This photograph was taken during the Zürich meetings of the U.I.S.P.P. in 1950.
(Photograph: S. Piggott)

From left to right — Kathleen Kenyon, Gordon Childe, Richard Atkinson, Robert Braidwood, Grahame Clark and Christopher Hawkes — quite a distinguished bunch!
V. GORDON CHILDE: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

S. Green

INTRODUCTION

This article describes the main features of V. Gordon Childe's life. Biographical information on Childe is more difficult to obtain than his books and papers, and for this reason I have specifically excluded detailed discussion of his many publications. Aspects of his work are dealt with elsewhere in this journal, and in previous publications (e.g. Gathercole 1971; Green 1981; Trigger 1980).

Born in Sydney on 14 April 1892, Vere Gordon Childe was the only surviving son of Stephen H. Childe, Rector of St Thomas's Church, North Sydney, and his second wife Harriet. Gordon Childe could trace his ancestry back on his father's side to the land-owning Childes of Kinlet, Shropshire, England. His mother too came from a prominent British family, whose male members traditionally entered the law or the church.

Gordon Childe grew up with his five half-brothers and sisters, in a household where religion and music were both important. His father was not a popular minister nor a communicative man, though a strong personality. It is tempting to assume that his son's later atheism, radical politics, and even his introverted personality, had their roots partly in reaction to his upbringing. Clearly there was a lot of intellectual and musical talent within the family, and a lot of affection towards the youngest child, Gordon, from his sisters. His mother Harriet remains a shadowy figure — religious, conscientious, presumably fond of her only child — and she died in 1910 when Gordon was eighteen.

In 1911 Gordon Childe entered Sydney University to read Classics. He was an exceptional scholar, graduating with first class honours in Latin, Greek and Philosophy in 1914. These were formative years. Here he studied Hegel, Marx and Engels under the Scottish Hegelian and inspiring teacher, Francis Anderson. Here, too, began his life-long friendship with H. V. (Bert) Evatt, also studying philosophy, also fascinated by Marx, also a brilliant scholar, and later leader of the Australian Labour Party.

During Childe's final year at Sydney University the Australian Workers Educational Association (W.E.A.) was founded; an organisation whose principles Childe supported all his life. The socialists, anarchists and 'Wobblies' (members of the International Workers of the World or I.W.W.) he met through the W.E.A. were exciting, challenging, and, above all, espoused philosophies radically different from those of his home background. But Childe was no mere 'angry young man'. His belief in Marxism was life-long, perhaps because it was an intellectual belief stemming from his philosophical studies. It survived his change of career from labour politics to prehistoric archaeology, and his increasingly comfortable life-style as a world-famous professor. A true academic, his letters and publications show he was thinking creatively about Marxism and the materialist conception of history all his life.
Childe continued his studies at Queen's College, Oxford, during the first world war. He spent a year on the course leading to a Diploma in Classical Archaeology and in 1916 submitted his B.Litt. thesis, entitled 'The Influence of Indo-Europeans in Prehistoric Greece'. His supervisors were J.L. Myres and Sir Arthur Evans. Prehistoric archaeology was at that time just becoming recognized as a distinct discipline. Childe later wrote: 'My Oxford training was in the Classical tradition to which bronzes, terracottas and pottery ... were respectable, while stone and bone tools were banusic' (Childe 1958a:69). He was already beginning to gather his remarkable first-hand knowledge of prehistoric artefacts, scattered across countless European museums. This depth of research and his exceptional ability to synthesize the archaeological evidence were to place him at the forefront of this century's prehistorians.

The socialist friends he made at the Oxford University Fabian Society — Robin Page Arnot, William Mellor, Raymond and Margaret Postgate and G.D.H. Cole — were as important to him as his formal studies. His closest friend at Oxford, with whom he shared rooms, was Rajani Palme Dutt, later a founder member and leading theoretician of the British Communist Party. Dutt was arrested in 1916 for his stand as a conscientious objector, and expelled from the university in 1917 for the propaganda of Marxism. Childe and Dutt were life-long friends, and remained sufficiently close politically for them to be planning, in the 1950s, a joint edition of Engels' Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (Dutt 1965:539).

Gordon Childe returned to Australia in June 1917 with a first in Literae Humaniores from Oxford and fervent anti-war and socialist views. After a short and unsuccessful spell as a schoolmaster in Maryborough, Queensland, he started work as a tutor at St Andrew's College, Sydney University. He was effectively dismissed from this post, and his appointment to another tutorial post blocked, because of his political opinions. Parliamentary questions about his case were twice raised in the N.S.W. Legislative Assembly, by William McKell (a later Governor General) and others — but to no avail.

Childe now found an academic career made so difficult because of his political views that he decided to turn adversity into advantage and seek a job in labour politics. Bill McKell helped find him a temporary government post in Brisbane, and by August 1919 he was employed as private secretary to the leader of the N.S.W. Labour Opposition, 'Honest' John Storey. Storey became Premier of the State in April 1920, and Childe was closely involved with political events and policies over the next couple of years. He returned to London in December 1921, as Research and Publicity Officer for the N.S.W. Labour Government; an appointment which was terminated within six months by the new Conservative Government in New South Wales. Childe's first book, How Labour Governs, published in London in 1923, is now regarded as a classic on the political and industrial organisation of the early Australian Labour Movement. It also shows that he became bitterly disillusioned by many aspects of Australian labour politics and politicians.

By June 1922, Gordon Childe was living in London, enjoying the company of his left-wing friends, many now members of the recently formed Communist Party. At the age of 30, he was still seeking a permanent job. J.V. Allen has said that at this point Childe's 'disenchantment with the present gave way to his enchantment with the past' (Allen 1967:53). In fact, his fascination with politics and with prehistoric archaeology were two sides of the same coin: an interest in how people shape their society and environment. During the years 1922—25 he supported himself by both political and academic jobs (see Green 1981:42ff). He also visited museums and prehistorians all over Europe, reading widely in several languages. J.G.D. Clark (1967:4) has opined that these years provided him with a 'supremely creative period in the wilderness', as he evolved a synthesis of the archaeological evidence culminating in The Dawn
of European Civilization in 1925. The impact of this book, and the others which followed in quick succession — The Aryans (1926), The Most Ancient East (1928), The Danube in Prehistory (1929) and The Bronze Age (1930) — cannot be overestimated. Looking back in 1957, Childe said ‘when I left Australia to study European archaeology some forty years ago, history meant written texts, and archaeology was accepted — rather grudgingly — merely as illustrating these’ (Childe 1957a). His books were influential in changing this view. Not only was the geographical scope of his research unique, but he had the unusual gift of bringing past societies to life. The Dawn began to explore the uniqueness of European prehistory, and to demonstrate the true value of archaeology, in a way which had not been attempted before.

Nineteen twenty five also saw Childe in a full-time job at last—as Librarian for the Royal Anthropological Institute in London—and continuing his travels abroad to see museums and sites at first-hand. In 1927 he accepted the post of Abercromby Professor of Archaeology at Edinburgh University. This decision was to set him irrevocably on a career as an academic and prehistorian. R. Palme Dutt later explained ‘.... he wrote to me that he would have chosen revolutionary politics but he found the price too high, and that he preferred what he termed the bios apolausticos (fleshpots) of professional status’ (Dutt 1965:539).

Childe’s 20 year tenure of the Abercromby Chair put Scotland firmly on the European archaeological map. His breadth of outlook, to say nothing of his political views, brought a breath of fresh air into the parochial Scottish antiquarian world. At Edinburgh he developed a curriculum leading to a B.Sc. degree, for he (and Lord Abercromby) believed that archaeology was a scientific discipline. Piggott has described how ‘his department, housed in a cramped and repulsive academic slum, was essentially a place where Childe worked by himself, with his own private library around him...’ (Piggott 1958:307). He lectured on Scottish prehistory set against the compelling background of European societies. A former student recalled how ‘he completely ignored what he regarded as the unnecessary stages of an argument. One’s mind was always leap frogging to keep up with him and most of his class were hopelessly lost. And yet he had a strange quality of magnetism which made it imperative to listen ...’ (see Green 1981:62),

He hated digging, but was conscientious, both in examining Scottish sites and publishing the results. He is best remembered as a field-worker for his excavations of the neolithic stone village of Skara Brae, in the Orkneys. Shortly after his death a former student wrote: ‘In the far north he is remembered with high regard and vivid reminiscence for it was characteristic of the man to win affection among those with whom he worked and lived, albeit their reactions to his personality are not innocent of wonder and humour. To them he was every inch the professor. The Stromness landlady who looked after him during the epic days of Skara Brae commiserated with genuine solicitude on how ‘the poor man never ate, too upset when he didn’t find anything, too excited when he did’ (Cruden 1957:251).

Childe was a man with whom few, if any, became intimate. He loved company but maintained a detachment in personal relationships and probably never realised how much affection he inspired. His odd looks and clothes are legendary: thick glasses, ‘strawberry’ nose, walrus moustache and gangling figure, dressed in a battered wide-brimmed hat and capacious black mackintosh. He loved to carry a conspicuous copy of the Daily Worker, enjoying playing up to his ‘red’ reputation.

In 1935 Childe paid his first visit to the U.S.S.R. He was fascinated by the Soviet experiment in communism, which he often said was the only answer for mankind in the long run. He played a unique part in the international exchange of scholarship in Europe; and had no time for the
political prejudices which prevented others from taking seriously Soviet archaeologists. A great strength which his prehistoric studies lent to his politics was his ability to take a long-term view. After the Soviet invasion of Hungary he wrote to his Australian cousin Alexander Gordon: 'The world situation in 1956 is distinctly unpleasant — but probably not really worse than in 1956 BC, say, under Shulgi of Ur.... Nor despite my devotion to the C.C.C.P can I really regard events in Hungary with equanimity.... But of course one must not believe anything one reads — not even in the Daily Worker!' (Childe 1956a).

Childe's publications continued unabated during his years at Edinburgh. He was continually searching for an explanation for the uniqueness of European civilization. Looking back in 'Retrospect' he wrote: 'I came to prehistory from comparative philology; I began the study of European archaeology in the hope of finding the cradle of the Indo-Europeans and of identifying their primitive culture' (Childe 1958a:69). His publications 1925-1932 synthesized a mass of archaeological data from Europe, the Near East and India, making a substantial contribution to relative chronologies, and to the increasingly economic interpretation of data. He espoused aspects of the materialist conception of history, but never lost sight of people at the expense of artefacts. Later he began a book on epistemology by explaining: 'As an archaeologist I deal with concrete material things as much as any natural scientist. But as a prehistorian I must treat my objects always and exclusively as concrete expressions and embodiments of human thoughts and ideas — in a word of knowledge' (Childe 1956b:1).

Gordon Childe's name became known to the general public through his enormously popular paperbacks — Man Makes Himself (1936) and What Happened in History (1942). He set out to show that history and progress can be demonstrated by archaeological evidence, and to bring the benefits of prehistoric archaeology to ordinary people. He wrote to his sister Alice: 'Penguins [books] sell at 6d on bookstalls everywhere and I feel archaeologists must now make a real effort to "sell" their knowledge to the masses as the Yanks would say or go under' (Childe 1942:78).

With the end of the second world war, some money began to be available to expand the study of prehistoric archaeology in Britain. The Institute of Archaeology in London, previously dependent largely on voluntary staff, was now able to offer Childe the Directorship of the Institute. He was keen to leave Edinburgh and had written to O.G.S. Crawford in 1944 'The London Chair is my one hope of escaping from Edinburgh before I'm 65' (Childe 1944).

As Director of the Institute of Archaeology, from 1946 to 1956, Childe ensured that the Institute established an international reputation. Other leading archaeologists on the staff included Zeuner, Cornwall, Kenyon, Wheeler and Mallowan; and many contemporary archaeologists were taught by Childe as postgraduate students there. He was happier in London than in Edinburgh; feeling less isolated in terms of academic, political and social contacts. He was a conscientious if unskilled administrator, but an inspiring and dedicated teacher and researcher.

His inaugural lecture in 1946 as Professor of European Prehistoric Archaeology described archaeology as a social science: '.... archaeology may be able to provide knowledge, practical useful knowledge, of the course of human affairs that eludes the literary historian. I am in fact going to suggest that archaeology is an indispensable element in the social sciences .... Archaeological data can and must provide the reliable basis requisite for the study of..."the dynamics of social change" and can alone furnish evidence on "the long-range trends in the life of societies"' (Childe 1946:50–51).
Practical classes for the Institute’s Diploma course included the Director himself firing ‘prehistoric’ pottery in the garden. He was at his best in tutorials and seminars, taking great trouble with students individually, although they had problems keeping pace with his encyclopaedic knowledge. Childe was delighted to be included on his students’ trips to Avebury, for he loved the companionship of his students. He liked to share his enjoyment of good food and wine and good music with others. He was a hospitable host to colleagues from all over the world and Max Mallowan recalled after his death ‘many of them have written to say how much they miss him’ (Mallowan 1958).

Less well-known was his continuing involvement in left wing politics. He was a member of the editorial board of the Marxist journals Past and Present and The Modern Quarterly. The Chairman of the board of The Modern Quarterly was Rajani Palme Dutt, and the meetings took place in the Communist Party’s headquarters. Childe was also a member for many years of the Executive Committee of the Association of Scientific Workers; he had helped found a branch of this trade union in Edinburgh.

Childe’s last ten years were prolific in terms of publications. History (1947) testifies to his continued interest in theoretical aspects of the study of history which for him included prehistory. Numerous papers, as well as Prehistoric Migrations (1950), deal with diffusionism and evolutionism. His interest in the possibilities of an analogy between organic and social evolution were to culminate in his popular work, Social Evolution (1951). Piecing Together the Past (1956) was based on lectures given over the preceding decade at the Institute, and dealt with aspects of archaeological methodology and classification.

Finally, with The Prehistory of European Society (1958), published posthumously, Childe believed he had presented an explanation of the distinctiveness of European culture which was both scientific and historical. He wrote: ‘I invoke no agencies external to the observed data, no eternal laws transcending the process as empirically given, but historical [conjunctures] of well-established environmental circumstances and equally well-known patterns of human behaviour legitimately inferred from their archaeological results’ (Childe: 1958a:74).

Whatever the true value of The Prehistory of European Society, it is significant that, for the author, it represented the culmination of a life-time’s study. As he neared retirement and his 65th birthday, Childe felt that he was not going to produce any new ideas. In an honest and moving statement on old age and suicide finally published for the first time in 1980, he wrote: ‘I don’t believe I can make further useful contributions to prehistory. I am beginning to forget what I laboriously learnt ... New ideas very rarely come my way ... In a few instances I actually fear that the balance of evidence is against theories that I have espoused or even in favour of those against which I am strongly biased’ (Childe 1980).

Childe’s farewell party at the Institute in 1956 was a memorable occasion, and he was further honoured and deeply touched by a Festschrift edition of the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society. Sir Mortimer Wheeler summed up Childe’s international reputation in his Presidential Address to the Society of Antiquaries:

when, not long ago, I was invited to take part in a symposium in the University of Chicago, the first request addressed to me was, “Tell us about Professor Childe”. In another distinguished university I am assured that undergraduates, in selecting their courses of study, first ask, “Has Gordon Childe written a book about it?” He generally has. (Wheeler 1956:171)
Exactly why Gordon Childe never returned to Australia before 1957 is not clear. Pressed by Mary Alice Evatt, wife of the Labour Leader H.V. Evatt, to visit his native land in 1931, he wrote: ‘I’d love to come to Australia again to see you and Bert and Billy McKell and Jack Lang too not to speak of Sir Alexander [Gordon] the Sydney Bridge and Canberra. And really I could afford it if only I felt I’d earned a holiday by getting Scottish prehistory back on its legs’ (Childe 1931:64). Childe’s plans for his retirement were to go back to Australia, see his sisters for the last time, and return to the scenes of his youth. He knew that he would find life less enjoyable without the creature comforts which money can buy; and dreaded a lonely old age in which he would be a ‘burden on society’.

Gordon Childe arrived in Sydney on his 65th birthday, 14 April 1957. It is sad that during his last six months his impressions of Australia were mainly negative ones (see Green 1981: 146ff.). Perhaps, with suicide in mind, he did not want to feel optimistic about his future or that of his native land. He did see possibilities for the study of Australian archaeology: ‘the archaeological sources for Australia’s prehistory are less well-studied in 1957, than the sources for European prehistory were in 1857’ (Childe 1957a).

He was unfortunate that 1957 was a depressing time for the Australian Left. He stayed in Sydney with Bert Evatt, leader of the Australian Labour Party, and wrote in August: ‘The Australian Labour Party is in a parlous plight. Evatt is a man of great ability and unusual vision especially on international affairs ... But the Party’s prospects are not at all bright ...’ (Childe 1957b). Childe was delighted at the successful stand being made in 1957 in Iceland against the sating of American bases for NATO and drew comparisons to the disadvantage of Australia: ‘The value standards [of Australia] seem to be proletarian but of an uneducated proletariat. Icelandic and Soviet standards, which could also be called proletarian in different senses, suit me better’ (Childe 1957c).

Childe did enjoy visiting his sisters Alice and Ethel, his niece Mary, and many friends and colleagues. He particularly enjoyed re-visiting the Blue Mountains and wrote in October: ‘I have employed the past couple of months with enormous zest satisfying my youthful craving to understand the complicated arrangement of the pale blue ranges that bounded the wide valley on the precipitous edge of which we had a summer-house’ (Childe 1957d:152). It was typical of his thoughtfulness to friends and family that he chose to fall to his death in the Blue Mountains on 19 October in such a way that an accident could be inferred.

Gordon Childe’s legacy to the study of prehistory was immense. He left an interesting self-assessment in ‘Retrospect’ (Childe 1958a); and summed up his views on the way ahead for archaeology in Britain just before his death in ‘Valediction’ (Childe:1958b). His influence in making the study of prehistory internationally recognized as a serious scientific discipline, and demonstrating the uniquely important role of archaeology to the study of history was unsurpassed in his time. He laid a foundation which has been built on by subsequent generations of prehistorians, and introduced concepts which still permeate the discipline. I hope that he did die with a belief in his own achievements, for if so he died content. His personal philosophy was that society’s ideas and knowledge are most important:

Society is immortal, but its members are born and die. Hence any idea accepted by Society and objectified is likewise immortal. In creating ideas that are thus accepted, any mortal member of Society attains immortality – yes, though his name be forgotten as completely as his bodily form dissolve. Personally I desire no more. (Childe 1956b:130)
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