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The Tale of an Asp

If you've ever handled a venomous snake, you already know what it's like to chat with Alexander Cockburn. Not just your average poisonous Marxist reptile, Cockburn is all grins and hisses and eye contact and bared Irish fangs as he chomps his soft-shell-crab sandwich at George's Global Kitchen. It's a giddy thrill to be inside the kill zone of the greatest living exponent of bilious journalism, and in my reverie I ponder the original Irish diaspora in which St. Patrick chased the serpents from the island and for a moment fantasize that Cockburn himself is descended from a race of socialistic bog-trotting snake people who escaped Ireland to sting and paralyze capitalists such as myself.

But it's a sunny day, and life is just a hot rock for Cockburn, who is flacking his new book, *The Golden Age Is in Us* (Verso, 434 pp., \$24.95), by cruising these United States in a pair of Plymouth Valiants — a 1960 that he owns to tour the West, and for the East a 1963 model that belongs to a friend.

With charm and modesty, and more than a jigger of perfidy, Cockburn disavows the presence of bile in his work and life.

"Bile is something eating at you all the time," he protests. "Bilious people hate. I don't hate."

"I think I'm funnier than I am billier, if that's a word," he says. "After column after column of careful analytic work, you take a few swings and all that people remember are the vivid slaggings, and all the careful theory goes for naught."

It's a pitifully cheap plea for sympathy coming from the leftist who taunted neocon godfather Norman Podhoretz as a "frother" for a decade; who, in the wake of the Soviet invasion, wrote, "I yield to none in my sympathy to those prostrate beneath the Russian jackboot, but if ever a country deserved rape it's Afghanistan"; who champions the Church of Scientology in its battle with *Time* magazine; whose routine invective put a spell on *New*

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Republic owner Martin Peretz in the '80s; and who, during the 1992 Clinton campaign, double-bar-

reled reporters Joe Klein and Sidney Blumenthal with this riposte: "The only reason [Klein] has not entirely vanished up the governor's backside is that Blumenthal is already occupying half the available space."

Truth be known, it's Cockburn's serrated wit that attracts readers (at least this reader) to his "careful analytic work" in defense of labor and ancient forests, and against the Kennedy assassination conspiracists and the economic preachings of Jeffrey Sachs. Cockburn is a critic at heart, paid to road-test books and political ideas and the *Zeitgeist*, and if the alternative to his curmudgeonry is the pallid civility of the nation's editorial pages, then we're lucky to have

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the dissatisfied bastard around.

Like H.L. Mencken ("cursed" by his admirers, he writes), Cockburn built his journalist reputation by using words as weapons, aiming for the heads of foes on the left and right (centrists almost never grace Cockburn's cross hairs). Over the last 23 years, Cockburn has spilled blood with press criticism in the *Village Voice*, regular op-ed work in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Los Angeles Times*, magazine work galore, and books about chess, politics, and the Amazon. You can sense the presence of the ghost of the Sage of Baltimore when Cockburn applies his acid logic to the McMartin child-abuse case and other hysterical allegations

that Satanists have infiltrated the day-care industry: If we permit children to give sworn testimony in such legal proceedings, he argues, we should jail them if they perjure themselves. Case closed.

Also like Mencken, Cockburn so adores vitriol that he collects and shares the insults flung

at him, reproducing in *The Golden Age* this piece of hate mail from a reader: "I was very happy to hear the news of your mother's death. As a Jew, whenever I hear tragedy befall an evil person, I quote from Proverbs 11:10. For a Jew-baiting goy like you it means 'And when the wicked perish there is joy.' May you goyim who attack and criticize Jews and Israel suffer even more."

Like every journalist made the object of a story, Cockburn turns the interview into a game of snake and mouse, but at least

he makes it fun. Less cutting in person than he is in print — otherwise he'd get punched — Cockburn is still a bit of a brat, seizing my list of questions and

speed reading them aloud, scribbling his own observations into my notebook when I leave the table to make a phone call — "God, the man is brilliant, et etc.," he writes about himself — and, assuming that traps are being set for him when they aren't, adamantly refusing to answer perfectly reasonable questions.

"I see where this is going," he says archly when asked about his least greatest hits — like the Afghanistan quip and his alleged Stalinist leanings. Suspicion abounds, too, when I inquire about the moral support he has lent the money-hustling Church of Scientology and I ask if there is any moral equivalence between the Church of Rome

and the Church of L. Ron.

"I decline the invitation," says Cockburn, a veteran defiler of the Catholic Church. As I pose the Scientologist question a couple more times, he repeats, "I decline the invitation," with a massive smile on his face. "What is their big crime? That they

have Tom Cruise? I should say, 'Release Tom Cruise and maybe he'd become Oliver!'"

Cockburn comforts himself with the knowledge that the Scientologists' "enemies" (his word, by the way) — the CIA, the pharmaceutical industry, the IRS — map almost one-to-one onto his. But later, when asked to produce his own enemies list (and a man who has written so wickedly about so many surely has a long one), he lies most unconvincingly: "I don't have an enemies list."

Yet reading *The Golden Age* you almost believe the fib. The book largely abandons his Mighty Achievements in Vituperation to explore the surface of a vivid and vigorous inner life. A huge garage sale of rewritten *Nation* columns, diary entries, letters to and from the author, and other literary leftovers from stopovers in Istanbul, Key West, Ardmore, Topanga, London, Rio, and other points, *The Golden Age* chronicles in journal form the years bookending the last of Reagan (1987) and the beginning of Clinton (1992) — "a seismic period in my life," Cockburn allows.

"Here is a sort of me, as 'me' as I can fix it," he says. "How I travel, who I talk to ... the evidence of my emotional life."

Emotional life, yes, but at a distance. Don't read *The Golden Age* for romantic disclosures. "I'm a public fellow — not a confessional writer," he says in mammoth understatement. But Cockburn sloughs off enough 54-year-old skin to expose some pink, scaly flesh. He shares his thoughts about and correspondence with other members of the immediate Cockburn clan — daughter Daisy, scrivener siblings Andrew and Patrick, his ailing mother, and

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Alexander Cockburn

flashbacks to his journalist Commie dad, the notorious Claud Cockburn. Also showcased in Cockburn's passing display are friends like Ben Sonnenberg and the late Andrew Kopkind, as well as the kitchen cabinet that advises him on political and economic matters — Noam Chomsky,

Robert Pollin, Frank Baracke, and Joe Paff, a neighbor of Cockburn's in Petrolia along Humboldt County's Lost Coast, where the writer moved in 1990.

Several million words into his caustic career, Cockburn pauses briefly when asked if he'd like to take back any of it.

"No, not really," he says, which is logical considering that snakes have no regrets. But then boiling out of his brainpan comes the sorrow of having hurt a few feelings with a bad review of the cookbook of the Lady's Club of Charleston in the pages of *House and Garden*.

"I was snotty about it," he says, with genuine remorse. "And they wrote to me saying, 'We were so happy to see you review the book, and so disappointed with what you wrote.'"

And what about the "rape of Afghanistan" wisecrack, for which he's been hounded for the last 15 years.

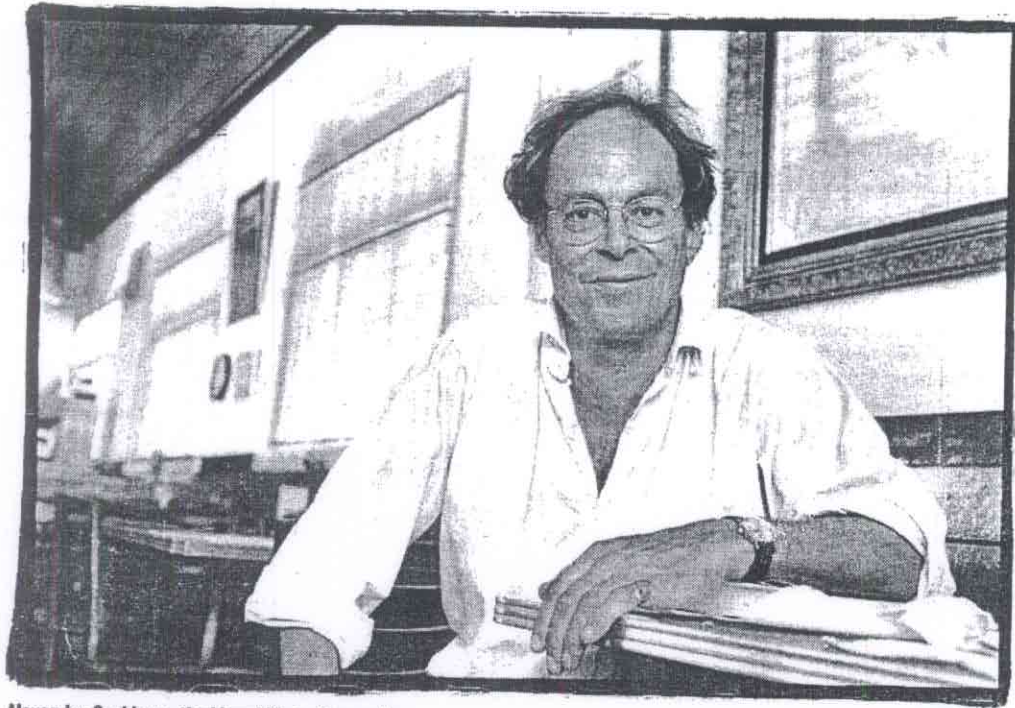
"P.J. O'Rourke says things like that all the time," he says, and then relents. "I shouldn't have written it," he says. "It was a joke."

Worried that the lunch might degenerate into a huff, we conclude the interview and Cockburn repairs to the parking lot to rearrange the piles of boxes and loose papers littering his trusty Valiant. His mind already on his next stop on the book hustings, Cockburn offers one last thought apropos of nothing.

"The Pulitzers!" he says. "A prize that hasn't been won by Herb Caen isn't worth winning!"

By Jack Shafer

July 5–July 11, 1995



Christine T. Anderson

Alexander Cockburn, the Lizard King of journalism.