

CHILDE OF HALE

a Version

by Maya Oppenheimer, to accompany Richard Whitby's film Childe of Hale, 2014

Version: 'a particular form of something differing.' This is perfect. But it continues, '... differing in certain respects from an earlier form or other forms of the same type of thing'. Category. Style. Model. Design. Type.

Either that, or this: 'an account of a matter from a particular person's point of view.' A version of events. Description. Record. Rendering. Construction. Impression. Account.

Not to make too fine a point, but these are the first searchable definitions of the word 'version' available online, that great digital dictionary. They seem perfectly flexible because they are vague, but there is an important distinction between the two that make the word useful in application to Richard Whitby's *Childe of Hale* video project. 'Version' relies on difference (from earlier and similar forms) but also has the rich quality of being a personal, subjective point of view. There is nothing derivative here: quite the opposite. We depend upon a rich layering of new and varied accounts to make a good story, to make history.





Middleton's portrait,
Walker Art Gallery

Childe of Hale is a version of versions. In this sense, it is a container of stories that differ slightly from earlier forms – as myths and accounts are wont to do in their metamorphoses – as well as being Whitby's articulation of the process of telling and making stories. The resulting video work is a narrative that is at once as varied and freely speckled as the accounts of its subject, John Middleton, the famous 'Childe of Hale', who was born in 1578 and grew to the alleged height of 9'3".

When we think of history, we expect to be guided through a presentation of facts by an authority or a knowledgeable host who gestures and walks through settings and scenarios to explain what happened, to who and when. Documentaries are especially thought to be this way, with their filmic presentation of facts arranged from evidence. But the landscape of history is much more complicated than this. It is a rich mix of versions with points of view that are valued, believed and important. We, as an audience, do well to realise the authorial hand at work in documenting stories; Whitby gives us this opportunity in his stitching together a magpie collection of footage, images and sound mostly drawn from four days of filming in and around the historic village of Hale.

John Middleton's life does not lend to a neat and tidy biography. What is known about him cannot be verified, which is partly why the story is so delicious in its telling. Residents from Hale auditioned in June 2013 to participate in the version of the 'Childe of Hale' story; wearing provided costumes, they improvise various stages of Middleton's life from his alleged self-induced, aspirational growth to his journey to London for a prize fight, his short-lived triumph followed by a roadside burglary and empty-handed return to Hale where he lived out his days behind a plough.

Whitby edits these performances together not as a chronological re-enactment of Middleton's story but as a furrowed montage with shots of Hale,

the costumed residents, footage from the annual carnival and animated motifs to allow viewers to contemplate this content as elements of storytelling. Many motifs of Middleton's life appear here not as proof but as echoes of a mythical story that enliven the performance rather than the history itself: a portrait of Middleton hanging in Speke Hall appears in the posture of Whitby's giant, a hand-print animation attests to his enormous paw, a gravesite rumoured to have been dug up to verify his bones is now sealed, a bronze statue was erected in the village. This process destabilises the narrative and keeps our attention on the mechanics and questions what it is about this story that captures meaning and persistence.

The more Whitby lets the versions come through, the more we become aware of how the story operates in cultural space. Flashes of the Lord's wristwatch or the thief's red fingernails, the plastic bucket on the beach, these are not anachronisms but important devices that mark agency. So too are the leaps Whitby makes from carnivals to actors to timeless stills of landscape, from sound to animation to recorded footage. These are all instances where time and narrative co-mingle, and the seams that bring the it all together in *Childe of Hale* are representations of process, of thinking through the story, but also experiments in how we react to seeing those details that are usually absent in the burnished gloss of spoon-fed media.



Middleton's 'handprints', Brasenose College

A linguistic trend has emerged lately that describes the transformation of nouns into action verbs: 'a source' becoming 'sourcing', is one example that attests to the phenomenon sprung from a world that is updating (another example) with constant and quick-silver changes. Here, Whitby slows down this effect making a work that is about the process more than the outcome:

‘version-ing’ elevates the process of putting together a story by using stories – and the result is at times jagged, at times peaceful and in the end a revealing version among versions.

Childe of Hale tells us about John Middleton, but it also tells us about difference, subjectivity and place. It tells us about the tools we use to craft a history and how this elicits meaning. Stories depend on versions, but not in their preservation of the past. The effort here is not so positivist; rather, the process reflects who we are as the makers and authors of those versions. With the production of *Childe of Hale*, we wonder what it is that holds such interest in Middleton’s story. It is not solely that Middleton was so enormous. The aftermath of his (mis-)adventure, his larger than life story – that he willed himself to be gigantic was treated poorly and died leading a normal life – creates a tension between mundane and exceptional that is captivating as well as unsettling.

Video credits

Actors: Ste Rathbone, John McCormick, Janice Collier, Faye Nelson
Megan Nelson, Emily Collier, James Rylance, Lynn-Marie Clarkson-
Wright, Peter Quint, Sue Gerrard, Michael Whitby, Brian Hargreaves,
Kathryn Ashill, Susan Langton, Anne Marie Mills, Mary Christine
Roach, Bob Roach, Robert Evans and members of the crew

Actors’ workshops and Voice of Interviewer Janette Froud
Camera Jamie George, Mark Couzens and Richard Whitby
Music Oliver Brignall and Richard Whitby
Costumes Claire Wincott
Stills and Catering Michael Whitby

Thanks to Bryan Biggs, LUX, Amit Sud, Jean Whitby, Paul Turton,
Jayne Clark



Supported using public funding by

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