

A Person of Interest: Gordon Childe and MI5

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62614/6pkwxr65>

Abstract: Vere Gordon Childe is widely regarded as the single most influential thinker in the history of archaeology. He is almost certainly the most prolific author and widely published scholar that the discipline has seen. Yet, his fiercely independent original thinking and character did not come without cost to him. This paper begins with a brief introduction to Childe the man and academic. It then utilises recently released MI5 files to sketch new insights into Childe's life and the different manner in which he was regarded by British and Australian Intelligence; the level of MI5 monitoring of Childe was intense. This paper draws attention to the scope that these intelligence files provides for further and more detailed biographical studies of Childe than was possible in this preliminary outline.

Childe the International Figure

Vere Gordon Childe (1892-1957) came from Blackheath in the Australian Blue Mountains. There are few if any figures in academe whose vast fame and influence are as evenly matched by their enigma and mystery as Childe, and new sources still reveal unexpected sides to the man. Childe was an assiduous correspondent and it is acknowledged that new aspects of him will become known as items from that correspondence come to light.

This paper briefly examines relatively unexplored sources of information on Childe. These are the files kept on Childe by MI5, the British Military Intelligence and

security agency, through almost the entirety of Childe's adult life. For those less than familiar with Childe as an individual, scholar, political agitator and thinker, a sketch of Childe is provided below to better contextualise both the significance of intelligence interest in him and the likely impacts of such ongoing surveillance on Childe. It emerges that Childe was probably well aware of his ongoing monitoring and it seems highly likely, as a result of such ongoing intelligence interference in his daily activities, that the flavour and quality of his life differed significantly from the image of him that has prevailed to date.



Figure 1: Childe was the first director of the Institute of Archaeology, London, a position that placed him at the centre of British academia and society. He is seen here with his staff outside St John's Lodge in 1955, L-R, Front Row: Maurice Cookson, Kathleen Kenyon, Sheppard Frere, Max Mallowan, Gordon Childe, Frederick Zeuner, Edward Pyddoke, Joan du Plat Taylor, Ione Gedye, Middle Row: Marjorie Conlon, Rachel Maxwell-Hyslop, Arthur Simon, Ian Cornwall, Geraldine Talbot, Olive Starkey, Back Row: Mr & Mrs Dance, Mary Pinsett, Jennifer Banham, Penny Brooks, Joan Sheldon, Judy Phillips, Marjorie Maitland Howard, Harry Stewart.
Image: courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections.

Firstly, who is Childe to the archaeological world and academic sphere generally? Thirty five years after Childe's death, Bruce Trigger, the preeminent historian of archaeology, depicted Childe as still 'the most renowned and widely read archaeologist of the 20th century' (Trigger, 1980: 9), while more recently, Childe has been described as 'perhaps the best known archaeologist of all time' (Diaz-Andreu 2009: 7). Childe's work, '*What Happened in History*' (Childe, 1942) has been translated into more languages, and read more widely than almost certainly any other archaeological work (Gathercole et al. 2009). Childe's output of scholarship was prodigious. During the years between 1923 and his death in 1957, he authored 517 articles, chapters and reviews, and 28 books. This does not include his considerable reworking and revision of new editions of his works and his translations of foreign-language books into English. While opinions vary on the integrity or ongoing relevance of Childe's work (Murray 1995, Trigger 1994), his genius and historical popularity appears beyond debate.

It is demonstrative of the renown and esteem Childe rapidly achieved, that when Harvard University invited the peak figure worldwide of each discipline it taught, to deliver a guest oration for its tercentenary in 1936 it was Childe who was chosen to speak for the field of prehistory and archaeology (Childe 1937). It is an indication of Childe's brilliance that this address to Harvard in the role of preeminent international prehistorian took place only eleven years after the publication of his first archaeological work (Childe 1925), and only nine years after commencing his first full-time academic position, at Edinburgh University (Green 1981: 56).

Yet, despite this fame, despite his gregarious nature among students and peers, we know almost nothing of Childe himself. Childe never married, nor was he ever publicly romantically involved. Certainly, there have been biographies and works with biographical content (Green 1981, Harris 1994, McNairn 1980, Trigger 1980), all of which suffer from the same predicament, namely, that on retirement Childe destroyed most of his correspondence (Trigger 1994: 10). We may know of Childe's public statements and writings, and may have been able to capture a few personal vignettes from the recollections of his colleagues and students and from their correspondence with Childe. Nevertheless, Childe's surviving writings seem largely guarded about his inner beliefs and his colleagues and students are for the most part long dead. Correspondence by Childe to wider circles of scholars has also sometimes been preserved. However the published studies of this correspondence do not indicate that it generally contains any depth of personal communication (Diaz-Andreu 2009a, Irving 1995).

A Brief Homecoming

Childe returned to Australia in April 1957 after a prominent academic career in England and Scotland. He spent some months travelling in Australia receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Sydney, visiting rem-

nant family in Queensland and guest lecturing for John Mulvaney in Melbourne. In October 1957, despite his bitter complaints that Australia was a cultural desert (Green 1981: 147), Childe seemed engaged in the minor enjoyable pleasures of a retired academic visiting colleagues here and there, and hiking in the Blue Mountains with what he termed 'enormous zest, satisfying my youthful craving' (Green 1981: 152). He appeared sociable and engaged with life, enjoying companionable walks with Basil Hennessey of Sydney University and lengthy late-night discussions on archaeology with Laila Haglund (Powell 2013: 173). On 19 October 1957, Childe did not return from a hike to the Bridal Falls at Govett's Leap in the Blue Mountains. When his spectacles and compass were found on his neatly folded coat next to a precipitous ledge, it was widely assumed, or at least publicly stated, in similar terms to those used in the *Daily Worker*,

The professor was extremely shortsighted and probably missed his footing when he went to Govett's Leap, a 1,000-ft cliff (Dutt 1957).

Eve Stewart, who with her husband Jim had at times hosted Childe in the Blue Mountains, could not reconcile Childe's cheerful disposition with suicide, neither could Hennessey or Haglund. Jim Stewart went as far as to entertain notions of political assassination (Powell 2013: 174).

No suicide note was found, but only due to Childe's foresight. His quite moving and explicit suicide note was already in the mail and on its way to W. F. Grimes, his successor as director at the Institute of Archaeology in London, with instructions not to open the note until January 1968 (Green 1981: 152). Grimes may well have previously been warned by Childe of his intentions,

Childe vacated the chair early to allow his successor to oversee the move of the institute to Gordon Square; he had in fact revealed to Grimes his intention to commit suicide (Gathercole 2004).

Grimes was not the sole recipient of such forebodings. In February 1957 Childe travelled to visit Celia Topp, a former student then resident in Gibraltar. Topp received a letter from a mutual acquaintance warning of Childe's low mood and that Childe had recently stated that once in Australia *he would in all probability throw himself over some convenient cliff* (Green 1981: 145).

Despite the public pronouncements of accidental death, suspicion remained as expressed in an entry to Childe's ASIO file cited at length later in this article (ASIO 22 October 1957). Perhaps the social stigma of suicide was such that at the time of Childe's (then postulated) suicide in 1957, people close to Childe did not wish to speak of him personally on the record, resulting in the relatively small collection of material about Childe, the man.

This reticence could also be reflected in the delay in opening the suicide note that Childe had left. His instructions were that it be opened ten years after his death. This

note remained unopened for over 25 years and was first published in 1980 (Childe 1980 (1957) in Daniel, 1980). It confirmed Childe's fall and death to have been intentional, because of his self-appraisal of being beyond his most productive years and also founded on his strongly worded abhorrence of becoming an invalid, lonely and a burden on society. Childe is explicit in this letter that he found the predominant social prejudice against suicide to be unjustifiable and irrational and insisted on his right to end his life when and where he saw fit, '*Life ends best when one is happy and strong*' (Childe 1980).

A Man of Many Parts

As indicated in the events described above, Childe's capacity for compartmentalisation should not be underestimated. His academic and philosophical thinking has been described as incorporating strong contradictions (Murray 1995) and in his personal life too it would seem he was quite capable of operating on multiple levels simultaneously. It appears clear that his peers and acquaintances in Australia, who met him shortly before his death, had no inkling of his intent to suicide. This impression was likely intentionally fostered by Childe. His final letter makes it quite plain that he recognised the socially unacceptable nature of his intended suicide and that he had no intention of causing ruction or upset to those he left behind by making a public spectacle of his death. If such was Childe's ability to moderate his behaviour and spring unpleasant surprises on his inner circles, then the considerable delay in posthumously opening his suicide note is perhaps also reflective of a reticence to let loose the problems that its contents could potentially have strewn over the archaeological world. Childe was quite the wildcard.

New information on Childe is unlikely to come from his closer acquaintances, those who knew Childe well have mostly left this mortal coil. However, new sources have come to light which provide fresh perspectives on Childe as an individual. These sources reflect upon just how little known and poorly understood Childe was to his colleagues, acquaintances and the wider world. They reflect on the disparity in image between Childe the scholar as regarded by his peers and Childe the political figure as perceived by British and Australian Intelligence. Ironically, the disparity among even his contemporary scholars in understanding Childe the individual, comes most obviously to the fore in works written in his tribute.

For, in a variety of published tributes, extracts from which are provided below, individuals who worked with Childe on a regular, even daily basis have expressed widely varying opinions on Childe's deepest held political and general philosophical worldviews. His acquaintances expressed puzzlement,

The great puzzle of Childe at all times was to what extent he was a Marxist (or a Marrist) and to what extent he paid lip-service to an Outsider philosophy (Daniel 1958: 66).

The puzzle was not so much whether Childe stood by his intellectual utilisation of Marxist concepts in his analysis of prehistory, but whether Childe the individual, saw himself as a Marxist in matters of current politics and personal philosophy. As would be expected of an analytical thinker, Childe's adherence to any one philosophical bent in academe or life, varied through time. Yet whether contemporaneously or in retrospect, Childe's peers seemed uncertain as to his personal philosophical position at any given point.

This uncertainty was reinforced by Childe's highly individual sense of humour which extended to practical joking and punning and a willingness to pose playfully for the camera (Figure 2).

Childe was not beyond playing calculated and protracted practical pranks, even on his benefactors such as Wheeler (Kilbride-Jones 1994: 138). Childe delivered his final lecture at the Institute of Archaeology dressed in a Central Asian gown and hat and carrying an Australian Aboriginal spear. For some time Childe occupied apparently less than optimal dwellings in an apartment block, the name of which punned pleasingly to him, The Hotel de Vere in Edinburgh, and while visiting London from

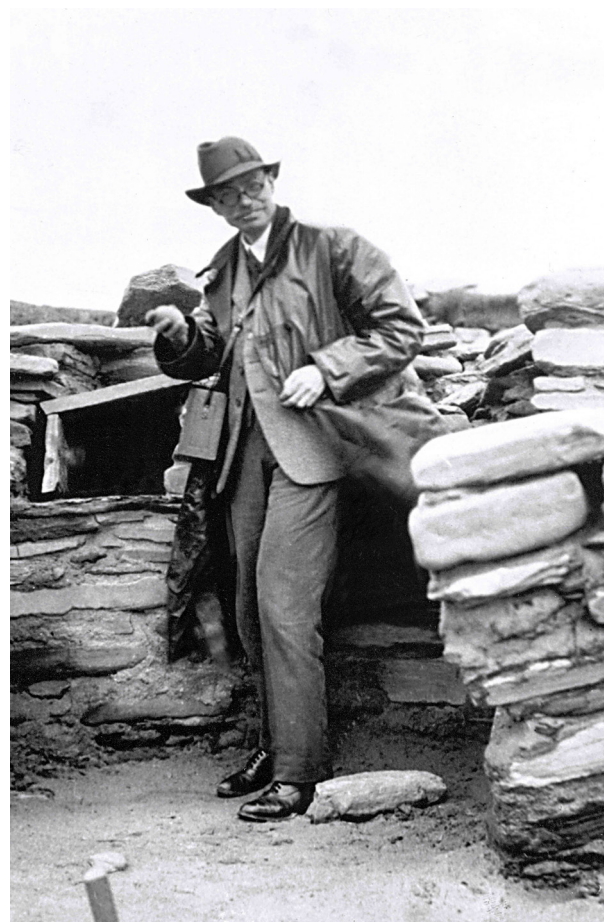


Figure 2: Childe at Skara Brae, grinningly posing with rock in hand. Image: courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections.

Edinburgh would stay at the Moscow Mansions (Green 1981: 73-74). During war rationing Childe often carried a sugar tin with 'Childeish sugar' inscribed on the top, and was wont to refer to himself to friends as 'Childeish' (Lyndsay 1981: xv).

This impish behaviour likely lay behind Daniel's pondering whether Childe's actions, such as public complaint at hotels over not having been delivered the *Daily Worker* (a communist newspaper) to read, was simply 'a pose' (Daniel 1958). Childe had long insisted that the *Daily Worker* be delivered to his university office where it would take pride of place on his desk (Piggot 1958: 308). Whether this was 'a pose' as Daniel puts it, or perhaps 'stirring' as the Australian Childe may have termed it cannot be determined. Childe certainly was for instance, wont frequently and publicly to make proclamations regarding 'Comrade Stalin', often in gleeful tones and beaming with delight at the likely effect of such comments on his often very conservative audiences, who he knew full well were constrained by their conservative etiquette from open critique of such statements by an esteemed academic.

Given this proclivity to (apparently good-natured) humorous obfuscation and teasing, it is understandable that those who knew Childe expressed a variety of opinions on what his personal philosophical positions were. These opinions ranged from Daniel's assertion that Childe was a conservative who merely used Marxism and Communism as a goad to humorously jibe his conservative colleagues, or that any Marxist excesses were likely a feature of Childe's 'exhibitionist' wit (Kilbride-Jones 1994: 136), to the assertion that Childe was a committed Marxist (Gathercole 2004, Renfrew 1994: 121, McNairn 1980:3). Of course one must bear in mind the desire by both conservative and progressively-minded archaeologists retrospectively to cast Childe in their own image and thus claim a Childean intellectual inheritance. Nevertheless, even accounting for this tendency, real division was still apparent.

If those who knew Childe well could form such divergent opinions on who Childe was as a political theorist - while being aware of the centrality of political theory to Childe as a person, then we have little hope of reconstructing the man as a whole some 58 years after his death.

MI5, ASIO and Childe – a Longstanding Relationship

The following will not try for a reconstruction of Childe; it merely presents a selection of excerpts from the files that British Intelligence kept on Childe during his time in the United Kingdom. These have been recently released (in part) to the public. A full analysis of these files would require a book-length treatment, well beyond the scope of this article. What I offer below is some insight into the manner in which Childe was perceived and surveilled by the intelligence agencies of the time and the manner in which this may have impacted on Childe as an individual.

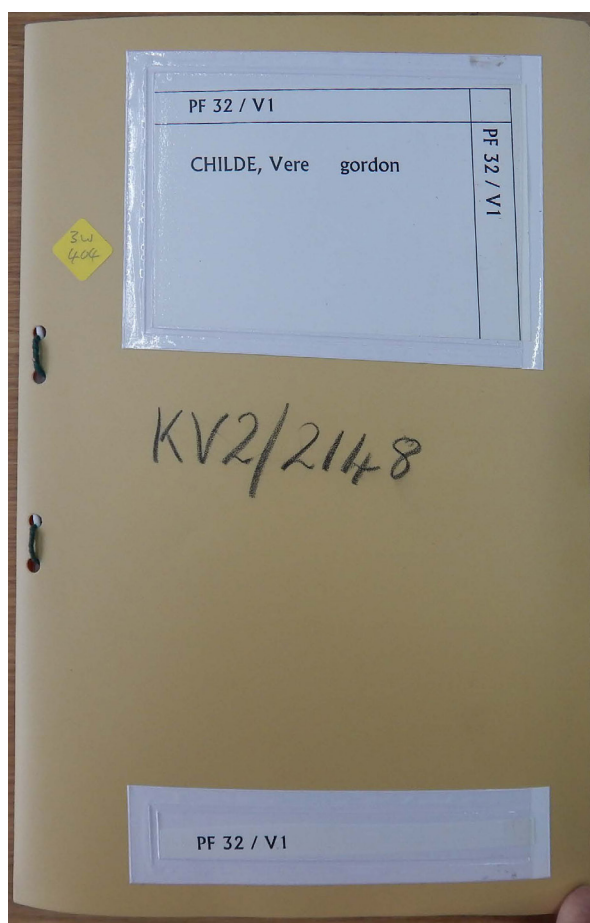


Figure 3: The earlier MI5 file.
Image: Australian Institute of Archaeology.

The existence and content of Australian Intelligence/ASIO files on Childe has long been known. John Mulvaney (Mulvaney 1992) provided some extracts from them in his tribute to Childe. The ASIO file regarding Childe on his final return to Australia is ASIO file [279] A6126/25. This comprises 32 pages, dominated by newspaper clippings from the Australian press in 1957, relating to Childe's death. Childe is repeatedly misnamed in the ASIO file as 'Professor Victor Childe'. It seems certain (as documented in correspondence with MI5), that ASIO paid little attention to Childe, or to his purported danger to society and would not have opened formal investigations into Childe had not an influential private citizen, Mr George Boss, taken action.

On 16 April 1957, the Australian Prime Minister's office received a handwritten note from Mr George Boss, J.P., of the Camperdown Hotel, advising of the return to Australia of 'a most disloyal British citizen', Gordon Childe.

Boss' letter appears to have thrown Australian Intelligence into activity, patching together a few pages of point-form information on 'Victor' Childe, including a typed transcription of Childe's listing in *Who is Who in Australia!* By August 1957 this had progressed to the point that the

file included a single-page but generally accurate chronology of Childe's life. This ASIO file concluded that while no evidence was to hand that Childe was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party, no doubt remained as to his effective membership and activism within it. This finding did not generate any further action by ASIO.

The British Intelligence files on Childe are far more substantial than those of Australian Intelligence, but are by no means comprehensive. They have been previously analysed to a limited extent (Champion 2009), with a focus on events prior to Childe's departure from England and return to Australia in 1917.

Childe's MI5 records, or at least those made available to the public comprise two buff folders, perforated and bound with rough green twine.

The earlier of these two files is file KV2/2148 (PF32/V1) 'Childe, Vere Gordon' (sic). There are 105 items in the MI5 file KV2/2148, spanning 42 years, with a three year break from August 1919 to September 1922. It comprises 155 pages of A4 photocopies of a variety of documents, including photocopies of copies made through photography, some of which are effectively illegible. The index pages, particularly for the earlier years, are less than perfectly coherent with the file contents and in several cases items listed in the index are not present in the file. It is therefore less than optimal to refer to items by their file index number, which is in any case of little use to the reader without the file as reference. Items in the file are referred to here by their first displayed date and some other descriptor such as author (where available) and content. Many items bear several hand-scrawled dates, which frequently seem to include (generally without explanation), date of transmission, receipt, first and subsequent actions, and closure. Hopefully, by consistently using the first date present, a coherent chronology can be constructed.

The chronological first item in file KV2/2148 was entered on 13 May 1917, and the last item is dated to 1 February 1952. In general, after the 1930's, handwritten items have been transcribed into typewritten text, with both a copy of the original handwritten item and the typed transcript included. This tends artificially to bulk out the size of the file. The file commences with an access register of signatures, accompanied by rubber-stamped dates of request. This access register indicates that this file was accessed 21 times from 1965 onwards. Legible date-stamps associated with subsequent requisitions are dated up to 1971. Following the access register, a register of entries lists the date that material was incorporated to the file, along with a very brief description of the nature of new data. As noted above this register appears to be inaccurate. The end of the register of entries is stamped 'File Closed'. This seems to refer to closure of this physical file rather than the ongoing investigation on Childe, which continued without break, as documented in the following file.

The later of the two files is file KV2/2149 (PF32/V2) 'Childe, Vere Gordon' (sic). It is formulated in the same manner as KV2/2148. It was accessed 24 times over apparently roughly the same period as its predecessor (1965-1971?). This file covers only three and a half years, from 19 July 1952, to 17 November 1955, yet constitutes 58 pages of material, divided into 39 entries and has no 'File Closed' stamp. It is almost certain that this file continued to the time of Childe's death in 1957. The file consists of items released in 2005 for public view after the statutory 50 years and this probably explains why it contains no material dated after 1955.

The MI5 files are frequently less than dispassionate in tone towards Childe. This is perhaps not unexpected given the highly hostile environment at the time towards both anti-war agitation and communism. The files commence during the First World War and the Communist Revolution in Russia. With the passing of time, particularly into the 1950's this existing unease was heightened by the widely shared perception in the Western world of the real threat of a communist plot for world domination. Childe's advocacy of pacifism, of Marxism as an intellectual tool, his (generally silent) participation in Marxist gatherings, his association with known western communists and his travel to and correspondence with the communist world led him to be regarded by British intelligence agencies as a potentially dangerous and treacherous individual.

A Life Intensely Watched

The first point that powerfully emerges from an overview of both MI5 files, is the pervasive and ongoing extent of surveillance to which Childe was subjected. For the vast majority of Childe's adult life, from age 25, almost to his death at 65, he was continuously subject to intensive and at-times intrusive surveillance. It must be borne in mind that not every instance of observation or interception was entered into Childe's file, or retained. Further, even today, there are items missing from this file, represented by blank pages which have been prominently stamped in red as,

The Original Document Retained in Department Under Section 3 (4) of the Public Records Act 1950. Jan 2005.

The evidence of surveillance contained in files KV2/2148 & KV2/2149 should then be taken as only a representative sample of the ongoing MI5 surveillance of Childe through most of his life. The nature of these surveillance techniques, such as interception of all of Childe's mail, reveals that Childe endured a daily experience of intrusion and interference into even the mundane aspects of his life. The forms of surveillance that Childe was subject to were all-encompassing, and include:

Third-Party Telephone Surveillance (10 instances filed): Any mention made of Childe during intercepted calls between people of interest was logged and if deemed significant, transcript was entered into Childe's MI5 file.

Third-Party Mail surveillance (13 instances filed): Any mention of Childe in intercepted mail between people of interest was logged, and if considered pertinent had its transcript entered into Childe's MI5 file.

First and Second-Party Mail surveillance (18 instances filed): Mail to and from Childe was routinely opened, frequently copied or transcribed and copies included in his file if content was deemed of interest. This included personal mail between Childe and his siblings.

Observer monitoring (35 instances filed): Members of MI5 or cooperating government bodies frequently attended functions at which Childe was present whether he was there in an active role or not, and reported on his actions and the nature of the events he attended. Similarly, customs officials and observers at ports and airports provided information on Childe's movements.

Informer monitoring (9 instances filed): Generally anonymous, sources often known to or acquainted with Childe either volunteered or were requested to provide information on Childe. These include academics at universities Childe attended.

Media monitoring (17 instances filed): MI5 scrutinised newspapers and pamphlets for mention of Childe, with copies or transcripts taken.

Travel Application (11 instances filed): Childe's applications for passport or visa approvals were consistently and rigorously examined and assessed.

Internal Intelligence Assessment (66 instances filed): Childe was the frequent topic of assessment and requests for exchange of information within different offices and bodies in the intelligence community.

Living under the Watch

In assessing what impact this surveillance may have had on Childe, it must be reinforced, as indicated above from his peer's variant perceptions of him, that Childe was certainly a man of parts. His widely varying interests and approaches to life, often did not encroach on each other. His communist sympathies did not seem to have precluded his membership in the elite, conservative Athenaeum club, nor did his frequently elitist intellectualism towards his peers prevent his enjoying discussions with his students in a manner that left them feeling treated as intellectual equals. While perceived by some as detached, impersonal and even incapable of social relationships (Brothwell 2009), his students often referred to him as 'Uncle Gordon' (Thomas 1992), and enjoyed social outings and occasions with him in informal and amiable settings (Figure 4). Childe did at times choose to open



Figure 4: Childe on an Institute of Archaeology field trip. Image: courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections.

himself to others across a variety of areas. However he appears to have been highly selective in what he shared with whom. He also appears to have been very capable of consciously moderating his behaviour to suit differing environs.

As further evidence of this compartmentalisation and in contrast to the image of Childe as socially disconnected, although Childe was never married or openly romantically connected, Childe did enjoy deep friendships with an eclectic few who could match his intellectual pace and world outlook. Jack Lindsay at The University of Queensland (Lindsay 1981), and Rajani Palme Dutt at Oxford were two such friends. Dutt in particular, in his obituary for Childe, noted Childe as his 'closest friend at Oxford' (Dutt 1957). Despite studying at two different Oxford colleges, Dutt and Childe undertook considerable expense to move out of college and into digs together (Dutt 1957). This does not seem to speak of Childe as an anti-social individual, rather as one of select and highly discerning interests. It did not help Childe's case with intelligence of course that Dutt was and went on to be a highly prominent communist (Callahan 2004). However Childe's friendship with Dutt seems to have been less damaging in the eyes of MI5 than Childe's friendship with a rather historically elusive character, P.T. Davies.

'Probably the Ugliest Man in the World' – Intelligence, Prejudice and Childe

The background to Childe's relationship with Davies is outlined in a letter in KV2/2148 dated 17 June 1917 from E. Armstrong, pro-provost of Queens College Oxford, to MI5 providing information on Childe at the request of MI5. Armstrong concluded that Childe was harmless but disgusting, and outlined Childe's background to friendship with Davies.

During World War I, Childe had not been eligible for service. In 1914, while studying at Oxford and aged 22, he had applied to the armed forces only to be turned down

on the grounds of his less than robust physique. Following this, Childe drilled for a while with the Civilians Battalion, but fairly soon his ideas appear to have taken a sharp turn to the anti-war left, due to his having fallen under the influence of P.T. Davies. Davies had been eligible for service, had refused to serve on grounds of conscience, and had served consecutive gaol sentences as a result. Childe had applied to visit Davies in gaol on several occasions, which only increased intelligence interest in Childe. Childe's appearance, the nature of Childe's relationship with Davies, and the perceived corrupting influence of Davies on Childe are described by Armstrong in vernal hyperbole, which openly accuses Childe and Davies of a homosexual relationship. Armstrong attributes Childe's change as due to,

a romantic affection for P.T. Davies. Childe is repulsively ugly, probably the ugliest man in the world, and Davies...has a certain personal attraction...The misfortune of Davies became a monomania with Childe, entering into all his work and spoiling it, and perverting his moral and rectal attitude

Whatever the reality was of the relationship described by Armstrong between Childe and Davies, it is only relevant here as an indicator of the degree of difficulty which people, even those relatively close to Childe, have had in attempting to understand him as a whole individual. Capacity for deep friendship, let alone considerations of romantic attachment, is simply not part of the vast majority of depictions of Childe. The exchange between Armstrong and MI5 is also a shocking example of the level of petty bile that could be expressed in official correspondence by Oxford staff, towards one of their students. It is noteworthy too, that far from expressing any moderating opinion on Armstrong's depiction of Childe, MI5 readily adopted Armstrong's terminology as to Childe's ugliness and perversion, and pressed the case further:

In a letter dated the 19th June 1917, the Home Office summarised its case against Childe by considering as misguided Armstrong's opinion of Childe as harmless. MI5 considered Childe to be a 'thoroughly perverted and probably a very dangerous person'.

Resulting from this and on that very day, a Home Office Warrant was issued for the detention and opening of all post and telegrams to Childe or any letters likely to be intended for him. Among the reasons stated for this Warrant was that Childe was 'A danger to this country'. Childe left England for Australia shortly after and returned to England in 1921. A second Home Office Warrant was taken out on Childe by Scotland Yard on 28 September

1922 and this appears to have operated for the remainder of Childe's British career.

Despite Childe's apparent ability to compartmentalise, surely the ongoing and intense surveillance that Childe experienced over most of his life, must have impacted on his mental and emotional states to some extent. The extent of this surveillance has never been fully appreciated. Neither has there been an evaluation of the measures that Childe may have taken to evade surveillance, with consideration to Childe's perceptions of constraints on his own freedom.

It was surprising to me, to observe the frequently snide, derogatory and often less than competent nature of MI5 depiction and surveillance of Childe.

It was unexpected, for example, to see that MI5 quite unnecessarily continued a highly pejorative mode of depicting Childe. In a letter dated 22 October 1917, MI5 advised Australian Intelligence that Childe was on his way to Australia, and described Childe as 'probably the most ugly man in the world'. This could hardly serve as an objective or accurate means of identifying Childe.

Taking the pejorative pettiness further, on 25 October 1917, in a note on Childe's MI5 file sheet, advice is made to send 'the address of the 'beautiful' Childe's sister' to other intelligence agencies.

Childe seems to have been aware of the interception of his mail and his monitoring in general, but possibly not of its extent. On at least two occasions, MI5 intercepted letters in which Childe had concealed letters to be forwarded other individuals, presumably people also of interest to MI5. Whether Childe concealed these letters in a genuine attempt to avoid surveillance, or whether he did so as a ruse, knowing that they would be discovered, can no longer be determined.



Figure 5: Childe with his excavation team in the Orkneys. Image: courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections.

However, what seems certain is, that particularly given the at-times bungling nature of MI5 mail interception, it would have been difficult for Childe not to have been aware that his mail was being tampered with on an ongoing basis.

MI5 may have had expertise in discreetly steaming envelopes open and resealing them. Yet, on 23 August 1948, an extremely apologetic note from MI5 to the Metropolitan Police Special Branch expresses regrets for having mistakenly punch-holed for filing, the original copy of a letter that now had to be sent to Childe in obviously tampered state, patently giving away that his mail was being monitored.

Given Childe's keen eye for detail, the likely residual evidence of general letter-opening and resealing by MI5 and the disruption to postal delivery times such interception would have entailed, I feel it likely that Childe would long have been well aware of tampering with his mail even without the tell-tale signs of mistakenly hole-punched correspondence.

Childe would likely have been aware that he was under physical observation too. This observation appears to have extended beyond the meeting-rooms of communist-related organisations. Childe's movements at airports and borders were reported it seems as a matter of course. Graphically, on 9 May 1941, Scottish Regional Security wrote to MI5 for more information on Childe than MI5 had previously supplied by in a summary letter dated 5 May 1941. Interestingly, given the above cited previous perception by MI5 of Childe as dangerous (and hence maintaining surveillance of him), MI5 had classified Childe in its initial report to Scotland as a 'progressive intellectual type and is not likely to be dangerous'. However, having become aware through mail intercept that Childe was in the Orkneys, Scottish Regional Security 'had enquiries made and found that he was indulging in archaeological pursuits near certain gun sites, etc.' and was therefore eager for more information on him.

Given likely levels of communication to the Orkneys at the time and the insular nature of its inhabitants, I would propose it unlikely that queries after Childe or monitoring of him could have been made in the Orkneys without triggering an awareness of intelligence presence. Childe had of course, a long-standing relationship with the folk and archaeological sites of the Orkneys. He had excavated there regularly as part of his professorial duties after his appointment to Edinburgh University in 1927. He was known to the small Orkney population, having employed local labourers (Figure 5) and boarded in local households. His somewhat odd mannerisms had endeared him to his Orkney landladies to whom he perfectly represented the eccentric professor (Green 1981). A stranger in the Orkneys asking after Childe would almost certainly have raised suspicion.



Figure 6: Childe with a teddy and a car at the Institute of Archaeology. The teddy bear was presented to him by students of the University of Brno. Image: courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections.

Playing the Game

If we accept that Childe was aware he was being monitored, then we must also consider that he may well have adopted strategies to mislead this monitoring or to free himself from it. That these measures most likely extended beyond the clearly documented technique of concealing of letters within letters. Childe's movements and written and other communications may well have incorporated attempts to evade or mislead observation.

This could well explain the events of October 1955. Childe was due to travel to Romania as part of a delegation invited by the 'Roumanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries'. MI5 communication to observers at London airport forewarned of his impending departure. The MI5 assets at London Airport confirmed that Childe had been listed on the manifest to depart on the date and flight noted but that he had not done so. Rather, they observed, that a V.G. Childe had departed London airport for Romania several days previously. Purchasing a double ticket would not have been cheap but it appears it may have worked as a ruse for Childe to ensure that his trip to the communist world was unhindered by MI5.

This event, with the previously mentioned reports of monitoring at borders and ports could well indicate that Childe had experienced delays or been impeded when travelling. Such efforts were most likely to have been balanced by intelligence desires not overtly to inconvenience a high profile individual. This is further indicated in a note from the Metropolitan Police dated 17 April 1952, which states that Childe had that day landed in London from Brussels with an old Czech visa in his passport,

Owing to the number of passengers passing through the control at the time, it was not possible

*to arrange for a discreet search of his baggage
by H.M. Customs*

Were Childe generally eager to avoid inspection of his luggage or a delay in travel, it seems likely he may have engaged in some ruse such as his double-booking to Romania, or playing on the reluctance of Intelligence agencies to cause public disruption.

The strict supervision and constraint of Childe's overseas travel and even monitoring of his movements within Britain evidenced in these files would seem likely to have conflicted with Childe's innate desire and need for travel. It was after all Childe's travel to numerous European museums as a relatively penniless young man that had led to his first major work *The Dawn of European Civilisation* in 1925. His acquaintances described him as 'invariably restless' for travel (Kilbride-Jones 1994: 138).

This wanderlust, combined with potential restraints on his international travel, may have been partially behind his affection for outings, in particular for high-speed, long-distance trips in his succession of powerful touring cars (Kilbride-Jones 1992: 138; Thomas 1992: 134). Indeed, were Childe subject to ongoing MI5 observation, a long drive in a fast car may well have been a simple way to relieve himself of potentially onerous MI5 observation. In Figure 6 Childe is seen posing in front of his car, with a teddy bear gifted to him by Czech students.

This level of likely observation could hardly have been pleasant for Childe to endure and would not have been eased by the apparent prejudice with which he was regarded by MI5.

It is difficult to overstate the sense of urgency (if not outright panic), pejorative wording, (and sometimes incompetence) shown by MI5 throughout the historical span of its files on Childe. On completing his university studies in England with a brief period in 1914 at the British School at Athens to study pottery for his thesis (Gill 2011 62), Childe had applied to return to Australia in 1917, and had requested to travel to Australia via America to inspect archaeological collections held there.

MI5 approved Childe's request to leave Britain, but refused to allow him a stopover in America or travel through the Panama Canal, demanding that he travel 'the long way round' (via Cape Horn at the tip of South America). MI5 were probably concerned that Childe would collaborate with American anti-war, pro-communist agitators at this highly sensitive time. America had only recently been drawn into the First World War in April 1917 and had not yet physically joined the war effort. Further, Childe's trip fell within the crucial period of the communist Russian Revolution, between March and November 1917, and it is understandable that MI5 would have sought to minimise any impact Childe could have had to influence Americans against joining the Allied war effort, or in favour of communism generally.

Childe agreed to the MI5 request and booked a berth on a New Zealand ship, the Rimutaka, travelling to New Zealand via Cape Horn. On the 3rd July 1917 MI5 wrote in some confusion and in most urgent terms to Captain Hemming of the Rimutaka,

Dear Sir,

A passenger, Mr. Vere Gordon Childe, aged 25, a graduate of Sydney University who has just taken his degree at Oxford, described as "probably the ugliest man in the world", has had his passport endorsed available for the direct journey to Australia valid to embark on the "Rimutaka" only. For your information this gentleman while his views on archaeology and other scholastic subjects appear all that can be desired holds, from our point of view, decidedly perverted views on the war and is a believer, amongst other things, in the justness of the German submarine warfare. He wished to visit America before returning to Australia and it is thought he might endeavour to disembark at Panama. This you will doubtless be able to prevent without difficulty. I should be glad to be informed that he is on board.

Captain Hemming responded to this request in a letter from Plymouth on the 13th August 1917, in which it is hard not to hear a sarcastic antipodean drawl,

Dear Sir,

I beg to state that the passenger Mr Vere Gordon Childe is now on board my ship. I have noted your wishes, but as this ship does not go to New Zealand via Panama, there will be little danger of him landing in America.

It almost beggars belief that MI5 operatives would either have forgotten their stipulation that Childe travel via Cape Horn or would have been so geographically uninformed not to realise that travel around Cape Horn did not entail passage through the Panama canal (that was after all why they had insisted on this route) but it seems such was the case. Nor did this lapse prevent MI5 proudly stating in a letter on 22 October 1917 to Australian Intelligence that MI5 had 'taken steps' to ensure Childe did not disembark in America during his return trip.

This intense concern seems to have lasted throughout the period of MI5 observation of Childe. This extended through a 40 year span and would almost certainly have seen at least one, possibly two generational changes of guard at intelligence.

ASIO Not Overly Concerned

While this attribution to Childe of potential threat went unchecked within MI5 internal correspondence, a distinct difference is apparent in the manner that ASIO perceived and depicted Childe. This contrast is most apparent during the early years of Childe's monitoring by MI5, during the First World War.

Australian Intelligence seems to have responded to MI5 communications regarding Childe with a laconic reserve and at times outright rebuttal of MI5 concerns as evidenced in the following exchange:

In a letter dated 22 October 1917, MI5 informed Australian Intelligence of Childe's departure for Australia. It reasserted that Childe held 'perverted' views, repeated that he was 'probably the ugliest man in the world' and that Australian intelligence should keep an eye on him.

In reply to MI5 Australian Intelligence (22 January 1918) made it quite clear that it knew well of Childe and did not concur with MI5's level of excitation at all. Each of the points of concern that MI5 had raised were rebutted by Australian Intelligence in turn noting Childe's history of volunteering for service, his inherent honesty, loyalty and respectable family and perhaps wryly, noting that Childe's most dangerous capacity was likely his ability to write pacifist articles. While stating clearly that Childe had been and would continue to be monitored, ASIO effectively emphasised that a drastic reduction of perceived threat was in order,

With reference to your letter of the 22nd October, 1917, 224788/D, I have to inform you that Childe's correspondence had already been under inspection. He is well known to our Sydney people. He volunteered, I believe, twice for active service while he was in England but was rejected. He is not considered likely to do anything dishonest or treacherous, but he is quite capable of writing harmful pacifist articles. Perhaps the influence of his loyal father, a retired Clergyman of the Church of England, with whom he is said to be living may be beneficial. He will, however, be closely watched.

There was then an overt and considerable difference in tone, content and action between ASIO and MI5 in their treatment of Childe, a difference which appears to have continued to Childe's return to Australia in 1957. The MI5 files contain ample evidence of Childe's ongoing and intensive observation by MI5 throughout his time in England. Yet, Australian Intelligence, and government apparently took quite some prodding even to countenance considering Childe as an intelligence target, let alone a national threat worth opening a formal file on, as is seen from the first items of Childe's ASIO file in 1957, dating to Childe's return to Australia.

The opening items in Childe's 1957 ASIO file describe exchanges regarding Childe between a Mr. George Boss J.P of the Camperdown Hotel, Parramatta Road, Camperdown Sydney, the Prime Minister's (Menzies) office and ASIO. George Boss had been criticised by Childe in *How Labour Governs* (Childe 1923: 157) for running a large bakery utilising only non-union labour and for continuing to do so after selling his bakery to the (Labor) Government. In *How Labour Governs* (1923) Childe had

gleefully disclosed that his source on Boss's employment prejudices was none other than Boss himself, who had apparently confided in Childe. Boss was not the sort to be crossed in this manner without seeking vengeance, however delayed.

The bakery in question was the NSW State Bakery – founded in 1914 to ensure supply of bread to the armed forces (*The Colonist* 28/2/1914). Boss was no stranger to playing the amateur and vindictive espionage saviour of the state and as seems clear from the following, was not the sort to let grudges lapse.

Boss had levelled fierce written allegations of communist treachery against his successor at the State Bakery during WWII, accusations of sufficiently wild nature to be included, although robustly queried at a Royal Commission into Bread (*Sydney Morning Herald* 18/3/1941). Boss' standing as a witness was not improved by his admission that he had recently obtained employment and information at the Bakery by dishonest means, although he insisted he had only done so in order to obtain intelligence for the Military and as such was a self-appointed secret service operative whose falsehoods were in the state interest (*Sydney Morning Herald* 18/3/1941). Unfortunately for Boss, he returned to the Royal Commission following lunch, in a state that saw him ejected from court by the Judge who noted that Boss 'did not appear to know where he was' (*Age* 22/3/1941). Little account was subsequently taken of his evidence.

Boss appears then to have been an individual of some influence sufficient to have his testimony taken into account at a Royal Commission and his correspondence noted by the Prime Minister's office, but at the same time of such eccentric character and anti-communist prejudice as to be regarded askance even by the anti-communist government of the time. This would explain the manner in which the Prime Minister's office sought to have some lip-service and acknowledgement paid to Boss' communiqué to them, but did not take his demands for a meeting seriously.

Boss' letter is contained in Childe's ASIO file, but is of such poor copy that it is better to rely on extracts from it reproduced in ASIO reports.

Mr. Boss's letter was dated 15 April 1957, only a day after Childe had landed in Australia. In it, Boss spoke of Childe as a 'most disloyal British subject' and requested an audience with the Prime Minister's office to discuss important information regarding Childe. Boss apparently was not beyond using his advanced age (79) to press the urgency of obtaining an audience. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Prime Ministers office declined to respond directly, and forwarded the issue to ASIO on April 23 1957. By mid May ASIO had determined that the issues Mr Boss wished to raise,

Refer to the time of the Prince of Wales' visit to Australia in 1920, and would bear little or

no relevance to Professor Childe's present-day activities (ASIO 17 May 1957).

This in itself, the willingness of ASIO to overlook Childe's potential long-passed indiscretions, seems to contrast with the vigilant surveillance of Childe practised by MI5.

Some smoothing over was nevertheless apparently required as described in an ASIO memo, 'Mr Boss appears to be well connected'. Boss was affronted that the Prime Minister's office had not even acknowledged his correspondence. He was apparently interviewed by ASIO in late 1957 as referred to in an ASIO memorandum on 6 December 1957, which also mentions conclusions of the investigation into Childe's death. Neither transcript of Mr Boss's interview, nor the results of investigation into Childe's death are present in the ASIO file.

Alone, at Last

With the exception of a single sheet of point-form internal notes, dated 10 July 1957 that mention Childe, it seems Childe was left alone for his final months, freed from over 40 years of near-continuous intelligence surveillance.

Yet one has to wonder at a particular choice of words from the Director General of ASIO, in his brief note dated 22 October 1957. He requested investigation into whether Childe's death may have been 'influenced by factors of counter-espionage significance'. ASIO's own appraisal of Childe certainly did not seem to perceive him as a threat to national security and differed radically in its relaxed manner towards Childe from the vigilance displayed by MI5. Was there perhaps more to Childe? Other doings that we have no record of, but which may have been enough to agitate MI5? Doings sufficient to give ASIO room to ponder and investigate whether his death was connected to 'counter espionage'? The very term 'counter-espionage' is puzzling. Surely, counter-espionage at home refers to actions by oneself or one's allies against foreign agencies. The only Australian ally that comes to mind as having an agenda against Childe would be MI5. Of course that is conjecture, but it seems the Director of ASIO was mentally conjecturing too.

The ASIO and MI5 files I have briefly examined here are fascinating in the unresolved and likely unresolvable glimpses they offer into previously largely unknown sides of Gordon Childe. But some things seem certain, or at least on fairly solid ground, Childe was, almost from his first arrival in Britain, subject to an intense scheme of intelligence surveillance that was both intrusive in nature and often venally expressed, as evidenced by pejorative statements in official documents as to his appearance, beliefs and character. It seems impossible that this would not have exercised a personal toll on Childe, despite his prodigious abilities to sequester aspects of his life and to play the part for roles in life, as he wrote them. The details of Childe's ongoing interaction with intelligence may never come to light. Nevertheless, the evidence presented

and interpreted here indicates far greater complexities and pressures in Childe's life, than would have been anticipated from other sources to date.

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Acknowledgements

This article would not have been possible without the generous support and encouragement of the Australian Institute of Archaeology. They assisted with the procurement of documents and working facilities within the Institute library.

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