

Terry Irving. *The Fatal Lure of Politics: The Life and Thought of Vere Gordon Childe* (Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2020, 418pp., 20 illustr., pbk, ISBN 9781925835748)

Vere Gordon Childe (1892–1957) may have been the greatest archaeologist of the twentieth century. He made a series of seminal contributions to the discipline's theoretical architecture which have never been superseded.

He did not do this by pontificating at a professorial desk. He considered archaeology to be a scientific procedure, a matter of building interpretation on a solid foundation of data, and he was a tireless fieldworker. Wanting to explain 'the foundation of European civilization as a peculiar and individual manifestation of the human spirit', he travelled across much of Central and Eastern Europe during the 1920s, acquiring at least a reading knowledge of a raft of foreign languages, in order to study museum collections, visit sites, interview local archaeologists, access specialist reports, and make notes and sketches. During his nineteen-year tenure as the Abercromby Professor of Archaeology at Edinburgh (1927–1946), he excavated at no less than twenty Scottish sites in a calculated programme to get 'Scottish prehistory onto its legs'. The books streamed forth: *The Dawn of European Civilisation* (1925), *The Aryans* (1926), *The Most Ancient East* (1929), *The Danube in Prehistory* (1929), *The Bronze Age* (1930), *The Prehistory of Scotland* (1935), *Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles* (1940), and *Scotland Before the Scots* (1946).

Here was the raw material from which Childe fashioned interpretive paradigms of tremendous explanatory power. At least four distinct meta-theories can be identified in his work. First, his meticulous mapping of the prehistoric materials of

Europe and the British Isles produced 'culture history'—a way of organising archaeological data into assemblages or packages, defined both spatially and temporally, and assumed to denote separate 'peoples'. Second, he placed culture groups in a framework of progressive social evolution that encompassed the whole of human civilization. Third, recoiling from an earlier 'racialized' version of culture history when this became central to contemporary fascist ideology, he synthesized evolutionism and diffusionism to create a new vision of cultural transmission and development. Fourth, he advanced a view of history as essentially progressive, an ascent based on accumulating knowledge and technique, but one that remained open, contingent, and subject to periodic setback through the pernicious influence of ruling elites in creaming off surpluses, in waste expenditure, and in promoting ignorance and mumbo-jumbo.

This is but the crudest summary of Childe's theoretical achievement. The paltry efforts of recent 'post-processualism' pale into insignificance by comparison. Quite rightly, we are now more alert to the limitations of material evidence in identifying past social groups, and to the way in which cultural identities are constructed and contested; we are therefore more cautious about reading an artistic style or ceramic form as a social signifier. But the solid theoretical architecture of culture history stands. It remains the essential starting-point for archaeological classification. Much the same holds for Childe's other major theoretical innovations. The titan has not been dethroned; we still stand on his shoulders.

Little wonder. 'We could say,' Terry Irving explains in this outstanding biography, 'with just a little exaggeration, that Childe was setting himself the task of doing for human history what Darwin had done in the broader field of natural history: to reveal that it was an orderly process of social evolution, a history of change, proceeding on principles that could be understood.' And Irving's achievement—in contrast to the work of other biographers—is to contextualize Childe's multi-dimensional theoretical revolution in the real-world social revolution to which he dedicated his life.

Barbara McNairn (1980) and Bruce Trigger (1980) certainly do justice to the scale of Childe's theoretical achievements. But they—and perhaps to an even greater extent Sally Green (1981)—tend to minimize the significance of Childe's intensive socialist activism between 1911 and 1926, his heavy involvement in left politics thereafter, his close personal relations with an illustrious circle of bohemians and radicals, and his life-long commitment to Marxism in both theory and practice.

Many academic colleagues at the time, and many since, have tended to be dismissive of Childe's politics. Wearing red ties and reading *The Daily Worker* were, we are invited to believe, mere affectation or eccentricity; certainly, of no real bearing on Childe's work as an archaeologist. Nothing could be further from the truth—as the secret services in both Australia and Britain knew well, for they spied on Childe for forty-five years. They knew he was not simply a fuddy-duddy bespectacled professor of archaeology in trilby and shorts; they held thick files on him replete with information about his activities as an anti-war activist, a supporter of militant trade unionism, an anti-fascist, and a communist sympathizer. And because he was blacklisted—the deep state shared its secrets with university

administrators—he sometimes struggled to get any work at all, let alone an academic post appropriate to his phenomenal talents.

Yet he refused to follow the line of least resistance: to do what most aspiring professionals tend to do, which is leave behind any youthful radicalism in pursuit of the status, emoluments, and comforts of middle-class life. Childe had his vices: he liked champagne and expensive cars. But his lifestyle was otherwise simple, even austere, and he lived for archaeology and politics, enjoying such recognition as came his way, but quite indifferent to the inducements dangled by the bourgeois establishment of his day. Here, on the evidence of this biography, we have the key to the brilliance of Childe's achievements. It was not simply his rigorous adherence to scientific method, his relentless accumulating of data, his extraordinary capacity for synthesizing catalogues of information about settlement forms, artefact types, and distribution patterns; it was also his immersion in the Hegelian-Marxist historical tradition and in the class struggles of the epoch of war and revolution through which he lived and fought. What Terry Irving has demonstrated, beyond any reasonable doubt, is that there was only one Gordon Childe, not two, not the brilliant academic as against the Marxist activist, but a man who was a brilliant academic *because* he was a Marxist activist.

This is not *the* seminal biography of Childe; it is essentially a political biography. I think Irving would be content to concede that. We are more than two-thirds of our way through the book before Childe takes up his first major academic post at Edinburgh in 1927, at the age of thirty-five. At this point, only two archaeology books have appeared, *The Dawn* and *The Aryans*; virtually all of the great academic achievements lie ahead. And as Irving surveys the second half of Childe's

life, the primary focus remains his political activity, though now with much of the emphasis on its interleaving with Childe's theoretical work. This gives the book a strong central thread and successfully shifts attention to the true well-springs of the archaeological insights; by the end, we know exactly where Childe was coming from, in a way that simply is not true in previous biographical treatments. So, this is a vital book, a true corrective to every blasé attempt to blue-wash Vere Gordon Childe, to reduce his politics to aberration and irrelevance, and thereby reclaim him for the establishment.

The result can occasionally be hard work. Perhaps some of the earlier chapters should have been edited down a bit. Sometimes the clutter of detail, the many characters and groups that pass in and out of view in the turmoil of mass strikes and radical movements between 1911, when Australia's Great Unrest began, and 1926, when the crushing of Britain's General Strike provided a kind of closure, obscures a clear view. But this is a quibble; and perhaps I am wrong, because the wealth of Irving's research merits the fullest exposure; especially so given that the author has a rare grasp on the realities of labour politics. I am often appalled by the misconceptions that litter so many attempts by amateurs to comment on the politics of the political left, whereas it is immediately obvious that Irving understands this world—Childe's world—because he is part of it.

Perhaps because Irving is not an archaeologist, some of Childe's seminal contributions to the discipline are passed over with little discussion; culture history, for example, is not even listed in the index. On the other hand, the author's fixing of Childe's theory of history onto its Marxist foundation is way ahead of anything attempted before. 'Childe was an intellectual who committed himself to the idea of

historical progress and the role of revolutions in history,' says Irving in his introduction. Childe lived through an epoch of war and revolution between 1911 and 1926, one in which he turned away from the middle-class complacency of his upbringing—a world of 'snobs and scabs'—to stand in solidarity with a militant proletarian movement; more than that, to embrace direct action, unofficial strikes, an elemental struggle from below, in opposition to the 'politicalism' (as he called it) of sell-out labour politicians and union officials. Here were ordinary human-beings engaged in mass struggle against their own exploitation and thereby becoming makers of history and agents of self-emancipation. There is a straight line between *How Labour Governs* (1923), Childe's first book and a path-breaking analysis of the conservative role of the labour bureaucracy in stifling rank-and-file activity, and *Man Makes Himself* (1936), where, as the title implies, we enter a pre-historic world in which human-beings shape their own destiny so long as their intelligence and ingenuity are not suffocated by priests, pharaohs, and other social parasites.

Childe's 'Neolithic Revolution' and 'Urban Revolution' are among the rich theoretical fruit of his understanding that people make their own history, and that history can go forwards, or stall, or go backwards, depending on the balance of class forces and the outcome of class battles. He never lost his keen sense that this was so, because he remained a public intellectual and a man of the (far) left until the moment when he chose to end his own life by throwing himself from a cliff in the Blue Mountains of his homeland. A slew of works bear testimony to that, including his most famous, *What Happened in History* (1942), which had sold 300,000 copies before his death. This, as Irving explains, was one of a half-dozen

popular archaeology books published between 1936 and 1958, where Childe was targeting a broad left-of-centre readership, including working-class activists, and presenting history as a weapon in the class struggle. *What Happened in History* was part of the 'people's war' movement, part of the global struggle against fascism, and a book which, in Irving's view, 'contributed to the anti-establishment mood that defeated the Churchill government three years later' (p. 309).

This is one of the most intelligent biographies I have ever read. The author demonstrates complete mastery over a wide range of sources. It has the feel of a book long in preparation. It is also notable for its consistent integrity, for the absence of any hint of polemic or apologetic, despite the immensely fraught political subject-matter with which Irving is concerned. We learn, for instance, of Childe's troubled relationship with Stalinism. His rejection of totalitarianism, of police rule, of censorship and the violation of scientific truth was passionate. The signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact in August 1939—which led to the annexation of Poland the following month—seems to have been a watershed moment for Childe. Irving describes him henceforward as a 'premature New Leftist'. Yet his doubts were kept private, he remained publicly associated with various Stalinist front organizations, and he was capable of writing (in *History* in 1947) that 'one great statesman of today [Stalin] has successfully foreseen the course of world history' (Childe, 1947: 83).

This is to touch on what was, for me, the ultimate tragedy in Childe's life. I once suggested (Faulkner, 2007: 81) that disillusionment with Stalinism after the events of 1956—Khrushchev's 'secret speech' reporting the crimes of Stalin and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian workers' revolution—may have contributed

to Childe's decision to end his own life. I am now convinced by Irving's arguments that his reasons were personal and academic, not political. Nonetheless, I think it significant that Childe never broke completely from an essentially statist view of socialism, first in the form of Labourism, then in the form of Stalinism. This should occasion no surprise: almost everyone in the circles in which he moved was either a Labourite or a Stalinist, and Cold War polarization meant that radicals who came out against the Soviet Union were seen as renegades.

The contradiction was never resolved. Childe had sensed while still a university student that the mass strikes of a militant working class might herald a new socialist order. But he never found his way to a crystal-clear understanding that the destruction of the old repressive state and the creation of a new kind of state based on mass participatory democracy was the very essence of socialism. Partly because of this, he failed to grasp that Stalinism—the physical liquidation of working-class democracy—was not simply deficient, but was the very antithesis of socialism; that it was, in fact, counter-revolution. This blind-spot, I think, is evident in Childe's theory of history: it remains, in the end, too top-down, too determinist, too much a matter of forces and relations of production, of a mechanical succession of 'stages'. Childe's prehistoric and ancient people never fully escape the cage of structure in which he enfolds them. His past needs further humanising in the spirit of works like Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and Geoffrey de Ste Croix's *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981).

But what a foundation on which to build! And what a superb insight into its construction we now have in Terry Irving's new biography!

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Simon Stone, director, Moira Buffini, screenplay, based on a novel by John Preston. *The Dig* (Producers: Gabrielle Tana, Ellie Wood, Carolyn Marks Blackwood, and Murray Ferguson; Cinematographer: Mike Eley; Editor: Jon Harris; Music: Stefan Gregory; Production Company: Magnolia Mae Films in association with Clerkenwell Films; Distributed by Netflix; 2021, 112 minutes)

The Dig is a beautiful, terribly sad film, set in rural Suffolk in 1939 as approaching war becomes ever more intrusive. Released internationally by Netflix on January 29 2021, it immediately became the streaming service's most watched film in the UK. Praised by critics—'serious, intellectually committed, and emotionally piercing cinema. Unmissable', said *The Times* (Maher, 2021)—it was nominated for five BAFTA awards, including Outstanding British Film. Its closing sequence is a masterpiece of acting, writing, and directing, and nowhere does the film fall below the standard that sets.

It is also, of course, a film about a real archaeological excavation. Archaeology is no stranger to screens, big and small, but *The Dig* may be unique. A commercial movie, it tells a story of the discovery of the Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, with extreme attention to historical detail. Filmed locally (or believably so, the newly built barrows and the house, Norney Grange, are in Surrey), it convincingly evokes a small country house estate at the time. All significant

characters, with one exception, are real, named protagonists of the original excavation, from labourers to people who were later to become key figures in British archaeology. The film has the air of a drama-documentary. The audience believes—or bristles at small instances of perceived error.

For all this, and for the way the film mixes fact and fiction and how this has been received by the public and by archaeologists, it deserves our attention. *The Dig* airs issues of central concern to archaeology: the passage of time, the engagement of people with the past, and the contribution archaeologists can make—or should make—to history and identity (themes of the film); and the difficulties of correctly reading the past, especially that of the archaeological profession, and the extent to which such a thing is possible (themes of the critique).

The film blends stories about individuals and their thoughts, their relationships, and the impact on their lives of the dig, as the latter proceeds from planning through discovery to a Treasure inquest