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Article in *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* · January 2020

DOI: 10.1353/pcg.2020.0007

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The Last Days of William Bunge: 2007–2013

CLARK AKATIFF

WHEN I FIRST PRESENTED THIS ACCOUNT of the last years and death of the famous American communist geographer William Bunge, I asked an audience of students and their professors, “How many have heard of ‘Wild’ Bill Bunge?” A minority of students and all the professors raised their hands, but most, by far, had not.

No surprise; who has heard of any geographer in these days? This is despite the growing importance of geography in science, in government, in business. All depend on Geographical Information Systems (GIS), and on digital maps. This formal revision of a paper given some years past is at this time being written under C-19 shutdown. The advance of the virus and the steps taken to suppress it give daily evidence of the relevance of geographical science. Yet as a pillar of learning, we stumble. The great American universities dropped geography as a Department of Learning. They kept maps and they kept geographers, often called something else, because you cannot do without geography. Geography grew in the state universities and abroad in Europe and Asia, but even there we see erosion. These days I see the term *geosciences* coming into use, and that is perhaps the future of the old girl. Time will tell, but let this memoir provide a brief but true insight into a man who led the field into its future state: Great Brilliance and/or Complete Obscurity.

Legends and Realities

You never know how well you are known or unknown. Certainly that is the case for me, more a rumor than a reality. The legendary status that some have attributed to me is all the more true of Bunge himself. As geographers we are both exceptions to the rule, on the margins, outlandish and without academic shelter, part of a larger people’s movement, unknown, or forgotten. That’s Bill, and even more so that’s me, Clark Akatiff, his ally and friend since 1968 (Akatiff 2016).

What brought Bill and me together? A love of geography, that old whore of the sciences, as well as the dreams for a world of peace, justice, and equality,

a world of socialism leading to perfect communism. Ours was a forty-year alliance, held at a great distance, but alive all the more so. The world of the mind takes place at a very high level. The word goes back and forth by the decades, not the moments. This bears explanation and repetition: this is a very slow-motion conversation we are having, already nearly a decade since Bill passed. And in my relationship to the man, there is also the true sense of the words *mentor*, *guru*, *disciple*, and *aide*. It speaks to the real relationship of the mind; it traces back to Socrates and Plato. I heard the man speak, and I bring his words as remembered and recorded.

I love Wild Bill, though he drove me nearly to distraction with his endless rants and professorial advisories, as well as the details of his family history. One could not help but note his spoiled behavior. He was, after all, from a rich family. And he understood that. He saw it as a fault, but could not overcome it. I recall his behavior at his last AAG meeting, in Boston 2008. Driven from Montreal in a limousine, imperious, expecting people to come to him, using me as a messenger boy (which I was happy to do). He once told me, “Clark, people don’t like me,” then laughed about it. There was nothing not to like about this big galoot of a man. He had a good heart and a great mind. He could sit at a piano and play the blues. He was the loudest voice in the room. Yet he rubbed many people the wrong way.

He had a reputation for violence. He would claim it was unearned, but it was a real reputation. There was an incident while he was at Wayne State in which it was asserted that he “roughed up a conservative student.” Some said he threatened to throw a racist out the window, but the story became elevated to an actual defenestration. I heard Bill reflect on that part of the legend several times: he denied the truth of that story, but there was always something menacing in his size and temper, as well as in his eagerness to confront his adversaries.

Ah, but that’s not the important thing. The important thing is that he was a progressive scientist, a leader in the field of geography, a communist—spelled CPUSA—during the J. Edgar Hoover hard times. And he was a battler for the survival of the children of the earth. Always doctrinaire, though selectively. Correct in the scientific sense of the word. A lover of the forms of traditional geography: expeditions, medals, maps, theory; as he called it, “The Geography” (Bunge 1973).

Bill once told me “I have the kind of mind that comes along only every few centuries”. He ranked himself in the fellowship of Herodotus,



Ptolemy, Humboldt, and Kropotkin. It is hard to believe a man with such an ego, but maybe we have to consider it. Why not? Big minds come along. Geography is waiting to blossom.

In preparation I listened to all the recordings I could find of William Bunge

speaking. One stands out: the “Geographers on Film,” from which this sketch is taken (Association of American Geographers et al. 1976), but also of phone messages I saved. These recordings were but a snippet of our talks by phone during the year surrounding my initial 2007 presentation of “Roots of Radical Geography.” I had not attempted to contact Bill during the writing of the paper. I was a little afraid to. I just wanted to get down what I myself remembered, before talking to him. The paper went well, and I decided to call him with a specific question of fact. I wanted him to verify being expelled from the CPUSA, which he did. But my first call was met with a voicemail. He called back also to mine, laughing and all giddy, saying, “You went to the geographers’ meetings...that made me dizzy.” He was elated. This began a series of phone calls in 2007–08, some of which I recorded. I regret not keeping all of those messages. Those I did keep were either from times I was unavailable or when I simply could not endure another thirty to sixty minutes on the phone. He was wordy, and our conversations were decidedly one-way. I have listened carefully to those recordings and transcribed notes from them, upon which this narrative is partially based. During that year of interaction, I persuaded or inspired him to attend the geography meetings in Boston the next year.

We went back and forth on the idea of his giving a paper. Initially he said no, they would have to pay him to give a paper. This was a point of honor to him, since he held a great resentment toward those whom he laughingly said, “I learned from, but they don’t learn from me.” “They owe me money,” he would righteously exclaim. I kept telling him about the bright young

geographers, people like Nik and Don, and that they needed to hear him. He would agree and send me some stuff, but it was not quite right.

He was righteously on the outside of the digital divide. He proudly told me, “We don’t have email,” and he expected me to submit his stuff, and he eventually sent me “The Legacy of Dr. King.” I let him down here, because I could not turn it into something, and he decided to keep with his initial decision not to present. By that time I had fully crossed the digital divide and found it impossible to deal with the printed text he sent, fragmented as it was.

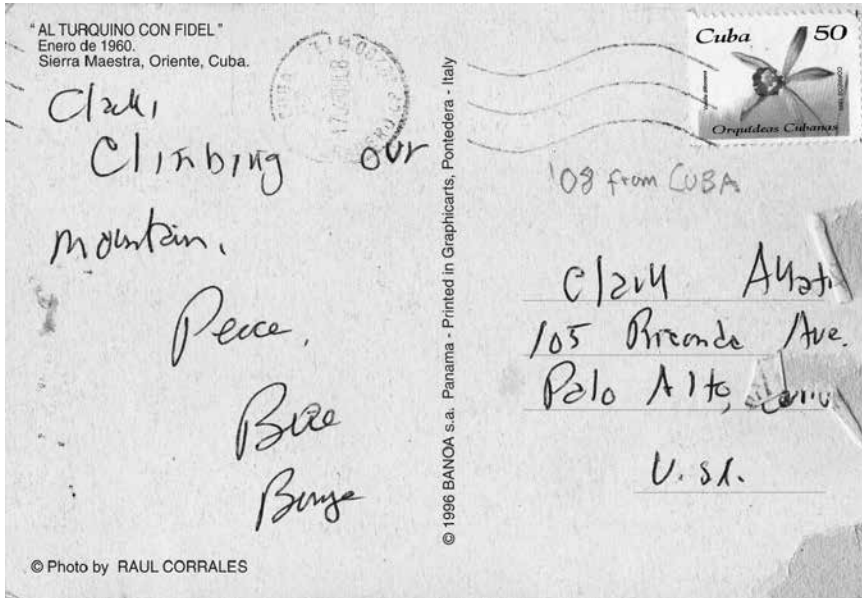
But he did attend the meetings for the first time in more than thirty years, and I welcomed him as he arrived in a big, black limousine. But he barely made it, and very few knew of his presence. Recovering from an injury to his leg, he was unable to circulate, but I circulated for him. I leafleted his Cuba handout and posted messages to people with whom he wished to speak. A few people visited him in his room at the big hotel with a view toward Cambridge, but most did not know he was there.

I stayed with him one night on a roll-out. We had our differences. He asked me why I wear my hair long. I told him that is the revolutionary style; he doubted it. As we parted, he said to me, “Tell the academic geographers that they should be sure that what they are doing is helping the poor.” A simple idea, not that easy to effect.

After 2008, I lost contact with him. I got a postcard from Cuba, then nothing.

I tried to find out about him afterward. I called his home number but reached a French speaking woman, with whom I could not communicate. Bunge was not well when he attended the 2008 meetings. He had slipped on the ice at his home in Montreal, and was dealing with an injured leg. He could not move it easily. He was most comfortable with it stretched out. Then in 2012 Nuria Benach, who was working on a book in Spanish about Bunge (Benach, 2012), gave me the number of a care facility where he might be. When I phoned the place I was told “he’s not here anymore”. Nik Heynen was also looking for him in order to republish *Fitzgerald, Geography of a Revolution* (Bunge, 1971). Through the years I continued to do internet searches for him, and for much of that time there existed a valuable blog out of North Carolina (Johnson, 2010), but unfortunately it is no longer available. I found legal notice of his 2012 divorce from Donia Johnson, but little else.

During the 2011 APCG meeting in San Francisco, I met Michael Chohaney, a student of David Nemeth’s at Toledo. He knew of the legend of Bunge and wanted to know more. At my suggestion, he and another student



went to Montreal to his last-known address. They found it to be a high security place, with guards at the doors. They were told that he was not there. Nonetheless, these intrepid explorers snuck in and, after a perilous search, including near arrest, they found him barely alive.

He was thrust up in some kind of straitjacket. He was partially gagged but could talk. He told them, “Get me outta here!”

They hushed him up so the guards would not be alarmed and told him “Clark sent us.” Hearing that, he relaxed and began to talk to Michael and his friend. He gave them his basic rap. We are facing a Darwinian imperative; the issue is survival; the children are God; the Indians are...on and on.

Then he kind of relaxed and faded away.

He left them with this message: “Tell the geographers, that whatever they do make sure it helps the poor.”

Wait a minute! Don't take that part about finding him alive seriously. That's just for fun and to add to the legend. No, he did not die a dramatic death. He died in obscurity on Halloween 2013, somewhere in Montreal. It wasn't until later that Dick Morrill found his name on the Social Security death index. Dick had been asked by Bill to write his obit for the *Annals* (Bergmann and Morrill 2018). I had written to Professor Morrill in early 2016 as I worked on an update to "Roots of Radical Geography" (Akatiff 2016).

So he is gone, but what of his legacy?

First, let us consider his role in the movement of geography to a theoretical science. We had started off on a scientific footing, but the great theoretical constructions of William Morris Davis and the environmentalists had been abandoned in the middle period of the twentieth century as a focus on data became everything. The limits of these early theories becoming apparent, they were all but abandoned. It was the publication of *Theoretical Geography* (Bunge 1962) that opened the door to a reconsideration of grand theory in geography. Of course, Bunge was but one, and not necessarily the most talented, of a group that gelled at the University of Washington. Yet, his contributions typically attracted much of the attention. It is the thin volume *Theoretical Geography*, which the Swedes published with his mother's money in 1962, that set the stage for the big changes that flowed through the profession in subsequent decades.

Secondly, there is the area of radical geography. Here, what distinguishes Bunge from the other radical geographers is that whereas the academic geographers brought Marxism to geography, Bunge brought geography to Marxism. This is a critical difference. The study of Marx in an academic setting is something that brings greater relevance to the studies, and, if not combined with active political struggle, also can bring academic tenure and great acclaim. Bringing the tools of geography to class struggle has the potential of increasing the effectiveness of political struggle, but it rarely, if ever, leads to academic tenure. And this brings us to the third legacy. From the meanest hovel the brightest light can shine.

Bill was ever dismissive of the academy. He said that the first requirement for starting a human geographical expedition was to be fired from your academic job. One had to get a job in the real world, which is what I have done. In this respect he is part of a greater movement. A movement for liberation, of which he and I are but a part. Bill never gave up on geography. Independent of academic support, he published widely in the literature, was filmed by

geographers where he spoke of his geographical and survival theories. I have boxes of materials he mailed me over those decades, and it's all geography. Here is Bill in his own words, from 2007: "...I am a Communist and I am using Geography to help the Communist Party...hah hah..." No wonder such a man could find no harbor in the bourgeois universities of our time.

William Bunge might best be understood as the Fidel Castro of geography. A fifty-year irritant and exemplar of the Communist ideal. Together, he and Fidel represent the antithesis of triumphal imperial geography.

Epilogue: Bunge on Bunge

Mario Bunge was a well-known philosopher and historian of science, a Distinguished Professor at McGill University from 1966 until his death in February 2020. While doing the research for Bunge's memorial in the *Annals*, Luke Bergmann came across this mention of William Bunge in Mario's memoirs:

...there was William Bunge, an American mathematical geographer who came to Montreal chased by Senator McCarthy's hounds. At Allan Memorial Institute of Mental Health, William was an unwitting guinea pig in the infamous experiment, carried out by famous McGill professors, funded by the CIA, designed to see whether it was possible to control minds by means of massive LSD doses. This brutal treatment left William handicapped for life, and he lived the rest of it on a mean pension in a distant and cold Quebec village. (M. Bunge 2016: 6)

Could this possibly be true? I knew Bunge to be very straightlaced when it came to drugs. Perhaps his aversion could possibly be traced to the events Mario elucidated; there is plenty of evidence of the destruction of personal lives that the MKUltra Medical Experiments of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s produced.³ Was William Bunge the victim of such a conspiracy? I have to say I cannot give a definitive answer to that question. Some things are purposely left secret, and only time and scholarly investigation can sort out the truth. We may never know whether Bill had been driven to madness by sinister hidden forces. It is doubtless that William Bunge was considered "crazy" by many who interacted with him. I would say "obsessed" was more to the point. Bill spoke of "usefulness" when he interacted with individuals and institutions. He did not hesitate to "use" people and things in advance of his vision of liberational geography. Notorious for running up huge phone

bills on “friends” accounts, institutionally he was the proverbial bull in the china shop.

But I strongly doubt the story Mario tells. In discussion with Luke on this topic, I learned that Mario Bunge had met Bill Bunge, but the reason had more to do with their shared surname than any kind of collaboration. He further indicated that Mario grew short with Bill, as did many people. So some truth here, but garbled.

There is too much evidence against the idea that Bunge could have been destroyed by secret medical experiments conducted at McGill Medical Center. Number one is that Bunge did not live in Canada until the 1970s, initially in Ontario and only later, after his marriage to Donia Johnson and the birth of two children, did he move to Quebec. Although MKUltra human experiments did lead to serious mental illness and suicide in a number of cases, they also launched the so-called psychedelic revolution, of which I was a part. I can attest to the fact that William Bunge was not part of that side of the revolution of the decade bridging 1966–1976. No, Mario has some fact, but not the true story here. It is true that Bill was persecuted by the hounds of Hoover. He could not travel, and was on various known blacklists, of which the list compiled by the House Committee on Un-American Activities is the most public (Rosenbaum 1970).

Bill was immensely proud of his listing here between H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael, two of the more militant black voices of their time.

William Bunge was not mentally handicapped. With limited resources, adrift in academia, he continued to do great work from his Canadian refuge. His accomplishments include the groundbreaking *Nuclear War Atlas* (Akatiff 1982; Bunge 1988). He played the principal role in the historic meeting of left geographers in Toronto, Ontario, in May 1974, at which meeting the Union of Socialist Geographers was formed (Sheppard, Thatcher, and Akatiff 2017) Over the decades this grouping has morphed into a significant thrust within the ranks of professional geographers (Peake and Sheppard 2014; see also Barnes and Sheppard 2019).

I knew Bill to be very forthcoming in providing details of his past life and experiences, and he never spoke of anything remotely like Mario’s assertions. In fact, he viewed drugs as counterrevolutionary. I can but repeat my previous words, “[he] thought drugs were a plot by the CIA to enslave the working class and keep the vanguard distracted. . . . Almost hit me when I said, after having heard his rap for hours as I drove him from Detroit to

House Panel Lists 'Radical' Speakers

By **DAVID E. ROSENBAUM**

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 14 — Representative Richard H. Ichord, chairman of the House Internal Security Committee, released today a committee report listing 65 "radical" campus speakers, although a Federal court order had prohibited official Government publication of the list.

The committee, formerly called the Un-American Activities Committee, compiled the list on the basis of a questionnaire sent out last summer, asking 179 colleges and universities to report all speakers who appeared in the last two school years.

The questionnaire was returned by 95 schools. According to the committee, only seven refused to answer as a matter of principle.

'Radicals' Listed

Most of those listed by the committee as "radical and/or revolutionary speakers" were members of the Chicago Seven, black militants, leaders of anti-war organizations or acknowledged Communists.

Among those not generally considered extremists were Jessica Mitford the author; John Ciardi, the poetry editor of *The Saturday Review*; Dr. Benjamin Spock, the pediatrician; The Rev. John C. Bennett, the former president of the Union Theological Seminary, and Jerome Skolnick, the criminologist, who prepared a study on demonstrations last year for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.

The committee said the 65 persons on the list had received a total of more than \$100,000 for their speaking engagements at schools that replied to the questionnaire.

Earlier, the American Civil Liberties Union asked Judge Gerhard A. Gesell of Federal District Court to prohibit the committee from publishing the list, arguing that to do would violate the right of free speech and harass the persons listed.

Judge Gesell signed a temporary order forbidding the Government printer, the Superintendent of Documents of the House of Representatives and the chief counsel of Mr. Ichord's committee to publish the report until he had held a full hearing.

But the judge acknowledged that he did not have the authority to prevent Mr. Ichord or any member of Congress from making the list public because of Congressmen's immunity from prosecution.

LIST OF SPEAKERS

Following is the list as released by the committee. The numbers indicate the organizations with which the persons on the list were said to be affiliated. The organizations are listed at the bottom.

Muhammad Ali (1).
Herbert Aptheker (2).
Robert Avakian (8).
John C. Bennett (3).
James Bevel (4).
Paul Boutelle (5).
Elaire Brown (7).
H. Rap Brown (7).
William Bunge (8).
Stokely Carmichael (9).
John Ciardi (3).
Jesus Colon (2).
Don Cox (7).
Carl Davidson (8).
Angela Davis (2).
Rennard Davis (6, 8).
David Dellinger (6, 10).
Douglas Dowd (10).
Harry Edwards (7).
Richard R. Fernandez (10).
John Froines (6).
Charles Gary (2, 7).
Carlton Goodlett (10).
Dick Gregory (4).
Deirdre Griswold (11).
Fred Hampton (7).

Floyd Hardwick (7).
Nathan Hare (3).
Tom Hayden (6, 8).
Nat Hentoff (5, 8, 11).
Amsal Hewlett (7).
Abbie Hoffman (6, 12).
Paul Jacobs (7).
Michael James (8).
Le Roi Jones (7).
Edward Keating (4).
Paul Krassner (12).
William Kunstler (6).
Mark Lane (3).
Claude Lightfoot (2).
Staughton Lynd (11).
Floyd McKissick (11).
Stewart Meacham (10).
Charlene Mitchell (2).
Jessica Mitford (2).
Carl Oglesby (8).
Linus Pauling (2).
Sidney Peck (2, 10).
Marcus Raskin (8).
Richard Rothstein (8).
Jerry Rubin (6, 12).
Nancy Rubin (12).
J. Mark Rudd (8).
Robert Scheer (9, 8).
Bobby Seale (7).
Mulford O. Sibley (10).
Jerome Skolnick (11).
Robert Sollen (3).
Mike Speigel (8).
Benjamin Spock (10).
Reles Tijerina (7, 8).
C. T. Vivian (3).
Wyatt Tee Walker (3).
Daniel Watts (5).
Michael Zagarell (2).

1. Nation of Islam.
2. Communist party, United States of America.
3. National Committee to Abolish HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee).
4. National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam
5. Socialist Workers party.
6. Cited for contempt in connection with the Chicago Seven conspiracy trial.
7. Black Panther party (sup-porter or member).
8. Students for a Democratic Society.
9. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.
10. New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam.
11. Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam.
12. Youth International party (Yippies).

The New York Times

Published: October 15, 1970
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DC, that what he needed to do was to drop acid. He got so mad he nearly exploded. I had to calm him down later" (Akatiff 2016, 260).

There is a dark scenario that one can draw from these tidbits. How was it that two years passed before we knew Bill was gone? Why no death

certificate? Why the secretive, high-security place he was last known to inhabit? What about his divorce from Donia Johnson? Why was David B. Kaplan, a serious scholar of Bunge's life, upon returning from a visit with Bill, detained at the U.S. border? And why were the papers Bill had given him confiscated?⁴ This seems a bit out of the ordinary.

What about his FBI dossier? That would make for some good reading. He mailed me a copy of the part he could get. Bill was a member of the Communist Party USA in the 1960s. Twice he was expelled from the party, and later in life in Quebec he again became a "card carrying" Communist. He was attempting a bridge to Cuba. These are the things that bring a person to the attention of intelligence and police agencies.

He was out there in front. He paid the price. He left his mark.

Let's not forget about him.

William Bunge.

Geographer.

Hero.

Notes

1 David "Jim" Nemeth, Professor of Geography, University of Toledo, has been mentor to several students who have studied the life of William Bunge. Jim was one of the few people present at Bunge's "seminar" in his hotel room in Boston in 2008. On ResearchGate he has opened a discussion of the assertions of Mario Bunge regarding MKUltra and Bill's involvement: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328886753_Did_MK-Ultra_Transform_Storied_Geographer_William_Wild_Bill_Bunge_into_a_Defenestrator

2 I apologize for using this device to deviate from the truth. But in truth, here are Michael Choaney's words describing the visit to CHSLD Saint-Lambert sur-le-Golf: "We snuck in and went to his room that August [2013]. He was not there... we were caught after wandering the halls for an hour—after some convincing, we booked it for Toronto!" (Personal communication, 09/24/2017). But more to the essential truth of the account, when I last spoke directly with William Bunge, it was near the last day of the Boston AAG Meeting in 2008. He had decided to leave for his home in Montreal. We spoke together about hope for the future and for geography. Not exactly a meeting of the minds. I believe he loved me, but as if I were a prodigal son, he was always disappointed in my lack of ambition and hippie-like radicalism. I turned to leave, knowing he would be gone when I returned, and he truly did say those words to me "...help the poor."

3 Project MKUltra was a notorious mind-control project initiated by the CIA in 1953 and continuing into the early 1970s. It is a source of much controversy and

FD-204 (Rev. 3-3-59)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

[REDACTED]

Copy to: 1 - Secret Service, Detroit (RM)

Report of: SA [REDACTED] Office: Detroit
Date: 6/18/68

Field Office File #: 100-29662 Bureau File #: 105-965056

Title: WILLIAM WHEELER BUNGE, JR.

Character: SECURITY MATTER - C

Synopsis: Subject continues to reside at 16570 Wisconsin Ave., Detroit, Mich., and is employed as an assistant professor of geography at Wayne State University, Detroit, Mich. Subject during past year wrote and distributed a 12 point pamphlet in which subject was anti-police, anti-teacher, and anti-merchant. Subject's name appears on Spring Mobilization Committee, Detroit, Mich., stationary as a sponsor, and gave a talk at such a meeting supporting this committee. Subject also appeared at a black symposium at Wayne State University, and at a demonstration at Detroit, featuring Father GONNET, prominent civil rights leader from Michigan.

[REDACTED]

-C-

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the object of a 1975 Congressional investigation. Since records of the project were ordered destroyed in 1973, full details of the project and those affected may never be known. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_MKUltra

4 Kaplan can be reached at davidbkaplan@live.com

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