



VERE GORDON CHILDE

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1892-1957

VERE GORDON CHILDE was born at Sydney, New South Wales, on 14 April 1892. He was the son of a parson, the Rev. S. H. Childe, and in later life would talk occasionally, and with evident reluctance, of a boyhood during which the natural rebel in him was irritated by the complacent late nineteenth century atmosphere in which he found himself: his father was a man of strict and narrow views, who even when his son returned from Oxford would not allow him to smoke his pipe in the house. His going to Oxford with a Graduate Scholarship in Classics in 1914 was an escape in many senses of the word, and apart from a brief episode again in Australia immediately after the First World War, he never revisited his home country until shortly before his death there. His return involved what he was to call himself, in the *apologia pro vita sua* which he wrote in the last year of his life,¹ 'a sentimental excursion into Australian politics', in the form of a couple of years' employment with the Premier of New South Wales during the first Labour Government.

At the Queen's College, Oxford, Childe read Greats and obtained a First, subsequently turning to what was to be the germ of all his subsequent activity as an archaeologist, research for the degree of B.Litt. under Arthur Evans and John Linton Myres on the subject of Indo-European archaeology. He has told us in *Retrospect* how such an investigation arose naturally enough from a training and interest in comparative philology and his first publication, in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* for 1915, was on the so-called 'Minyan' ware, which then as now was proving a ceramic will-o'-the-wisp obligingly eager to mislead the archaeologist in the Indo-European wilderness.

After his temporary return to Australia, Childe first appears as a portent in British archaeology when he arrived in London in 1922 at the age of 30, unknown except that he bore recommendations from many eminent Central and Eastern European pre-historians, through whose countries he had recently been travelling. Archaeological posts were at that time excessively rare, but a fortunate vacancy in the Royal Anthropological Institute

¹ Found among his papers on his death and published posthumously under the title 'Retrospect', in *Antiquity*, xxxii (1958), 69-74.

enabled him to be appointed Librarian. He was thus provided with paid employment, a library containing a very large proportion of books on prehistory, and, above all, an opportunity to continue his individual lines of research. In all its essentials, the pattern of his life for the next thirty-five years was set at that moment.

A few papers were published during the next couple of years, still dealing with Aegean or East European problems, but in 1925 British archaeology received the impact of the *Dawn of European Civilization*, though few realized the importance of the book in the history of British archaeological scholarship. Almost overnight it established Childe, in the eyes of those who could appreciate the fact, as a prehistorian of European calibre; the publication of *The Aryans* in the following year consolidated his position and presented a synthesis of the work on which he had been engaged since an undergraduate. He has described how *The Dawn* was conceived as the first step in an intellectual investigation which was to last for the rest of his life, and how the successive major works which he published between 1926 and 1930 took their logical places in this enormous piece of research: *The Most Ancient East* was first published in 1928, *The Danube in Prehistory* in 1929, *The Bronze Age* in 1930.

Five major works of scholarship in six years is an astonishing output for anyone. Of these books, *The Bronze Age* is the slightest, *The Danube*, nearly 500 pages long and presenting a documented synthesis of a vast mass of material published in all the languages of Europe and preserved in dozens of widely scattered museums, perhaps the most remarkable. Their purpose, as we now know from *Retrospect*, was to collect and present the evidence which prehistoric archaeology could give for 'the foundation of European Civilization as a peculiar and individual manifestation of the human spirit': the words come from the preface to the first edition of the *Dawn* and succinctly express the nature of the theme on which he had embarked in 1925.

In 1927, under the terms of the will of Lord Abercromby, the University of Edinburgh was able to found a Chair of Prehistoric Archaeology. This was the second such foundation in Great Britain, the Disney Chair of Archaeology in the University of Cambridge having been established in 1851. But whereas the terms of the Disney Chair were accommodately vague, as might be expected of a foundation of that date, Lord Abercromby, as a distinguished prehistorian himself, had clear ideas about the nature of the chair he was to endow, and expressed

them vigorously in his deed of bequest. The Abercromby Chair was to be held by a scholar concerned by definition with the archaeology of non-literate societies in antiquity, and its scope was to be at least European and preferably that of the entire Old World. The new professor was to be a man in the prime of life who had studied such prehistoric archaeology at first hand and from the literature; it does not require much knowledge of Scottish antiquarian politics in the 1920's to realize the significance of these remarkable clauses, clearly designed to exclude rather than to accommodate certain potential applicants. But they might have been framed for the benefit of Gordon Childe, who was appointed the first Abercromby Professor in 1927.

For nearly twenty years Childe was to hold the Abercromby Chair, and so to make the University of Edinburgh known as one of the great centres of international academic archaeology. He evidently regarded the post as primarily one of research, for although his own work, both in the wider European and Oriental field and in the more restricted aspect of Scottish prehistory, continued with increasing mastery and an unabated volume of published work of high quality, he never developed a school of archaeology in the university. 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, and gave his statutory lectures and tutorials. Only one candidate read Honours Archaeology during his tenure of the chair, though his influence on senior students in other disciplines who attended his lectures was considerable. Neither at Edinburgh nor at the Institute of Archaeology in London University did Childe show any natural aptitude or liking for teaching: those pupils who learnt most from him gained their knowledge rather by benefiting from that immense intellectual generosity which enabled him to share his great learning with anyone who was prepared to make first the considerable effort of penetrating his façade of awkward shyness, and then the no less formidable task of accepting the compliment of being treated on an intellectual footing equal to that of his master. To those of us who managed in however imperfect a degree to surmount these difficulties, the memory of Childe is one we hold in the deepest affection and gratitude.

In Scotland he turned his attention to problems of local archaeology in the field as well as in the museum and library. Here he conducted his first excavations, the most famous of which resulted in the recovery, at Skara Brae in Orkney, of one

of the most remarkably preserved settlements of the second millennium B.C. in northern Europe. But although in some curious way he enjoyed his excavations, he was never at home among the techniques which this exact archaeological discipline involves. In fact, it must be admitted that he was a bad excavator, and that his inability to appreciate the nature of archaeological evidence in the field, and the processes involved in its recovery, recognition, and interpretation, led in turn to a tendency to ignore the potential inequality in the reliability of the evidence he employed in his works of synthesis. Once he had moved from Edinburgh to London, he hardly excavated again: he had taken up the task while in Scotland from a sense of duty and as a part of the responsibilities of the holder of the Abercromby Chair.

In 1935 he published the first modern treatment of the prehistory of Scotland seen within the framework of that of the remainder of the British Isles and of the European continent. The *Prehistory of Scotland* still remains required reading for the student, and, it must be admitted, is a far more satisfactory performance than his work of a decade later, *Scotland Before the Scots*, where he attempted to interpret the evidence in terms of the Marxist model of social evolution. Side-by-side with his Scottish work he continued to produce new editions of *The Dawn*, and in *New Light on the Most Ancient East* completely revised his original work of 1928. But in 1936 the publication of *Man Makes Himself* showed Childe to be capable not only of writing technical works for his fellow scholars, but of producing works of synthesis addressed to the general reader. In this book, and in others such as *What Happened in History* (1942), *Progress and Archaeology* (1945), *History* (1947), *Social Evolution* (1951), and his posthumous *Prehistory of European Society* (1957), he presented his views on the pattern of man's past as deduced from archaeological evidence. The last book was evidently conceived as a summing-up of all he had attempted to demonstrate in the successive editions of *The Dawn*, and indeed in all his other work, for in it he thought he had answered the question which had been before him since the early 1920's, the reasons for 'the foundation of European Civilization as a peculiar and individual manifestation of the human spirit'. We must return to this question and to Childe's answer: if we find the latter a rather disappointing one, we can I think see why it was framed in its final form.

The last phase of Childe's life was to begin in 1946, when

he accepted the 'invitation to become Professor of European Archaeology and Director of the Institute of Archaeology in the University of London. Here the students reading for the Post-Graduate Diploma were perhaps more congenial to him than the Edinburgh undergraduates, and certainly during his years in the Institute his influence on the younger generation of archaeologists was extended and strengthened. The concept of an international approach to problems of prehistory, the study of European archaeology as the smallest comprehensible unit, owes more in this country to Childe than to any other single scholar, and he established it resolutely as a part of the Institute's tradition. Before leaving Edinburgh he had produced, under the title of *Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles*, what amounted to a textbook for students of the pre-Roman archaeology of our islands; at London he continued to revise his earlier works (notably *The Dawn*) and to contribute numerous papers to archaeological journals, his major work being *Prehistoric Migrations in Europe*, based on lectures given in the University of Oslo. In his last year at the Institute he published the substance of a course of lectures on archaeological method given there as *Piecing Together the Past*.

So much then for the main outline of Childe's professional life—'a shilling life will give you all the facts'. From *Retrospect* we know that his intellectual pilgrimage was made along a consciously planned route, and that his own estimate of success or failure at this or that point was not necessarily that his colleagues might have made. We must now examine the nature of his quest, seeing it in relationship to the character and nature of the man.

Few if any of us had realized, I think, that in his succession of published works Childe was pursuing quite the course which we know him to have plotted for himself. His colleagues and pupils saw him as a great synthesist and systematizer who, for the first and perhaps for the last time, brought the whole field of European prehistory from the fourth to the middle of the second millennium B.C. within the grasp of a single scholar's mind. Side-by-side with this came the attempts to interpret the material in terms approximating to social and economic history, the distinction of concepts such as the Neolithic and the Urban Revolutions in Western Asia, and a series of demonstrations of an evolutionary pattern inferred from archaeological evidence when viewed from a materialist standpoint. We now know that he was consistently seeking one major aim—to 'show that even in

prehistoric times barbarian societies behaved in a distinctively European way'. It is the theme of the preface to the first edition of *The Dawn* in 1925, developed with intricate variations for over thirty years of intense intellectual activity, for the last quotation is from the *Prehistory of European Society*, published after his death in 1958.

He thought, too, that he had found the answer. His work had led him to infer from archaeological evidence that the metal technologist emerged as an independent craftsman in prehistoric Europe, his activities inter-tribal, his allegiance to his craft, and his status a valuable member of society free from the bondage of food-production. In the ancient Orient, Childe saw the comparable craftsmen as economic serfs within the framework of a constricting social scheme, but in the freer (if more barbarous) air of Bronze Age Europe the metal-worker was able to 'shake off the bonds of allegiance to an overlord or the more rigid fetters of tribal custom' and so become the precursor of 'the metics at Athens, the wayfaring journeyman of the Middle Ages, and the migrant craft unionist of the 19th century'. Western technocracy was to have its roots not only in European history, but in prehistory.

To attempt an understanding of this intellectual inquiry of Childe's and of his life of scholarship, we must begin by trying to see the man himself. The fact that he was the dedicated scholar, as soul-hydroptic for learning in the archaeological field as was Browning's Grammarian in his, in itself poses a problem. So far as anyone knew him, he appeared simply as an embodiment of his work, engrossed in pursuing his constant intellectual course. This is not to say that Childe did not enjoy his game of bridge at the Athenaeum or his bottle of wine at dinner, but learning for him was the austere content of his life, not an enrichment which might enhance perception and emotion. One cannot think that he would have agreed with the first Marquis of Halifax that 'the struggling for knowledge hath a pleasure in it like that of wrestling with a fine woman'.

He was very ugly, and he was an Australian. These two factors, coupled with the resultant awkwardness and shyness among all but a very few friends and for very short intervals, seem to have decisively affected his intellectual standpoint. He was an Outsider, with a familiar love-hate relationship to his position, resenting and disliking it, but at the same time exaggerating his oddness by such means as wearing eccentric broad-brimmed hats and deliberately making himself an intellectual solitary. A young

Danish colleague once asked him why he had chosen the Danube basin as an area for intensive study, and he replied that as an Australian, he was an outsider to Europe, with no local allegiance to one area rather than another. The Danube was for him an inescapable geographical fact, winding its way through an irrelevant tangle of political entities; the British Isles little more than unsubmerged portions of the Continental shelf. This was a detachment which could be of immense value in achieving a synoptic, unbiased view, but it could also lead to an unreality of approach, where the fragments of archaeological evidence became the pieces in an intellectual game in a manner recognizable to his colleagues as another example of 'Gordon's naughtiness' in handling evidence, but apt to be very confusing to the young student.

In 1933 he opened his lecture course at Edinburgh with an address entitled 'Is Prehistory Practical?' The date is significant: much of the lecture is directed against the perversions of archaeology then current in Nazi Germany, but significant too is the evident necessity felt by Childe to justify his own discipline, not only academically, but within the social order. If prehistoric archaeology could be justified as socially respectable, he, its outstanding exponent, would receive an appropriately honoured place in society, not only as an intellectual, but as an intellectual engaged in studies themselves of direct value to the community at large: the Outsider would be admitted by the Establishment. And as a classic, he would know that the workers with the mind—the physician or the bard—ranked as free craftsmen in the ancient European order of things, so that his position in the modern world might be thought to have roots in the Bronze Age.

In such a context, surely the puzzle that Childe's political attitude presented to his contemporaries becomes a little less difficult to unravel. He may well, as a shy, idealistic, awkward young man, have seen in his version of Communism a structure of society in which honoured recognition for the intellectual engaged in socially justified work would be more possible than in the England of the 1920's: the Outsider would be more easily admitted to privilege in such a hypothetical society. Coupled with this, one must remember that he had a natural interest in Marxism as a possible model of the past which might prove useful and significant in his understanding of archaeological evidence. He used this model from time to time, notably in *Scotland Before the Scots*: the intellectual necessity which he

seems to have felt for perceiving some sort of a pattern, some inherent meaning, in prehistory, would inevitably result in a tendency to accept and use such a conceptual framework. To this must certainly be added a sense of humour expressed in a convoluted intellectual joke and as a part of the deliberate cultivation of eccentricity *pour épater les bourgeois*. He would sign his letters in Cyrillic script, and once, as I went into his room at the Institute of Archaeology with him, he said, looking at his disordered desk and grinning delightedly, 'My *Daily Worker* isn't conspicuous enough!' and then rummaged among his papers until it was found, and prominently displayed for the next visitor.

It is to be hoped that he did eventually realize that he was, in fact, accepted in the terms he would wish, as the greatest prehistorian in Britain, and probably in the world. He had a touch of the arrogance which can sometimes be so disconcertingly allied to a sort of compensatory naïve humility. I once asked him from which bookseller he ordered his foreign archaeological books and he answered with some surprise, 'I don't *buy* the books—I expect the authors to send them me!' Of course they did, but Childe took it less as a compliment than as a right, a due paid to his eminence as a scholar.

His contribution to British archaeology was a very great one. It was he who first demonstrated to us what are now familiar concepts in the interpretation of prehistory—cultures, associations, synchronisms, and chronologies. We owe more than we realize to four pages in the preface to *The Danube in Prehistory*, where in 1929 he set out the basic principles on which we have all worked since. To Childe, too, is due the acceptance of international archaeology on at least a European scale as the normal content of academic teaching in the subject in this country. The unwearying polyglot, the indefatigable traveller, he presented to us, year after year, the fruits of his study of Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age Europe and Asia in a manner unknown before, and unlikely to be repeated. It is improbable that any single scholar in the disciplines of archaeology will again be able to master the evidence in a field so extensive as his. His contribution to scholarship is as lonely and as unique as was the man himself, but it is one which will continue to act as an inspiration to successive generations of archaeologists for many years to come.

STUART PIGGOTT