



RED SILK

THE LIFE OF
ELLIOTT JOHNSTON QC

PENELOPE DEBELLE

Wakefield Press

RED SILK: THE LIFE OF ELLIOTT JOHNSTON QC



Penelope DeBelle is an award-winning journalist who began her career at *The News* in Adelaide. In 1983 she moved to Melbourne and worked as a political reporter at *The Herald*, then as Melbourne writer for *Good Weekend* magazine. In 1995, after the birth of her daughter, Honey, she and Robert returned to Adelaide where she worked as Adelaide correspondent for *The Age* for a decade. In 2008 she joined *SA Weekend* magazine at *The Advertiser* as a senior writer, winning the SA Press Club 2009 Gold Award for a feature on former South Australian Premier, John Bannon. In 2010 she won the National Press Club Engineer's Australia award for an article on maths. She has a Bachelor of Economics degree from Flinders University (Hons arts).



Watercolour by Paul Heywood-Smith, painted in 1983 from a photograph in *The Advertiser* on the appointment of Elliott Johnston to the Supreme Court Bench.

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Foreword

A biographer should be so lucky: a subject who lived in interesting times, who participated in many of the major events of the twentieth century and was an observer of others and who, above all, remains interesting in his own right.

I met Elliott Johnston on only a few formal, legal occasions. I regret that I did not know him well – a regret that is magnified by this account of his life and times. On any view, Elliot was and is a complex character: a lifetime Communist, but not an ideologue; a critical thinker who, at times, was naively optimistic about the political cause he espoused, a person who believed that there could and should be a better political system, but who was prepared to work within the current system and, even, accept some of its privileges and honours. Above all, however, he believed in equal justice. That belief sustained his professional life and, perhaps, goes some way to explaining his political beliefs.

This book is not simply an account of Elliott Johnston, the lawyer. It is also an account of a student radical who, even then, would put his belief in freedom of thought and speech above his personal interests, a Communist warrior whose ideas and principles were not well understood even by his comrades. It is the story of a husband separated from his young wife, Elizabeth, during the Second World War and later while he was a student in China, a wife whose beliefs, integrity and industry matched his own and with whom he had a long and loving relationship. The backdrop to all of this is a fascinating picture of Adelaide life and society, particularly student life in the late 1930s when Elliott's fellow students included Max Harris and others associated with the Angry Penguins, as well as Fin Crisp who, with Elliott's help, founded the National Union of Australian University Students. Equally fascinating is the account of the privileged circumstances of Elizabeth's family, the Teesdale Smiths.

What comes through this account of Elliott Johnston's life is his complete and unswerving commitment to improving the lives

of others, both by political means and practical assistance. This practical assistance was not confined to his work as a lawyer. For example, when stationed in New Guinea during the Second World War, Elliott ran literacy classes to help other soldiers write letters home. However, it was as a practising lawyer that this aspect of his character came to the fore, fighting workplace injury cases and representing ordinary men and women whose ability to pay his legal fees was never an issue. He also appeared in complex criminal cases, both for the defence and the prosecution. Elliott was a skilled advocate and his courtesy and charm won him many friends and admirers within the legal profession. One such admirer was Chief Justice Bray, who provoked considerable controversy when he nominated Elliott for silk in 1969.

The controversy surrounding the appointment of a member of the Communist Party as Queen's Counsel delayed Elliott's appointment until 1970, when he became Australia's first Communist silk – the 'Red Silk'. He remained an active member of the Communist Party until his appointment to the Supreme Court of South Australia in 1983 – the first openly avowed Communist to be appointed to a superior Court in Australia.

Being 'a first' of anything nearly always involves difficulties, especially in the Law, which remains an essentially conservative profession, and was even more so in the 1970s and 1980s. At the very least, being 'a first' usually involves a higher level of scrutiny than would otherwise be the case. Elliott seems not to have been confronted with many difficulties, either as the first Communist Queen's Counsel or as the first avowed Communist appointed to the Supreme Court of South Australia. Perhaps, in part, that was because of his social connections through Prince Alfred College and the Teesdale Smiths. Certainly, it was partly due to his courtesy, charm, integrity and professionalism. It was also due in part to the South Australian legal profession, which boasted a progressive, independent and outstanding Chief Justice in the person of Sir John Bray and which produced Australia's first female Queen's Counsel in the person of Roma Mitchell, who later became the first woman to be appointed to an Australian Supreme Court. Certainly, I have always found the South Australian legal profession to be open-minded, progressive and tolerant. I suspect Elliott's profes-

sional life might have been more difficult and more controversial in any other state.

Elliott's commitment to equal justice has been and continues to be an inspiration to many, including those who had the privilege of working with him before his appointment to the Bench. That commitment underscores his work on the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody following his retirement from the Supreme Court. His commitment to equal justice for Indigenous Australians has a long history, including as first Chairperson of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement. Despite Elliott's work on the Royal Commission, equal justice remains elusive for many Indigenous Australians. It is to be hoped that, sooner rather than later, the recommendations of the Royal Commission become established both in law and in fact. That would be a fitting tribute to the work of Elliott Johnston, a good man and a great Australian.

Mary Gaudron
7 December 2010

Preface

This biography of Elliott Johnston is not an authorised work in the accepted sense. It was commissioned by lawyers who had worked with Elliott and wanted his extraordinary life to be remembered. Elliott cooperated with generosity, efficiency and a good deal of grace, but he had no direct hand in what appears on these pages. He has not read it (although his son, Stewart, has) and the analysis is mine and not his. It is a book about Elliott, not by him.

Red Silk places on record Elliott's personal involvement in international events that took place more than half a century ago. The Depression shaped his Communism but he was equally committed to the great cause of peace. His presence at the 1950 Peace Congress in Sheffield, which moved to Warsaw after the Attlee Government prevented some delegates from entering the country, place him in an incredible moment in world history. Pablo Picasso was there, and Elliott sat a few feet from him. He returned from Warsaw through Stalinist Russia at the invitation of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Five years later he went to the People's Republic of China for 18 months to study Communism as a guest of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, returning again through Russia. Elliott's personal recollections, combined with the historical record, memoirs and reports from the time, provided the basis for writing about these events. (I am indebted, with a healthy dose of irony, to ASIO for their diligence in bringing to my attention articles from sources as diverse as *On Dit* and *Truth*.)

Elliott's commitment to Communism ran parallel to his practice of the law. For many people their co-existence in one man was at best perplexing, at worst something to be feared. Even those close to Elliott were not entirely sure how a man of such intelligence could remain a follower of Communism after the horrors committed in its name. I was unsure how the two could be reconciled. Part of the book's purpose, then, was to make sense of a life that seemed riven by fundamental contradictions.

Elliott is that gift to a biographer, a good record-keeper. In his

personal papers he held letters, press clippings, notes from speeches, and seminal Communist Party of Australia documents going back to the late 1940s. They are a treasure trove for any future Communist historian and provided me with a firm foundation from which to understand our conversations.

The initiative taken by the commissioning panel turned a good idea around a dinner table into a reality: they are Andrew Collett, Mick Doyle, Paul Heywood-Smith QC, Carmel Kerin, Robyn Layton QC, Peter McCusker, Ann McLean and Lindy Powell QC.

The degree of goodwill towards Elliott, and as a consequence this project, was striking. He had his enemies, but he was also widely venerated, admired and loved. In that spirit, I was given generous help. Many of Elliott's colleagues and friends contributed ideas, stories, guidance and support. All direct quotes included in this book, including from Elliott, were from my interviews unless footnotes indicate otherwise. I particularly thank Chris Sumner, John Bannon, Greg Crafter, Ted Mullighan QC, Justice Kevin Duggan, Sam Jacobs QC, Max Basheer and Professor Carol Johnson from the Politics department of the University of Adelaide for her early guidance. I was greatly assisted by my brother-in-law, Bruce DeBelle AO QC, who helped me to move an early draft into a more finished manuscript, particularly in relation to Elliott's practice of the law. His thoroughness allowed me to proceed with a great deal more confidence. Others who assisted with proofreading were Jean Lamensdorf DeBelle and Rachael White.

On a number of occasions Elliott asked me – always with the greatest respect – to make sure that Elizabeth's contribution was properly acknowledged. He would have preferred a biography in which husband and wife received equal billing. The reality is that Elliott was more at the forefront of public life and that Elizabeth preferred it that way. Her life was interwoven with his and she appears throughout the book, including a chapter dedicated to who she was and what she achieved. In life they were equal partners.

I am extremely grateful to Stewart Johnston for his help, advice, photographs and information. He very graciously allowed the book to take shape beyond the reach of family control and I hope his faith has been rewarded.

Wakefield Press has proven again its invaluable role as a supporter of histories and biographies that might fall short of the commercial bar set by the larger publishing houses. The sage guidance of Michael Bollen has been greatly appreciated. I was also privileged to have as an editor the talented Penelope Curtin.

My final thanks go to Elliott. His unfailing good humour made our regular meetings around his kitchen bench table unexpectedly pleasurable. More importantly, he is the real thing. It was gratifying to delve deeply into his life and to discover that up close he is a man of integrity.

Penelope Debelles
February 2011

Chronology

- 1918 Born 26 February at Gover Nursing Home, Adelaide
- 1932 Elder Scholarship to Prince Alfred College
- 1935 Tops South Australia Leaving Honours in Economics
- 1936 Commences Law at University of Adelaide
Articled clerk with Povey Waterhouse
- 1937 Secretary of University of Adelaide Peace Group
- 1938 Business editor of *Phoenix*
- 1939 Joint founding editor of *Obiter Dicta*
Meets Elizabeth Teesdale Smith
- 1940 Stood down from University of Adelaide
Enlists with Australian Military Forces
Graduates and begins private practice
- 1941 Student dunking in River Torrens
Elliott and Elizabeth join Communist Party of Australia (CPA)
Called up December 15
- 1942 Marries Elizabeth April 17
- 1943 Stationed in New Guinea
Joins Army Education Services
- 1944 Promoted to Lieutenant
- 1945 Demobbed. Returns to Povey Waterhouse
- 1946 Starts own practice
- 1948 Wins Clerks Award
First South Australian Supreme Court appearance
- 1949 Birth of only child, Ian (Stewart) Johnston
- 1950 Sheffield Peace Congress (transferred to Warsaw)
Visits Russia
- 1951 Returns to Adelaide on *Orcades*
Full-time organiser with SA branch of CPA
- 1953 CPA candidate for seat of Stuart in state election
- 1954 Elected to state committee of SA branch of CPA

- 1955 Study trip to People's Republic of China
- 1957 Returns from China
Resumes legal practice
- 1959 Joined by Elizabeth at Johnston & Johnston
- 1964 First High Court appearance (workers compensation)
First murder trial
- 1969 Rejected as Queen's Counsel by Hall Government
- 1970 Appointed Queen's Counsel by Dunstan Government
Purchased 345 Carrington Street
- 1971 Elizabeth joins Crown Law office
Chairman of Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement
- 1975 Privy Council appeal in London in Van Beelen case
Laverton Royal Commission
- 1976 Elizabeth first female assistant Crown Solicitor
Elizabeth chairs first SA Sex Discrimination Board
- 1980 Communist candidate for Port Adelaide at federal election
- 1983 Appointed South Australian Supreme Court judge
Resigns from CPA
Visits China
- 1984 Elizabeth on board of SA Housing Trust
- 1988 Retires from Bench
Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody
- 1989 Appointed lead Commissioner after Jim Muirhead resigns
- 1991 Royal Commission hands down report
- 1992 Associate Professor, Flinders University Law School
- 1994 Order of Australia
- 1996 Honorary doctorate Flinders University
- 2002 Elizabeth Johnston dies
- 2006 Honorary doctorate from University of Adelaide

CHAPTER 1

A revolutionary in China

On a bridge above the Pearl River in Guangzhou, Elliott Johnston looked out at a new Communist nation that was coming to life. It was January 1957 and the young lawyer from Adelaide was dressed in the blue uniform of a Chinese cadre. After 18 months in Chairman Mao's China, Elliott believed that he was seeing his dream of a workers' paradise come true. Around him he saw signs of a nation that was embracing the Communist ideal of men and women working side by side, in harmony, for the good of all. This vision of a more enlightened way of living, in which the state protected the weak and distributed wealth according to need had made him a Communist 16 years earlier. First Russia, now China ... Elliott burned with hope that Australia, too, would be a Communist nation one day. At the end of a long immersion in Red China, Elliott was convinced that a new world order had been born. It was the single greatest moment of his life.

This was his second time on the bridge. Elliott, 39, had arrived 18 months earlier as one of a group of Australian Communists handpicked to study Chairman Mao Tse-tung's revolution. The new People's Republic of China had established a school in the capital, Beijing, and had invited comrades from around the world to study the second great Communist movement of the twentieth century.

Soon after arriving in August 1955, Elliott had found his way to the Pearl River. There he saw farmers on their way into Guangzhou (then Canton), hurrying over a bridge spanning a river that teemed with sampans. Travelling either on foot or bicycles, and balancing long poles on their shoulders that supported bamboo baskets over-

flowing with rice, eggs, vegetables and chickens, the peasants poured in from the countryside to the busy port, much as they had done for a thousand years.

Eighteen months later, the scene had changed. Peasants still crossed the bridge carrying produce, but travelling in the convoy were two of the very earliest trucks manufactured in China. They were white utility vehicles that had been dispatched by the Communist government to communes in the country and the cities. Elliott had seen the first of them a few months earlier lined up outside a factory in Changchun, close to Inner Mongolia, and at the time he had wondered how they would be used. Now Chinese people were seeing tangible rewards for their efforts. It was a sign to Elliott that China was being transformed into a vibrant Communist economy. He could not know then that he had been exposed to only the best of what Chairman Mao wanted the 12 Australians to see.

It was the second visit to China by an invited group of Australians who were being groomed for Party leadership. What they learnt was meant to strengthen the ideology and practice of the Communist movement at home. During the first China trip, from 1951 to 1954, Chairman Mao had personally welcomed the Australians; they were comrades from a nation destined to join an emerging Asian Communist bloc.

Elliott, married with a young son, was a prominent member of the South Australian Party branch and on the Party's orders had ceased practising law in Adelaide in 1951 to become a full-time Communist organiser. He was being schooled for leadership and had attended two Party seminars in Sydney before being taken quietly aside and told to prepare for China. He should not alert anyone to where he was going or how long he would be away.

In Australia in 1955, as the Cold War took hold, Communism was feared. A referendum to ban the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) four years earlier had failed, but national sentiment against Communists was strong. Anti-Red hysteria worsened as Right-wing Industrial Groupers, backed by the charismatic Catholic anti-Communist, Bob Santamaria, formed cells inside trade unions to fight Communist control. The first trip to China had been illegal under Australian law. Three years later travelling to Red China to study was permitted but hardly smiled upon.

Very little was known in the outside world about China, its people, culture and conditions. In 1927 the dominant Kuomintang (Chinese National People's Party) led by Chiang Kai-shek had turned on the fledgling Chinese Communists and killed many of its leaders. Twenty-two years later, on 1 October 1949, the Communist leader Mao Tse-tung stood in triumph in Tiananmen Square and proclaimed the People's Republic of China. But the Australian Government had no contact with the Chinese Communists nor was the Communist government recognised by Australia or the United States of America, and, with the exception of notable correspondents like Mao Tse-tung's American biographer Edgar Snow, there were few first-hand reports describing the vast country or the people and their politics.¹ Deep-set patterns of suspicion and mistrust were taking hold. One of Elliott's travel companions, Bernie Taft, had to be taken outside the Melbourne Party office to be informed of his trip because officials believed the rooms were bugged. Spies from the newly formed Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) were listening, and Elliott was already under surveillance.

He had discreetly made his arrangements. It meant leaving his wife Elizabeth and young son Ian, but Elizabeth was a loyal Communist too, and the couple did what the Party wanted. During the 18 months Elliott was away, Elizabeth had no clear idea where her husband was and she had expected him home four months before he returned.

Elliott's application for a passport to attend the Communist school had set off alarm bells in Canberra. His stated intention of travelling to 'China, the USSR, Czechoslovakia and Poland' caused a flurry of departmental exchanges and was considered at the most senior levels. Elliott had to explain why he wanted to visit China and possibly countries behind the Iron Curtain. He notified the Department of Immigration by letter that his reasons were tourism and to study 'legal-constitutional arrangements'.²

He was the only South Australian in the group, which had flown to Hong Kong and entered the People's Republic of China by

¹ Snow's book, *Red Star Over China*, published in 1937, introduced the Communist Party of China to the outside world.

² Department of Immigration, 'Elliott Johnston', National Archives of Australia, Canberra, 1950–55.

train. Those with him included Bernie Taft, Ted Bacon, who later headed the Queensland branch, Laurie Aarons, Harry Stanistreet and Harry Bocquet from Melbourne, and from Sydney, Joyce Stevens, the only woman.

Hong Kong was, as it still is, glittering and exotic. The group was met by representatives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and booked into the Miramar hotel. After a banquet, they took an evening stroll, stepping over a Chinese woman and her baby who lay prostrate on the ground. There was nothing they could do to help her, but they were filled with hope that life would soon be different.³

Two days later, they boarded a train for Red China and arrived in Guangzhou, a trading port from the second century and accustomed to dealing with the outside world. It was a noisy introduction to the Chinese mainland, which contained more than a fifth of mankind. After two days on a train, they arrived at the Communist school on the outskirts of Beijing (then Peking). The small Australian group was part of an Asian contingent that included Communists from New Zealand, India, the Philippines, Burma, Indonesia, Vietnam and Pakistan. There was also a group of guerrilla fighters taking a break from the jungles of Malaya, where they were fighting British colonial rule.

The school was in a large complex with a high brick wall enclosing a series of two-storey buildings, and it was Elliott's home for the next 18 months. They were made welcome with gifts of blue Maoist workers' uniforms and poetic Chinese names, but they were also heavily supervised.⁴ They were cared for by a large Chinese staff of lecturers, translators, administrators, cooks, security and medical personnel, and had access to sporting facilities and laundries, even a modern theatre equipped with earphones for the translation of films. About 200 comrades from different countries ate together three times a day, sometimes unable to communicate but united by Communist ideology. In sparse lecture rooms with concrete floors the group studied the history and achievements of the CCP. Elliott, who had read the original doctrines of Marx and

³ Bernie Taft, *Memoirs of Bernie Taft*, Scribe, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 77–8.

⁴ Bernie Taft was named Bo Ming, meaning 'bright and clear'. Elliott did not record his Chinese name.

Engels, had nothing but admiration for the way Communism in China was taught and practised. He attended lectures six days a week on the foundations of Marxism–Leninism, political economy and dialectical and historical materialism. He learnt how, by organising along Soviet Communist lines, the Communists had brought order to a war-weary and depleted country, and how Chairman Mao had heroically led his Red Army on the Long March to Yan’an, in the north-western province of Shaanxi.⁵ He had an English translator, a delightful young man who had lived in Australia and who spoke English with an Australian accent. Lessons were in Chinese or Russian and each group sat in its own language area with an interpreter, who translated according to the language of the specific group, painstakingly word for word.

From behind the walls the comrades saw little of the real China, and when they ventured outside they were presented with a stage-managed view of Communist life. They were invited guests but were not free to wander. They could not explore on their own nor become too friendly with the local Chinese. None of them, including Elliott, thought this was odd or suspicious and they felt honoured to be part of China’s political rebirth. Organised exercise was an integral part of the learning regime and every morning saw some form of activity – volleyball, running or walking. On the long train journey to Beijing, Elliott had woken in alarm when the train stopped suddenly and brisk military music blared out from the speakers. The Chinese jumped from their seats and threw themselves vigorously into an exercise routine, touching their toes and leaping into the air. This went on twice a day, and one of the few things Elliott brought back from China was a recording of the military music that accompanied the Communist callisthenics.

The Australian contingent elected a committee, headed by Laurie Aarons, and including Elliott, Ted Bacon and Bernie Taft, to maintain morale and liaise with the Chinese. They celebrated birthdays, drank beer, and saw parts of the ancient Great Wall, rebuilt under the Ming Dynasty to keep out marauding nomadic tribesmen. The pale-faced comrades in their blue uniforms were

⁵ Chairman Mao’s mythologised leadership of the Long March is challenged in Jung Chang and Jon Halliday’s bitter revision of history (*Mao: The Unknown Story*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2005).

objects of blatant curiosity to ordinary Chinese people and when they visited landmarks like the Forbidden City in central Beijing and the lakes and bridges of the Summer Palace, they were surrounded by locals who stared and laughed at the hairy foreigners, calling out ‘monkeys, monkeys’.⁶

Everything in China, from agriculture to theatre, seemed to revolve around the revolution and the common good. All cultural activities, including operas and plays, commemorated Maoist heroes and no aspect of daily life was too insignificant to be regulated. Beijing was in the grip of a plague of flies and Elliott was allocated a quota of ten flies a day to kill in the name of the revolution. Ideological remodelling was an essential part of the armoury of Chinese Communism and Elliott learnt how to be a dutiful Communist. Good cadres scrutinised their personal lives for evidence of the bourgeois traits of selfishness, ego or desire for the limelight. These were to be renounced. Revolutionaries had to be motivated by the most honourable of reasons. Modesty was a virtue, and individuals, they were told, should be heroes. Self-examination and self-criticism were milestones on the rough road to self-improvement, and in Elliott’s classes these sometimes took the form of public confessions before fellow students. ‘You’ve told us the good reason; now tell us the *real* reason’, the Chinese would say when a student sought to rationalise his actions.⁷ But the psychological pressure imposed on the students was relatively mild, and the brutal personal censure used in the Cultural Revolution to turn student against teacher and son against father was still a decade away. Elliott did not find the public self-examination intrusive or irksome and he saw nothing to cause alarm.

Although he appreciated it only later, Elliott was in China at the best possible time. In the mid-1950s, the country enjoyed, at least superficially, an interlude of intellectual freedom unlike anything before or after. It was a lull between the period of revolutionary establishment, known as ‘Liberation’, and the beginning of the next of Mao’s dramatic set pieces, the 1958 ‘Great Leap Forward’, whose policies of forced collectivisation caused mass starvation and devas-

⁶ Taft, p. 89.

⁷ Eric Aarons, *What’s Left*, Scribe, Melbourne, 1993, p. 97.

tating suffering. Forty million people died as a result. While Elliott was there, Mao Tse-tung invited gentle criticism of his regime in the episode known to the rest of the world as the time of 'a hundred flowers', a phrase from a work by a Taoist sage, 'Let a hundred flowers blossom, let a hundred schools [of thought] contend'.⁸ In this spirit of openness, Mao urged Chinese intellectuals to speak from their hearts and to offer criticism in the manner of a breeze of mild rain.

Elliott believed that Mao was on a genuinely inclusive path. The spectacle of brainwashed Chinese Communists standing before the National People's Congress to make excoriating public confessions to kill off their old reactionary selves was not part of his experience. Later the period of 'a hundred flowers' was seen for what it was, a veneer of openness that gave the illusion of intellectual vigour. Worse, Mao was deliberately flushing out the dissenters before embarking upon a brutal cycle of recrimination and purges. 'Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred thoughts prevail became, let one thought prevail', Elliott said later, with some bitterness.⁹

Everything he saw at the time convinced him that the Communist experiment was a success. When he quizzed a sweeper on a train, the worker told him pay and conditions had never been better. He said he worked harder now because he had a share in the railways and he took pride in keeping the train clean in order to keep down disease.¹⁰

It was true that China was making great economic strides. Two years earlier, the first of the Five Year Plans had been announced and vast armies of workers had been mobilised to build massive infrastructure projects, like the 300-kilometre railway line in the south-west province of Szechuan, completed at great speed and then used for domestic propaganda to show what Communism had achieved. Elliott heard how a thousand grateful delegates gave Chairman Mao a three-minute standing ovation at the 1956 National Congress of the Communist Party of China in Beijing's

⁸ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Hundred Flowers*, Stevens, London, 1960, p. 8.

⁹ Unless otherwise stated, all comments attributed to Elliott Johnston were made in interviews with the author between 2005 and 2009.

¹⁰ Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), 'Elliott Frank Johnston', National Archives, Canberra, 1957.

Great Hall of the People. Extravagance and waste were criticised, and the finance minister warned that China must not sacrifice quality and safety in production by being impatient and taking risks.

Most pleasing of all, China seemed to be following a consensual pace of change that made allowance for human adaptation. The transition to Communism seemed to be progressing at just the right rate. Land redistribution and the collectivisation of agriculture were underway, and it appeared to be happening voluntarily, with some land still in private hands. Elliott visited a show farm north of Beijing, where he marvelled at the small weirs and dams ingeniously carved out of the countryside's hills and valleys. Man-made canals were dug and fish had been introduced, and Elliott thought it a great example of how cooperation helped everyone. On the same farm he saw a giant hothouse made entirely from soil strengthened with grass and peat, its roof and three sides enclosed. The fourth side was a wall of glass designed to trap the sun and heat the interior. Inside, a fire raised the temperature just enough to enable vegetables to grow during the winter when the land was under snow. Elliott talked to some of the farmers who were wearing boots for the first time and who told him their lives had never been better.

In late 1956 the group travelled to the vast expanse of northern China which, with Russia's help, was being opened up to economic growth. State quotas were driving the iron and steel, coal, cotton and cloth industries, and production targets had been established for factories, workshops, teams and individuals. New plants, like the factory where Elliott had seen the first vehicles coming off the production line, were huge in scale and in ambition. They were shown a factory manufacturing the tools and equipment needed to set up a power industry. A peasant society, which for centuries had laboured from dawn and gone to bed at dark, was being transformed by electricity. In Shanghai he visited the home of a man who owned a profitable metal factory. The man spoke with enthusiasm about his arrangements for a staged handover; he would remain the manager and receive a declining percentage of the profits over time. After 15 years, his equity in the factory would be extinguished, the factory would be state-owned and he would be paid a salary. ASIO reported

later that Elliott was struck by 'the happy look worn by people of all classes, both workers and intelligentsia'.¹¹

Six months after Elliott had arrived in China, the news of Soviet Russia's terrifying experiences under Joseph Stalin leaked out. The practice of mass extermination and terror had been Russia's dirty secret, but in 1956 President Nikita Khrushchev made his 'secret speech'. Speaking in a private session at the Twentieth Party Congress in Moscow, Khrushchev denounced Stalin, his predecessor, as a cruel despot and madman who for 30 years murdered his countrymen on a whim. Court cases had been fabricated and false confessions of guilt extracted under torture; innocent people were exiled to the gulags or shot. Western intelligence translated the speech and circulated it. Elliott heard whispers, which were confirmed when the Victorian Communist, Ted Hill, who had been at the Congress, returned through China and showed the group the speech reproduced in full in the *New York Times* newspaper. No one could doubt that it was genuine. Elliott read with silent horror what a new leader was saying about the giant who had led post-revolutionary Russia for three decades.

There was still a huge stock of goodwill on which to draw and enough excuses to go around. Here was Russia admitting its mistakes and making a commitment to a more transparent future. Best of all, Elliott believed that here was China presenting a smiling socialist alternative to the mistakes of Stalin.¹² As if to emphasise that China had nothing to hide, Elliott's group was later supplied with reports from the European press, in which Stalin's crimes were analysed and discussed.¹³

Russia and China were close and remained so while Elliott was in China. Russia supplied teachers to the Communist school and helped China's industrial program by providing advice and expertise. But China's ambitions were being unleashed and while Elliott was there Mao would say, 'The Soviet Union's today is China's

¹¹ ASIO, 'South Australia: Elliott Frank Johnston', National Archives of Australia, Canberra, 7 June 1957, p. 100.

¹² Bob Walshe, '1956: The secret speech and reverberations in Sydney', *The Hummer*, publication of the Sydney Branch, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, vol. 3, no. 10, 2003.

¹³ Taft, p. 93.

tomorrow'.¹⁴ China took an enigmatic position on the Khrushchev speech, announcing that Stalin's contribution to Communism had been 'seventy per cent positive and 30 per cent negative'. China had clearly determined its own trajectory free of Russia; the message was that Australia should do the same. Elliott believed China was adapting Communism to fit the circumstances of its history and people and he took this as a lesson that Australia, too, should find its own way.

After 18 months, the group was tired and rundown. The poor-quality food had stripped them of weight and they were isolated in a country not diplomatically recognised by Australia. Elliott did not want to draw attention to Elizabeth by sending letters post-marked 'China' and they had corresponded irregularly and briefly. In late 1956, they were instructed to burn all papers and documents, including, regrettably, all photographs. It was time for Elliott to start making his way home. Most of the group were to return by rail across China and to the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, but Party headquarters in Australia intervened. Elliott and three others were diverted to the Soviet Union for a short study visit. He went without question.

Although the timing was opportune for learning first-hand about Russia after Stalin, it proved a desultory experience. Elliott had already visited Moscow in 1951 and was impressed then by the industry and purpose of the Soviet experiment. He resolved on this visit to discover the reaction of ordinary people to the Khrushchev revelations. Illness intervened. He arrived in Russia in December 1956 and was taken almost immediately to Moscow General Hospital for minor surgery. The operation went badly and he needed a lengthy convalescence which isolated him from the rest of his group. (On his return to Australia he defended the failed operation, claiming, according to his ASIO file, that he had 'the best surgeon there', but he had reached the hospital too late.)

When he emerged from hospital four weeks later, he asked to visit a factory where he could question the workers. He was taken to the outskirts of Moscow where tools for the power industry, similar to those he had seen in China, were manufactured. The factory,

¹⁴ Ross Terrill, *China in Our Time*, Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney, 1992, p. 14.