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Alexander Cockburn bites back

The left may be dead, but this radical is alive and well

By Joan Smith
EXAMINER BOOK EDITOR

A LONG with his friend Molly Ivins and fellow native of the British Isles Christopher Hitchens, Alexander Cockburn has long been one of the most interesting voices in journalism on the American left.

In the stifflingly predictable pages of *The Nation* magazine, his column, "Beat the Devil" (named for the novel and subsequent film by his father, radical Irish journalist Claude Cockburn), has for years been an oasis of fresh information and insight.

He was for a decade the Wall
[See COCKBURN, C-2]



EXAMINER / PENNI GLADSTONE

Leftist writer skewers both sides of the political spectrum.

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◆ COCKBURN from C-1

This radical is alive and well

Street Journal's token left-wing political columnist, and now writes a syndicated column that appears in a few dozen newspapers around the country, including the Los Angeles Times. He also collaborates on a newsletter out of Washington, D.C., launched by one of his former interns at The Nation, Ken Silverstein, called Counterpunch.

Dry, erudite and often wickedly funny, Cockburn skewers public figures of every persuasion, always alert to the tragic absurdities of the exercise of power.

"Young Rene, a few weeks short of his 18th birthday, was riding in an open truck with 24 companions last Sept. 14 when he had direct personal experience of the diversion to the contras of profits from the sale of U.S. arms to Iran. As the truck rattled along the road from Pantasma to Wiwili in northern Nicaragua, the truck hit a land mine," he wrote with characteristic understatement in a 1987 piece for the Wall Street Journal called "Rene's New Legs."

Now Cockburn has published an odd and interesting new book with the leftist publishing house Verso, a journal covering the years 1987 to 1994 called "The Golden Age Is in Us: Journeys & Encounters." Carefully and artfully arranged, it is a collection of meditations on public events, material gathered for columns and letters to and from friends and family, including his daughter, Daisy, Noam Chomsky and an anonymous woman who writes from England to enlighten Cockburn about the female orgasm. "Once a man can satisfy you, he can also bore you and, within the orgasm, he sows the seeds of ennui," she reports.

Mind you, this last bit is as personal as Cockburn allows in this journal, which depicts a rather peripatetic man — the native of Ardmore, Ireland, has roosted in New York and Florida and now resides in Petrolia, up on California's Lost Coast — who is preoccupied, not with his interior landscape, but with the world of poli-

tics, both contemporary and historic.

The title is meant to be a reassuring message to the beleaguered Left. "These days," Cockburn writes, "we're shy imaginers of Utopias on hold. . . . The Golden Age is *in us*, if we know where to look, and what to think."

An unregenerate Marxist in an age when Marxism is thoroughly out of fashion, Cockburn is withering in his dismissal of neoconservatives the likes of David Horowitz and Peter Collier, who "face the dilemma of all renegades living on their memories: that sooner or later their stories will grow whiskers too, and fresh renegades will jostle them aside."

But Cockburn is equally impatient with the excesses of what he calls "my side of the fence."

"Some groups on the Left really have to give up this creaking argot of 'ruthlessly denouncing' this, or 'mercilessly exposing' that. Exposing and denouncing aren't necessarily bad activities, but the language has to be something people

recognize as part and parcel of their own lives. 'Striking hard blows' at the enemy. No one does that, at least in English.

"The end of all this jargon is the old Comintern directive my father once came across at the Daily Worker: 'The lower organs of the Party must make even greater efforts to penetrate the more backward parts of the proletariat.' My father said this would be construed by the masses as a dirty joke. The comrades looked at him askance."

Cockburn says he has no interest in recording his inner or emotional life. "I wanted to show the context of a life, to give a sense of one's comings and goings, who one talks to," he said during an interview when he was in town recently to read at Modern Times Bookstore. "I've tried at various times to do a self-reflective kind of journal and it never comes out right, it just looks silly."

Self-reflective is not the word, for instance, for his treatment of his mother's death, which consists of a series of terse entries beginning in the Amazonian village of Belém, where he was researching a book about the rain forest with his friend Susanna Hecht: "Sept. 16. Phone call. Mama is back in hospital. I have to rush to Ireland."

There is a funny anecdote in which he reads to his mother and the "other four ladies (on the ward), all of them devout Catholics," an interview with Claude Cockburn's old friend, novelist Graham Greene, in which Greene denies God, Satan and hell. Between entries, his mother dies.

"This is not meant to be one of those self-conscious literary journals, like the Goncourts'," he says. "You know the sort of thing: 'Had an important conversation with Balzac today. Talked about future of novel. Vexed at success of Zola.' It's not like that. My father's first novel was 'Beat the Devil,' and when I was quite young he said to me, 'Alexander, the thing about

this novel is that there is not a single moment of self-reflection in it. It's all done entirely through what people say.' I was very interested in that as a formal achievement."

Even in three volumes of autobiography, his father wrote nothing of his family life, Cockburn says. "I didn't know he'd been married twice before my mother until I was 18 and I was going to Oxford and he said, 'Well, Alexander, you may meet someone there called Sarah Cockburn.' And I said, 'Oh, same name.' And he said, 'Well, yes, she's your half-sister.'

"And then he said, 'And then you may meet someone else named Claudia,' and the conversation went on from there."

He is still close to his two younger brothers, who are also journalists. Andrew lives with his wife, Leslie, in Washington, D.C., where they produce TV documentaries and books and write for Vanity Fair and the New Yorker. His brother, Patrick, writes for the London Independent.

"I love journalism, particularly when I'm going around the country on these book tours and people come up and say, 'Thank God for the Nation and your column. If I just had the radio and the TV I'd go mad.' Because you're telling them they're not lunatic to think the way they do and you're putting out information in a way that is hopefully entertaining."

"People on the Left like to be depressed, and if you're depressed you're not very alluring to yourself or to anyone else. That's why I called this book 'The Golden Age Is In Us.' We have to look at the good things that are being done all over the country. Times are hard, but there is no use shutting down for the rest of the millennium."

Alexander Cockburn will speak Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. at Cody's Books, 2454 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley.