

What's in a name - was John Curtin 'Vigilant'? Analysing style to determine authorship.

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Abstract

Curtin researcher Tom Fitzgerald amassed a wealth of evidence that John Curtin wrote under the pen name 'Vigilant' in the early years of his editorship of the *Westralian Worker*. If true, the personal and literary columns penned by 'Vigilant' provide new insights into the inner temperament of Australia's war time Prime Minister. Fitzgerald's evidence for Curtin as 'Vigilant' is presented in this paper and the attribution is further explored by applying stylistic tests developed at the Centre for Literary and Linguistic Computing at the University of Newcastle (NSW).

Before entering parliament, Australia's war-time Prime Minister John Curtin was editor of the Labor *Westralian Worker*. From 1917 to 1928, he wrote a weekly editorial as well as contributing significant content to the rest of the paper. In February 1917, as Curtin moved from Melbourne to Perth to take up the editorship, articles under the pen name 'Vigilant' began to appear in the *Worker's* pages. In particular, a regular column called 'Our Bookshelf', first published in March 1917, carried the 'Vigilant' by-line for all of that year. The column continued until July 1919 with 'Vigilant' contributions becoming less frequent over time.¹ These 'Vigilant' columns took the form of extended personal essays of a literary character.

'Vigilant's' more than forty articles show his keen mind and wide reading. The columns reveal much about his views and the writings and people influential in forming his thinking.

'Vigilant' wrote lucidly and with passion on themes as diverse as the evolution of drama from ancient Greece to Shakespeare's England, the theory of evolution, Russian literature, the industrial history of Broken Hill, the place of women in society, the rationale for modestly priced, locally produced school textbooks, and the great need for more scholarship in the ranks of Labor.

'Vigilant' reviewed poetry, novels, plays and works of non fiction. He wrote about works by Shelley, Kipling, Omar Khayyam, Oscar Wilde, Galsworthy, Gustave Le Bon, Edward Carpenter, Joseph Furphy and many others, bringing his own thoughts to bear on the issues their writings illumined.

For example, in reviewing Carpenter's book on 'the sex problem in its every aspect' ('Love's Coming of Age: A Notable Book Review', 2 March 1917), 'Vigilant' wrote about the place of women in society and the nature of sex and marriage. Taking the socialist line, he stated that 'the only ultimate complete solution of the sex-problem, bound up as it is with the economic dependence of woman, lies in the emancipation of society'. More revealingly, on a personal level, he tasked his readers to look at their own relationships to see if they are free of the 'exercise of physical or economic advantage by the man' or 'the exploitation of sex-charm on the part of the woman'.

Respected economist, journalist and Curtin researcher Tom Fitzgerald believed that John Curtin was 'Vigilant' and that the by-line allowed him to express 'his more personal feelings

under the guise of pen-names', revealing glimpses of Curtin's 'inner temperament and thinking about life and human nature'.² Fitzgerald noted that the purpose of the 'Bookshelf' column was to 'associate literary knowledge with the advancement of an intelligent and enlightened Labor movement'³, an aim close to Curtin's heart. Curtin would have seen it as part of his role to instruct and educate Labor supporters, and in so doing, he had to reveal more of his humanistic interests than he could under his editorial hat. Fitzgerald presents a variety of evidence for Curtin being 'Vigilant'; much of it is circumstantial but taken as a whole, the case is a powerful one.

Certainty about the authorship of the 'Vigilant' articles would add an important element in understanding Curtin's outlook and motivation in his political career and war time prime ministership. While his editorials, later writings on economic matters and parliamentary speeches have been extensively studied, no published biographies of Curtin⁴ have considered the pen name attributions. The 'Vigilant' columns deal with subject matter not considered in the known Curtin writings. While Fitzgerald researched the pen named material for his proposed biography of Curtin, the work remained incomplete and unpublished at the time of his death in 1993. His meticulous investigations are detailed in his Curtin research papers now held at the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library in Perth, Western Australia.

To explore the attribution further, we applied some stylistic tests developed at the Centre for Literary and Linguistic Computing at the University of Newcastle (NSW), where two of the authors work. The methods offer an independent line of evidence on the problem. First, however, we need to present Fitzgerald's arguments in favour of the attribution in detail.

The first appearance of the 'Vigilant' articles coincides with Curtin's appointment as editor of the *Westralian Worker* and takes the pen name away from a timber industry correspondent with a regular column 'Great Southern Notes'. Fitzgerald believed the earliest 'Vigilant' articles of 2 and 16 February were written and posted to Perth by Curtin before his arrival in the west and before he was aware that the pen name was already in use. The usurping of the by line pointed to the new 'Vigilant' being someone who took ready precedence over the existing user; clearly *Worker* staff would give such precedence to their new editor.⁵

The content of the 'Vigilant' articles points to them being written by Curtin; the views expressed were views Curtin held strongly and the articles reveal knowledge of people, places, events and literature that he knew well. For example, the *Worker's* Directors had specifically appointed Curtin to push the anti-Hughes, anti-conscriptionist viewpoint in Western Australia, replacing Hilton, the out-going editor, who had tried to keep the paper even-handed on the conscription issue. In Melbourne, Curtin had been secretary of the Trades Union Anti-Conscription Committee. 'The Lost Leader', one of two articles by the new 'Vigilant' published on 2 February 1917, made a strong attack on Prime Minister Billy Hughes and his moves to introduce conscription. This was followed on 16 February by another anti-Hughes article 'Leaders Lost and Strayed' which also responded to criticism by Hilton levelled at 'The Lost Leader'.

Curtin believed passionately in the importance of education – he had a 'driving impulse for educating workers and for self education',⁶ as evidenced by his involvement with the Workers' Education Association while Secretary of the Timber Workers' Union (1911 to 1915) and by the many activities and classes he undertook as a member of the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP) in Melbourne from about 1906 until his move to the west. 'Vigilant' clearly shares this passion and indeed the 'Our Bookshelf' columns continually encourage workers to self improvement through directed reading and seek to educate them about

literature through spirited reviews. A recurrent theme in the 'Bookshelf' columns is the relationship between poetry, drama and literature and the workers' struggles – for example 'The Novel As a Propaganda Agent' (15 June 1917) and 'Literary Midwives of New Russia' (22 February 1918). 'Comrade Curtin' was reported in the *Socialist* of 26 February 1909 as giving 'an instructive address on "The Place of Poetry in Propaganda", basing his advice and contentions on Hugo's masterly work on William Shakespeare'⁷.

'Vigilant's' 'School Books' (16 February 1917) is a call for the establishment of a State school text-books publishing house to ensure quality texts at lower cost to parents. This theme occurs again in a later 'Bookshelf' piece 'Plays, Schools and Schoolbooks' (3 May 1918). The works mentioned as exemplars were texts in Victorian schools, which Curtin, coming from Melbourne, would have been familiar with.

Curtin had great respect for, and first hand knowledge of, the Reverend Frederick Sinclair, a Melbourne cleric who was actively involved in the VSP in Curtin's time and who served for a period as editor of the VSP's *Socialist* newspaper.⁸ 'Vigilant' similarly knows Sinclair personally, writing in 'Random Notes' (29 November 1918) that 'his unorthodox Sunday services are worth attending. In personal appearance he looks his part – a veritable Apollo'. In the same article, when writing of the need for literary drama, 'Vigilant' notes that 'A similar work has long been performed by Fred Sinclair, whose fortnightly play-readings are amongst the greatest literary treats that Melbourne affords.'

There are many parallel events in the life of 'Vigilant' and Curtin. For example, 'Vigilant' very early expresses a poor opinion of Perth's intellectual life compared with that of the eastern capitals ('The Repertory Theatre Movement', 6 April 1917). He sees an urgent need for lifting that life, especially with a repertory theatre, writing that 'the West hasn't been furiously progressive in the world of ideas of late'. This seems the reaction and voice of a new arrival in Perth, and one who has first hand experience of Melbourne repertory. Additionally, 'Vigilant' reveals his knowledge of the Gippsland timber country of Victoria when writing about Esson's play *Dead Timber* in the same article: 'The scene is laid in Gippsland. Who has seen a Gippsland clearing? Great grey giants, ringbarked and dead, but still standing'. Curtin knows this country – he knew it from his youth⁹ and from his travels throughout the region as secretary of the Timber Workers' Union of Victoria.

Curtin had been busy with the State election campaign in 1917 as had 'Vigilant' before publication of his article 'A Bookshelf Holiday' (26 October 1917): 'For the last few weeks, amidst the welter of election campaigning, "Vigilant" has been able to give but scant attention to either new books or old'. Instead of a literary piece, 'Vigilant' embarks on a study of nature, writing about a ramble on a bush track at the ocean end of Cambridge Street, through an area he clearly knows well. Curtin at this time lived in a rented house in Railway Parade, West Leederville, near the eastern end of Cambridge Street, making a walk down to the bush end of the street a natural thing for him, particularly as he enjoyed walking.

Curtin was in Kalgoorlie and Boulder on the WA Goldfields on speaking engagements¹⁰ at the same time that 'Vigilant' was writing a column in which he had to quote verses from memory 'under difficulties in a third-rate country township, away from books that could supply some much finer quotations' ('The Value of Song', 22 June 1917).

'Vigilant' reveals detailed knowledge of the appalling conditions 'in Victorian prisons twelve years ago, when the Victorian Socialist Party was fighting for the right to hold public meetings under similar conditions to other bodies. The conservative Colonial Secretary of the

day (Sammie Gillot, who was shortly afterwards “Brussels-carpeted”) was horrified when informed upon the matter’ (‘A Column of Notes’, 25 October 1918). By easy and free association, ‘Vigilant’ recalled details (including the name of the Colonial Secretary and his subsequent fate) which strongly suggest he is drawing on a direct memory of the affair, a memory which Curtin would hold.

From his research, Tom Fitzgerald became convinced despite his ‘own strong initial doubts’ that there was ‘overwhelming evidence’¹¹ that John Curtin was writing under the pen name ‘Vigilant’. If true, these pen named articles would allow a re-interpretation of Curtin, providing insights into his personal feelings and views on the world which are not found in the great wealth of his public and political writings and utterances. Fitzgerald believed that the pen-named writings were ‘only fragments but the more precious for that, given their quality. The inner person to be seen in these bright flashes has extraordinary delicacy and refinement of sensibility, cohabiting with a powerful realism and bitter irony regarding the state of the world’¹².’ If Curtin was ‘Vigilant’, it would help us to see the events of Curtin’s life from Curtin’s own viewpoint.

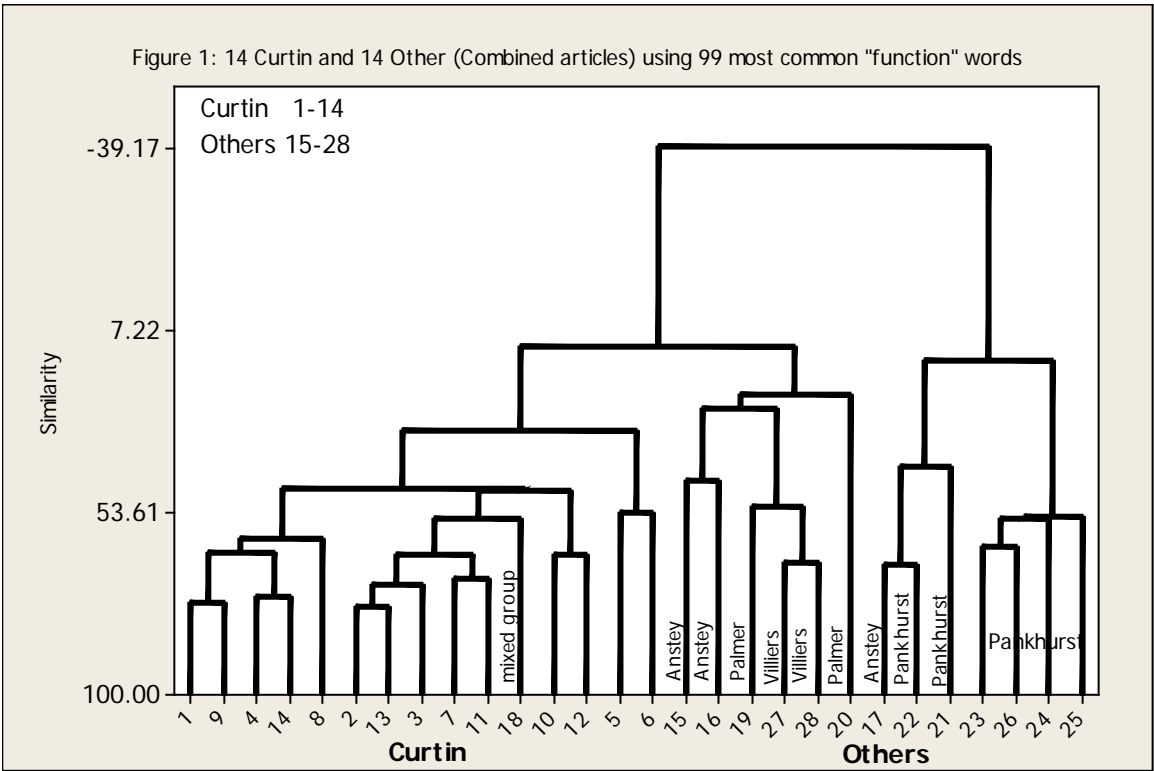
We were interested in testing this attribution on stylistic grounds. We first assembled a corpus of journalistic writing by Curtin and others, so that we could identify (if possible) stylistic features that serve to distinguish Curtin’s writing from that of his peers. We compiled a collection of just over 120 *Westralian Worker* and *Socialist* articles in electronic form. Most were published in the years 1915 to 1918. The forty-one articles we assembled bearing John Curtin’s signature yielded 50,664 words; the pseudonymous signature ‘Vigilant’ is attached to forty articles totalling 48,480 words; and there are forty-one articles in the corpus written by a number of other authors totalling 50,406 words. Four of the ‘other’ authors (Frank Anstey, Vance Palmer, Adela Pankhurst and L.J.Villiers) are each represented by at least four substantial articles.

Two difficulties needed to be considered when we were developing the testing procedures. One was article length; the other, the possibility of generic difference between political ‘leader’ type articles and more literary ‘review’ type articles. Although the overall word counts for each of the groups (the known Curtin, the known ‘Others’ and the ‘Vigilant’ group) were sizeable, the word count for the individual texts was generally quite small, ranging from 395 words to just over 2000. At the Centre for Literary and Linguistic Computing, where the tests were carried out, 1,000 words is considered an absolute minimum for individual texts under examination. For this reason, we devised a number of groupings of texts¹³ which afforded the possibility of using all articles (even the shortest), as well as using the longer articles as separate entities.

In order to minimize the effect of subject differences between the various articles (for example political as opposed to literary material) we used ‘function’ (non-lexical) words for the testing procedure. In general, function words can be described as those words which

contribute to the overall meaning by imposing grammatical function, rather than being meaningful themselves. They dominate the list of the very commonest words of the language, and include words such as *as and, the, to, of, and he*. For the most part they constitute a closed set. Not using 'lexical' or 'content' words seemed to be an important consideration for this project where we were comparing 'leader' and 'review' type articles. Indeed we found that the corpus frequency of words such as *war* and *labor* was extremely high (*war* was the thirty-fourth most common word in the corpus, and *labor* the thirty-ninth).

The first task was to see if we were able to distinguish Curtin from the other known authors. A simple dendrogram¹⁴ (Figure 1) of combined whole article groups of Curtin and Other authors, using the 99 most common 'function' words, was able to separate the fourteen Curtin groups from the fourteen Other groups, with only one exception (entry 18). This particular entry was the only 'mixed' group entry, combining authors represented in the corpus by only one or two shortish articles. Authorial integrity was maintained in all other groups.



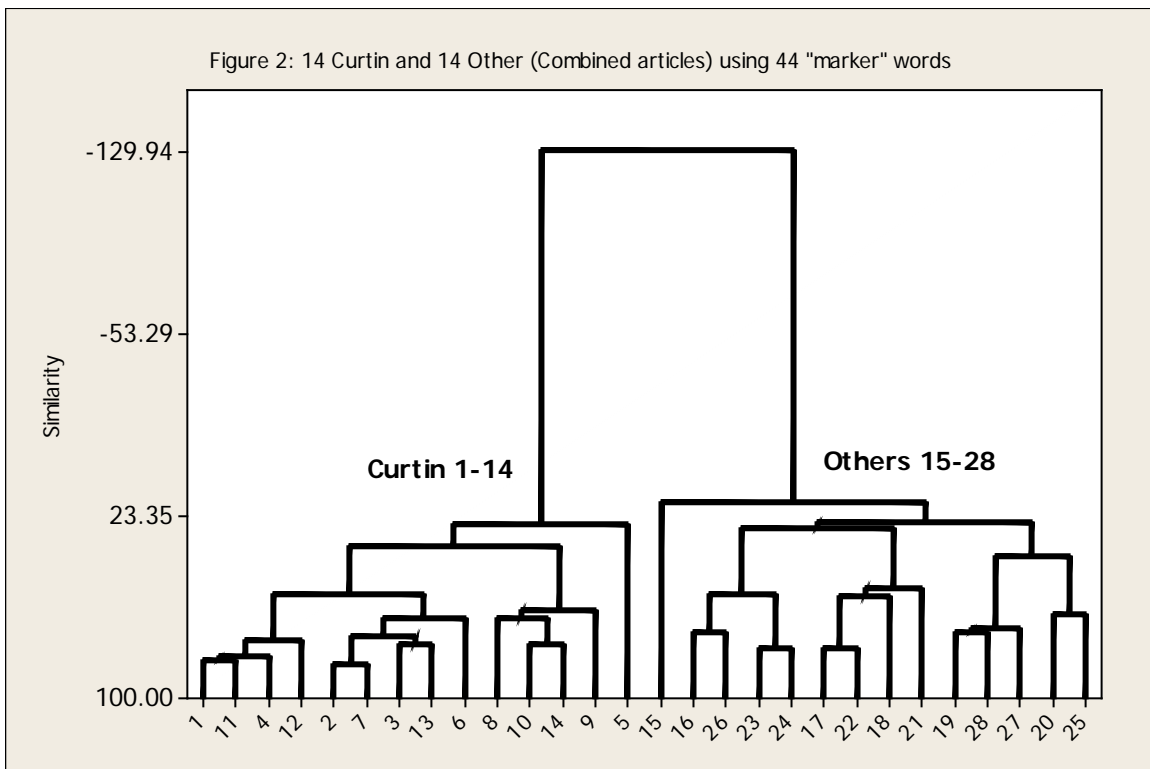
We then looked among our 200 'function' words, for words which could be considered as 'Curtin marker' words – that is, words which Curtin used relatively more or relatively less often than his fellow authors. The t-test was used for this purpose. The t-test estimates whether the difference in mean between two groups of observations reflects a genuine, consistent difference, or merely a chance effect arising from fluctuating counts. Our testing yielded forty-four such words, nineteen used relatively more often by Curtin:

the to what were any should between because each does cannot thus why however during until neither outside despite

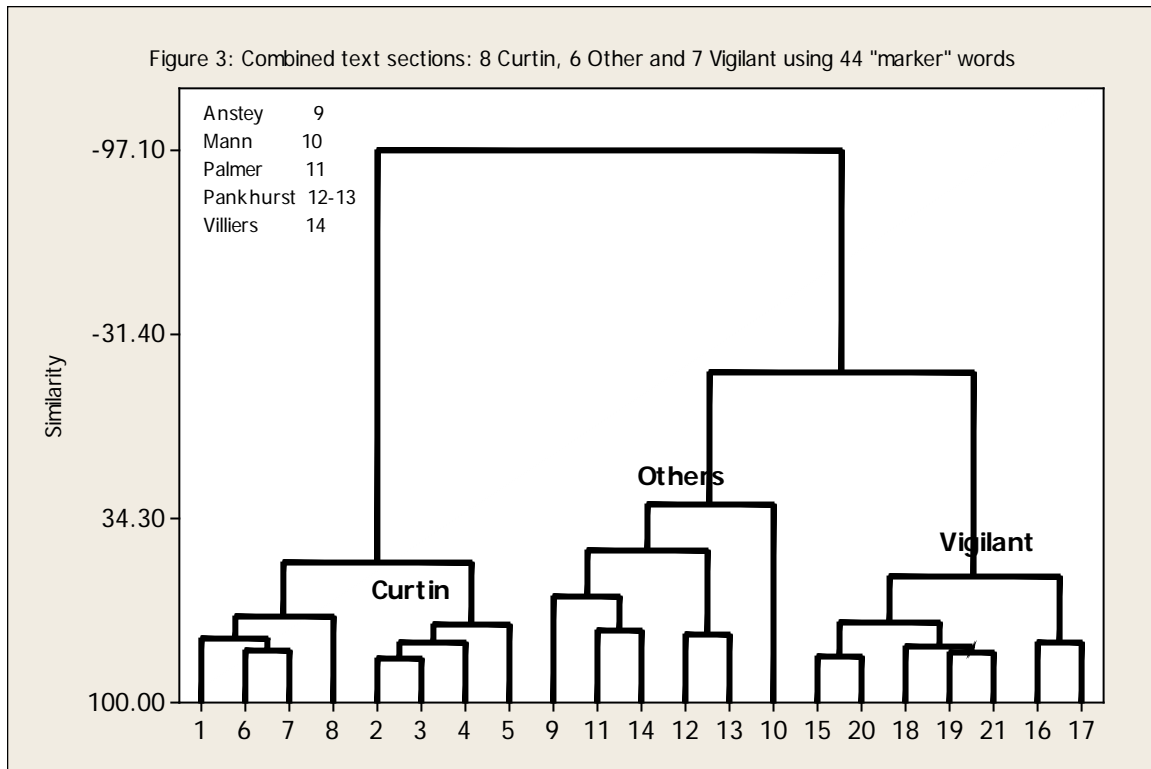
-- and twenty-five he uses relatively less often:

and are their or no who our upon these such over those her yet well without I much
 most many themselves you too just off

The dendrogram using these ‘marker’ words (Figure 2) shows strong separation between the two groups; this time the mixed entry (18) joins the ‘Other’ branch of the tree, and it can be seen that each of the two branches of the tree shows more cohesion than in figure 1. Texts exhibiting the greatest similarity unite earliest, while those with the greatest difference unite last. In the terms of our experiment, we can conclude that Curtin does have a distinctive style. The differences in the frequency of usage of marker words in his articles and in the others are sufficiently marked, and consistent, to put the two sets of samples into two quite separate clusters.



Having shown that our tests are able to distinguish groups of Curtin’s articles from those of other known journalists, the next step involved introducing groups of articles carrying the ‘Vigilant’ by-line. The hope – that the ‘Vigilant’ group would join the Curtin group and eschew the Other group – was not realised. The ‘Vigilant’ articles, presumably because of the shared characteristics that come from their closeness in purpose, audience and subject-matter, formed their own distinctive group, showing no close affinity either with Curtin or with the non-Curtin group. (see Figure 3 below)



All our testing to this point worked on the assumption that there was only one author using the ‘Vigilant’ by-line. If more than one hand was responsible for the articles, then it would be necessary to use single rather than combined articles in our tests. We therefore carried out a series of tests using individual articles with more than a thousand words; eighteen ‘Vigilant’ articles qualified. (see Table 1 below) In one series of Principal Component Analysis tests,¹⁵ we used fifteen Curtin and fifteen ‘Others’ articles as an unchanging background into which the eighteen substantive ‘Vigilant’ articles were added one by one. As variables we used the forty-four Curtin and non-Curtin marker words identified earlier and plotted the results for the First and Second Principal Components. The results of these tests appeared to confirm the notion that more than one author was responsible for the ‘Vigilant’ articles, since six of the eighteen articles were located on Curtin’s side of the plot, (Figure 4) while another six were located on the Others’ side (Figure 5) with the remaining six located in the middle of the plot between the two groups. (Figure 6)

Figure 4: Articles over 1000 words: 15 Curtin 15 Others and 6 'Vigilant' : 44 marker words

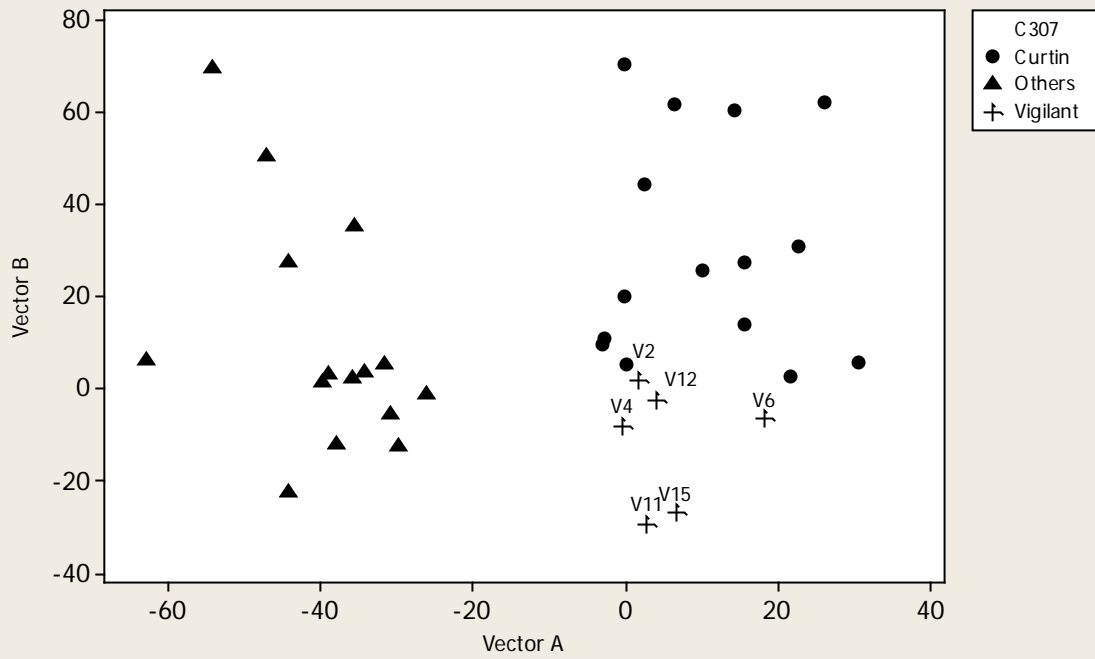


Figure 5: Articles over 1000 words: 15 Curtin 15 Others and 6 'Vigilant': 44 marker words

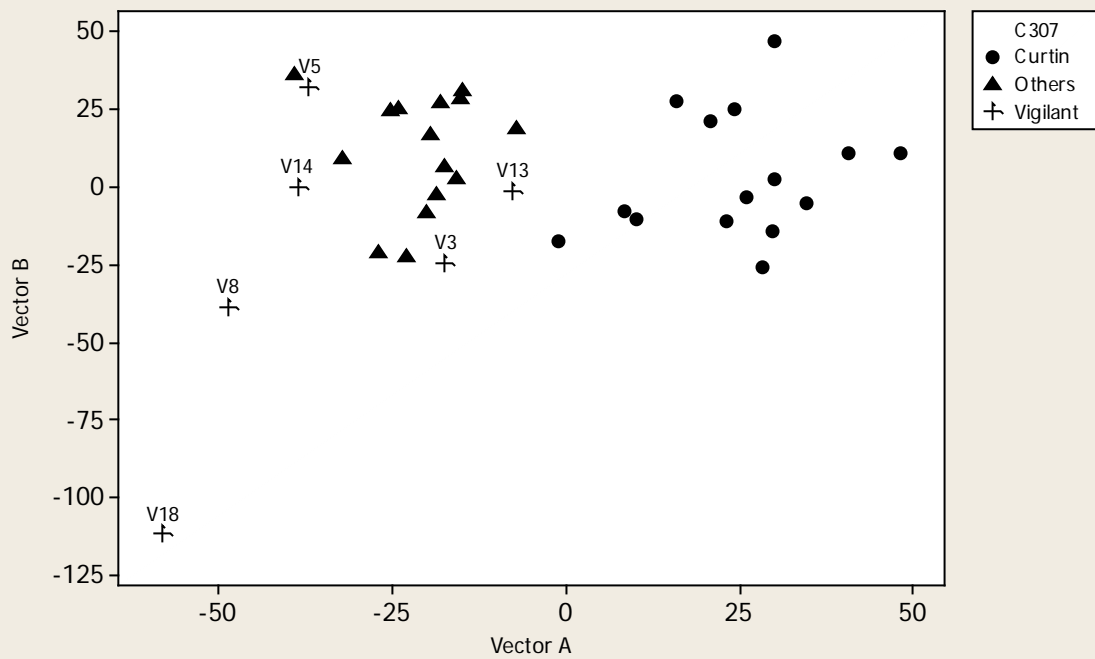
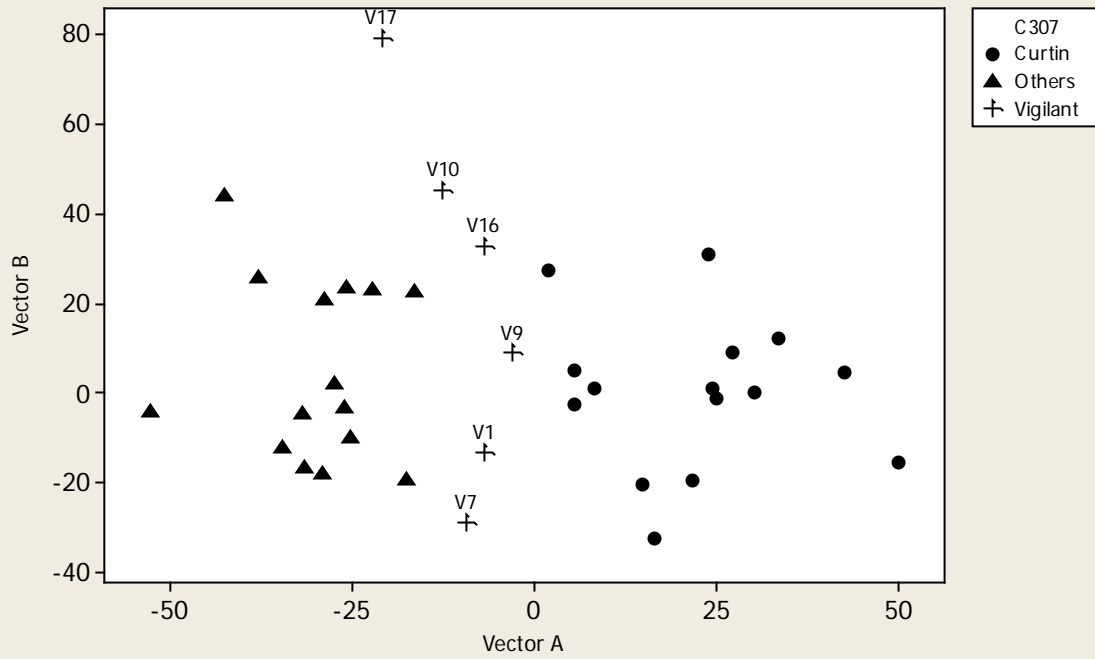


Figure 6: Articles over 1000 words: 15 Curtin 15 Others and 6 'Vigilant': 44 marker words



Based on these tests, we can make a good case for Curtin's authorship of some of the 'Vigilant' articles; the tests suggest that not all the articles are by Curtin, however. In this case the external evidence collected by Fitzgerald is more clear-cut than the internal, stylistic indications, as far as we have been able to assess them. If Curtin did write all the articles, then he certainly varied his style quite remarkably, in some cases carrying over few habitual preferences from his political writing to these essays in literary history and evaluation. We hope this foray into the stylistics of Curtin's journalism will prompt others to take up the problem of the 'Vigilant' articles, perhaps exploring further the biographical evidence as well.

Table1

Vigilant Article Title	Date	Words	Plot id. No.
Evolution Of Drama. 1.	29/06/1917	1278	V1 (fig. 6)
Evolution Of Drama. 2.	3/08/1917	1273	V2 (fig. 4)
What Shall I Read on Evolution?	24/08/1917	1330	V3 (fig. 5)
Evolution Of Drama. 3.	17/09/1917	1354	V4 (fig. 4)
Literature of Vagabondage	21/09/1917	1175	V5 (fig. 5)
The Blacksmith in Legend and History	28/09/1917	1073	V6 (fig. 4)
Evolution of Drama. 4.	12/10/1917	1349	V7 (fig. 6)
A Bookshelf Holiday	26/10/1917	1473	V8 (fig. 5)
Literary Midwives of New Russia	22/03/1918	1301	V9 (fig. 6)
Industrial History of Broken Hill	24/05/1918	1028	V10 (fig. 6)
Omar Khayyam and da Vinci	21/06/1918	1160	V11 (fig. 4)
Flinders Petrie on Civilisation	5/07/1918	1096	V12 (fig. 4)
Working-class History	19/07/1918	1104	V13 (fig. 5)
Such is Life - Great Work	6/09/1918	1188	V14 (fig. 5)
Great Poems of Progress IV	20/09/1918	1033	V15 (fig. 4)
Ibsen's Plays	11/10/1918	1276	V16 (fig. 6)
Random Notes	29/11/1918	1495	V17 (fig. 6)
The Novel as Propaganda Agent	15/06/1917	1322	V18 (fig. 5)

Endnotes

¹For a complete list of 'Our Bookshelf' columns, see JCPML. Records of the Australian Labor Party WA Branch. 'Our Bookshelf' columns published in the *Westralian Worker*, mainly written under the pen-name 'Vigilant'. 1917-1919. Series 612. For other 'Vigilant' articles, see JCPML. Records of the Australian Labor Party WA Branch. Articles in the *Westralian Worker* by 'Vigilant'. 1917-1921. Series 611.

²JCPML. Records of Tom Fitzgerald. John Curtin: - the opening, 1911 - 1988. JCPML00653/280

³JCPML. Records of Tom Fitzgerald. Notes re 'Vigilant' - his life cycle, 1918-1919. JCPML00653/36/13

⁴Published biographies of John Curtin include:

Day, David. 1999. *John Curtin: A Life*. Sydney: HarperCollins.

Edwards, John. 2005. *Curtin's Gift: Reinterpreting Australia's Greatest Prime Minister*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Serle, Geoffrey. 1997. *For Australia and Labor: Prime Minister John Curtin*. Perth: John

Curtin Prime Ministerial Library.

Ross, Lloyd. 1977. *John Curtin: A Biography*. South Melbourne: MacMillan.

⁵ JCPML. Records of Tom Fitzgerald. Notes re 'Vigilant's' identity, 1909-1988. JCPML00653/36/10

⁶ JCPML. Records of Tom Fitzgerald. Notes re 'Vigilant's' identity, 1909-1988. JCPML00653/36/10

⁷ JCPML. Records of the Victorian Socialist Party. Party Chronicles. *Socialist*, 26 February 1909, p. 3. JCPML01001/1

⁸ Curtin writes of hearing the Reverend Sinclair on a Sunday in February 1910 in JCPML. Records of Jessie Gunn. Letter from John Curtin to Jessie Gunn dated 22 February 1910. JCPML00300/13. Original held by National Library of Australia: MS 889. Sinclair was a speaker at VSP meetings Curtin attended (see for example, JCPML. Records of the Victorian Socialist Party. At the Bijou. Ingersoll and Revivalism. *Socialist*, 14 May 1909. JCPML00819/025) and Curtin praises him and other editors of the *Socialist* newspaper in a 1915 history of the paper, in JCPML. Records of the Victorian Socialist Party. Ten Years Ago. Recollections and Reflections by Jack Curtin. *Socialist*, 27 August 1915, p 4. JCPML00819/104

⁹ Curtin spent his youth in country Victoria and writing in 1909 to a young friend, he noted: 'I feel sorry at hearing of the scarcity of water in your district. I have had experience of water famines Jessie in Gippsland and a place not far from where you are now – Charlton', in JCPML. Records of Jessie Gunn. Letter from John Curtin to Jessie Gunn dated 13 May 1908. JCPML00300/8. Original held by National Library of Australia: MS 889.

¹⁰ The *Westralian Worker* of 29 June 1917 reported 'Last week we had a visit from Mr J. Curtin, editor of the "Worker". He arrived in Kalgoorlie on Friday morning and left on Sunday night with the intention of breaking his journey at Westonia. During his stay on the goldfields he was kept remarkably busy...'. JCPML. Records of the Australian Labor Party WA Branch. A Welcome Visitor. *Westralian Worker*, 29 June 1917, page 8. JCPML00984/5

¹¹ JCPML. Records of Tom Fitzgerald. Notes re 'Vigilant's' identity, 1909-1988. JCPML00653/36/10

¹² JCPML. Records of Tom Fitzgerald. John Curtin: - the opening, 1911 - 1988. JCPML00653/280

- (1) all articles divided into 2000 word sections, cutting across article boundaries: - Curtin 22, 'Vigilant' 21, Others 20 sections.
- (2) groups of combined articles (totalling over 2500 words) preserving article boundaries: - Curtin 14, 'Vigilant' 13, Others 14 groups.
- (3) groups of combined articles (totalling over 5000 words) preserving article boundaries:- Curtin 8, 'Vigilant' 7, Others 6.
- (4) substantial articles as separate entities: - Curtin (32 x 1000+ words); 'Vigilant' (18 x 1000+ words); Others (23 x 1000+ words).

¹⁴ We used Minitab (Release 14, Copyright Minitab Inc., 1972-2003) for the dendrogram and Principal Component Analysis procedures in this study. Dendrogram or cluster analysis works by finding the closest pair of samples, based on their frequencies of the variables used, then joining that pair to the next closest sample or pair, and so on, until all the samples have been included in a cluster.

¹⁵ Principal Component Analysis (PCA) reduces the information from multiple variables to a series of single, composite vectors, starting with the most important one (the First Principal Component), moving on to the second most important, independent, vector and so on until all the variance is exhausted. This method has been extensively used and tested in authorship

studies. See, for example, R. S. Forsyth, D. I. Holmes and E. K. Tse, 'Cicero, Sigonio, and Burrows: investigating the authenticity of the Consolatio,' *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 14 (1998), 375-400.

Archival Sources

Records of Tom Fitzgerald, John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Perth.

Papers of Jessie Gunn, National Library of Australia, MS 889

Journals and Newspapers

Socialist

Westralian Worker