

1-1-2009

C/58/63: An 'Incriminating Biography'

Rowan Cahill

University of Wollongong, rowanc@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity>

Recommended Citation

Cahill, Rowan, C/58/63: An 'Incriminating Biography', *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 9(1), 2009, 12-23.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol9/iss1/3>

C/58/63: An 'Incriminating Biography'

Abstract

During the period 1967–1972, the author was under ASIO surveillance because of his opposition to the Vietnam War, and related radical activism. Drawing on the idea of surveillance files constituting what Fiona Capp has termed 'incriminating' biographies, Cahill uses this file (C/58/63) to reflect upon the political mindset of ASIO, and his own activism, during the period. This paper was originally presented at the Power to the People: The Legacies of 1968 Workshop, University of Wollongong, 3 October 2008.

C/58/63: An 'Incriminating Biography'

Rowan Cahill

During the period 1967–1972, the author was under ASIO surveillance because of his opposition to the Vietnam War, and related radical activism. Drawing on the idea of surveillance files constituting what Fiona Capp has termed 'incriminating' biographies, Cahill uses this file (C/58/63) to reflect upon the political mindset of ASIO, and his own activism, during the period. This paper was originally presented at the Power to the People: The Legacies of 1968 Workshop, University of Wollongong, 3 October 2008.

In Australia during the Vietnam War, the charge was frequently made that domestic opposition to the war and to conscription was variously organised/manipulated by Communists. On the international stage Prime Minister Menzies claimed this, for example, in 1965 in an address to the Australia Club in London.¹ However, as Ann Curthoys has pointed out, while the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was important as an organising force in the anti-war movement, it was only part of a loose coalition of forces opposed to the war.² Apart from trade unions, churches, and political parties, there were at least 146 organisations actively opposing conscription and the Vietnam War during the period 1964-1972.³

Writing in 1970, Richard Gordon and Warren Osmond, and Terry Irving and Baiba Berzins, documented the historical, ideological, strategic and generational tensions, confusions and divisions within the Australian Left regarding the Vietnam War, conscription, and social change.⁴ Ann Mari Jordens has pointed out how early Australian opposition to the war, and later to conscription, were, to a great extent, the work of people who had been shaped by the Second World War; people who were middle-aged, middle-class, politically moderate, some propelled

by religious, rather than political, beliefs.⁵

For the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), however, dissent and opposition were the conspiratorial products of Communists/radicals, a view that was then fed to the government.⁶ The anti-war movement, and all that flowed from it, according to a July 1968 analysis, was at root a machination of Soviet Union foreign policy; the less Communists were seen as an active presence or as an initiating agency, the more that proved their sinister guile.⁷ Research papers generated by ASIO were provided to right-wing journalists; between 1962 and 1972 ASIO supplied 67 sets of briefing papers to the Australian press, the bulk of them about the Communist Party. ASIO research materials were also provided to anti-Communist organisations like B.A. Santamaria's National Civic Council and the Congress for Cultural Freedom.⁸

I enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts degree at Sydney University in 1964, the same year the conservative Menzies government announced the introduction of a selective conscription (National Service) scheme for 20 year olds. I was conscripted the following year in the second call-up ballot, a fate shared by 1 in 12 of my vote-less male peers.⁹ In May 1966 I destroyed my call-up notification (the so called 'draft card') and began a political trajectory that brought me to prominence in the emerging and developing anti-war, student protest, and New Left movements.

My radicalisation commenced in high school during the late 1950s and early 1960s, as a tentative and developing liberal unease with the stifling conformity of Menzies era Australian society and culture. It was an unease that delighted in the pages of the new satirical Oz magazine, the first issues of which I enthusiastically devoured with some of my peers in the school playground during my last year of schooling in 1963.¹⁰

Conscription brought this liberal, middle-class unease face-to-face with the power of the State in a personal way, and compelled me to focus on a war I previously knew little about. During 1967 ASIO began its surveillance of me and I became ASIO file C/58/63.¹¹

The rebellion of youth against conscription and the Vietnam War concerned ASIO, generating a mixed response within its ranks. Particularly troubling was the New Left of the late 1960s, a multi-dimensional leftism that variously blended

moral and cultural nonconformity with the leftisms developing in Europe, the US, and the Third World.¹² It was hard to classify, and left “older (ASIO) officers cold”.¹³ According to a 1970 ASIO research paper, the New Left comprised a range of people; the offspring of old leftists, radical Christians, career rebels (who spurned regular employment in order to protest), anti-draft activists, and “drug using beatniks and other social deviants”.¹⁴

The rebellion and its complexity intrigued younger ASIO officers. Reports and background papers were generated within the organisation and it was claimed that Australia was headed for “internal war”. An ASIO view was that orthodox Australian Communism was wedded to an insurrection or coup d’état; the new radicals sought nothing less than the complete restructuring of society through the use of urban guerrilla warfare. In developing this understanding ASIO tended “to accept at face value” some of the Left’s “wilder fantasies”.¹⁵ Another ASIO fear was that international Trotskyists and anarchists would push the politics of the Australian Left further to the left, so that revolutionary politics would become part of regular political discourse.¹⁶

Alarming also for ASIO was that the CPA was changing, transforming ideologically from its traditional authoritarianism and conservatism, and moving away from its links with the Soviet Union. Particularly worrying about this transformation was that the party was seen to be building relationships with other people and organisations seeking what ASIO described as “great” and “fundamental” social change.¹⁷

Opposition to the Vietnam War, the youth revolt, and attendant intellectual ferment, boosted ASIO organisationally. Staff numbers increased, it moved into new purpose designed premises in Melbourne, its areas of specialisation increased, and state police Special Branches became “official adjuncts”.¹⁸ Students were recruited as informants; university intellectuals were targeted because of their role in contesting political conservatism;¹⁹ break-ins, along with phone-taps, became tools for collecting raw intelligence data.²⁰ From 1969 to 1972, an operation codenamed ‘Operation Whip’ concentrated on the anti-war movement, a major part of its brief being to target student activists with a view to establishing their links with the CPA.²¹

ASIO regularly released material to selected parliamentarians who then used it in their parliamentary speeches.²² As mentioned above, selected journalists also received ASIO materials. In 1969–70, ASIO produced a paper on the anti-war militancy of secondary school students. There are close parallels between this material and a widely sold booklet *Student Power* (1970) published under the name of journalist/author and NSW State Liberal parliamentarian, Peter Coleman.²³

ASIO file C/58/63 was generated in, and reflects, this broad ideological context. The file is catalogued by the National Archives of Australia as beginning in 1967. However the first folio (page) of the file has been exempted (withheld) from the public arena so the circumstances of the file's origins remain unclear. Folio 2 is a copy of a leaflet in which I am mentioned, published in March 1968 by the Sydney University based Students for a Democratic Society. All up, for the period 1967 to 1972, the file comprises 171 folios; 18 of these are totally exempted (withheld) from public scrutiny, and 68 are partially exempted (censored) with the blackening-out of words, names, and bureaucratic numberings/references that could possibly assist cross referencing and checking by independent researchers. The exemptions were variously made by ASIO under the exemption categories described by Section 33 of the Commonwealth of Australia Archives Act (1983).²⁴

The content of the file has apparently been gathered through bureaucratic research (e.g. of Birth, car registration, records), personal and photographic surveillance, the contributions of informants, media monitoring (newspaper clippings where I am mentioned; selected published items I authored), postal and telephone intercepts. I was amongst those targeted by 'Operation Whip'. The surveillance/informant material largely concerns associates, people met (their names cross-referenced to other ASIO files), meetings attended (and sometimes what transpired) and demonstrations/protests attended.

In common with many other ASIO files now in the public domain, C/58/63 is little more than a collection of raw information and data, with a chronological structure, about a particular person. There is no specific overall biographical narrative, little in the way of commentary/analysis, and the

material included is selective. However, as Fiona Capp has argued, ASIO surveillance files constitute a form of biography compiled while the subject was alive, with a 'narrative' that is implied. In a sense the files are 'works in progress', constructed parallel to the life of the subject as it was being lived. The existence of a file is evidence the subject was under surveillance, bringing with it implications of being guilty of something, of being a dangerous social type, of being subversive. The files are not comprehensive 'literary' biographies, but constitute what Capp termed "an incriminating biography...the inverse of hagiography", the intention being to conjure up "the diabolic rather than the saintly". To this end only aspects of the subject's life are recorded, akin to a collection of episodes or 'snapshots'. Fact, falsity, gossip, legend can all form part of the data, the material reflecting the subject not as a full human being but as a political being. The ideological forces that have shaped, and shape, the collector/agency frame the data collection process. For the reader-user a file is a biographical resource from which an "imagined enemy" can be constructed.²⁵

So who was the subject of C/58/63 as seen by ASIO, 1967-1972?²⁶ Rowan John Cahill, a.k.a. John, Rohan, Roland, and Rowen Cahill, was born in Cremorne, Sydney, in 1945. Correct, except for the suggestion of multiple identities; these were due to mistakes by ASIO field operatives and/or ASIO transcribers. Cahill was variously described as being either 5' 4" or 5' 9" (for the record, the correct height was 5' 6"), with fair to brown hair, of medium build, a youthful appearance, and with "pointed features". He owned and drove a 1961 green Volkswagen sedan, its registration details dutifully recorded by ASIO. This detail was important for tracking Cahill during surveillance operations.

Cahill was an undergraduate, then a postgraduate, student at Sydney University; at times ASIO was confused, describing him as an academic. According to surveillance reports, he was a frequent presence at protests and demonstrations, sometimes addressing them, and sometimes getting arrested. Media monitoring indicated he also wrote, and authorised, leaflets; he was frequently published in the Left press; and he edited the Sydney University student newspaper *honi soit* (which in fact was not the case; he was its publisher). ASIO regarded him as

a student leader.

In August 1968 Cahill was prominent in the capture and detention of two NSW Police Special Branch officers, including the Branch Head. The officers were observed in an unmarked police Mini Minor, covertly tape-recording a student meeting on the Sydney University campus. Students surrounded the car, and immobilised it. Tyres were deflated, the electrical wiring system was wrecked, sugar was put in the petrol tank, and the car plastered with anti-war stickers. The officers were detained for two-and-a-half-hours until the Acting Metropolitan Superintendent of Police agreed to come to the campus and sign a statement to the effect that in future, police would not spy on campus student meetings.

Following this signing, the officers were released, their car lifted and carried by students and dumped on Paramatta Road. Between the capture and the dumping, a large number of police assumed siege positions off-campus, while students erected barricades on-campus. The media dubbed the incident 'The Siege of Sydney University'. There is a two-page report of the incident in the Cahill ASIO file. While a large number of students were involved in the incident, only four were deemed of interest to ASIO; Cahill was one, his behaviour implicitly belligerent/inflammatory, and noted as "abusive".²⁷

In May 1969, an ASIO report noted that Cahill and others were planning to go into the Army and "interpret the military laws in such a way that they could not be charged with treason or sedition, but could work effectively."

Essentially correct. What the report failed to include was background and context. At the time the Commonwealth was steadfastly refusing to grant me status as a conscientious objector, for which I had applied; the issue was the subject of a long-running legal case. With the support of Ken Buckley, a founding member and leading activist of the NSW Council for Civil Liberties, and the assurance he had organised a panel of supportive lawyers, the plan was to enter the Army should I be compelled, and work on behalf of the Committee for the Rights of Servicemen (CRS).

The CRS was convened by Ken, run on a need-to-know basis, and mainly comprised ex-servicemen like Ken. Its purpose was to familiarise servicemen, particularly conscripts,

with their rights and civil liberties, disseminate anti-Vietnam war materials, and facilitate challenges to 'unlawful' military orders/commands. To date the CRS had only distributed leaflets to conscripts as they arrived on periodic intake 'recruitment' days at the Marrickville Army Depot (NSW), notifying them of the existence of the CRS. As it turned out, I was never put to the test; in August 1969 a District Court judge recognised my status as a conscientious objector.²⁸

The May 1969 report brought Cahill to the attention of ASIO's B1 Branch, the Counter Subversion Branch that dealt with Communist influence in trade unions and front organisations, with international Communism, and with plans for the internment of left-wing Australians (which remained operational until at least 1971).²⁹ "Abusive", "treason", "sedition": C/58/63 was, arguably, an increasingly dangerous character.

By 1971 Cahill had been "assessed" by ASIO as a "Trotskyist sympathiser" and as being associated with prominent Trotskyists. He was also known to be a member of the Australian Labor Party and in frequent contact, and working closely with, leading members of the CPA. He was even known, at least once, to have done a job of subterfuge for the CPA. He had acted as a front man in the hire of the Sydney Town Hall for a lecture by visiting French Marxist intellectual Roger Garaudy, on the Christian-Marxist dialogue.³⁰ Cahill also was linked with numerous other Left organisations. Amongst his contacts were Left intellectuals (also the subject of ASIO files). He was involved in the development of political links between tertiary student radicals and trade unions, and seen to be interested, and involved, in the radicalisation of secondary school students and Aborigines.

In a sense, the Trotskyist 'sympathies' attributed to me were correct; but ASIO did not explain what it meant by the description, nor did it probe or elaborate upon these 'sympathies'. To a great extent my interest in Trotsky was intellectual. A study of aspects of Trotsky's life formed part of my History Honours thesis in 1968; I was greatly impressed by Isaac Deutscher's three-volume study of Trotsky.³¹ Of special interest was Trotsky's later life and thought following his exile from the Soviet Union. Trotsky was a lens through which I explored the nature of the State, and the historical problems

of what happens to idealism of a social justice kind when it becomes part of a revolutionary programme, and later, part of the apparatus of State power.

ASIO's data correctly identified me as being close to the CPA, and in March 1970 described me as an intellectual with views to the left of the CPA and "explicitly revolutionary". While I was never a member of the CPA, from 1969–1973 I was a member of the Editorial Board of the party's theoretical/intellectual journal *Australian Left Review*. Part of a small group of young intellectuals, I was invited onto the Board in an effort to widen the journal's readership and develop perspectives reflecting New Left and contemporary Marxist perspectives. The work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci figured prominently.³² According to a March 1970 ASIO analysis in the Cahill file, the CPA had a strategic master plan to utilise the intellectual resources of "Marxist academics" and create "Red Bases" in the universities from which "the revolution" could then be "exported into society".³³

C/58/63 depicted Cahill as having a broad range of leftist contacts, and as working politically in a broad-left way. Again correct. However, ASIO failed to elaborate. Considering what we know of ASIO's political understanding of the time, it can be conjectured the organisation viewed Cahill's broad-leftism as part of an organisational conspiracy. In reality, however, my broad-leftism was personal and hard won. It emerged slowly out of my interactions with many people; and from my undergraduate studies of European and British history, which included studies of the English Civil War (with an emphasis on Republican politics), and of nineteenth century Socialism. From these came understandings of the often crippling impact that competing egos, tactical issues and ideologies had upon radical social movements.

Further, in weaning myself off a Christian (Protestant) upbringing, I had encountered Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946; my edition, Fontana, 1963) during my early twenties. Huxley explored the world's theologies, not in terms of their differences, but by what they had in common; in the process he established significant common philosophical/theological ground. It was a revelatory read, and I came to apply a Huxley type of 'common ground' approach in my engagement

with the Left. What needed to be emphasised/recognised so far as I was concerned was not the many differences on the Left, but what was common and could unite. It was an approach that contributed to my work in helping build the first Moratorium against the Vietnam War in Sydney (1970).

The portrait of Cahill that emerges from C/58/63 mirrors the ideological concerns of ASIO during the period 1967 to 1972; essentially he is what ASIO wanted him to be. Of course the subject did contribute to this portrait by his actions/activities, but much of C/58/63 is a circumstantial construction of an imagined, possibly unpleasant, and dangerous, political being, certainly more dangerous than he was in reality. No evident interest was expressed, nor time spent, by ASIO trying to understand C/58/63 as a human being, nor in probing the personal nature of his politics. For ASIO it sufficed to apply labels, and to join the dots. The pattern that emerged was pre-determined. Which begs the question: does the same, or similar, approach still apply in today's hydra-headed world of Australian spooks?

Rowan Cahill was prominent in the anti-war, student, and New Left movements during the 1960s and early 1970s. He has worked as a teacher, journalist, historian, and agricultural labourer. His most recent book was *A Turbulent Decade: Social Protest Movements and the Labour Movement, 1965–1975*, Sydney ASSLH, Newtown, 2005, co-edited with Beverley Symons. Rowan is a PhD candidate at the University of Wollongong.

Endnotes

- 1 Ann Curthoys, 'Mobilising Dissent: The Later Stages of Protest', in Gregory Pemberton (editor) *Vietnam Remembered*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 1993, p.138. For an introductory overview of printed materials variously arguing similarly see John Playford, 'The New Left: A Select Bibliography' in Richard Gordon (editor), *The Australian New Left: Critical Essays and Strategy*, William Heinemann Australia, Melbourne, 1970, pp.301–304.
- 2 Curthoys, op. cit., p.138.
- 3 Ann Mari Jordens, 'Conscription and Dissent: The Genesis of Anti-War Protest', in Gregory Pemberton (editor), op. cit., p.74.
- 4 Richard Gordon and Warren Osmond, 'An Overview of the Australian New Left', in Richard Gordon, *The Australian New Left*,

- pp.3-39; Terry Irving and Baiba Berzins, 'History and the New Left: Beyond Radicalism', in Gordon (editor), *ibid.*, pp.66-94.
- 5 Jordens, *op. cit.*, pp.74-80.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, p.76.
 - 7 David McKnight, *Australia's Spies and Their Secrets*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1994, pp.210-213.
 - 8 For the close working relationship between ASIO and journalists during the 1960s and 1970s see Frank Cain, *The Australian Security Intelligence Organization: An Unofficial History*, Spectrum Publications, Richmond, 1994, pp.203-204; David McKnight, *Australia's Spies*, pp.285-291; on ASIO's supply of data to anti-Communist organisations see David McKnight, 'I pry with my little spy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 2008.
 - 9 For an explanation of how conscription worked, and ballot statistics, see Ann-Mari Jordens, 'Conscription and Dissent: The Genesis of Anti-War Protest' in Gregory Pemberton (editor), *Vietnam Remembered*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 1990, pp.62-72.
 - 10 For discussion of my Leftwards political trajectory see Rowan Cahill, 'A Conscription Story', *The Hummer*, Vol.2, No.4, Winter 1995, pp.17-22; Rowan Cahill, 'Vietnam Reading', *Overland*, No.150, Autumn 1998, pp.11-15. For overviews of Oz magazine, its times, and significance, see Richard Neville, 'An enfant terrible turns 20', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 1983, pp. 29-30; Barry York, 'Looking back at Oz magazine', *National Library of Australia News*, May 2001, pp.10-12.
 - 11 Parts of my ASIO file consulted for this paper are in the control of the National Archives, Canberra, reference CRS A6119/90, Item 2749, Rowan John Cahill-Volume 1 (1967-1970); Item 3044, Volume 2 (1971-1972).
 - 12 For discussions of the Australian New Left see Rowan Cahill, *Notes on the New Left in Australia*, Australian Marxist Research Foundation, Sydney, 1969; Gordon (editor), *The Australian New Left*.
 - 13 McKnight, *Australia's Spies*, p.228.
 - 14 *Ibid.*
 - 15 *Ibid.*, pp.232-234.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, pp.233-234.
 - 17 *Ibid.*
 - 18 Cain, *The Australian Security Intelligence Organization*, p.200.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, pp.200-202.

- 20 McKnight, *Australia's Spies*, p.228.
- 21 Ibid., p.217.
- 22 Ibid., p.216.
- 23 Ibid., pp.229–230.
- 24 For an explanation of permitted deletions under the Act see “Fact Sheet 52-Exempt information in ASIO records”, National Archives of Australia. <http://www.naa.gov.au/about-us/publications/fact-sheets/fs52.aspx>
- 25 This paragraph draws on Fiona Capp, *Writers Defiled: Security Surveillance of Australian Authors and Intellectuals, 1920–1960*, McPhee Gribble, Ringwood, 1993, pp.1–14.
- 26 The following discussion is based on my reading of ASIO files on Rowan John Cahill, National Archives, Canberra, reference CRS A6119/90, Item 2749, Rowan John Cahill-Volume 1 (1967–1970); Item 3044, Volume 2 (1971–1972).
- 27 For accounts of the ‘siege’ see Andrew Moore, “‘A Secret Policeman’s Lot’: The Working Life of Fred Longbottom of the New South Wales Police Special Branch”, in John Shields, editor, *All Our Labours: Oral Histories of WorkingLife in Twentieth Century Sydney*, New South Wales University Press, 1992, pp.214–216; John Percy, *A History of the Democratic Socialist Party and Resistance, Volume 1; 1965–1972*, Resistance Books, Chippendale, 2005, p.108.
- 28 Ken Buckley (1922–2006), economic historian, academic, civil libertarian. During World War 2 Buckley had served in the British army as a paratroop officer in special operations units of the Military Intelligence Corps. He had served in the Middle East and in Greece. The CRS reflected his clandestine training. For the CRS see Ken Buckley, *Buckley’s!: Ken Buckley; historian, author and civil libertarian-an autobiography*, A&A Book Publishing, 2008, pp.230–231; Cahill, ‘A Conscription Story’, pp.21–22. For a discussion of the sensitivity of the Australian armed forces to selective objection to military commands/service, see Tom Frame and Kevin Baker, *Mutiny! Naval Insurrections in Australia and New Zealand*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 2000, pp.249–259.
- 29 For the responsibilities of B1 Branch see McKnight, *Australia’s Spies*, p. xi; for ASIO’s internment plans, *ibid.*, pp.112–122; see also L. J. Louis, *Menzies’ Cold War: A Reinterpretation*, Red Rag Publications, Carlton North, 2001, pp.51–52.
- 30 Professor Roger Garaudy was monitored by ASIO during his week-long visit to Australia in September 1970. He mainly addressed academic audiences on topics relating to contemporary Marxist

philosophy. For an ASIO report on the Australian Left Review sponsored tour see AA CRS A6119/90, Item 2749, folio 138. For insight into the intellectual/political issues Garaudy was promoting at the time, see Roger Garaudy, *The Alternative Future: A Vision of Christian Marxism*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1976.

- 31 Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed. Trotsky: 1879–1921*, Oxford University Press, London, 1954; *The Prophet Unarmed. Trotsky: 1921–1929*, Oxford University Press, 1959; *The Prophet Outcast. Trotsky: 1929–1940*, Oxford University Press, London, 1963.
- 32 In 1968 *Australian Left Review* published Alastair Davidson’s pioneer English-language study *Antonio Gramsci: The Man, His Ideas*.
- 33 “Communist Party of Australia Interest in Marxist Academics”, No. 2/70, 13 March 1970, AA CRS A6119/90, Item 2749, folios 112–113. For a commentary on this document, see R. Cahill, “Security Intelligence and Left Intellectuals: Australia, 1970”, *International Gramsci Journal*, Issue Number 1, 2008. www.uow.edu.au/arts/research/gramsci-journal/articles/RowanCahill-article_first_issue.pdf.