

Opinion – Geoff Crowther or The Birth and Politics of a Hippie Worldview

Written by Curtis Large

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CURTIS LARGE, JUN 6 2023

American commentator Michael C. Moynihan (2012) once penned a combative opinion piece for *Foreign Policy* magazine. Entitled 'Leftist Planet', it accuses the Lonely Planet travel guidebook series of propagating a political outlook comprising 'acknowledgement of a lack of democracy ... followed by exercises in moral equivalence, various contorted attempts to contextualize authoritarianism or atrocities, and scorching attacks on the U.S. foreign policy'.

The reporter also remarks on the history of the publisher and the character of its 'hippie' founders, Maureen and Tony Wheeler, who established it in 1973. Responding, Lonely Planet representative Stephen Palmer (2012) strongly refuted 'any suggestion that we have any political affiliation or bias, and in particular that we are sympathetic to repressive regimes.'

In truth, this exchange relied on incomplete evidence. That it was a meaningful debate is clear; guidebooks have long shaped the social and political imaginaries of Western travellers, especially in the developing world. As Hermann Hesse wrote in *Journey to the East* (1968, 27), redolent of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), 'the East was not only a country ... but it was the home and youth of the soul, it was everywhere and nowhere, it was the union of all times.'

Moynihan was justified in his critique of Lonely Planet insofar as he applied a historical lens to detect a progressive tone across its output. Yet, had the journalist investigated the Wheelers' first hire, dishevelled maverick Geoff Crowther, he would have discovered the 'knee-jerk leftism' of many of their earlier guidebooks to in fact be rooted in anti-authoritarianism. This was cultivated through Crowther's exposure to the Western counterculture of the 1960s and 70s and later equipped him to criticise and warn against autocratic regimes in the Global South.

Crowther, who died in April 2021, was an enigmatic figure. When Nicholas Kristof (1986, 41) profiled him for *The New York Times*, the article recounted how he would 'talk about him in worshipful tones, recognizing him as the patron saint of travellers in the third world ... Crowther always pops up in conversations in odd places and situations.' Equally, writing in his travelogue *Magic Bus*, historian Rory MacLean (2007, 272) relates a basic inaccuracy: Crowther was not born on the same day that the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

His birth actually occurred over a year before, on 15 March 1944, and he had a modest upbringing in Todmorden, West Yorkshire (*The Times* 2021). But although MacLean was inaccurate in one sense, World War II and its aftermath doubtless proved a political awakening. As a teenager, Crowther hitchhiked around Europe, which, even in the late 1950s and early 1960s, appeared in sufficient disrepair to embody his first inspiration towards pacifism (BBC 2021).

With his anti-war beliefs aligning him with the nascent Western counterculture, Crowther entered Liverpool University as a biochemistry student in 1962 (Roberts 2021). One flatmate was the late Oxford physicist Fred Taylor (2016, 13), whose description of their Students' Union captures the nonconformist milieu available to them (16):

I remember dancing to ... the Animals, and even Screaming Lord Sutch ... he did have a chart success in the 60s with "Jack the Ripper", despite the fact it was banned by the BBC, which used to regard itself as the keeper of the

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nation's morals.

By 1970, Crowther had explored the noted 'hippie trail', visiting Kabul, Kathmandu, and India (MacLean 2007, 145; Everist 2021, 14). This route represented a liberal free-spiritedness, the ideological significance of which is highlighted by the turmoil which eradicated it. Crowther himself sensed the traumatic echoes of European conflict after Afghanistan's invasion by the Soviet Union in 1979, while the Iranian Revolution likewise led to the exclusion of backpackers from what was a previously hospitable country (BBC 2021; MacLean 2006, 79–80).

Returning to bohemian Notting Hill in London, Crowther joined BIT, an alternative information service. BIT (or Binary Information Transfer) was founded in 1968 in accord with the socialist ideals of the unrest which had swept Paris that May, becoming a cornerstone of the British underground scene (Boyd & Wilmer 2015). It was an open house and commune, providing free advice on social matters including abortion, accommodation, and legal aid (Wheeler & Wheeler 2005, 7). In 1972, Crowther co-produced the second version of BIT's *Overland to India and Australia*, a popular pamphlet supplying travel tips for the hippie trail (Jenkins 2021).

Among its admirers were Maureen and Tony Wheeler. Three years after establishing Lonely Planet, they hired Crowther to produce a comprehensive guidebook on Africa in 1976 (Wheeler & Wheeler 2005, 89–90). First published a year later as *Africa on the Cheap*, the insertion of personal opinions began to typify his work. Deemed 'colourful' by Nebbs (2016) and 'trenchant' by Peters (2020), the latter argues that their inclusion enhanced the readability of Crowther's texts, while others have criticised them for representing orientalist romanticism.

Housefield (2000, 11–12), for instance, disapproves of Crowther's co-authored view from *North Africa: A Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit* (1995) that 'entering Fes el-Bali [in Morocco] is like stepping into a time warp back to the Middle Ages', claiming it ignores the modernity of the people living there. Similarly, Kamat (2003, 24) takes issue with his alleged overemphasis on lasting Portuguese influence on Goa in his *India: A Travel Survival Kit* (1984), citing it as evidence that the region is still 'projected as a European "limpet" clinging to the west coast'.

While over-simplified, such remarks were not intended as chauvinistic or exceptionalist. Crowther (1993: 24) elsewhere lauds India since 'despite its population problems and vast poverty, [it] manages to do something neither the USSR nor China can manage: feed its own people without importing food'. Meanwhile, in his *South America on a Shoestring* (1980: 21), he scorns the West for its 'deadening aspects of industrial discipline'. Instead, his orientalist estimations indicate an honest but generalist approach, stemming from both the inevitable imperfection of on-the-ground research, as well as the necessity to write and sell to a catchall readership.

This is further demonstrated by the unarguable anti-authoritarianism of Crowther's more explicitly political passages. Iaquinto (2014), for example, lists with approval his claims from 1977 that President Mobutu's Zaire was 'politically a very screwed-up country' and that the inaugural President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, had squandered money on projects which were 'inappropriate to the country's real needs'. With a background influenced by pacifism, hippie rebelliousness, and May 68 socialism, Crowther had, consciously or not, assembled a potent worldview which was filtering into the minds of travellers throughout the developing world.

His most notable stance was a loathing for Malawi's first President, Hastings Banda. In the first edition of *Africa on the Cheap*, Banda's dictatorship was portrayed as ruthless and warmongering; the President himself is referred to as 'the second Hitler' (BBC 2021). Consequently, Crowther was forbidden from entering Malawi and the guide was censored, joining other 'highly subversive titles' such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence. A warning to conceal the guide at the border was printed in subsequent editions (Wheeler & Wheeler 2005, 269). Many visitors took elaborate precautions to avoid confiscations by frontier guards, including by rebinding the pages into the covers of school textbooks (Calder 2021).

Lonely Planet's *Africa* series also featured Crowther's distinctive hand-drawn maps. According to Hartley (2003, 123–24), photocopies of these had an unlikely strategic role in the final stages of the Ethiopian Civil War. In 1991, rebels of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) drove captured ex-Soviet T-54 tanks into Addis Ababa using Crowther's cartography, which was enlarged and handed to all infantry units. With the EPRDF

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duly exiling the despotic President of Ethiopia, Mengistu Haile Mariam, Tony Wheeler later observed that 'it's the only time we've directly helped to overthrow a government' (Roberts 2021).

Though accidentally implicated, I imagine Crowther to have been pleased by the guerrillas pulling down Mengistu's statue of Lenin in the capital (Hartley 2003, 124); his political roots and convictions always swung against strongmen and their tyrannies. This was despite orientalist views frequently peppering his works, an aspect which requires emphasis in light of the author's disdain for several leaders of what were recently decolonised African states.

Conversely, Crowther was among the very first writers to encourage ordinary Westerners to get 'up close' to countries in the Global South and interact with their peoples (Roberts 2021). Hence, he vastly improved the cultural understanding of countless young travellers from the West and was among the most important guidebook authors of the past century for doing so.

The extensive globetrotting that Crowther undertook to facilitate this eventually took its toll. Thirty years on the road subjecting himself to alcohol, drugs, and disease—and the family issues such absences presented—left Crowther nostalgic and embittered by the time he met MacLean (2007, 272–74) in Goa around the early 2000s. But even as Crowther sat 'tired of life', with 'his white beard ... stained nicotine-yellow', he still insisted on offering his political commentary (278):

China's the future ... They won't *defer* to other cultures. They don't want to be *transformed* ... Forty years ago, we put on kaftans and headed east ... Now the East is coming back at us dressed in DKNY.

Clearly lacking the nuance to be a developed analysis of the Chinese Century, these thoughts are interesting since they attest to the defiant influence of the Western counterculture and its hippieism on Crowther's worldview. This movement entailed an anti-authoritarianism which distinguished his work, most notably at Lonely Planet, while it also entertained a recklessness towards intoxicants and social obligations which came to haunt him in later life.

Richard Everist (2021, 14), Crowther's friend and colleague, aptly captures both sides of this dynamic in his obituary: 'those who were lucky enough to meet face to face with Crowther in his early chapters found a charismatic, politically engaged leftist, and a funny, generous, charming, drunk.' Leftist indeed, but surely not of the retrograde 'Leftist Planet' sketched by Moyinhan.

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