
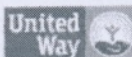


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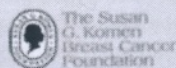
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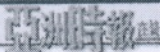


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OBITUARY

Passage of a trailblazer

By Bertil Lintner

CHIANG MAI - Adrian Cowell, one of the greatest documentary filmmakers of our time, passed away in London earlier this month. The last time we met, in Bangkok in July, he brought me a DVD copy of one of his first and still historically important documentaries: *Raid into Tibet*.

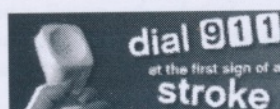
The remarkable black-and-white film was shot in 1964 when he, Chris Menges, a cinematographer and film director who later earned worldwide fame for directing movies such as *The Killing Fields*, *The Mission* and *The Boxer*, and George Patterson, a Scottish missionary and author who was fluent in Tibet's Khampa language, became the first and only Westerners to venture into

the country with the armed Tibetan resistance, which at that time was active in the Himalayas.

This unlikely trio followed a group of nine Tibetan guerrillas with eight rifles between them into Tibet. Traversing a mountain pass at an altitude of more than 5,000 meters above sea level, they reached the heights overlooking the Kodari Highway, from where the Tibetan guerrillas ambushed a Chinese army convoy.

Cowell told me that on their return to Kathmandu, Nepal, Patterson made the mistake of telling the British ambassador what they had seen and done. The ambassador then told King Mahendra, the king of Nepal, about their exploits and the Nepalese police tried to hunt them down.

The three filmmakers got away, only to be apprehended on the

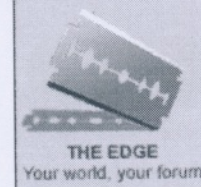


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Indian border as they attempted to leave Nepal. By then, the film had been sent out through other channels and all that the Nepalese authorities got hold of was an audio recording Cowell, who was also interested in ornithology, had made of a Himalayan cuckoo.

The Nepalese policemen played the tape backwards and forwards, suspecting that the sound of the cuckoo contained some secret, coded message. Finding nothing, the three were released and their documentary was shown shortly after that in the Britain, the United States and some other countries. It remains the only known film footage of Tibet's guerrillas.

Cowell was born in 1934 in Tangshan, China, where his father ran a small business. He was raised in Britain, educated at Cambridge University, and returned to Asia in 1955-1956 when he and some other British students drove a Land Rover from London to Singapore.

The journey took them through northeastern India and over the Pangsau Pass into Burma, now known as Myanmar, where they drove along the famous Ledo Road, also known as the Stilwell Road after the US commander who oversaw its construction, built by Allied forces during World War II. They continued across Burma's Kachin and Shan states into Thailand and beyond. That was when his interest in Burma, and especially the ethnic Shan insurgency, was first sparked.

In the mid-1960s, after filming the raid into Tibet, he and Menges also spent several months inside Shan State with the Shan National Army, a local resistance force in the Kengtung area in easternmost Burma. They produced yet another dramatic black-and-white documentary, *The Opium Trail*, which was first shown publicly in 1966. But nothing will likely ever match Cowell's *The Opium Warlords*, which was shot when he and Menges returned to Shan State in 1972.

Their intention had been to spend six months with the Shan State Army (SSA), another ethnic Shan rebel army, and make a television documentary about the Golden Triangle opium trade. Sixteen months later, Cowell and Menges finally returned to Thailand after Burmese military authorities had sent several sorties with the apparent intention of assassinating them. Various opium-trafficking gangs also attempted to kidnap the film-making duo.

They eventually emerged unscathed and brought out with them the most remarkable documentary that has ever been made about any aspect of the decades-long civil war in Burma. This was long before digital cameras and even video recording devices existed. The original was shot on 16-millimeter film and required a dozen mules to carry their bulky equipment, including machine generators to recharge their camera batteries.

Inspirational exposes

I first saw *The Opium Warlords* at a film festival in Hong Kong in 1979. Cowell's explanations of the complexities of the opium trade were learned and showed that the production of narcotics in the Burma region of the Golden Triangle was not a law-and-order issue, but rather an outgrowth of decades of civil war, chaos and anarchy.

Cowell also showed that the Burmese army was deeply involved in the trade; at that time the narcotics business was run by government-recognized home guard armies called *Ka Kwe Ye*, or "defense" in Burmese. Cowell's research showed that the Burmese army often provided security for the opium convoys.

In many ways, *The Opium Warlords* inspired me to become a journalist, settle in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, and

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specialize in Burma, especially its regions of the Golden Triangle. I made my first clandestine trek into Shan State with the SSA in 1981 and rebel soldiers as well as villagers everywhere I went remembered and spoke fondly of "Adrian and Chris".

While making *The Opium Warlords*, Cowell helped the SSA and its allies to draw up a proposal to sell Burma's entire opium crop to the United States government in exchange for a degree of political recognition. That offer was rejected by Washington and Cowell left Asia for South America, where he spent the 1980s filming a series of five films entitled *The Decade of Destruction* that documented the enormous environmental destruction in Brazil's Amazon region.

In 1990, *The Decade of Destruction* was shown in Britain and the United States and contributed greatly to a better understanding of the importance of tropical rain forests and how and why they should be preserved. The documentary focused on the work of Francisco Alves Mendes Filho, better known as Chico Mendes, a Brazilian rubber tapper, trade union leader and environmentalist who was assassinated in 1988 by powerful people with an economic interest in the destruction of the Amazon.

In the 1990s, Cowell returned to Southeast Asia and Shan State where he made a television series called *The Heroin Wars* and two sequels to *The Opium Warlords*, namely *The White Powder Opera*, where Cowell and Menges filmed a gang of drug dealers in Hong Kong and the police who tried to capture them, and *Opium: The Politicians*, which showed how the Shan opium proposals Cowell helped to draft were presented to Washington while president Jimmy Carter was in the White House.

When the proposal was rejected, the US government decided instead to support the Burmese military regime with helicopters and other military equipment used to target ethnic rebel groups. The architect of that program, Carter's drug czar Peter Bourne, later admitted that it was a serious policy mistake and even went to a Shan rebel camp in Burma to apologize. On the other hand, Lester Wolff, the US official who had spoken in favor of the Shan opium proposal, ended up doing public relations for the Burmese government.

The Heroin Wars was Cowell's last major documentary, but he never lost touch with the people he had met along the way during his many years of film making. He will undoubtedly remain a tremendous source of inspiration for filmmakers, journalists and authors driven to investigate and understand complex and often misunderstood issues, including the roots and causes of the Golden Triangle's opium trade. Cowell will have his place in history, not only beside the great explorers and documentary makers of our time, but also for shining light on indigenous people's struggles in some of the world's most remote and darkest corners.

Bertil Lintner is a former correspondent with the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and author of several books on *Burma/Myanmar*. He is currently a writer with *Asia-Pacific Media Services*.

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