

## LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

### PATRICK & CLAUD COCKBURN: A LEGACY OF GUERRILLA JOURNALISM AGAINST MEDIA COMPLACENCY

**LAURA FLANDERS** - Dishonest reporting on war, racism, and politicians lies, normalizing coverage of fascists campaigning for high office. If you are seeing too much of that sort of thing right now, know that you're not alone. And it's not the first time we've seen a situation like the one we're in today. Go back 90 years, for example, and you'll find a prequel in the period that saw the rise of Adolf Hitler. What was the headline over the New York Times report on Hitler becoming Chancellor of Germany on January 31st, 1933? Well, here's what it was. "[Hitler Puts Aside Aim To Be Dictator](#)" and they continue, "there is no warrant for immediate alarm. The more violent parts of Hitler's alleged program, he has himself in recent months been softening down or abandoning." Hitler, of course, went on to invade Poland, spark World War II and implemented genocide, slaughtering 6 million Jews and millions of others, including disabled people, LGBT people, communists and ethnic minorities. Today, we are going to learn about a young British journalist who, seeing what was happening at that time, quit his job with the prestigious London Times and founded The Week, an independent newsletter that became famous for its scoops and opposition to fascism and to the Western powers that were enabling its rise. He wrote under many pen names, including Frank Pitcairn, but his real name was Claud Cockburn and he's the topic of a new biography by his son, Patrick Cockburn titled "[Believe Nothing Until It Is Officially Denied, Claud Cockburn and the Invention of Guerrilla Journalism](#)." It's just out from [Verso](#). Patrick is an award-winning journalist himself with a long expertise, especially in the Middle East. And if all that wasn't reason enough to focus here today, there's also the fact that Claud was my grandfather making Patrick my uncle. Now regular viewers of this program have already met my sister, my partner, and learned about my dad. So let's round out the family tree a little bit further. Welcome to the program, Patrick. It's great to have you.

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - Thank you for having me.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - Let's talk about why this book now, why did you decide that Claud, who had written several volumes of his own autobiography deserved another look by you?

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - I, well, obviously I knew about him when I was growing up and I knew what he'd done. He'd written an excellent autobiography in three volumes. And I think what tipped the balance in my mind towards writing a biography about him was in 2003, I asked [MIS](#), the British equivalent of the FBI to, if I could see his archive, what they had on him, which I knew they might release because 50 years had passed. I mean enough time had passed for them to do so. I heard nothing, and then they released them. 24 volumes or large files to the [National](#)

[Archives](#) in Kew in London. And then I found that two things. One, there was an awful lot in them that I didn't know. Secondly, I'd often wondered if Claud's newsletter *The Week*, all his campaigning against the Nazis and the government at the time had had much impact on the powers that be. And I could see from the MI5 files that it had enormous influence at a time when the *New York Times* and others were saying that Hitler's bark would be worth worse than his bite. Claud had, you know, horrible but graphic accounts of the persecution and murder of Jews in Germany and when he had no doubt that this Hitler and the Nazis were the ultimate evil long before any of the newspapers and the politicians realized the same thing in the US and UK.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - He had that because he had spent time in Germany himself. He'd been in pre-war Berlin. Talk a little bit about his history and how you think he came to be so clear sighted as to what was going on, to see it so clearly.

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - Well, his father was a British diplomat, so at quite an impressionable age, was about 16, he went to join his father in Budapest. Budapest and was the first World War had officially ended, but in a sense it was still going on in Budapest. There were pogroms going on, there were red terror, there was white terror. There was eventually a very nasty dictatorship. So he was very plugged into the politics of Central Europe. He learnt German, he went to Berlin, he worked for the *London Times*, he spoke perfect German. He then later returned, he went to the US just before the Great Crash. He covered that. Then in 1932, through German friends, he knew things that were getting worse and worse in Berlin. So he resigned from the *Times*, he was the *New York* correspondent, one of the *New York* correspondents and returned to first to Vienna and then to Germany and found things that bad though he thought they'd be, they were even worse because these were the last days, the Weimar Republic, these were the, you know, Nazi storm troopers were already in the streets. And then about 48 hours before Hitler took power, Claud was told by friends, you know, it'd be a really good idea to get out, they got your name on the list. And he thought for a moment, "Maybe I'll stay. I've got a British passport." And then common sense reasserted itself, and he got on the train to Vienna. So he just got out. Then he went to, then he got there, he had no money, he didn't have a job, but he thought, what can I do to oppose this ultimate evil? So he had very precise ideas how this would be done. So he set up this newsletter *The Week* in London in an attic and he filled it. It was filled with scoops from the beginning. His idea was to influence the influencers. He knew it wouldn't get to that number of people, but he hoped it could, you know, hoped it could get to people who were really interested in what was going on. It could get to journalists, it could get to politicians and so forth. But that sort of idea only works if you can really provide the goods in terms of information that other people don't have, which he did, which is the real reason why it took off and became influential.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - There's a part in his memoir that you quote in your book where he's describing what people are actually saying in the capitals of Europe and how refugees from Germany are quite clear about what's happening and speaking in panicked or if not panicked, at

least super concerned terms. He then points out that the language, the what is being said and the way that it's being said is simply not appearing in the newspapers of the day. Can you talk about the significance of that and the parallels if you see them to this moment?

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - Yeah, so it was a great sort of vacuum of information about what a lot of people knew what was happening and what was appearing in the media. Now this doesn't really, I think, really come across in history books because newspapers in general, I mean invariably in fact don't want to admit to their own failings, to their own failings, and in terms of Hitler or any other big historic event, you know, be it the invasion of Iraq, be it what's happening at the moment in Gaza and Lebanon. So I think this became somewhat obscured later, but he felt that it was very discouraging that people, this wasn't in the newspapers, but he also thought it's very encouraging in a way because he could fill that vacuum. So he sort of felt that, I mean he said at one point that even if he made only a small noise in the sort of atmosphere of the 1930s, in the atmosphere of continual crises, this would sound like a scream, and in many ways it did. So his calculation worked out. He felt it was something that would work when you had an era of continual crisis or a series of crises as you had in the 1930s. And that was again, a reason for writing the book now because it seems to me the 2020s are rather like the 1930s that we have one crisis succeeding each another. We have these crises turning into wars. You know, the 1930s became known as the Devil's Decade in a way, I think one could use the same words to describe the 2020s.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - One moment that summarizes to me, or at least sort of sums up a lot of the parallels is the moment where the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain takes to the pulpit, as it were, the podium to declare that he has a relationship with Adolf Hitler, they've met, and that there is not war but peace in the offering. This is 1938. Here's a snippet of that speech.

**NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN** - This morning I had another talk with a German chancellor Herr Hitler. And here is the paper which bears his name upon it as well as mine. We regard the agreement signed last night on the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - That was Neville Chamberlain speaking in 1938 in the famous Peace In Our Time speech. Forgive me if I'm exaggerating, but I hear in that a version of what we have been hearing all year from the US President Joe Biden in relation to Israel and Gaza, of ceasefire is in the works. Just a little bit longer, just a little bit longer. We're working ceaselessly. Kamala Harris says the same thing. Is that, am I being hyperbolic here?

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - No, unfortunately not, I think. You know, it's sort of, and I think that was Claud's great frustration as one might feel frustrated now that it, it was pretty obvious what was going on. It was pretty obvious that things were going to get worse. Yet those who were

meant to be in charge kept on announcing that, you know, peace was just around the corner, that things weren't as bad as they looked. So yeah, I think that the parallel is all too strong.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - Why do you think, as somebody who's written for mainstream mainline publications like [The Independent](#) and others, Patrick, why do you think mainstream media is so bad at sounding an alarm? Are they invested in there not being war, not us, not naming fascism? Are they simply scared, intimidated from saying the things they really know to be true? Is it this kind of allure, illusion of objectivity, that if we actually sound anything other than normal we'll be considered biased? What is it? What holds journalists and their publications back?

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - Well, a lot of them sort of basically reflect the attitude of the government, of the country they're in. You know, they will reflect the attitude of the proprietor, certainly the press often have an amnesia about this. I mean, at the time that Neville Chamberlain was speaking in 1938 was pretty well known, None of the established press wanted to disagree with him. You know, what can one do about it? Well, Claud felt one simple thing, and this is reflected in the title of the book, which is skepticism for individuals. Whether you read a newspaper, watching television or any other part of the news, news outlets just to be skeptical and not to believe anything until it's officially denied. It's amazing how many people, including lots of journalists, don't focus on the fact that so much of what they're being told is partisan. That those who tell leak them things have very good reasons for doing so. And you know, you find this not just in the present war, but as I've been sort of war correspondent in the Middle East and of covered wars elsewhere, and it sort of amazes me rather in retrospect, how very crucial things were misreported by the press. You know, I remember in 2001 in Afghanistan, it was fairly obvious if one was reporting day to day that the Taliban hadn't been defeated, they'd gone home, but the media sort of reported that they were outta business. No need to pay any attention to those guys anymore. Well look what happened since? In 2003, you know, the Iraqi army completely defeated, mission accomplished. You know, we can put our own guys in to rule in Baghdad. Completely untrue. Most of the Iraqi army had gone home. There was no way the Iraqi's going to accept an occupation. You know, and the revelations often, you know, that about what's really happening often don't come from the mass media, they come from politicians or they come from elsewhere.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - I want to come back to the Middle East in a second, but before we do, the part one of the aspects of the book that is so helpful to me and gratifying in a sense is that you add lots of people back into the story that didn't get much of a do in a lot of Claud's autobiographical writings and paint a picture of Claud in at work, but a lot of other people with him. My grandmother is mentioned, Hope Hale Davis, Jean Ross, do you want to talk a bit, Gerda Taro, you want to talk a little bit about some of the characters in Claud's life that fill out the picture because I found it striking, the community, the company that he was in at that time.

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - Sure, I mean, at quite an early stage when he was at university, when he was at Oxford, his sort of closest pal was Graham Greene, the novelist and there was a cousin, Evelyn Waugh, another novelist. These were very sort of close friends of his, they don't get much of a mention in his autobiography, but rather amazingly, his first two wives don't get mentioned at all. The first Hope Hale was a journalist in New York, whom he married in 1931 and had a daughter by and she thought of writing about him and their relationship and also about his second wife, Jean Ross, who was the model for Christopher Isherwood's Sally Bowles, you know, in Cabaret and elsewhere. But originally in Isherwood's novella about Sally Bowles in Berlin, who Hope rather amazingly became a very best friend of, and I found that extraordinarily interesting.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - I mean, it is kind of extraordinary that he left Jean and Hope out of his other autobiographies. Any insight into why?

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - Maybe just sort of too complicated.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - A little complication that helped bring me to being, I take it seriously. I take umbrage.

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - You take umbrage?

**LAURA FLANDERS** - Don't get me wrong. I adored Claud and admired him tremendously, a huge hero in my life. But have to say, I was glad to see that you both found writings by my grandmother that hadn't been published and that they helped to add so much to the story. Did you get any clearer as to what had influenced Claud? What caused him to have the politics that he had? And do you want to describe that just a little bit?

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - He was pretty sort of rebellious from an early stage. He started up even as a 15-year-old at school, two sort of news, different newspapers, handwritten, which are very sort of critical of the school authorities and both of which were banned. He became a communist, joined the Communist party, you know, after getting back from Germany because he thought they were the only people who had the sort of fanaticism and the organization to fight Hitler. He also thought that in Spain that only through sort of organization, their sort of organization and arms from the Soviet Union did they stand the slightest chance of winning. You know, they weren't just fighting Franco, they were fighting Mussolini had sent 80,000 troops. Hitler had sent the luftwaffe, which carried out Guernica. His feeling was that in Germany and later in Britain, that people said, why aren't you more moderate? And he said, the problem is the moderates never do anything apart from telling him to be more moderate. And he felt that a right through. So he was, he felt that the effective opposition to appeasement of Germany, effective opposition to the government in Britain, what you required was to be organized by people who

are pretty fanatical. But then you immediately had to get a very broad band of public opinion, which would include people who are very conservative in many ways to stand with you and then you could be quite effective. So you had quite well worked theories of how you could oppose the powers that be, the authorities and have an impact.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - I mentioned at the top that you had brothers, you have two, Andrew and Alexander. Alexander much missed, passed away a few years ago. His publication [CounterPunch](#) surely is an example of the kind of guerilla journalism that you described. Your other brother Andrew has been doing extraordinary reporting on the role of Amazon in this moment in providing IT services and satellite services to the Israeli defense force so called. The family continues to do this work. I'd love to ask you the question, Patrick, that I ask all of our guests, which is what you think the story will be that future journalists will tell of now?

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - I think they'll be pretty astonished. Particularly Gaza and Lebanon and Iran. You know, I covered many previous wars in the Middle East, you know, usually the US may have been complicit with Israel in various attacks and invasions, but after a bit they would restrain them. That hasn't happened this time. This is pretty extraordinary. The role of the Biden administration was something I didn't expect. So it happened quicker, it happened when it didn't have to happen and it'd be an awful lot worse than I imagined. So likewise, in the 1930s, you know, there was inevitability of what was going to happen after Hitler came to power, after Franco had won the civil war in Spain, the rise of fascism, very difficult to stop. And in one sense, Claud did get exactly what he wanted at the end of the day, which he'd rather to his own amazement, which was he'd wanted the British government and the US government fully committed to fighting fascism and the Nazis and Hitler. Eventually that happened. He said they could only do this in an alliance with the Soviet Union, that happened too. Two-thirds of the German army was on the eastern front come D-Day. And in Britain, you had a sort of popular front government that sort of united everybody. So I don't think one should sort of depress oneself too much. Claud, it's often said, you know, that I think horrible phrase, you know, talking truth to power. Well, dear old power certainly doesn't want to hear the truth. You know, it's a very good idea of the truth. Doesn't want to lose its power. What you ought to do, what everybody ought to do is tell the truth to the powerless and enable them to do something about it.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - Patrick Cockburn, thank you so much for joining us. We will put all the information about your rest of your books and this new one, "[Believe Nothing Until It's Officially Denied](#)" out now from [Verso](#) at our website.

**PATRICK COCKBURN** - Thank you.

**LAURA FLANDERS** - I remember Claud as my grandfather and I spent the most time with him that I ever did in the first weeks following my father's sudden death. I was just 13 and even

though our families weren't particularly close, my mother packed me off to stay with Claud and Patricia at the home in Ireland in those first weeks. What I remember most was how much time in fact Claud had for young people like myself. How seriously he took me, wanting to know what I thought, assuming I was thinking about more than others might suspect. He shared articles in the news, talked truly about what I was doing, showed interest, made fun of people. We had a lot of good times together. I noticed that and noticed too how much time he had for animals and for people that others might consider dull. There aren't any dull people, he would say, just bad questions, find the right question and you'll find the subject that just about everyone has inside them, in which they are truly an interested and interesting expert. I don't know quite what the relevance of all this is for this particularly fraught moment, but I think there is some. Spend more time with young people, assume they're thinking about more, more deeply than others might suspect. I don't know, we all might get smarter that way. In the meantime, you can find my uncut conversation with uncle Patrick and all my conversations with Alexander and Andrew in our archives at [lauraflanders.org](http://lauraflanders.org). That uncut conversation comes directly to subscribers to our free podcast. I hope you'll join them. 'Till the next time, I'm Laura for "Laura Flanders and Friends." Stay kind, stay curious, and why not add brave.

*For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast, it's all at [lauraflanders.org](http://lauraflanders.org).*