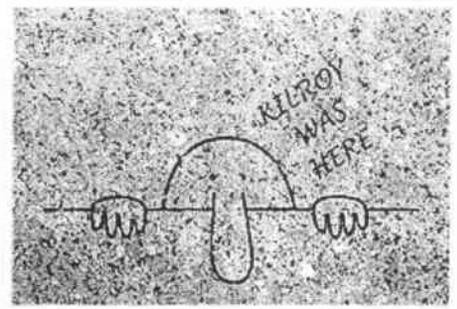


**Kilroy was here** is an American popular culture expression, often seen in graffiti. Its origins are open to speculation, but recognition of it and the distinctive doodle of "Kilroy" peeking over a wall is known almost everywhere among U.S. residents who lived during World War II and through the Korean War.



Engraving of Kilroy on the WWII Memorial in Washington DC.

## Origins



A depiction of Kilroy on a piece of the Berlin Wall in the Newseum in Washington, D.C., USA

The phrase appears to have originated through United States servicemen, who would draw the doodle and the text "Kilroy Was Here" on the walls or elsewhere they were stationed, encamped, or visited. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* notes that it was particularly associated with the Air Transport Command, at least when observed in the United Kingdom.

One of the first sightings was at a Grainger Branch in Baltimore where it was rumored to have been drawn by Kilroy himself. One theory identifies James J. Kilroy (1902–1962), an American shipyard inspector, as the man behind the signature. During World War II he worked at the Fore River Shipyard in Quincy, Massachusetts, where he claimed to have used the phrase to mark rivets he had checked. The builders, whose rivets J. J. Kilroy was counting, were paid depending on the number of

rivets they put in. A riveter would make a chalk mark at the end of his or her shift to show where they had left off and the next riveter had started. Unscrupulous riveters discovered that, if they started work before the inspector arrived, they could receive extra pay by erasing the previous worker's chalk mark and chalking a mark farther back on the same seam, giving themselves credit for some of the previous riveter's work. J.J. Kilroy stopped this practice by writing "Kilroy was here" at the site of each chalk mark. At the time, ships were being sent out before they had been painted, so when sealed areas were opened for maintenance, soldiers found an unexplained name scrawled. Thousands of servicemen may have potentially seen his slogan on the outgoing ships and Kilroy's omnipresence and inscrutability sparked the legend. Afterwards, servicemen could have begun placing the slogan on different places and especially in new captured areas or landings. At some later point, the graffiti (Chad) and slogan (Kilroy was here) must have merged.

*The New York Times* indicated this as the origin in 1946, based on the results of a contest conducted by the American Transit Association to establish the origin of the phenomenon. The article noted that Kilroy had marked the ships themselves as they were being built—so, at a later date, the phrase would be found chalked in places that no graffiti-artist could have reached (inside sealed hull spaces, for example), which then fed the mythical significance of the phrase—after all, if Kilroy could leave his mark there, who knew where else he could go? *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* notes this as a possible origin, but suggests that "the phrase grew by accident."

Author Charles Panati says: "The mischievous face and the phrase became a national joke." He goes on to say: "The outrageousness of the graffiti was not so much what it said, but where it turned up."

Kilroy was the most popular of his type in World War II, as well as today. Herbie (Canadian), Overby (Los Angeles, late 1960s), Chad (British, World War II), and Mr. Foo (Australian, World War I and II) never reached the popularity Kilroy did. The 'major' Kilroy graffiti fad ended in the 1950s, but today people all over the world still scribble 'Kilroy was here' in schools, trains, and other similar public areas. In the 1947 film *Nightmare Alley*, the expression is seen scribbled on the wall in back of Tyrone Power during a memorable scene.