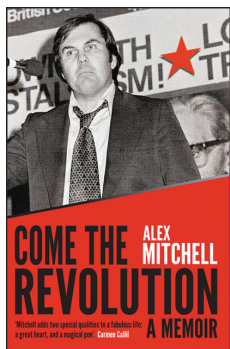

BOOK REVIEW

YOU CAN BRING MAO AND LIN PIAO BUT DON'T BRING TROTSKY

REVIEW OF COME THE REVOLUTION: A MEMOIR BY ALEX MITCHELL



Come The Revolution: A Memoir by Alex Mitchell (NewSouth Publishing, 2011) ISBN: 978174223307; pages: 536.

Veteran Australian journalist, Alex Mitchell, has written a compelling memoir of his life as a journalist both in Australia and in the United Kingdom and also as a member of the Central Committee of the United Kingdom Trotskyist Workers Revolutionary Party. This book spans Mitchell's life as a schoolboy in the late 1940s, early 1950s in Townsville to his return as a Sydney *Sun-Herald* journalist in 1986. A second volume covering his second life as a mainstream journalist from 1986 to his retirement in 2007 is on the cards.

His working career as a journalist started on the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*. From there he went to work on the *Mount Isa Mail*.

In 1961, Mount Isa had a population of 17,000, of whom 5,000 were employees of Mount Isa Mines Limited (MIM). He covered as a reporter the conflagration that became the wildcat MIM strike of the early 1960s and became good friends with the strikers' leader, Pat Mackie. Mackie was not only at loggerheads with MIM, but also with the Australian Workers Union's Queensland Branch Secretary, Edgar Williams, whom Mitchell describes as having a "capacity for treachery and for doing the dirty work for the bosses".

From Mount Isa, Mitchell got a job as a reporter on Rupert Murdoch's then Sydney afternoon tabloid, *The Daily Mirror*. Mitchell had an admiration for Rupert Murdoch in the 1960s, whom he regarded as a real newspaper man to whom journalists showed great admiration and loyalty. Mitchell found working on the *The Daily Mirror* as being a conducive environment to overcome what he saw as "the stifling conservatism of the Menzies era". He saw Murdoch as a crusading proprietor who enjoyed needling the establishment – a view he came to change after Murdoch smashed the Fleet Street printers' union when the presses where moved to Wapping. Although Mitchell described the culture of the Sydney newspaper scene as possessing "alcohol-fuelled blokishness, sexism and misogyny", perhaps this culture was little different to the rest of 1960s Australian society. One of Mitchell's flatmates in Sydney was the person who was to become the doyen of the Canberra Press Gallery, Laurie Oakes. From Sydney, Mitchell ended up in the Canberra Press Gallery before his departure for the United Kingdom in 1967. (A note of correction, Harold Hold drowned at Cheviot Beach near Portsea not at Port Melbourne.)

Once in England, Mitchell obtained positions at the *Sunday Times* and then on television in Granada TV's current affairs show, *World In Action*. While working as a journalist in both Sydney and London, Mitchell was always at the centre of the action. He gives a close account of some classic personalities of the time, such as Germaine Greer, Christopher Hitchens, Phillip Knightley, the Kray twins, Kim Philby and Auberon Waugh. He met Waugh on what was claimed to be a mercy flight to Nigeria paid for by the Catholic relief organisation, Caritas. This so-called mercy flight appeared to be running guns to the Biafran insurrection. Mitchell's account of what he saw of the forced starving of the Biafran people at the behest of the dominant Nigerian government no doubt contributed to his own political radicalisation. That radicalisation led him into the arms of one of the United Kingdom's many Trotskyist parties.

From the *Sunday Times*, Mitchell then went on to edit the Socialist Labour League's daily newspaper *Workers Press*, which ultimately became *News Line*. Both these papers were the organ of the Socialist Labour League under the charismatic leadership of Gerry Healy. Its members became known as Healyites. The party later changed its name to the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), whose more famous members were from the Redgrave acting dynasty, Corin and Oscar winner, Vanessa.

The core of this book, hence its name, is Mitchell's involvement in the Central Committee of Healy's party and as editor of its daily newspaper. Many did say and have continued to say that Mitchell, by joining a Trotskyist party and becoming a political journalist, threw his life away. Up until that point, one can certainly see an upward trajectory of his career in journalism. One may wonder where he may have gone had he not dedicated the best years of his life to the cause of a millenarian radical party. The Healyites claimed that the contradictions of the capital system would lead to a revolution. The Healyites had as their goal to "build a revolutionary party educated in the class treachery of social democracy, Stalinism and revisionism". This political sect, like most fundamentalists, saw themselves as being "purer than thou" and worked frenetically towards building this revolutionary party. Its founder, Healy, was a mesmerising orator with a profound self-taught grasp of English and economic history (sounds like the English Left's counterpart to Bob Santamaria). Mitchell was captivated by him and almost to the end remained a close and loyal follower. Like all Trotskyist parties, the WRP split and split again. With a cheque for £40 as redundancy pay for nearly 20 years work for the party, Mitchell returned to Australia to reclaim the wreckage that his life had become. Mitchell sacrificed much for the party, including a wife and two sons who returned to Australia 10 years before he did.

The book contains Mitchell's own self-doubt as to whether his life was thrown away in the interest of what had become a splintered shell of a party. While being a key member of the WRP, he had close connections with many of its Middle Eastern allies and benefactors, including Colonel Gaddafi, Yasser Arafat and Saddam Hussein. Rather than throwing his life away, Mitchell describes getting from his membership of the WRP "times of passion, commitment, excitement and a lot of heart-stopping arguments". To him, "Trotskyism taught me a world view of history and a method for analysing unfolding events". The 73-year-old Healy himself was thrown out of the party on the basis of allegations of sexual misconduct with female members of the party over the preceding 20 years. A year later, Healy was again thrown out of a reformulated WRP, in typical Trotskyist wordspeak, for being a "Menshevik traitor". Mitchell recognised that the one-man domination of a small vanguardist party was doomed to lead to an implosion. However, Mitchell also has a view that the state had a role to play in the destruction of the WRP. It was always said at Australian universities in the 1970s that the Trotskyist parties were only able to form a quorum at their meetings because of the attendance of undercover ASIO operatives.

Upon his return to Sydney, Mitchell returned to the life he had left behind as a journalist and worked as such on the *Sun-Herald* as one of its more erudite and quirkier columnists. Who can accurately claim that he threw away the best years of his life on Trotskyist adventurism? He clearly is a writer of the first rank. At the very least, this book will stand as a great chronicle of the times from a radical left-wing perspective. For that, the politically savvy reading public in this country and the United Kingdom is in his debt. Not many journalists have led as interesting life as he as.

To continue the title of this review taken from an old student song:

You can bring Ho and Uncle Joe, but don't bring Trotsky,

Trotsky's a real cool smarty, stuffed up the Communist Party.

Perhaps that ditty might have been sung earlier this month at Berkelouw's bookshop in Bowral when these memoirs were launched by former New South Wales Education Minister Rodney Cavalier.

*Jeffrey Phillips SC
Denman Chambers, Sydney*