

# Vere Gordon Childe: an Australian perspective

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This paper seeks to provide an Australian context for the work of V.G. Childe and to explore the relationship between Childe's intellectual outlook and the country where he was born, grew up in and to which he returned to die. To achieve this task it is divided into two parts. In the first part it looks at the way in which Childe's upbringing and experience in a "progressive" dependency of the British empire helped to shape many of his fundamental intellectual preoccupations, including his theory of knowledge and his universalism. In the second section it addresses some of the reasons why Childe has not had a great deal of influence on the intellectual life of Australia despite his international reputation.

KEY-WORDS: Childe, Australia, Social Laboratory, diffusion, nationalism, universalism

## CHILDE AND BRITISH AUSTRALIA

In this paper I am seeking to provide an Australian perspective on the life and work of V. Gordon Childe. Childe's relationship to Australia is ambiguous because he spent much of his adult life, from 1921 to 1957, away from Australia only returning to die in the place of his birth in 1957. Nevertheless the recent collection of papers examining Childe's relationship to Australia has demonstrated the imprint that his Australian upbringing, education and experiences left on Childe (Gathercole, Irving and Melleuish eds 1995). Childe was not an Australian thinker in a crude nationalist sense but rather a thinker raised in Australia who found that if he were to pursue his intellectual vocation he needed to be at the centre of that empire of which his homeland was but one part. Consequently his relationship to Australia was complex, and I would like to consider some of that complexity, both with regard to the Australia of Childe's day and in considering the significance of Childe for the Australia of the 1990s. First I should like to place Childe in the framework of early twentieth century Australia.

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Childe was born into an Australia that was part of a larger imperial whole. Officially Australians did not exist: Australians of British extraction were British subjects and they tended to think of themselves as being both British and Australian. When Childe was eight the six self-governing British colonies of Australia federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia. The primary purpose of federation was to establish free trade amongst the colonies, and the new Commonwealth was not a sovereign entity. Nevertheless, internally the Commonwealth was a self-governing entity free to pursue its own economic and social policies. This it did and during the first decade of the twentieth century it established a set of policies that were to define Australian development for the next eighty years. These policies of White Australia, industry protection and a system of industrial relations based on a quasi-judicial system (conciliation and arbitration courts) is now termed the “Australian Settlement” (Kelly 1992:1-16). These policies gave the Australia of the time the reputation of being the “Social Laboratory” of the world, engaged in bold democratic experiments (Melleuish ed. 1990).

Growing up in a “progressive” dependency of a the British empire was to leave its mark on the way in which Childe viewed the world, and on his conception of pre-history. I should like to point out some of more significant aspects of this imperial experience. Firstly there is the issue of the relationship of Australia as a province on the periphery of empire; secondly there is the question of the direction in which the “Australian Settlement” led Australia and Childe’s reaction to that development.

As a dependency of a great empire Australia could not develop in the same fashion as a metropolitan power. In the early twentieth century its major economic role was the production of fine wool for the world market. It did not possess a developed industrial sector or a large class of technical professionals and intellectuals. Each Australian colony had a university by 1914 but these were relatively small institutions that produced doctors, lawyers and schoolteachers. There was, in effect, an imperial division of labour in intellectual matters. Being a dependency meant that Australian scientists were not expected to do much in the way of original theoretical work. The place of science in Australia was practical: its role was to deal with specific problems related largely to the vital developing agricultural industries. When a national scientific research institute was established in the 1920s its role was seen as one of conducting applied agricultural research (Schedvin 1987, especially chapter 4).

It has been argued that this emphasis on the “practical” as opposed to the theoretical was a defining characteristic of Australian life. When French writer Albert Méтин visited Australia during the earlier years of the twentieth century he wrote of the “socialism without doctrines” that pervaded Australian life (Méтин 1977). One should be careful on this matter. Alexis de Tocqueville had also considered that an emphasis on the practical was characteristic of American democracy (Tocqueville 1968:549-644). Nevertheless it can be said that while not unique to Australia, a concern for the practical was important in the Australia into which Childe was born.

Most of Childe's Australian intellectual contemporaries were concerned that the knowledge they discovered be used to build a better Australia.

The issue of the relationship between metropolitan centre and regional periphery was important for Childe in a different way. During the second half of the nineteenth century the two major Australian colonies, New South Wales and Victoria, had adopted different economic strategies as means of achieving social growth and development. Victoria adopted a protectionist approach, using tariffs as a way of encouraging local industry to grow and compete against goods imported from elsewhere. New South Wales, on the other hand, followed the English model of free trade, emphasising the need to trade and interact with other countries. It can be argued that the adoption of these two opposing economic models had profound effects on the cultural values that grew up in the two colonies and in the intellectual works that gave expression to those values (Melleuish 1995b, chapter 2). Victorian intellectuals tended to favour a view of social and cultural development that was nationalist in inspiration, one that saw societies developing in isolation as independent and self-enclosed entities. New South Wales intellectuals were more sensitive to the flow of ideas and goods amongst the countries of the world. They tended to emphasise the importance of international factors when explaining social development. As early as the 1840s and 1850s New South Wales intellectuals had discussed the importance of the "intercourse of nations" in the expansion of civilisation and had developed a diffusionist model to explain how civilisation had spread across the globe (Melleuish 1989: 126-9). It is worth pointing out that one of the major exponents of the diffusionist case for the spread of civilisation in the early twentieth century was the New South Wales born Grafton Elliot Smith (Smith 1930).

This leads us on to the second major factor that affected Childe as an Australian intellectual, namely the dynamic of the "Social Laboratory" during the first two decades of this century. The Australian Settlement was founded on a policy of protection, repudiating free trade in favour of tariffs. It also involved the victory of a nationalist vision of Australia and its place in the world over a more internationalist one. The purpose of protection was to keep foreign goods out of the country, the purpose of White Australia (or "immigration restriction") was to keep foreign people, in particular Asians, from entering Australia. Over time the desire for isolation from the rest of the world became greater, particularly in the wake of World War I and the upheavals that followed it. Australia came to be seen as a pure place that needed protection from outside contaminating influences. The customs service was used to prevent books of a subversive or corrupting nature from entering the country (White 1981: 141). Given that Australia has long had to put up with the "tyranny of distance", there was a belief that the country could isolate itself from the world and develop its democratic way of life free from outside influences (Palmer 1954:70).

Such was the world into which Childe was born. He was a native of New South Wales, and he was educated at the University of Sydney where he majored in both

classics and philosophy. His philosophy teacher was a Scotsman, Francis Anderson, who taught a philosophy that was universalist and liberal in outlook (Melleuish 1995a:158-60). From Sydney Childe moved to Oxford where he began his archaeological training. Returning to Australia during World War I he attempted to attain an academic post but found his opportunities limited, not least because he had espoused the pacifist cause during the war (Evans 1995). Working as a research officer for the labor premier of New South Wales he returned to Britain to conduct research only to find himself stranded by a change of government. From there he became an expatriate pursuing an academic career in archaeology, an outsider both in Britain and Australia.

There are a number of ways in which Childe's Australian background was important in his work as an archaeologist and pre-historian. The first relates to his theory of knowledge and the emphasis he placed on traditions of craft that fused theory and practice, as opposed to the abstract concepts of the academic world to which Childe (1956:68, 1966:183) was invariably hostile. It is quite reasonable to see his approach to human knowledge as coming out of his Australian experience. Other Australian intellectuals of that period, including the social psychologist, Elton Mayo, shared Childe's hostility to academic abstraction (Melleuish 1995a:152-3). For Australian intellectuals of those years, including Childe, knowledge was something real and practical.

The second way in which Childe's Australian background was significant was in terms of his sensitivity to the question of diffusion. As an heir to the New South Wales free trade tradition Childe recognised, as only one sitting on the periphery of empire could, that ideas, goods and people move from one part of the world to others. There is a diffusion of civilisation – and a movement back from the periphery to the centre. Diffusion is an important element of social progress for Childe for whom the ultimate goal of history was the achievement of a world in which knowledge and scientific ideas moved freely from country to another. He was opposed to the narrow chauvinism that characterises much nationalism, arguing that “progressive change is accelerated by intercourse with divergently adapted and differently organised societies” (Childe 1951: 173; see also Childe 1982).

This leads to the third way in which Childe's Australian background affected his outlook; his reaction to the way the Australian “social laboratory” developed during those years. Childe's primary response to this situation was his analysis of the Australian Labour movement, *How labour governs* (Childe 1964). In this work Childe reflected on the way in which the achievement of office had corrupted labour politicians, leaving them more interested in the perks of office than the practice of their principles:

“the Labour party, starting with a band of inspired Socialists, degenerated into a vast machine for capturing political power, but did not know how to use that power when attained except for the profit of individuals” (Childe 1964: 181).

Childe was left somewhat disillusioned by his Australian experiences and by the failure of the “social laboratory” to attain its democratic goals. Moreover one can also argue that Childe reacted against the narrow culture that the attempts to quarantine Australia helped to create in Australia during the years after World War I; as Ray Evans (1995) has shown Childe himself was a victim of that chauvinism.

Childe became a believer in internationalism and in history as the growth and progress of civilisation both as a result of his colonial upbringing and as a reaction against the way in which Australia was moving during the early decades of this century. This fact affects the way in which Childe is viewed in Australia in the 1990s.

### CHILDE AND AUSTRALIA IN THE 1990S

Australians have never been particularly forward about claiming expatriates as their own. Childe returned to Australia to die in 1957 and shocked some Australians at that time by comparing Australia unfavourably with tenth century Iceland (F. Smith 1964:ix). As most of his productive intellectual life had been outside of Australia his influence on Australian intellectual life was, and remains, limited. In general, that influence has been primarily in the field of Australian labour history. *How labour governs* was reprinted in 1964 and Childe’s work in this area has been scrutinised by a number of labour historians and political theorists with T. H. Irving the leader in the field. Childe continues to be important for professional archaeologists in Australia, as is demonstrated by the contributions to the recently published Childe and Australia volume.

Still, given that Childe is one of the very few Australian intellectuals to have achieved a high international profile, his impact on Australian intellectual life has not been great. For example the wider historical profession in Australia remains largely untouched by his vision of historical development. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is that in the wake of the disintegration of the British empire Australian historians took to viewing history, and Australian history in particular, in nationalist terms. Childe’s universalism held little appeal for these nationalist historians because they favoured a model of organic social growth rather one based on diffusion and the interchange of ideas, people and products. In pre-history, the major development in Australia during recent years has been in relation to the origins of the indigenous people of the continent, again an area in which Childe, whose concerns were essentially European, does not appear to have much relevance (Mulvaney 1995:212-6).

It can be said that Australia has not really recognised the achievements of one of her most important sons. There are changes going on in Australia today that may change that state of affairs. The older Australian nationalism has been eroded by the arrival, since 1945, of a large number of migrants from non-British countries. Australia now proudly proclaims that it is a multicultural nation; it seeks to develop

an international awareness amongst its citizens. “White Australia” and the “Australian Settlement” are no more, and Australia is extremely conscious of the fact that it must develop ties with the countries of Asia. The old narrow Australia, against which Childe reacted, has been dying over the last thirty years, even if the concerns of her historians have not yet caught up with these developments.

Under these circumstances it is indeed possible that Childe will finally achieve the recognition in the land of his birth to which he is entitled. Childe’s work sought to explore the dynamics of human history within a universalistic framework. He was opposed to the narrowness of the nationalist vision. As Australia moves from dependency of empire to nation to a greater appreciation of the wider international order it is to be hoped that it will also recognise the significance of the ideas of its most famous historian.

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