

VERE GORDON CHILDE

1892-1957

He was “. . . the leading prehistoric archaeologist of our time. . . . Were it not for the range and depth of his interests and his extraordinary capacity to establish the time-space relationships of such a vast and complex array of data, the foundations of our knowledge of Old World archaeology would never have been written.” In addition, he “has made a series of provocative but nonetheless brilliant contributions [to] the theory and method of archaeology.”

The foregoing words, taken from Hallam L. Movius' review of *Contributions to Prehistoric Archaeology Offered to Professor V. Gordon Childe in Honor of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday by Twenty-Seven Authors* (*Man*, Vol. 57, Art. 42, pp. 42-3, 1957), accurately sum up Childe's position in our profession and his principal contributions to it. Anthropologists the world over will feel his loss, at the height of his powers, as the result of a fall from a cliff in the Blue Mountains near Sydney, Australia, on October 19, 1957. He had just retired from the faculty of the University of London and had returned to his native Sydney for a 6-months' vacation, during which he had planned to write another book.

Childe was born in North Sydney on April 14, 1892. He studied Classics at the University of Sydney and in 1914 obtained a graduate fellowship to continue his classical education at Oxford University in England. While there, he did research on Indo-European elements in the Bronze Age of Greece and from this developed an interest in the prehistory of the Balkans and Central Europe.

After the First World War he returned home and became active in the Australian Labor Movement, serving from 1919-21 as private secretary to the Labor Prime Minister of New South Wales. Out of this experience came his first book, *How Labour Governs* (London, 1923).

These early activities foreshadowed a sharp and conflicting dichotomy in Childe's interests and academic approach, which was to persist throughout most of his career. On the one hand, he was a humanist, deeply immersed in the data of archaeology and better able than any other scholar of his generation to synthesize those data from a historical point of view. On the other hand, he was a socialist, strongly influenced by Marxian theories of evolution, and this led him to produce a series of theoretical books in which he interpreted archaeological data from the standpoint of Dialectical Materialism.

His historical interests were the first to bear fruit. After his Labor interlude he traveled widely in Greece, the Balkans, and Central Europe, examining the archaeology of those areas and studying the literature, most of which he was able to read in the original languages. Out of this came *The Dawn of European Civilization*, in which he synthesized the archaeology of Europe, showing how the elements of Near Eastern and Mediterranean civilization had diffused northwards to the rest of the continent. Originally published in 1925, this book has undergone 5 revisions, the last issued in 1957.

In 1925, the year in which *The Dawn* first appeared, Childe became Librarian to the Royal Anthropological Institute and, in 1927, Abercromby Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh. He held the latter position until 1946, when he moved to the University of London as University Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology and Director of the Institute of Archaeology, the posts from

which he had just retired at the time of his death. In the 1930's he received honorary degrees from Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania, served as Visiting Professor at the University of California, and in 1945, when he was becoming persona non grata to our State Department because of his Marxian theories, he represented Britain at the 220th anniversary celebration of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow and Leningrad.

The Dawn was followed by a series of other books in which Childe displayed his talents as a humanist and a prehistorian. Foremost among these is his *New Light on the Most Ancient East*, in which he synthesized the archaeology of the vast area from Egypt to Pakistan, showing the development of the elements of civilization there before their diffusion across the Mediterranean into Europe. Like *The Dawn*, this book is a classic in its field. Originally published in 1928 as *The Most Ancient East*, it was revised and reissued with its present title in 1934 and again in 1952. Other works of synthesis include *The Danube in Prehistory* (1929), *The Prehistory of Scotland* (1935), and *Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles* (1947). In *The Aryans* (1926) Childe made an archaeological study of the origin and spread of the Indo-Europeans and returned to this theme in his *Prehistoric Migrations in Europe* (1950). He was never very much of a field man and his only major site report is *Skara Brae: a Pictish Village in Orkney* (1931).

The socialistic and evolutionary side of Childe's interests first came to the fore in 1935, when he published *Man Makes Himself*, a work famed for its concepts of the Neolithic and Urban Revolutions, the former marked by a shift from food gathering to food production and the latter by the development of metallurgy, writing, and the other attributes of civilization. These revolutions are presented as universal events in the evolution of culture, although they are illustrated with examples taken almost entirely from the archaeology of the areas in which Childe had done his synthesizing, especially the Near East. In *What Happened in History* (1942) he combined his system of revolutions with Lewis H. Morgan's stages of Savagery, Barbarism, and Civilization and illustrated them more fully with examples from the archaeological literature; and in *Progress and Archaeology* (1944) he discussed evo-

lution from a topical standpoint, that is, in terms of the food quest, burials, tools, etc., rather than in terms of stages. In *History* (1947) he traced the development of historical method from prehistoric time to Marx's Dialectical Materialism, ending with an indirect tribute to Stalin as an exponent of the latter. He concluded his *Society and Knowledge* (1956) with the prediction that the "Humanist ideal" will eventually become subordinate to the ideal of "Society."

Whereas Childe's works of historical synthesis were primarily inductive, that is, he drew his conclusions out of the data, his evolutionary writings tended instead to be deductive, in that he assumed the theories and selected facts from the archaeology to illustrate them. In so doing, he ignored other facts which were contrary to the theories. He was too good a prehistorian not to recognize the existence of these conflicting facts and in 1951 published a new study, *Social Evolution*, in which in effect he repudiated the universal type of evolution to which his socialistic tendencies had previously led him. Examining in detail the chronological sequences in a series of areas extending from Europe to the Near East and the Nile Valley, he came to the conclusion that the evolutionary process had varied from area to area, depending on local environmental and economic conditions and upon the operation of the process of diffusion. He restated this conclusion as follows in "The Evolution of Society," published posthumously in *Antiquity* (No. 124, Dec. 1957, pp. 210-13):

With the general acceptance of the doctrine of organic evolution continuity between human history and natural history was also accepted. The latter [sic] became just the latest chapters in a single historical record with archaeology bridging the gap between the record of the rocks and the written record. The content of these latest chapters may be termed social evolution, and the Darwinian mechanisms of variation, adaptation, selection and survival may be invoked to elucidate the history of man as well as that of other organisms. But while the use of these terms may emphasize the continuity of history, it may also cause confusions and, in fact, misled some of the early anthropologists and archaeologists when they tried uncritically to apply Darwinian formulae to human societies or artifacts. . . .

In fact, the intrusion of diffusion as an agent of evolution . . . has so drastically altered the historical process that no analogy between the evolution of species and the evolution of societies is valid. . . .

The doctrine of evolution has raised human history above the domain of miraculous revelation or romantic fiction. . . . It has not provided a new extraneous agency

to replace discredited deities or facts, nor revealed a short cut to conclusions that should obviate the collection of facts.

One wonders whether Childe's career, culminating in these words, may not contain a lesson for New World archaeologists. There is a curious, if somewhat superficial, parallel between Childe's repudiated universal approach to evolution and the developmental classifications which are now the vogue in American archaeology. Will the latter, with their sequences of stages which are supposed to be universal throughout the western hemisphere, eventually prove to be more successful than Childe's stages, which he found to be limited in their applicability to the Near East; or will the New World stages, too, have to be regarded as an erroneous "short cut to conclusions" and an unsound way to "obviate the collection of facts," restricted in applicability primarily to the centers of Amerindian civilization?

Childe's specific historical conclusions, limited as they are to Europe and the Near East, and to the protohistoric period, need not concern us here. His methods of historical synthesis are pertinent, however; for how often has it been said that the New World needs a Childe to synthesize the results of our researches! Although he summarized his methodology in *Piecing Together the Past* (1956), this hardly does him justice, probably because he tended to work intuitively. Indeed, his syntheses are characterized by a paucity of conceptual tools, the principal one being the concept of a culture, corresponding to that of a focus or a phase in this country. To determine the dates of cultures, he relied primarily upon "synchronisms" with historic archaeology, that is, he looked for artifact types common both to his prehistoric cultures and to the contemporaneous civilizations and assigned the dates for the types in the latter to

the former. "Integrative" concepts such as horizons or traditions had no place in his syntheses. He tended to stress the survival of earlier forms of culture in peripheries rather than the principle that similarities necessarily indicate contemporaneity, and was sensitive to the possibility that 2 cultures might have coexisted in the same area. It was he who first suggested that the Forest cultures were distinct from Mesolithic cultures in other types of environment, a distinction subsequently elaborated by Grahame Clark in *The Mesolithic Settlement of Northern Europe* (1936).

Childe's works of synthesis are often difficult to read because of his attention to detail, not only in material culture but also in the non-material implications of the remains, to which his Marxist orientation led him to pay more attention than most archaeologists of his generation. His syntheses are well organized in narrative form, however, and the whole is never submerged in the details. In last analysis it was his encyclopedic knowledge of the facts of archaeology and his ability to digest them which made him such a superb synthesizer.

IRVING ROUSE

NOTE: A bibliography of the publications of V. Gordon Childe, compiled by Isobel F. Smith, was published in the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society for 1955*, n.s. Vol. 21, pp. 295-304 (Cambridge, 1956).

Two posthumous publications by Childe have appeared since the above went to press: *The Prehistory of European Society* (Pelican Books, 1958) and "Retrospect" (*Antiquity*, 1958, Vol. 32, No. 126, pp. 69-74). The former is essentially a popularization of *The Dawn of European Civilization*. In "Retrospect," Childe surveys his life's work and in effect writes his own obituary. The reader may find it interesting to compare the latter with the evaluation presented here. (In it, Childe comments as follows on an aberrant use of the concept of horizon: "This was childish, not Childeish.")

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Facts and Comments section is omitted in this issue because of lack of space, but will appear again in future issues.