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Come the Revolution: A memoir, Alex Mitchell. New South Publishing, 2011, xv + 536 pp, RRP \$39.95

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Alex Mitchell is perhaps best known as a commentator on NSW politics with a racy, hard-hitting style. Some may have heard hints of an adventurous past as an investigative journalist and radical activist. Mitchell now reveals all in this forthright and engaging memoir.

Mitchell grew up in a middle class, although politically open-minded, family in North Queensland. As a teenager he became a journalist, first in Townsville then Mt Isa. In 1962 Mitchell hit the 'Big Smoke' when he landed a job on Sydney's *Daily Mirror*, recently acquired by a young Rupert Murdoch, who emerges as an innovative and even likeable figure. Mitchell provides a valuable inside account of the 'too much checking spoils a good story' tabloid rivalry between the *Mirror* and its Fairfax competitor *The Sun*. He writes vividly of the vanished era of pre-electronic age journalism — a world of hot metal, typewriters and stories dictated from phone booths. The 'pencil sharp' newshounds who taught Mitchell his craft — including one celebrated for 'typing stories with his penis' — imparted some important lessons: before starting to write always ask the simple but invaluable question 'What's this story about?'; never use 'I'; readers 'don't want bullshit, they want to know what's going on' (from the legendary Murray Sayle); and never believe a story you hear in a pub (especially about a giant rooster).

Mitchell's description of life on the police round adds a new edge to the term 'ambulance chasing': 'we chased police cars, fire engines and ambulances to scenes of crime, carnage, death and destruction, always trying to be on the spot ahead of our rivals'. Another old expression, 'work hard and play hard', acquires a new resonance in Mitchell's reminiscences: 'late nights, all-nighters, pubs, parties, nightclubs, poker machines and rock'n'roll'. He brings back to life a vanished Sydney where Sunday entertainment was listening to soap box orators in the Domain and a big night out was steak Diane and Barossa Pearl at Chequers nightclub.

Like many Australians of his generation, Mitchell was drawn to London in the 1960s. He worked with Murray Sayle and Phillip Knightley, socialised with Richard Neville and Germaine Greer and pursued the notorious: Bernie Cornfeld, Robert Maxwell, L Ron Hubbard, the Kray brothers, Kim Philby. Mitchell's experiences on the *Sunday Times*, when investigative journalism was in its infancy, and as a pioneering television current affairs journalist are entertaining and

enlightening. He reported on Biafra (with Auberon Waugh) and Idi Amin's Uganda. Mitchell emerges as a dedicated, adventurous practitioner of his craft with a larrikin streak, a conviction that rules were made to be broken and an abhorrence of hypocrisy and corruption.

Again like many of his generation, Mitchell reacted against the stifling conformity and conservatism of the 1950s and 60s by becoming involved in radical politics. Not many of those who protested against the Vietnam war, however, went as far as he did. The second part of *Come the Revolution* deals with Mitchell's involvement with the Trotskyist Workers' Revolutionary Party which he joined in 1971 aged 29. Increasingly influenced by the Party's strangely charismatic leader Gerry Healy, Mitchell lost salary, career prospects, friends and, eventually, contact with his children. He became editor of the WRP's newspaper and a member of its inner circle. A number of well known figures in the media, arts and entertainment were also adherents of Healy, most notably Corin and Vanessa Redgrave (in some circles it was known as the West End Revolutionary Party). It is a tribute to Mitchell's skill that he can make the surreal contortions of Britain's 1970s revolutionaries readable. Unsurprisingly, Mitchell continued to have an adventurous life. He exposed CIA agents in London and visited Muammar Gaddafi, Yasser Arafat and Saddam Hussein.

As tends to happen with extremist groups of the left or right, in the mid-1980s the WRP self-destructed in an orgy of infighting. Healy and his acolyte Mitchell were expelled. The vicious nature of the split — involving intimidation, abuse and violence — would make most readers glad that the WRP never acquired political power. After 15 years of dedicated (some would add misguided) service to Trotskyism, Mitchell found himself back in Sydney, broke and unemployed. Although disillusioned he was not embittered. He still believes in socialism — hence the title of the book.

Some readers of *Come the Revolution* have lamented Mitchell's lost Trotskyist years. One can, however, respect the man and his journey without sympathising with the politics. Many others have sincerely given periods of their life to causes, cults and religions they later lost faith in — and not many got to associate with Vanessa Redgrave, Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein. ▲