

# INTRODUCTION

## A Death in the Cold War

The Australian-born archaeologist and prehistorian Vere Gordon Childe was one of the most distinguished scholars and public intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century. His concepts of the Neolithic and Urban revolutions ‘rank among the most important theoretical advances’ in the study of human cultural evolution. He wrote 21 books, including the immensely popular *What Happened in History*, which sold 300,000 copies for Penguin Books in its first 15 years. He also wrote 281 articles or chapters and 236 book reviews in 99 periodicals. His reputation was not confined to the English-speaking world. His books were translated into 21 languages, and he travelled widely, finding appreciative audiences in Europe, Russia, Turkey and India, as well as North America and Australia.<sup>1</sup>

Publishers in the 30 years after his death issued more of his works than they had in the slightly more than 30 years of his career. The most recent of many conferences devoted to assessing his legacy was organised in 2007. Even outside the academy his name is known. In the 2008 movie *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the hero, after smashing his way into a college library on a motorbike, is recognised by a student who asks Jones for help to understand the diffusion of civilisation. The hero, an archaeologist who moonlights as a saviour of civilisation (although he has just done terrible damage to one of its achievements), resumes his teaching role momentarily to advise the student to ‘consult the works of Gordon Childe’.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Michael E. Smith, ‘V. Gordon Childe and the Urban Revolution: A Historical Perspective on a Revolution in Urban Studies’, *Town Planning Review*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2009, p. 5; Peter Gathercole, ‘Allen Lane’s Archaeological Best Seller’, *The Penguin Collector*, no. 46, July 1996; Peter Gathercole and Terry Irving, with the assistance of Margarita Díaz-Andreu, ‘A Childe Bibliography: A Hand-List of the Works of Vere Gordon Childe’, *European Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 12, nos 1–3, 2009, p. 204; Sally Green, *Prehistorian: A Biography of V. Gordon Childe*, Moonraker Press, Bradford-on-Avon, 1981.

2 The papers from a conference organised by Margarita Díaz-Andreu at Durham University to celebrate Childe’s legacy 50 years after his death are reprinted in the *European Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 12, nos 1–3, 2009; *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, directed by Stephen Spielberg, 2008.

The film is set in 1957, at the height of the Cold War, coincidentally the year of Childe's death. There is a surprisingly subversive tinge to the film, as it reveals the existence of McCarthyite repression in universities. Prior to his library-vandalising moment, Indiana Jones had been captured by the Russians as they destroyed an American atomic research station. After an unlikely escape he resumes teaching (we hear him lecturing about Skara Brae, Childe's most famous excavation) only to be sacked by the college because the FBI thinks his presence with the Russians indicates that he is a communist sympathiser. His best friend in the college resigns in sympathy, suggesting that FBI interference was a wider problem, something Childe would have understood. As a pacifist, anti-imperialist and revolutionary socialist, Childe was spied upon by the state security bodies of Britain, Australia, the USA, and possibly the Soviet Union, for 40 years. On several occasions this surveillance derailed or hampered his career. When his body was found at the bottom of a cliff in the mountains west of Sydney, there was speculation that his death was neither deliberate nor accidental but the result of a sinister act.<sup>3</sup>

Childe's continuing reputation rests as much on the extraordinary range of his thought as on its particular usefulness to scholars of archaeology and prehistory. But his interest in social evolution, the theory of knowledge, and historical explanation were not just indications of breadth of mind; they placed him in a particular political setting and defined him as a left-wing intellectual. The connection between his politics and his career is the starting point for this study of his life and thought. It seeks to understand his life by placing him within the tradition of dissenting intellectuals of the left. It examines his thought to understand the political ideas that gripped that tradition in the first half of the twentieth century.

Childe's scholarly reputation, resting on work undertaken in Britain from the mid-1920s, was the product of what we might call his 'second life'. He was 33 when he published his first book on prehistory and 35 when he took up his first academic position. So there was ample time for him to have an interesting 'first life'; in fact, in his twenties and early thirties he contemplated devoting his life to politics. Since his days as an undergraduate at the University of Sydney before the First World War he had been active in left-wing politics, variously Labor, socialist, anti-war, and radically democratic.

At the same time, he had performed brilliantly in his university examinations in Sydney and Oxford, but when he applied for suitable academic posts

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3 Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*, Oxford University Press, 1986.

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in Australia the university authorities, acting in concert with the business elite and the Commonwealth of Australia's military spies, made certain that he was not successful. So, he looked for employment using his political connections, and for most of 1918 to 1922 he was the beneficiary of Labor Party patronage. In his 'first life' he made his mark not in universities but in gritty Trades Halls and party offices, talking not to students of the human sciences but to agitators and Labor parliamentarians.

The knowledge of political philosophy and working-class politics that Childe gained in his 'first life', mainly in Australia, would influence his account of 'what happened in history'. For historians of archaeological thought, Childe's use of Marxism in his scholarship is a continuing area of disagreement (including the view of tiresome Marxist purists that he was not really one at all). The study of Childe's 'first life' reveals that if we want to understand his thinking, the question to ask is not 'What did Marxism mean?' for his archaeology, but 'What part did Marxism play in his life?' We have to consider, in other words, how Childe made the study of prehistory part of a political mission that began in his 'first life' and continued to his death.

As the First World War was ending, Childe wrote to an academic mentor in Britain that he intended to return there 'to escape the fatal lure of politics' in Australia. Ten years later he was well into an academic career in Britain that would bring him great esteem, but throughout that career politics continued to lure him. Indeed, politics were implicated in his death. There is a direct line between Childe's attraction to politics in his early life and his final – and fatal – political act. This is a book about the central place held by socialist politics in his life, and his contributions to the theory of history that it entailed. It is also about the conflict in socialist politics between radical revolutionary democracy and parliamentary social democracy, for Childe decided that 'politicalism' – his name for the latter – was fatal to socialism.<sup>4</sup>

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Outside the Great Hall of the University of Sydney a small group of students listened through the side door as the Chancellor bestowed the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters on Gordon Childe. After the ceremony we waited on the asphalt outside the main entrance to see him walk in the academic procession,

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4 Childe to Gilbert Murray, 17 November 1917, Gilbert Murray papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, shelfmark 376, f. 86.

the collar of his green shirt just visible behind the academic gown and his heavy woollen suit. We were the campus radicals, gathered by the Labour Club to honour a fellow socialist on that warm April day in 1957.<sup>5</sup>

The previous year I had bought a copy of Childe's *Progress and Archaeology* (1944) because it promised to 'describe the progressive tendencies of mankind during the last 50,000 years'. It was number 102 in The Thinker's Library from the Rationalist Press Association (RPA), a series of cheap hardbacks that I recognised because there were several titles on our bookshelves at home, books by three of the great secularists and materialists, Thomas Huxley, Winwood Reade, Ernst Haeckel – and now Childe. He was part of something with which I could identify, a movement of 'forward thinkers' who, as the RPA asserted, believed that 'the relentless test of Reason' would eradicate superstition and ignorance while advancing human progress and welfare.

But as for Childe's politics, we campus radicals had only the vaguest idea: just that he was a Marxist scholar. Was there anyone among us who had heard of Childe's first book, *How Labour Governs – A Study of Workers' Representation in Australia* (1923)? It was out of print and rarely recommended in courses on Australian history, for in those dog days of the postwar boom we learnt about Australia only as a peripheral topic in British imperial history. In my Australian History class, we took bets on the date the lecturer would get to the moment when the first fleet sailed out of Portsmouth, usually a few weeks before the exam. Change was coming though, and a few years later I was part of the radical redirection of the humanities and social sciences liberated by the social movements of the 1960s. In 1960 the first issue of the journal *Labour History* appeared, and in 1964 there was a second edition of *How Labour Governs* – as a paperback. Meanwhile, Cold War emphases on consensus and conformity kept us in ignorance of our labour and radical past.<sup>6</sup>

In an interview in 1957, Childe referred to working in the 1920s as the private secretary to the Labor Premier, John Storey. Who? Storey didn't figure in our sketchy knowledge of labour history. Confusingly, *The Bulletin*, a right-wing magazine, reported that Childe had worked for Premier William

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5 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 1957, p. 4 (and photo on p. 1); Kylie Tennant, *Evatt: Politics and Justice*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1970, p. 21. The convention in labour history circles is that 'labour' refers to the organisations (parties, trade unions, bookshops etc.) in the 'labour movement', while 'Labor' refers to the parliamentary party, which adopted that spelling in the early 1900s. On the Sydney University campus in 1957, the Labour Club was not a Labor Party club.

6 V. Gordon Childe, *How Labour Governs – A Study of Workers' Representation in Australia*, London, Labour Publishing Company, 1923; 2nd edn, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1964.

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Holman, which didn't seem right because Holman was a Labor renegade, expelled by the party for supporting conscription in the First World War. We certainly had heard of Holman and Prime Minister Hughes and the other Labor Party rats; they were part of the labour movement's folk memory of defeats and setbacks. Subsequently I learnt that Childe did *not* work for Holman. Moreover, I discovered that this mistake has a curious provenance, for it turns up in the file compiled in 1957 by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) on Childe. Perhaps the same informant, as ignorant as we were about labour history, misled both the magazine and the security service.<sup>7</sup>

Six months later the newspapers carried the story of the finding of Childe's body a thousand feet below a lookout in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. Early on the previous day a taxi had driven him from the Carrington Hotel in Katoomba, where he often stayed, to Govett's Leap at the western edge of the Grose Valley. The taxi driver waited, but at midday went looking for Childe and discovered his hat, compass and glasses outside the fence at Barrow Lookout. Receiving no answer to his calls, he drove to Blackheath to alert the police. Constable Morey returned with the driver to Govett's Leap and descended into the valley but had to suspend his search at dusk. The following day Childe's body was found on a ledge near the Bridal Veil Falls. The news was on the front page of Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*: 'Seventeen men took five hours to get the body to the valley floor, then carry it up 6000 steps hewn from the rock to the top of Govett's Leap'.<sup>8</sup>

I followed the story not only because I had a political interest in Childe but because I was familiar with that part of the Grose Valley. In January, with five others, I had walked to the Blue Gum Forest from the end of Hat Hill Road. We scrambled down 275 metres at Perry's Lookdown, lunched and swam at the junction of the Grose River and Govett's Creek before following the creek to Junction Rock. Here we turned west and followed Govett's Leap Brook to the base of the Bridal Veil Falls. Just east of here Childe's body was found. Then we climbed the cliff track to Govett's Leap.

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7 *Daily Telegraph*, 23 April 1957, 'The Sherlock Holmes of History's Dawn'. Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, 'Childe, Vere Gordon', National Archives of Australia, A6126/279 (released 1993), see f. 18; *The Bulletin*, 8 May 1957.

8 *Daily Telegraph*, 21 October 1957 (with photo of police party taking the body up the steps); *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 October 1957. References at the time to Luchetti's Lookout were wrong, as Peter Rickwood has shown in his 'Forensic History: Professor Childe's Death Near Govett's Leap – Revisited', *Blue Mountains History Journal*, issue 3, September 2012, p. 47.



Govett's Leap, Blackheath, and the Grose Valley. Childe's body was found below Barrow Lookout, the high point to the left of the waterfall. (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney, Tyrell Collection, 85/1284-1589; Kerry and Company, Sydney, c.1884-1917)

Since then I have discovered many more coincidences linking Childe to my experiences on that expedition. We were staying at 'Rostherne', owned by the family of George Arnold Wood, who was the first Professor of History at the university between 1891 and 1928. During the South African War (1899-1902), as the founder and President of the Australian Anti-War League, Wood was vilified in the press and censured by the Senate of the university. Sixteen years later, when Childe was victimised for opposing the First World War his supporters in the peace movement used Wood's trials to publicise the existence of a tradition of jingoistic intolerance in the university. Another coincidence: in the Blue Gum Forest we had swum naked just as Childe's friend, John Le Gay Brereton, and his friends had done in the mountain streams in the summer 50 years earlier. We took a taxi from Blackheath to 'Rostherne'. The driver was Stefan Siedleckie, whose daughter, Dr Stefania Siedleckie, carried out the postmortem and signed Childe's death certificate. Both Stefan and Stefania were socialists: the father in the Labor Party, the daughter in the Communist Party. Stefania was a prominent advocate of family planning and

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birth control in the early 1970s, helping to set up the Leichhardt Women's Health Centre in Sydney.<sup>9</sup>

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The obituaries duly appeared, but their content was not always as the left would have wished. In *The Times* of London, Rajani Palme Dutt protested that its obituary had omitted any mention of Childe's Marxism. Dutt had good grounds for linking Marxism and Childe. In 1917 he had shared digs with Childe in Oxford: 'There in the somewhat cramped surroundings of a tiny common working and sitting room we pursued our arguments on Hegel and Marx far into the night'. Childe was 'in the forefront of archaeologists of our time', Dutt wrote, precisely because of his Marxism, 'since archaeology is by its very nature compelled to use consciously or unconsciously the methods of Marx, and build up the history of civilization from the records of tools and material objects'. Although Dutt, who was a founding member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, did not claim that Childe became a party member, he insisted that Childe 'remained ... heart and soul with the Marxist movement'. There was another weakness detected by Dutt in the obituary: its neglect of Childe's first book, *How Labour Governs* (1923), 'a very striking analysis of the limitations of a reformist Labour Government'.<sup>10</sup>

In Australia, where there were no obituaries in the daily press, it fell to the left to commemorate Childe and incidentally to expose the impact of Cold War ideology on Australian historians. Since the early years of the century the labour press and worker education movements had nurtured a distinctive tradition of historical writing – anti-imperialist, radical and class-focused. It had produced scholarly histories of importance by H.V. Evatt, Lloyd Ross and Brian Fitzpatrick, all path-breaking in their own way and worthy successors to the seminal work, Gordon Childe's *How Labour Governs*. In the 1940s and 1950s this radical and nationalist tradition was gaining acceptance among university historians, as revealed in publications by Robin Gollan, Bob Walshe and Russel Ward. In the

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9 R.M. Crawford, *A Bit of a Rebel: The Life and Work of George Arnold Wood*, Sydney, Sydney University Press, 1975; photograph of nude bathing in J. Le Gay Brereton papers, University of Sydney Archives; Australian Peace Alliance, 'Sydney University and the Progress of Knowledge' (press release), 12 September 1918, MF 1805 169/9-16; personal information on Stefania Siedlecky, confirmed by information from Roger Milliss.

10 R. Palme Dutt, 'Prof. V. Gordon Childe', *Times* [London], 24 October 1957, p. 14.

meantime the political environment changed with the election of the conservative Menzies government in 1949 and the retreat of the labour movement, weakened by internal fighting over communist influence in the unions. The moment was favourable for a counterattack, especially on historians, by conservative intellectuals. So puffed up were they by the turn of events, and by CIA money, that the main organiser of the attack claimed to be fighting ‘a counter-revolution in Australian historiography’, and of course the phrase suggested ever-so-subtly that left historians were promoting a communist agenda.<sup>11</sup>

Those under attack could see the political dimension of what was going on and two of them took the opportunity to strengthen their position in their obituaries for Childe. In *Overland*, a left-wing literary magazine, Brian Fitzpatrick, whose anti-imperialist economic histories were being criticised by conservative historians, got straight to the point:

It may not be obtrusive to remark now, as I did when I made a little speech in praise of Childe last September, that Dr Evatt and I are proud to find ourselves placed in Childe’s company when detractors of the labour movement and its historians offer their MA and PhD theses on labor [sic] to university examiners.

Fitzpatrick, the author of a short history of the labour movement and a regular contributor to *The Rationalist*, reminded his readers of Childe’s ‘rationalist, socialist convictions’. Fitzpatrick, a working journalist, praised Childe’s commitment to popularising the story of man’s evolution. Then he summarised Childe’s academic career, but he ended by scorning the Melbourne dailies for failing to carry an obituary for Childe, who was ‘among the greatest Australians, men who made substantial contributions to knowledge’.<sup>12</sup>

Russel Ward published his obituary in *Outlook*, Helen Palmer’s independent socialist magazine, which already had an indirect link to Childe, for Helen’s uncle, Esmonde Higgins, had been an associate of Childe’s in London’s Labour Research Department in the 1920s. Ward began in Fitzpatrick’s manner, by striking a political note:

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- 11 Terry Irving, ‘Rediscovering Radical History’, <http://radicalsydney.blogspot.com.au/p/rediscovering-radical-history-essay-by.html>; Peter Coleman, *Australian Civilization – A Symposium*, Melbourne, Cheshire, 1962, see p. 6 of his introduction. Coleman was a founding member in 1954 of the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom which was funded by the CIA, an arrangement that became public knowledge in 1967.
- 12 Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘In Memoriam – V. Gordon Childe’, *Overland*, no. 11, January 1958, p. 22, and *Meanjin*, vol. 16, December 1957, p. 424; Don Watson, *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life*, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1979.



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About forty years ago V. Gordon Childe and H.V. Evatt were close friends at Sydney University. A couple of years ago Mrs Evatt told me that she was often warned by her elders to have nothing to do with either young man, as they were too much given to dangerous thoughts. Such visionary dreamers would come to nothing.

When, some weeks before his untimely death, I told Professor Childe the story, he hooted with laughter, and went on to recall how he had been 'persuaded' to leave the University as a result of his public support for the anti-conscription campaign during World War I. By bestowing an honorary degree on him this year, the University of Sydney did, perhaps, more honour to itself than to Childe, who had in no way recanted his unpopular principles in the interim.

His work will always have special interest for socialists ... because it is an all too rare example of how to apply Marxism to a specific problem. Childe was a life-long Marxist, but one for whom Marxism was always a method of attack and never a ritualistic incantation or a set of holy dogmas.

And that was virtually all his obituary did: claim Childe as a fellow socialist who 'like other really first-rate scholars' found it 'quite unnecessary to shield his work from the common gaze behind a smoke-screen of pretentious and polysyllabic jargon'. Ward made thereby an argument for the kind of approachable radical history that was under attack by academics and conservatives. It was the kind of history found in his *The Australian Legend*, published the following year and reprinted 15 times, through three editions, since then.<sup>13</sup>

There was an unstated personal motivation behind Ward's obituary, arising from an experience of discrimination not dissimilar to Childe's. Two years earlier Professor R.M. Hartwell had recommended Ward for a lectureship at the University of New South Wales, but Vice-Chancellor Philip Baxter and Chancellor Wallace Wurth vetoed his appointment because Ward 'had been active in seditious circles in Canberra'. Hartwell resigned in disgust and went to Oxford. It was not until Hartwell broke his silence about this act of covert political interference that we learnt that Wurth unofficially but routinely consulted ASIO about appointments. Meanwhile, Ward had accepted

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13 Russel Ward, 'Death of Professor V.G. Childe', *Outlook*, vol. 1, no. 4, November–December 1957, p. 11; Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1958; Russel Ward, *A Radical Life: The Autobiography of Russel Ward*, South Melbourne, MacMillan, 1988.

a lectureship at the University of New England and begun a distinguished academic career.<sup>14</sup>

A third person went public with praise for Childe, his old friend Herbert Vere (Bert) Evatt. They were still close. Childe had spent a few days at the home of Evatt and his wife Mary Alice, when he first arrived back in Sydney in early April 1957, and Evatt, as a member of the Senate of the university, probably had a lot to do with the decision to award Childe an honorary degree. When Childe's death was announced, Evatt issued a press statement saying Childe was one of the University of Sydney's most distinguished graduates. Evatt was also feeling the anti-communist winds of the Cold War. A secretive conservative Catholic organisation known as 'the Movement', set up in the 1940s, was using opposition to communist influence in the trade unions to infiltrate the Labor Party. In 1954 Evatt publicly exposed their machinations, a move that resulted in the expulsion of Movement members. Beginning in Victoria, these former Labor Party members campaigned against Labor on an anti-communist platform. By 1957 'the split' in Labor had reached Queensland. In the issue of *The Sydney Morning Herald* reporting Childe's honorary doctorate the main story was that the Labor Party in Queensland had expelled its leader, the Premier Vince Gair, for his right-wing policies. Within a few months his followers had joined the small anti-Evatt groups in other states to form the Democratic Labor Party. For the next 15 years the DLP would direct its supporters to give their second preference votes to the conservative coalition, thus keeping Labor out of office federally until 1972.<sup>15</sup>

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One of the main things that the Cold War meant for most people in the 1950s was Soviet espionage. A series of sensational exposures of British and American citizens who had passed information to Russian intelligence agents captured the front pages: Nunn May in 1946, Klaus Fuchs in 1950, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean in 1951, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed by the Americans for spying in 1953, and Kim Philby in 1955. In Australia the

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14 Hannah Forsyth, 'Knowledge, Democracy and the Russel Ward Case', unpublished paper, 2011. Ward had resigned from the Communist Party in 1949.

15 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 October 1957, p. 1, 'Tribute by Dr Evatt'; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 1957, p. 1, 'Crisis in Queensland Labor Party'; Bradon Ellem (ed.), *The Great Labour Movement Split in New South Wales: Inside Stories*, Sydney, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 1998.

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Australian Security Intelligence Organisation was set up in 1949 after the United States counter-espionage operation, code-named Venona, revealed the existence of a Russian spy ring within the government and public service. Then in 1954 Vladimir Petrov, the acting head of intelligence in the Russian Embassy in Canberra, defected, and the Menzies government set up a Royal Commission to investigate Petrov's material on Soviet espionage. Evatt believed (incorrectly as we now know) that Menzies and ASIO had timed Petrov's defection to harm Labor's chances in the 1954 elections, and, when it became known that Petrov's material mentioned several of Evatt's staff, he was convinced that the whole affair was an anti-Labor conspiracy. He decided to appear for them before the Royal Commission, but the Commissioners withdrew his leave to appear. Later, Evatt would show in parliament that the Commission was a legal disgrace. No Australian was ever charged with spying for Russia as a result of the Royal Commission, mainly because the USA insisted that the evidence from the Verona decrypts should not be made public. In fact, the Petrov Commission damaged ASIO, for in subsequent years the left in the labour movement took every opportunity to discredit it. The role of ASIO in the Russel Ward case, for example, was made public when Jim Cairns, the Labor left-winger who would become a doughty leader of street protests against the Vietnam War, raised it in parliament in 1960.<sup>16</sup>

Suspicion as to the kind of Australians who might spy for Soviet Russia fell of course on the members of the Australian Communist Party and its associated organisations. The party was beholden to the Russians financially and ideologically, although after Khrushchev made his notorious speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 many members regarded Stalinism with revulsion and the Russian version of state socialism with distaste. We also know now that Wally Clayton, a high ranking but elusive member of the party, ran a spy ring of public servants passing material on to Russian intelligence agents at the embassy. But for most party members in the 1950s, the Soviet Union was not central to their adherence to communist ideals. Yes, there had been a proletarian

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16 David Horner, *The Spy Catchers: The Official History of ASIO, 1949–1963*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2014; Desmond Ball and David Horner, *Breaking the Codes: Australia's KGB Network, 1944–1950*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1998; Michael Thwaites, *Truth Will Out: ASIO and the Petrovs*, Sydney, Collins, 1980; Robert Manne, *The Petrov Affair: Politics and Espionage*, Sydney, Pergamon Press, 1987; Ken Buckley, Barbara Dale and Wayne Reynolds, *Doc Evatt: Patriot, Internationalist, Fighter and Scholar*, Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1994, see pp. 378–80; *House of Representatives Official Hansard*, No. 49, Tuesday 6 December 1960, p. 3619 (Jim Cairns, speech).

revolution in Russia in 1917; it was world-historic if you accepted the simplistic version of the materialist conception of history then current in the party; but it was not necessary to suppose that Australian revolutionaries had to slavishly follow the Russian path. Such was the comforting rationalisation of most Australian communists as they digested the revelations of Stalin's crimes in Khrushchev's secret speech. Complete rejection of the militaristic, manipulative model of communist politics that produced the Stalinist 'cult of the individual' and the police state – that would not occur until the collapse of the Soviet Union more than three decades later. In the meantime, there was a steady exodus of thoughtful members, including most of its intellectuals, some of whom were expelled for demanding an open discussion of Soviet communism.<sup>17</sup>

Revolutionaries expect surveillance; they are after all intent on overthrowing the capitalist state. They will accept assistance from allies at any time and from wherever, but in the last analysis they are only as authentic as the support they receive from the oppressed in their immediate surroundings. As for ASIO, according to its official history, it responded to directions from the government but it was also a deeply conservative organisation that equated the Communist Party with the interests of the Soviet Union. All communists, in its view, were psychologically capable of espionage, and that applied to those who sympathised, the 'fellow travellers', as well. Indeed they were even more dangerous because they could hide behind a facade of liberalism. Many artists and academics were targeted unjustly, and some such as Russel Ward suffered harm to their careers. Hence the oft repeated depiction of ASIO as an enemy of civil liberty, harassing individuals who are acting within their rights. But this misses the point. When anti-capitalist ideas are in the air, as they were in the 1950s and 1960s, ASIO's basic function, its real importance to the state, is gathering information about, and in the process disrupting, movements of revolutionary change. And that was the situation in 1957 when Childe returned to Australia. The main issue for the state ought to have been subversion, but although ASIO had separate departments for subversion and espionage, as long as conservative politicians exploited the fear of espionage for electoral purposes, ASIO found it difficult to stop looking for Soviet spies,

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17 Tom O'Lincoln, *Into the Mainstream: The Decline of Australian Communism*, 2nd edn, Melbourne, Red Rag Publications, 2009; Mark Aarons, *The Family File*, Melbourne, Black Inc, 2010; David McKnight, *Australian Spies and Their Secrets*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1994. The author of this book left the Communist Party in the early 1960s.

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although said spies would have been working fairly fruitlessly in a country at the periphery of world capitalism.<sup>18</sup>

Gordon Childe was accustomed to surveillance. He had had a dossier with the British intelligence service, MI5, since 1917. He would have been aware of this because his application to travel home via the USA in that year was refused. Arriving in Australia (via the Cape) the censorship of his mail began immediately, Military Intelligence having been tipped off about his anti-war activities by MI5. He knew this too, because he joked about it in his correspondence and attacked the censors publicly. When he returned to Britain in 1921 the MI5 dossier was reopened, remaining active until he left for Australia in early 1957. In the 1940s he turned down invitations to lecture in the USA because he expected the State Department would deny him a visa. Just before he embarked on the ship to Australia, he revealed that he was annoyed that he would be spied on in the country of his birth. Sure enough, ASIO opened a file on him.<sup>19</sup>

In Childe's file there is a memorandum that reveals clearly the Cold War espionage frame in which ASIO placed revolutionaries. On the day after Childe's body was found, the Director-General of ASIO wrote to the Regional Director in New South Wales:

Local press reports indicate that Professor Childe recently met his death near Katoomba in circumstances which suggest that he may have committed suicide. If there is any justification for this view, and in the light of earlier allegations against him, we should be glad if you could discover whether his action in taking his life could have been influenced by factors of counter-espionage significance.

The press reports, however, when they tried to explain Childe's death, assumed it was an accident – and the subsequent inquest confirmed their assumption. Why, then, did the head of Australia's counter-espionage organisation pursue the possibility that Childe had committed suicide? What circumstances suggested suicide rather than an accident? And if an unnatural death by someone

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18 McKnight, *Australian Spies*, p. 85.

19 Military Intelligence Section 5 (MI5), 2005 KV2/2148 and 2005 KV/2149, 'Childe, Vere Gordon', files held at National Archives (UK), released in 2005; ASIO, 1993 [279], 'Childe, Vere Gordon', A6126/24, held at Australian Archives, Canberra, released 1993; W.J. Peace, 'Vere Gordon Childe and the Cold War', in Peter Gathercole, T.H. Irving and Gregory Melleuish (eds), *Childe and Australia: Archaeology, Politics and Ideas*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1995, pp. 128–43.

with a security record has to be treated as suspicious, why did the suspicion suggest a spy in trouble rather than a disillusioned subversive?<sup>20</sup>

The Russian Embassy in Canberra had been closed since the Petrov affair so Soviet spooks would have had to have had very good cover indeed to keep operating in Australia. Nor is there any evidence in Childe's ASIO file that he had made contact with foreign intelligence operatives. But that was the possibility raised by the Director-General's memo. The various consequences of such imagined contact for explaining Childe's death are so unlikely as to be delusional. Perhaps Childe jumped to escape exposure as a Soviet agent of influence? Did he jump to get away from a Soviet agent? Or did someone push him? The memo was an instinctive response by an official with Cold War paranoia. When, at the inquest, a witness was recalled to testify that he 'had no reason to believe that the deceased had to fear violence from anybody' it may have been the result of ASIO's interest, because only in ASIO was this being implied as an explanation for the possibility that Childe took his own life in a counter-espionage context of fear.<sup>21</sup>

The Director-General was not the only person to be paranoid about Childe's death. When Mary Alice Evatt, Bert's wife, heard the news she immediately concluded that he had been murdered, because he knew too much. About what and by whom? We don't know, but the context in which she came to that conclusion is easier to imagine, given Bert's suspicions that ASIO had become a dangerous and reactionary force in Australian politics. In which case, perhaps Mary Alice thought that ASIO had done the wicked deed.<sup>22</sup>

There was also a strange and uncomfortable echo of his death in a 1964 novel. In *The Dangerous Islands*, Russian agents are secretly installing devices in remote places along the Celtic Fringe – the Hebrides, Ireland and the Scillies – to allow their satellites to guide nuclear-armed rockets with greater accuracy. A Russian fishing trawler nearby carries technicians and spies to maintain the devices, but they are also reliant on the local knowledge of an archaeologist, old and white-haired Professor Burbage, who is excavating a Bronze Age burial site on one of the western islands. The Russians are blackmailing him

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20 Director-General to Regional Director NSW, 22 October 1957, Childe's ASIO file, as in footnote 7 above.

21 Inquest into the death of Vere Gordon Childe, evidence of Alexander Gordon, 22 November 1957, Inquest no. 2389 of 1957, NSW State Records Office, 13/8459.

22 Bill Peace to Terry Irving, 19 March 1988 re Peace's correspondence with Kylie Tennant: 'Mary Alice Evatt was convinced that Childe was the victim of a political murder! Apparently Childe wrote to Evatt a note the day or two before he died stating that I'll see you next week or something to that effect. Mary Alice Evatt, according to Tennant, was convinced that Childe knew "too much about something".'

## INTRODUCTION

because in 1936, while digging in the USSR, he had an affair with the wife of a high-level Russian official. The climax of the novel occurs on a cliff on Bryer in the Scillies. Burbage has worked out that the heroes of the novel, an MI5 man and his girlfriend, want to question him, and he is determined to avoid this. A chase ensues along the cliffs, observed by a Russian spy who has come ashore from the trawler. Burbage slips and falls to his death, whereupon the Russian shoots him twice to make sure he is dead. Later the body of the would-be assassin washes up on a beach, murdered by his own comrades. The MI5 man ensures the Russian has a proper burial with a headstone reading 'A communist, known to God'.<sup>23</sup>

Was the unfortunate Burbage based on Childe? He had made a visit to Russia in 1935 and he had excavated archaeological sites in Ireland and Scotland, including the Neolithic village at Skara Brae, in the Orkneys. This was public knowledge at the time, but the author of the novel knew Childe personally. The name on the title page was Ann Bridge, but her real name was Lady Mary Dolling Sanders O'Malley. She was an amateur archaeologist, and archaeology turns up in several of her novels, one of which, *And Then You Came* (1948), includes an archaeologist, Professor Porlock. She dedicated this novel to Childe, who had provided her with archaeological information to help with her 'romantic reconstruction', as he called it, of the legend of Deirdre of the Sorrows. Childe told her he did not see much of himself in Porlock but he was grateful for the dedication:

To Professor V. Gordon Childe, D.Litt., D.Sc., F.S.A., F.S.A. Scot.,  
Professor of Prehistory at London University, who more than any other  
man has made their own prehistory live for the people of Britain. With  
very great respect.

This respect is perhaps the source of her sympathetic treatment of the character Professor Burbage in *The Dangerous Islands*. The heroine describes Burbage's pro-Russian activities as 'silly' but 'innocent', and discounts the value of his unwilling assistance to the Russians.<sup>24</sup>

Childe and Lady Mary had a mutual friend, Mansfield Forbes, a lecturer in English at Cambridge who had dug with Childe at Old Keig and Finavon in Scotland. Another connection was between her husband's cousin, Angus

23 Ann Bridge, *The Dangerous Islands*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1964.

24 Ann Bridge, *And Then You Came – A Novel*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1948; Childe to Lady Mary O'Malley, 12 July 1948 and 16 December 1948, Ann Bridge papers, 22/2, Harry Ransome Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; Bridge, *The Dangerous Islands*, pp. 118, 178.

Graham, a Scottish archaeologist who worked with Childe on the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of Scotland. A still further connection was through Mary's flatmate in her single years, Ethel Graham, the sister of Angus Graham, who married the historian R.G. Collingwood, whose writings on Roman history Childe admired and whose theory of history challenged Childe to develop his own ideas. Nothing untoward here: it was a typical friendship and professional network of the British elite.

There was, however, another connection, one with Cold War overtones, through Lady Mary's husband Sir Owen St Clair O'Malley. With strong anti-Soviet views, he was a high-level diplomat and Foreign Office counselor who was knighted in 1943. Earlier that year, on the discovery of a mass grave of nearly 22,000 Polish officers near Katyn, he wrote the report for the FO that pointed overwhelmingly to Russian guilt – a verdict confirmed in 1990 by Mikhail Gorbachev. There is a distinct possibility that O'Malley would have known that his wife's friend had an MI5 dossier, and that in 1941 this friend was under suspicion because of an excavation near a defence site in Orkney. During the Cold War, O'Malley's important diplomatic role in Europe was followed in the press, so he was precisely the kind of person to whom the FO's Information Research Department would have fed its propaganda. He might have known, and told his wife, that in 1949 George Orwell had 'fingered' Childe, along with others, as a communist sympathiser who was therefore an untrustworthy British subject.<sup>25</sup>

Childe was never a spy, not even an agent of influence consciously collaborating with Soviet power. As we shall see, he was sceptical of the benefits of that power for science and liberty. But as his ASIO file pointed out, in Britain he was a member of several Communist Party front organisations and his 'recent utterances have generally been in accord with the prescribed Party line'. In 1957, in the context of the Cold War, this was sufficient for a chief of ASIO, the wife of a Labor political leader tormented by hostile political and security forces, and a conservative novelist married to a ruling-class diplomat to wonder about his involvement with disloyal forces. What each of them missed was a simple truth: that Childe was an intellectual who had committed himself to the idea of historical progress and the role of revolutions in history.<sup>26</sup>

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25 Alan J. Foster, 'O'Malley, Sir Owen St Clair (1887–1974)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* online edition, accessed 21 June 2011; 'Archaeologist Fingering by Orwell', *British Archaeology*, 73, November 2003, online edition accessed 1 May 2011.

26 File note in Childe's ASIO file, A6126/24, f. 18.