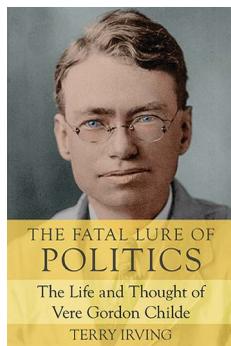




Book Review

TERRY IRVING. 2020. *The fatal lure of politics: the life and thought of Vere Gordon Childe*. Clayton: Monash University Publishing; 978-1-925835-75-5 Ebook \$39.95.



Gordon Childe was perhaps the dominant figure in archaeology from the 1920s–1950s. He has certainly received more critical attention than any other, with at least three monographs and three conferences devoted to him and his work. The outline of his life is well known: born into a traditional middle-class family in North Sydney, he went on to a brilliant academic career in Sydney and Oxford, developing a commitment to left-wing political ideas before returning to Australia in 1917. Forced to resign from a college tutorship on account of his political views, especially opposition to the First World War, he was rejected for other academic posts for which he was well qualified; he struggled to find employment, but was eventually taken on as personal secretary to the Labor leader of New South Wales (NSW), then as a research officer for the NSW government, but was stranded in London in 1922 when a change of government meant the termination of his post. He returned to archaeology and began publishing a string of important books on European prehistory before eventually being appointed to a Chair in Edinburgh in 1927, and then in London from 1946 until retirement in 1956 and suicide in the Blue Mountains in 1957.

Such a narrative raises a major problem of how to reconcile Childe's two apparently separate careers in academia and in politics. Was he an archaeologist who had to seek other employment by force of circumstances at the end of the war? Or was he a political activist who turned away from politics in disenchantment at the state of the labour movement in the early 1920s? Much of the biographical research published so far has been by archaeologists, mostly from Europe, concentrating on his career as a prehistorian and overshadowing work by Australian historians, to whom he was well known as a political activist and author; it was almost a reprise of Childe's lifetime, when many of his archaeological colleagues refused to take his political commitment seriously. Now at last we have the first extended study of the development of Childe's political thinking and the pattern of his political activity, by Terry Irving, a veteran Australian labour historian; as a young student radical in Sydney, he witnessed the occasion when Childe was awarded an honorary degree in April 1957, and later, as an academic historian, devoting himself to a decades-long research project on Childe.

This volume is the product of that research. It started as a study of Childe's political thinking and activity, but later expanded to include his academic career in archaeology, a project in which Irving received much help from the late Peter Gathercole. Irving has explored Childe's work in politics and his work in academia, not as two separate phases of his life, but as two

intertwined parts of the theory and practice of a socialist intellectual for whom historical knowledge played an important role in the struggle for social improvement.

Childe is not an easy subject for a biographer. He destroyed his private papers, although some glimpses can be found in the archaeological notebooks that did survive. One major source is, of course, his publications, though these extend to 21 books, many translated into multiple foreign languages, and over 200 articles and as many reviews, with contributions to 99 different periodicals. He was also involved with many institutions and organisations, both archaeological and political, as a member and frequently as an officer or council member; his traces are to be found in many such archives. He was a prolific writer of letters: many were sent to significant people, including archaeologists such as Sir John Myres and O.G.S. Crawford, as well as to many people in public and political life, both in the UK and Australia, and his letters survive widely scattered in their archives. Biographers must also be grateful to the interest of the secret services and their detailed records: Childe's anti-war and left-wing comments in 1917 were regarded as dangerously subversive, and he was closely watched both in Britain and in Australia from then onwards, with his correspondence regularly intercepted.

What has emerged is a triumph of archival research and fully documented presentation. More material may come to light in unexpected places (no one has yet found a copy of his Oxford BLitt dissertation), but for the moment this is the fullest collection, and most detailed discussion, of the available biographical evidence. But it is much more than that, for Irving's attempts to locate Childe in his social, political and intellectual milieu lead to some extended explorations of the history of socialist political philosophy and of the labour movements in Britain and Australia, especially in the period of Childe's activism there in 1917–1922. It is fascinating to see Childe's struggle to clarify the role of a well-educated, middle-class would-be academic in a working-class movement with a traditional scepticism of bourgeois intellectuals. Irving also gives us a detailed critique of Childe's first book, *How Labour governs* (1923), and its pessimistic view of Labour's entanglement with parliamentary politics rather than agitation for social reform.

The final section of the book deals with Childe's archaeological career and his growing interest in historical materialism and the history of technology, and in Marxism as a method of historical analysis. Most prehistorians will be familiar with these themes from some of his major works, but not so much with some of the later works, the products of his interest in epistemology and the social value of scientific knowledge. Ironically, progress in prehistoric archaeology has rendered the better known works primarily matters of interest in the history of archaeology, while the lesser known books of his later career are still relevant to current debates about archaeology.

This is a superb biography of a remarkable individual, detailed, nuanced, sympathetic but not uncritical. It is a major contribution to Australian social and political history, but also to the history of archaeology and our understanding of the most intellectually challenging scholar who has worked on European prehistory and more widely on human social evolution.

References

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