pumped for information and angles—and to see your cherished conclusions broadcast to the world with Alexander’s inimitable spin. A string of collaborators were acknowledged—James Ridgeway, Bob Pollin, Ken Silverstein, JoAnn Wypijewski, and Jeffrey St. Clair—but also interns and a network of contacts in the most various institutions. By the 1980s Alexander was writing up to three columns a week, as well as undertaking other commissions. Commenting every week on a wide range of events over nearly fifty years, he must have made mistakes; but they were never those of the crowd-pleaser or seeker after easy popularity. Alexander’s defence of the civil rights of Scientologists and sex offenders were products of an honourable libertarianism and contrarianism—principles he practised more consistently than some who embraced them rhetorically. The writing was as polished and debonair as always but the pace was relentless. Yet I’m struck that the interns who worked with Alexander, even those who have strayed far from Alexander’s politics, write of the joy of working with him.

Until overtaken by his final illness Alexander’s stamina was sustained by a rudely healthy—even pastoral—lifestyle and by an enviable ability to fall fast asleep in the middle of the evening. Alexander’s wonderful ‘Short Meat-Oriented History of the World’ in *NLR* 215 brilliantly conveyed his zest for country living. Having at first immersed himself in New York he later moved to Key West—as far south as you can get while still being in the US—and subsequently to the West Coast, first Aptos and then to distant Petrolia, a tiny settlement on the Lost Coast, where he lived for the last twenty years. These remote lairs still allowed him to keep in touch electronically and to make regular expeditions of discovery at the wheel of one of his classic cars. Alexander wrote up his road trips for *CounterPunch* as explorations of *l’Amérique profonde*, offering vivid accounts of voices from the US South, Midwest and West that are rarely heard, and of rural and small-town landscapes rarely glimpsed.

Alexander’s prose style was notable for its clarity and fidelity to the real. It seemed to come easily but this was probably deceptive. He was a voracious reader and relentless telephoner, working hard to follow up promising news trails. He had a wide network of friends and informants to whom he could turn, beginning with two remarkable brothers—one

in Washington, the other first in Russia and then in the Middle East. Alexander's laconic paragraphs also owed something to the aphoristic Adorno of *Minima Moralia*, with his hatred of cliché and cant—but, as Edward Said put it, without the latter's 'mournfulness'. Adorno's book remained an inspiration to Alexander down to recent times; he would often request a new copy from Verso to replace those lost or given away. In one of his last books—*End Times*, co-authored with Jeffrey St. Clair—Alexander grappled with the dialectic of destruction and renewal now being played out in the newspaper industry and other media. In a remarkable three-hour interview with C-Span at the time of its publication, he predicted that the Murdoch empire would be brought low by its own cynicism and invasive brutality, as well as by the new world of cyberspace. Meanwhile, Alexander's response to the crisis of the press focused on taking advantage of the new methods of communication. In the mid-nineties he began working with Ken Silverstein on the political newsletter, *CounterPunch*, and later launched it online with co-editor Jeffrey St. Clair. Together they built it into an indispensable source of reportage and opinion, often garnering more hits than Salon.com.

My last contact with Alexander was over a piece he had written on the euro crisis which he kindly adapted for a Soho broadsheet. He found a way to arraign the Eurocrats and their shameful bullying of countries large and small, while avoiding the boorishness and chauvinism of British 'euroscepticism' and supplying sly grace-notes that complemented the more central argument:

It looks as though the eurozone may be in meltdown, which is just fine in my book. The sooner we get back to francs, lira, punts, drachma and the rest of the old sovereign currencies, the better in the long run. It used to be as much a part of going to France as choking on Gauloises smoke to change money and be handed a bundle of notes featuring the devious Cardinal Richelieu, instead of the characterless but somehow always expensive euro notes . . . The EU 'project'—a very irritating word that should be tossed in the dumpster along with 'iconic', 'meme', 'parse', and 'narrative'—is in potential outline a nightmare. Down with federalism!! Remember Simone Weil's hatred of the Roman Empire and what it did to Europe's cultural richness and diversity . . . 'What did the Roman Empire ever do for us?' the left nationalist asks in Monty Python's imperishable *Life of Brian*. 'Roads', the federalist begins tentatively. My native country of Ireland has been covered with vast roads, courtesy of the EU. We've got enough of them. Europe's got enough of them. Enough of the eurozone, enough of the 'European project'!

As the eurozone crumbles, as war threats are brandished, as tropical hurricanes lash the temperate zones and as votes are cast this November, there will be temptations to forget Alexander's counsel and give in to the despair of lesser evils. But his rigorous and glorious defiance remains as an inspiration, whose precise meanings we will have to divine and interpret for ourselves.