Notes on the Work of V. Gordon Childe

Discussion and criticism of the work of Gordon Childe is long overdue. It is of immediate concern not only to archaeologists and anthropologists, but also to the hundreds of people who every year work on excavations or otherwise devote themselves to archaeology, as well as to anyone actively interested in social history. It is impossible here to do more than glance at some of the more obvious problems raised in, and by, his writing. Childe was, however, first and last a working archaeologist. It seems appropriate therefore to begin an evaluation of his work by a survey of his archaeological development. As an archaeologist he was using evidence that grew every month, and his thinking naturally changed with the evidence. It is only possible to sketch this development here.

Childe's work must be considered as a whole. The tendency of professional archaeologists is to split off the large and fully documented archaeological summaries (which for convenience we call textbooks) from the paper-back general surveys of prehistory and small books on archaeological method. So, in a tribute to Childe, the editor of Antiquity praises The Dawn of European Civilisation and The Danube in Prehistory, leaving aside Man Makes Himself and What Happened in History as though not worthy of discussion. Indeed, we are left to infer that the paperbacks and 'little' books are essentially frivolous products of Childe's regrettable left-wing eccentricity. Here was a truly great man who did not know how great was his scholarship and his influence, and who was not fully aware from time to time of the ideological camps into which his scholarship was leading him.

Marxist historians have criticised equally unhelpfully, from a different viewpoint, when looking in the little books for things like 'class struggle', which are outside his terms of reference as set out in the textbooks. Similarly the lay reader does not understand the little books if he regards them as popularisations in the common sense. The earlier ones will appear as positive statements with all questions answered-though the problems are not shirked if you know where to look for them-the later ones puzzling in their aims and the terseness of their language.

1 The best analysis of Childe's work is by himself, in 'Retrospect', in Antiquity, June, 1958. The present writer unashamedly draws upon this.
3 Professor Piggott has realised this, and also points out how the poor Illustrations of "The Dawn" ill became a textbook — for it is not a textbook in the usual sense.
societies - in Neolithic Europe. Childe filled in the blank map of Europe and began to restore some of their history to these prehistoric societies by founding a chronology based on pottery sequences. Fixed points in the chronology are provided by the few direct contacts between temperate Europe and the Aegean world, and so ultimately to the old-established chronologies of the Near Eastern civilisations. The dependence of Europe on the East remained a fundamental premise with Childe throughout his life, and even in his most self-consciously Marxist phase of the 'thirties he did not deny the archaeological fact of cultural contact, or diffusion.

In the years following the first *Dawn* Childe invested the dry pot-sequences of archaeology with the flesh and blood of history by formulating the concept of the Neolithic Revolution. Up to this time various factors which distinguished the New - Neolithic - Stone Age from the Old Stone Age, which stretched behind it for thousands of years in time, had been selected; none seemed particularly more significant than the others. Childe showed how food production was in fact the significant distinction, making possible the controlled consumption of food, and therefore larger social units and an increased population. Ultimately it brought about fundamental changes in human thought and habits, just as the 'Industrial Revolution' of historical times has done. The concept of the Neolithic Revolution has passed over into the usage of archaeology, as well as into popular thought, where it is probably Childe's greatest single contribution to the contemporary view of the past.

In writing *The Bronze Age*, and during subsequent visits to eastern sites, Childe became aware of the different conditions brought about by the Bronze Age. Bronze-using societies must have been dependent on a complicated network of trade, while bronze smiths were the first necessarily full-time specialists in early society. At Ur and other sites Childe observed how 'rustic villages had grown into vast townships just as English villages had grown into manufacturing towns'. The new cities and the bronze industry on which they were founded were evidence for Childe of a second, or Urban, Revolution. The three divisions into which prehistory was divided by his two 'industrial revolutions' were made to correspond with Morgan's savagery, barbarism and civilisation. These divisions, which summarise the basic economic facts in the way of life of a society, have a considerable practical usefulness in archaeology, where they have still not been superseded.

The full expression of the new theory is to be found in *Man Makes Himself*, where the documentation of the two 'revolutions' is set out, and prehistory is seen as an ever-upward increase of man's power over his environment. This interpretation fulfils Childe's two cherished and life-long aims: to reveal the 'scientific' nature of history, and to justify archaeology as a truly historical discipline. Both depend on the fact that justifies the name revolution for the conversion to food production and the beginning of city life: the great expansion of population at each stage. This is a measurable thing. And since, we are assured, all history has been progressive to the same end, history is itself subject to measurable - this is, scientific - criteria. These two revolutions of prehistory must have affected human life on a vastly greater scale than any of the political or military events of traditional histories. Archaeology, which has discovered them, is therefore vindicated.

Twenty years later there is much to criticise and discuss in *Man Makes Himself*, which cannot be dwelt on here. The theory to a large extent carries its own weaknesses. What, for instance, stimulated the accumulation of wealth necessary for the specialisation implicit in a metal industry, and for all the unproductive members of an urban community? Childe admits that in Mesopotamia and India the documentation is lacking. Even in Egypt it is not easy to explain the dynamism compelling a collection of Neolithic societies to 'save up', as it were, for civilisation.

*Man Makes Himself* is ambiguous about the role played by bronze in the second revolution. The smelting of copper ores 'prepares the way for civilisation', but the regular production of bronze was 'discovered only by deliberate comparison and experimentation' after the Urban Revolution had taken place. There is no stage by stage reference back to actual remains to show how far metallurgy was responsible for the rise of cities, or vice versa. These ideas would in any case need new comment now in the light of new discoveries from Jericho, which shows two settled and successive agricultural societies of the eighth millennium B.C. (neither with the art of pottery). The earlier of these had surrounded its settlement with massive defences, which would seem to imply other similar settlements not far away, and a highly organised - if not urban - society. Jericho may not be a 'city' in the sense defined by Childe; even if it were, it may not invalidate the theory of urban revolution. But on present evidence we must admit that Jericho may show the origins of city life and the beginnings of a metal industry - assumed by Childe to be intimately connected - to have been very widely separated in time.

Over the next decade the 'progressive' and 'scientific' theory of *Man Makes Himself* was exploited and developed. *What Happened in History* demonstrates the continuity of technological tradi-
tions through successive empires. *Progress and Archaeology*, a delightfully optimistic study of 'progress' in all departments of life (not excluding funerals) adds the corollary that since what is not progressive leaves no imprint in the material record, evil - dark ages when technical traditions are retarded or lost - is for the archaeologist a blank. *History* is the statement of a Marxist historian, where the theory of Marx and Engels, because of its insistence that technological development 'conditions and limits all other human activities' seems to Childe perfectly consistent with the nature of archaeological processes.

*Social Evolution* marks the close of this first creative period of Childe's work, and first defines and explores the problems that were to concern him in the last years of his life. He had evidently outgrown his first naive justification of archaeology, for this book is concerned again with what exactly archaeology can discover about early societies, and how it fits in, therefore, with theories - Marxist and otherwise - which have in abstract defined the way societies should have developed. Incidentally, this finally gives the lie to any suggestion that Childe's politics were detrimental to his archaeology. The quest he now set out on was an archaeological one: had he been content to fit archaeological facts (tailoring them to suit) with Marxist theory, he would have stopped short at *History*.

The result of his search is disappointing. For not only is the archaeological record sadly incomplete, through the decay or loss of much material, but even the evidence which looks potentially fruitful allows too much latitude of interpretation to confirm the Marxist, or any other, theory of society. This is less surprising where houses, graves or religious buildings are concerned; but it is disappointing where industrial activity is in question. For we often have first hand knowledge of industries and their products; we know, for instance, many sites of Neolithic flint mines in Western Europe in the second millennium B.C. We know how the flint was obtained, what was made from it, how far afield it was traded. Does this mean that it should still ignore the hundred odd written. Does this mean that it should still ignore the hundred odd.

Yet such was the intellectual climate of the time that even Childe felt it necessary to establish this point again in detail, in *Social Evolution*. In any case, this still leaves a predicament. For if not in its claim to predict, in what does the special contribution of Marxist historical theory lie? Many historians, not Marxists, believe that the economy of a society is its ultimate basis, by which everything else stands or falls. But they make no claims to working this out in detail. Archaeologists by the nature of their evidence are bound to respect the material foundation of society. If 'historical materialism is established by showing the amount of history that is made intelligible by it' it must be confessed that this is a principle of no more practical help to the prehistorian than a mechanical theory of prediction that does not in fact predict.

The canons of Marxism have of course a saving clause which covers the dilemma: archaeology recovers, 'the means of production', but not 'the mode of production' which would inform us how the 'means' were used in any particular society. Archaeology scarcely existed when communist theory of society was being written. Does this mean that it should still ignore the hundred odd years archaeology has devoted to recovering the actual remains of the primitive societies, which it describes only in abstract? Childe believed not; and to reject, finally, the crude mechanical application of Marxism in history was not, for him, to reject Marxism. out in future he could not take his theory ready-made and apply
it, externally, to the archaeological evidence. He had to battle his way through to a new theory, where the data of archaeology were the starting point of theory.

Hitherto, evolutionary theories of society had assumed that the suggested development was a pattern that had repeated - faster or slower, and with variations - but basically, a repeating pattern. In *Social Evolution* Childe shows that throughout prehistory diffusion is an element that cannot be overstressed, that in fact it creates the pattern. Archaeologists talk about 'Neolithic self-sufficiency', implying that most Neolithic societies, could, if put to it, have been self-supporting. In actual fact it is impossible to find one that was without any outside contacts, while these grow more intense during the succeeding Bronze and Iron Ages. 'The Bronze Age' and 'The Iron Age' are convenient terms, but they have no absolute dates attached to them, and over a distance of a few thousand miles two bronze ages may be thousands of years apart. For this reason no two bronze ages may be strictly compared, because each is influenced and shaped by a different environment, an environment that has changed with time, and all the bronze ages that have preceded it.

Diffusion cannot have been confined to technological inventions and material things, but must have applied also to social organisation and the non-material aspect of societies. In Palaeolithic, even Mesolithic, times the total world population was small enough that it is possible to suppose small groups were totally isolated. One is then at liberty to postulate unilinear evolution. But it is hypothesis only, and will never receive any confirmation from archaeology, the 'palaeontology' of anthropology. While for later periods it seems superfluous to suggest one single evolutionary tree, once we appreciate the proliferation of prehistoric societies and their reaction on one another. The only way of explaining all this is to explain their environment and the sequence of events in them: in other words, to write their history, or pre-history.

It has been suggested here that *Social Evolution* marks a crisis in Childe's work; and yet it is noticeable that he himself made nothing of it in his 'Retrospect'. It would be misleading to suggest that the strands picked out here for discussion emerge quite so clearly in the book, which is concerned also with the analogy between organic and social evolution, already explored in *Man Makes Himself* and elsewhere. We may guess - though it is only a guess - that the new development of his thought, though offering him an infinitely more subtle concept of history, seemed to undermine the more superficially 'scientific' nature of history, with its secure framework and predictable laws. The conclusion, though referring back to his biological analogy, seems to be a rather self-consciously brave reaffirmation of his belief in human progress and the scientific nature of the process by which it becomes known:

In fine, then, the analogy between cultural evolution and organic evolution breaks down. But to admit this is not to deny that cultural change is an orderly and rational process that can be understood by human intellect and without invoking any necessarily incalculable factors and miracles.

The definition of that process was the task of Childe's remaining years, and its culmination was *The Prehistory of European Society*. This is based on the continued assimilation of new archaeological evidence, as it came to light and was published in successive issues of *The Dawn* and *New Light on the Most Ancient East*. It is based also on several years' re-thinking about the environment of past societies; for if the environment of every society is unique, so also must be the body of social knowledge and belief belonging to that society. *Society and Knowledge* presents Childe's interpretation of the social basis of knowledge, standards of judgment and awareness of environment, and acknowledges his debt for this to Durkheim, and through him to Marx. He claims, 'Now at last I rid my mind of transcendental laws determining history and mechanical causes, whether economic or environmental, automatically shaping its course.' This for Childe made history more 'scientific', because it corresponded more closely with the actual process as it had worked out in time. But it cannot now be demonstrated in any other way than as 'What I believe':

Henceforth I shall state what I believe, not what I claim to know, and shall enunciate beliefs that may not be truths. I believe then that the pattern of Reality - I do not know that it is patterned - is at least four-dimensional. Reality is an activity, a process that is neither repeating itself over and over again nor yet is approximating to a pre-determined goal or the realization of a preconceived plan. It is on the contrary genuinely creative, constantly bringing forth what has never been produced before, genuine novelties.

The theory of knowledge is expressed in its most developed form in *Piecing Together the Past*, a textbook of archaeological method, whose last chapter battled yet again with the problem 'What is the good of archaeology?' Childe's new creative period of thought demanded now a new justification of archaeology. That it had enormously expanded the vista of human history is taken for granted, but the critical increases of population it had uncovered are no longer invoked. The new rationale is linked on the one hand to the idea in *Progress and Archaeology* that what is not Progressive is simply a blank in the record; on the other to his new epistemological theory. Making allowance for the material aspects of societies that have not survived, he takes over the suggestion in
Collingwood's *Idea of History* that faithful history is that which recaptures the motives of past agents; but he curiously adapts this to his own materialist usage. The tangible relics of archaeology do, Childe suggests, recall prehistoric thought for us, provided we understand their manufacture and function. They recall, in fact, the thought of past society, in so far as it was scientific, and therefore translatable and translated into action. It is true that any superstition and ritual which would undoubtedly have accompanied the making of a flint scraper are lost for ever - just as we possess the temples, but can never recover the rites performed in them. These thoughts have died for ever, because they were unscientific and received no material expression, except in so far as they stimulated and encouraged material acts. Characteristically, Childe asks, 'Does that matter?'

The historical uniqueness of every society, first explored in *Social Evolution*, is combined finally with these attempts to reconstruct past environments and thoughts in *The Prehistory of European Society*. Childe here defines the differences between the European Bronze Age and the Near Eastern Bronze Ages which gave rise to it, finding here the clue to the peculiar nature of European society. The resources of Egypt and Hither Asia were necessary to bring about a metallurgical industry, while later their urban, totalitarian regimes were necessary to provide the trade, patronage and markets for a fully developed Bronze Age. The search for ores brought them in contact with Crete and the Aegean, where the precious skills and secrets of metallurgy were leaked to the barbarians, and barbarian societies grew upon the wealth - partly traded, partly plundered - of the east. These emulated civilisation, but without the rigid class divisions that now hampered the older civilisations. What specially distinguished them was that the smith and craftsman were free members of society, selling where they pleased and not tied by the bonds of slavery or patronage. The Mycenaean civilisation similarly reacted upon barbarian Europe, providing a market for raw materials which travelled along the well-known 'Amber Routes'. Eventually Europe, though poor and barbaric, was able to support its own Bronze Age, surviving the downfall of the Mycenaean civilisation, and without paying the heavy social and economic price of Egypt and Hither Asia. Its craftsmen were free to try innovations and improvements, its communities a collection of politically separate societies which nevertheless shared a common technical tradition. The archaeologist is able to observe the progressive nature of this tradition in the rapid invention and replacement of tools and weapons.

The theory undoubtedly needs the searching to which Childe would have subjected it, had he lived. The peculiar status of the European bronze smith is crucial, but this depends mainly on negative evidence; and in his *Past and Present* summary Childe shows that he has in mind the 'pre-class' society of Europe at this time. He is therefore appealing to hypotheses outside the material evidence. In some important cultures it is impossible to detect the influence of the bronze smith. The megalithic cultures, for instance, which extended over huge areas of western and northern Europe, covering several centuries in time, show very little positive trace of the use of bronze. Their importance in their own time may have been at least as much spiritual as industrial.

The development of Childe's thought was cut short by death. The present notes have tried to show how a decade of Marxism, mechanistically understood, was succeeded by a decade of more subtle analysis and historical understanding. It is important that this he also considered to be Marxism.

It is natural to ask how far, at any stage, his philosophy integrated with his archaeological work. It is useless now to ask whether his Marxism was a 'good' or 'bad' thing. His early, dogmatic and optimistic phase has given us, for instance, the uncreative assessment of the Roman Empire in *What Happened in History*, but also the brilliant *Scotland before the Scots*, purposely modelled on Russian 'Marxist' theory, which tries to explain the evolution of societies without recourse to diffusion or migration. The book has been castigated by archaeologists on this account, but Childe cannot and does not in fact exclude migration from his prehistory of Scotland.

We may suspect that an inborn contempt for religion was reinforced by the 'science' of history. Religion, for Childe, scarcely ever did more than 'lubricate the means of production with sentiment'; and his interpretation of societies which functioned on religion at least as much as our own does on politics was undoubtedly the poorer on that account. Similarly, though always willing to admit that archaeology has no concern with individual human happiness, he was unable to appreciate that for many people it is genuinely inferior to history for that reason. This blind spot enabled him to pervert Collingwood's meaning of 'motive' to his own archaeological usage. It also left him content to ignore ques-

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5 The argument of this book is put more succinctly in the epilogue to *The Dawn*, 6th edition. The article, 'The Bronze Age', in *Past and Present*, No. 12, 1957, also elucidates it.

6 No. 12, 1957.

tions of progress in social morality, such as regard for human life, which might well be a function of economic prosperity.

None the less, it was the naive and optimistic Marxism of the 'thirties that reinforced his enthusiasm for technological progress: the liberation of burdens transferred from men's (or women's) shoulders to the beasts, the courage of the first metal prospectors, the deep secrecy of the smith's craft, the mystery of the potter's wheel. Through Childe's imagination and sympathy with primitive man a whole generation has been able to reach back into the past; while for archaeology they have provided objective standards of judgment, and gathered scattered evidence into an intelligible whole.

His later work is not yet evaluated, or even widely known. One thing is certain, that in it he was a pioneer. He was lonely not only among practitioners of archaeology, but also among those who shared his philosophical outlook and might have encouraged him. There has been a latent feeling of impatience with Childe among Marxist thinkers - as though he did not achieve the expected results because in some perverse way he did not try hard enough. There has been no understanding of the difficulty of his material, the nature of the problem that faced him when he was forced to discard the dogmatic philosophy of the 'thirties, and how he transcended it.

His dedication, all his life, was to the facts of archaeology as they became revealed. He was foremost to record and interpret these, as the many successive editions of The Dawn and New Light illustrate. At the same time he was concerned to relate the new facts to the larger field of human history, and to probe unceasingly the meaning of that evidence and its interpretation. His last book represents the union of this accumulated archaeological experience and his developed philosophy. What would have followed - whether there were any external or personal events at this time to make Childe doubt that 'evil is simply what is not cumulative' - must lie in the realm of speculation.

8 'Childe has not yet succeeded in overcoming many of the errors of bourgeois science,' Mongait, 1951, quoted by Mikhail Miller, Archceology in the U.S.S.R., 1956.
noting significant changes in Childe’s terminology and use of analogy between 1928 and 1957. Keywords: Gordon Childe, Neolithic Revolution, Urban Revolution, technology, vocabulary. The central interest of this aspect of Childe’s work was underlined in 1980 by Trigger’s choice of title for his book Gordon Childe: revolutions in archaeology. Genesis of revolutions Childe first made direct associations between the noun ‘revolution’ (frequently with a capital ‘R’) and episodes of change in prehistory in the mid 1930s. It had been notably absent from The dawn of European civilization (1925), which employed the language of transition (e.g. ‘The’. Vere Gordon Childe was an Australian historian, linguist and archaeologist. This biography of Vere Gordon Childe provides detailed information about his childhood, life, achievements, works & timeline. After the completion of his education, he went back to Australia and worked in a couple of institutions/universities, but was expelled or forced to resign owing to his political affiliations. After several unsuccessful stints, he became the first Abercromby professor of prehistoric archeology at the University of Edinburgh, a post established by deed poll at the bequest of prehistorian Lord John Abercromby. V. Gordon Childe stayed back in London and spent much of his time studying at the British Museum and the Royal Anthropological Institute library. Works by childe. Supplementary bibliography. Vere Gordon Childe (1892–1957) was a scholar whose work commanded appreciation from many publics. Through his book What Happened in History (1942) he personified prehistoric archeology for several generations of college students. Much of the work of cultural reconstruction presented in the Dawn has been superseded by the results of the scientifically controlled excavation which has flourished in Europe since the end of World War ii and the use of radiocarbon techniques of dating (for bibliography see Gimbutas 1963, pp. 69–106; Piggott 1965).