

ENTERTAINMENT

BOOK
REVIEW

Collected Cockburn

The wicked wit of the
Left publishes a new
book of essays.

By John Fetter
If Alexander Cockburn held to the dictum of either saying nice things or saying nothing at all, his writing output would probably decrease by 95 percent.

As the bad boy of progressive journalism, Cockburn has built his reputation by tripping up galloping Reaganhuts, venting spleen at equivocating liberals, and hoisting not a few faint-hearted lefties by their own second thoughts. To read his syndicated column "Ashes and Diamonds," run in the City Paper, his column in *The Nation* or any of the myriad of articles he publishes in other magazines and newspapers, is to discover how poisonous a pen can be.

Cockburn's new book *Corruptions of Empire* brings together many of his most entertaining and insightful dissections of folly. Divided into two sections — "Life Studies" and "An Archive of the Reagan Era, 1976-1987"

— the book gives a personalized account of the decline of English and American political culture.

Although an Irish citizen, Cockburn has made his home in the U.S. since 1973, arriving just in time to witness (and no doubt contribute to) the post-Watergate decline in America's self-image. This "foreign" perspective has given him a de Tocqueville-like angle on American foibles — after reading *Corruptions of Empire*, one truly understands how the U.S. has gone from barbarity to decadence without the intervening stage of civilization.

Unlike de Tocqueville, Cockburn doesn't spare the home turf — where he received an education (Oxford) and his first jobs in journalism (London). His landscape of the British empire in decline is cluttered with such native sons as Lord Baden-Powell, the analytical founder of the Boy Scouts, and Ian Fleming, the creator of the supreme Cold Warrior, James Bond. In these pieces ("The Scoutmaster" and "The Secret Agent"), Cockburn is at his best — demythologizing British hero-figures, revealing them as far from laudable (or even tolerable).

Cockburn's pleasure in beating the dead British imperial horse is surpassed only by his obvious delight in tackling the myth-making



Alexander Cockburn,
author of *Corruptions of
Empire*.

apparatus of the hobbled, but still dangerous American empire. Baden-Powell finds his peculiarly American expression in a figure like Walter Annenberg, Republican toady and media mogul ("The Boss"), while Jerry Bruckheimer and Don Simpson, co-producers of the movie *Top Gun* are the apparent heirs to Ian Fleming ("Top Gun").

But Cockburn doesn't resort to simple *ad hominem* attacks — his pieces are devoted more to uncovering ideologies that buttress the status quo.

Take for instance his analysis of McNeil and Let-

ter ("The Tedium Twins"). Civic ennui is not simply an unfortunate side effect of their television news show, but rather, according to Cockburn, its political raison d'être.

The narrating, humorless properties of the "MacNeill/Leiter Report," familiar to anyone who has felt fatigue creep over him or her at 7:30 Eastern time, are crucial to the show. Tedium is of the essence, since the all-but-conscious design of the program is to project vacuous alibering ("And now, for another view of Hitler...") into the mind of the viewer, until he is properly convinced that there is not one answer to the problem, but two or even three, and that since two answers are no better than none, he might as well not bother with the problem at all.

The articles in *Corruptions of Empire* are designed to combat precisely this equation of politics with boredom. Cockburn always leans his prose with humor, and yet, in so doing, doesn't trivialize his subject. The pungent wit is always anchored in Cockburn's marvelous language and an overwhelming accumulation of facts.

Furthermore, his refreshing insistence at not being even-handed or conventionally objective allows indulgence in a quality generally lacking in prosaic journalists: imagination.

Who else would envision Andy Warhol brown-nosing the brownshirts ("Adolf Hitler by A.W.") or Hercule Poirot solving the murder of Anwar Sadat ("Death on the Nile")?

As a corrective, then, to the welled conservatism of mainstream newspapers, to the infuriating diatribes of liberal magazines like *The New Republic* and to the often pallid reportage of left journals, Cockburn's work is unparalleled, both in scope and in presentation.

Like many critics, however, his precision becomes muddled when it comes time to discuss alternatives. On the economy, for instance, he lambasts the Democrats for their befuddled traditionalism — higher taxes, deficit cuts, slavish devotion to an independent Federal Reserve.

Cockburn's solution? A general nod towards full employment, redistribution of the wealth and a growth economy. Complicating factors such as capital flight, environmental constraints, continued concentration of power among multinationals are conveniently bypassed.

Similarly, Cockburn becomes relatively tight-lipped when it comes to tackling sticklers like whether to work within or outside the Democratic party, how to negotiate with the Soviet Union, how the mainstream

media should reform itself.

Of course, one could argue that posing solutions is not the role of a gadfly. Yet, for all the brilliant insights and writing of *Corruptions of Empire*, it would be fruitful if Cockburn could look beyond the not with equal clarity.

After all, mucking about in the corruptions of the Athenian empire, even the archetypal iconoclast Socrates had his Republic. A