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CHILDEISH IDEAS

THE BIZARRE FASHION AND REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS
OF BRITAIN'S MOST ECCENTRIC ARCHAEOLOGIST

DISCUSSED: *Scotland, Farming, The Dawn of Civilization, Red Shirts, Shorty Shorts, Marxist Archaeologists v. Nazi Archaeologists, Hannah Arendt on Revolutions, Cities and Urban Planning, Dinner with Stalin, Indiana Jones, Fashionistas, Tea*

I. HIGH IN THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

On a bright October morning in 1957, V. Gordon Childe, at the time the most famous archaeologist in the world,¹ finished his tea and caught a



cab outside the posh Carrington Hotel. He asked the driver to take him to Bridal Veil Falls, a remote peak located high in Australia's Blue Mountains, Childe's boyhood home. Childe exited the cab and instructed the cabbie to return at noon so that he could spend the morning studying the local geology and revisiting a

¹ This is of course discounting Indiana Jones, arguably the best-known (albeit fictional) archaeologist of all time. Although rumor has it that Jones was based on an actual archaeologist (William Flinders Petrie, Hiram Bingham III, Howard Carter, Gordon Childe, James Henry Breasted, and Robert Braidwood make up just the short list of potential inspirations), it seems most likely that the whip-carrying, gun-toting character created by George Lucas and Steven Spiel-

berg was an amalgam of real archaeologists and fictional personas such as the adventurer Harry Steele played by Charlton Heston in *Secret of the Incas*. In any case, Childe's trademark fedora and leather jacket easily fit into the visual pantheon of ur-Indys. In addition to being name-checked in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, Childe is also an eerie doppelgänger of "Toht," the evil Nazi archaeologist best known for the face-melting retribution he receives in the final scenes of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

much-beloved spot he hadn't visited in over three decades. The cab left. Childe, after surveying the cool blue haze thousands of feet below, placed his compass and mackintosh on a rock, removed his ever-present pipe and spectacles, and stepped off the edge of the cliff.

For Childe, one of the most influential, brilliant, and iconoclastic archaeologists of the twentieth century, this "fall" was an odd but characteristically lonely move. The few friends who were aware of Childe's intention to end his life chose to protect his memory rather than to speak out, thus for several decades the public remained unaware that Childe's death was anything other than an accident. The truth about Childe's suicide became clear in a statement reprinted in a 1980 issue of the journal *Antiquity*. The letter, sent by Childe to his successor at the London Institute of Archaeology days before his death, concludes elegiacally: "Life ends best when one is happy and strong."

Although his major accomplishments were well behind him by 1957, at the time of his death Childe was very much enjoying the perks of minor celebrity and his status as the quintessential elder statesmen of archaeology—lecturing around the globe, pontificating about his work. He had a lot to be proud of: over the course of thirty years, Childe had published dozens of books and articles about the ancient human past that were both popular and critically acclaimed, selling millions of copies around the world.

II. "MAN BECAME HUMAN BY LABOUR." —GORDON CHILDE, 1942

While Childe is no longer a major player in modern archaeological discourse, many of his "Childeish ideas" (as he liked to refer to them) about the evolution of civilization—the first human cultures, the first farmers, the first states—are so deeply embedded in our ideas about prehistory that they structure our understanding of it. Although he was written off as obsolete for a time—a pre-radiocarbon dinosaur in a world of highly accurate, scientific archaeology—Childe's ideas about what life was like in the past often proved to be much more resilient than those of his peers.

His career was an ambitious project to close the gap between history and prehistory. Pulling together scraps of evidence from far-flung archaeological sites, Childe published twenty-one books with quietly subversive titles like *What Happened in History* and *Man Makes Himself*. Trained in comparative philology at Oxford, he was a genuine polyglot who read widely in several languages.² His faculty for languages

² Childe's pride in reading most European languages reportedly outstripped his ability to intelligibly speak them. Although at some point Childe had studied modern Greek, Italian, Spanish, French, German, and Russian (among many other languages), his foreign colleagues were often dismayed when Childe tried to converse with them in their own language. His unintelligibility was compounded by the fact that Childe didn't like to remove his pipe from his clenched jaws while speaking, and the fact that he had a ten-

allowed him to travel extensively, and during his life he visited literally thousands of sites and museums in Europe and the Near East, absorbing as much information about artifacts and local histories as he could.

Working by himself, Childe pieced together this fractured archaeological record and became one of the last grand synthesizers—a role largely absent from the current era of collaborative research and electronic interconnectedness. He went after the big questions that had dogged European social theorists for hundreds of years: What are the qualities that make us uniquely human? Was the human past Hobbesian (nasty, brutish, and short) or Rousseauian (in dignified equilibrium with nature)? Have we made progress from a hypothetical "natural" state?³ Why live in cities? How did we become sedentary in the first place? How can the past tell us how we ended up *here*, surrounded by gadgets and governments and taxes and wars?

In hindsight, we know that some of Childe's answers to these questions were incorrect. (Then again, it's hard to name a person who's had a significant cultural impact and who was not, at least occasionally, guilty of specious reasoning.) And although Childe got a few of the details wrong, his genius rested in his ability to el-

dency to frequently and unexpectedly switch from one garbled foreign tongue to another.

³ According to Childe, absolutely. But according to Ray Davies of the Kinks, who suggested that "in man's evolution he has created the cities and the motor traffic rumble / but give me half a chance and I'd be taking off my clothes and living in the jungle," the answer is dubious.

egantly convey the broader picture, and to envision a past that was more than simply mechanistic—a past that was populated not with automatons but with people who deserve both our sympathy and our respect. In other words, people like us.

III. CHILDE THE TEDDY BEAR

While Childe was publicly known as a serious Marxist theorist and heavyweight intellectual, in reality he was a fun-loving prankster, a combination of personalities that endeared him to his students and coworkers as a sort of gruff teddy bear. He enjoyed teasing his mostly conservative colleagues by wearing flamboyant red dress shirts, and leaving communist newspapers strewn about his office. Looking at his messy desk he once joked, “My *Daily Worker* isn’t conspicuous enough!” Having witnessed the havoc wreaked in Europe by fascism, Childe became vehemently antitotalitarian. True to his contradictory nature, though, this didn’t stop him from having dinner with Stalin when he visited Moscow.

As long as archaeology is a discipline, Childe will forever be remembered for coining two terms taught in virtually every Intro to Prehistory textbook: the Neolithic Revolution (the advent of farming) and the Urban Revolution (the advent of cities). I vividly remember cramming for a final late at night as an undergraduate, attempting to

memorize the list of ten traits⁴ that Childe believed defined the first urban societies. I remember returning to Childeish ideas much later, as a graduate student, then arguing that the Neolithic Revolution was irrevocably passé in that hypercritical way only graduate students seem to argue. As an adult, I have not been able to put away Childeish things.

The scientific merit of Childe’s revolutions has been hotly debated in the fifty years since his death, in large part because he compensated for his scientific deficiencies with conceptual and rhetorical robustness. Because of Childe, we no longer think of revolutions primarily as political struggles, but rather as culminations of cultural change, “pools of human experience,” as Childe referred to them. These paradigm shifts come in the form of breakthrough or viral ideas that have the ability to resolve earlier structural contradictions that served as an impasse to change. Childe, in short, attempted to strip the word of some of its more radical connotations, stating, “The word ‘revolution’ must not of course be taken as denoting a sudden violent catastrophe.”

⁴ And, in case you were wondering, I still remember the recipe for a state society: (1) densely concentrated populations in the thousands; (2) people who specialize in work other than farming; (3) taxes; (4) monumental public architecture; (5) a ruling class; (6) writing or at least accounting; (7) calendars and math; (8) iconography; (9) dependence on foreign trade; (10) some form of capitalism, however nascent. Interestingly, Childe’s famous article on the subject, “The Urban Revolution,” was published in an urban-planning journal (*The Town Planning Review*) rather an archaeological one.

While there has been no shortage of such violent, catastrophic revolutions during the twentieth century,⁵ exemplified by events like China’s Cultural Revolution,⁶ these failed to negatively affect the successful characterization of numerous peaceful social movements as revolutions as well: Kuhnian Scientific Revolutions, the Green Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Internet Revolution, etc. In fact, the word has become so watered down that it has served as both a campaign ad (the Reagan Revolution) and a diet craze (the Atkins Revolution). Fashionistas now declare runway revolutions on a seasonal basis. Perhaps for them, as for the heroine of Eugene Zamiatin’s communist utopian novel *We*, “There is no final revolution.... Revolutions are infinite.” Ironically, in part because of Childe, revolutions have lost their radical edge.

IV. HANDSOME CHILDE

Born in 1892 in Sydney, Australia, Vera Gordon Childe was the only son of well-to-do parents, both of whom came from prominent British families. His father and paternal grand-

⁵ On the modern significance of revolution, philosopher Hannah Arendt has stated that “wars and revolutions... have thus far determined the physiognomy of the twentieth century.”

⁶ In the course of researching this article, I ran across references not only to the Chinese Cultural Revolution (in which possibly millions of people starved to death), but to a brand of yogurt named “Cultural Revolution” (“Organic yogurt that will transform your taste buds!”), either one of the most ineptly named products of all time, or the victim of acute historical amnesia.

father were both well established and almost universally disliked figures in the Church of England, and Childe was raised in a strict and deeply religious household. This bourgeois upbringing provided young Gordon, as he was known, with ample material to rebel against in his later years as an outspoken atheist and Communist. He grew up in a palatial country home, and loved to go for walks in the surrounding Blue Mountains.

Childe was also an unusually gifted student. He studied language and philosophy at Sydney University, and became influenced by Hegel, Marx, and Engels. After winning a prestigious scholarship in 1913, he left New South Wales behind to study at Oxford, a sure sign of success among the Australian intelligentsia.

Childe's years at Oxford proved to be a major turning point in his life. Childe felt at home at Queen's College. He studied with some of the world's best classical and Near Eastern archaeologists, and continued to capitalize on his facility for language. He became obsessed with understanding the root language of the ancient Europeans, Indo-European, but later destroyed his thesis on it when Indo-European theories were adopted by the Nazis.

During World War I, Childe became a pacifist. He had found his milieu, and spent all of his time either studying ancient civilizations or speaking on behalf of contemporary socialist causes on campus. He was part of a tightly knit circle of friends at Oxford who shared his leftist views, but he always remained somewhat aloof, enigmatic. He be-

came known as "Handsome Childe," a comment on his physiognomy that made light of his awkward appearance, but that was used affectionately by friends. He stayed up late into the night passionately debating Hegel and Marx with his roommate, and learned how to hold his liquor.

V. HOMECOMING

Upon his return to Australia in 1917, Childe did not yet think of himself as a writer or as an archaeologist. He suffered from the depressing shock that many postgraduates go through in their twenties, when they return home overeducated and underexperienced, cut adrift, mystified as to why the world isn't knocking at their door. Childe spent time as a Latin teacher at a middle school, a job for which he was ridiculously overqualified and not terribly well suited. He got involved with the Labour Party, but was forced to resign his position at Sydney University because of his outspoken socialist views. Although he continued to pursue a political career for a few years, this event essentially soured Childe on the prospect of direct participation in politics.

He finally found his footing upon returning to London. Childe put his experience with Australian politics to good use, and published a critical book on the subject, *How Labour Governs*,⁷ in 1923. With the money

⁷ Though Childe later considered this book to be a work of juvenilia, it stands as one of the best portraits of Australian politics during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

made from this venture, he spent the next few years doing research in the British Museum, or buried in the stacks at the Royal Anthropological Institute. Disillusioned with the present, Childe reignited his passion for prehistory by visiting museums all across Europe, sketching and writing about the artifacts that he saw. He managed to land a spot as a librarian at the Royal Anthropological Institute, one of just a few positions to be found as a professional archaeologist in Britain. And then something miraculous happened.

VI. ANNUS MIRABILIS

In 1925, Childe—essentially a nobody in academic terms—published what was to date the most influential (and the only) synthesis of the European archaeological record available in English, *The Dawn of European Civilization*. Known simply as *The Dawn*, this book was remarkable not only because it presented a masterful portrait of the prehistory of the entire European continent, but because Childe, although well versed in Near Eastern archaeology, was essentially an autodidact in terms of the European archaeological record. (Childe was mainly a philologist by trade, with some experience in Near Eastern archaeology; his knowledge about European archaeology was obtained by visits to European museums.) The success of *The Dawn* wasn't simply due to Childe's firsthand knowledge of the stylistic connections between prehistoric artifacts across Europe. It was successful because, contrary to

most of the descriptive model-based archaeological literature at the time, it presented a predictive model—meaning it predicted how historical processes unfold in both the past and the present—rather than simply providing a portrait of the archaeological record (which Childe referred to derogatorily as “postage-stamp archaeology”).

Childe rocketed to the forefront of academia in just a few short years, and by September of 1927 he had accepted a prestigious position as Abercromby Professor of Archaeology at Edinburgh University. *The Dawn* was so phenomenally well received that it eclipsed many of Childe’s later works, so much so that archaeologist J. D. G. Clark later remarked that “[Childe] had achieved what he was going to achieve in this genre essentially by 1930.”

VII. TROUBLE

In 1926 Childe followed up *The Dawn* with what would end up being his most regretted work, a book called *The Aryans: A Study of Indo-European Origins*. In it, Childe reviewed the linguistic and archaeological evidence of the westward route taken by the Indo-Europeans, ostensible progenitors of European civilization, from a hypothetical homeland in southwest Russia. While we now know that there is no one-to-one correspondence between ethnic groups living in modern nation states and archaic populations, Childe was one of many prominent social theorists during the ’20s attempting to define

archaeological cultures that could be equated with modern biological groups in an effort to discover the genesis of European culture.

In Germany, Childe’s main rival, Gustaf Kossinna,⁸ was espousing similar *Siedlungsarchaologie* models that linked sharply defined archaeological culture areas with historic and modern European populations. Kossinna died before the national socialists came to power, but (like Wagner, Nietzsche, and many other intellectuals) his death didn’t stop the Nazis from using his ideas to support a myth about the deep antiquity and superiority of a Nordic “race.” Although the scientific validity of the biological concept of race was quickly challenged by anthropologists following the Holocaust, at the time only a few prescient writers had foreseen the potentially disastrous collision of nationalism, bureaucratically controlled ethnic identities, and technologies capable of facilitating genocide on a massive scale.⁹ Childe wasn’t one of them. He could not or simply did not fully realize the implications of *The Aryans* in the context of Europe’s political future.

Like Kossinna, Childe was ultimately interested in how language contributed to the intellectual progress of prehistoric Europeans. Unlike Kossinna, these ideas were never intended to justify German manifest

⁸ Sort of the twentieth-century version of Germany’s Ernst Haeckel to England’s Charles Darwin.

⁹ As Kafka hinted at in both “*In der Strafkolonie*” (“In the Penal Colony”), published in 1914, and “*Ein Hungerkünstler*” (“A Hunger Artist”), published in 1919.

destiny and genocide—events that Childe found abhorrent. Still, *The Aryans* contained a Eurocentric take on history, and implied that culture essentially runs downhill. Although Childe quickly disowned the book, and had adopted a new theoretical model grounded more deeply in Marxism by the time the Nazis coopted his earlier ideas, *The Aryans* remained the black sheep of Childe’s work. By 1930, his friends had learned not to mention this embarrassing chapter of his career.

VIII. REBOUND

By the mid-1930s Childe had once again hit his stride, reaching his peak in terms of publishing, excavating, and collecting data for future publications at far-flung archaeological sites across Europe and Asia. Just thirty-five when he joined the faculty of Edinburgh University, Childe was not only the youngest but the *only* archaeologist teaching in an academic post in Scotland. Rather than try to fit in, he went out of his way to stand out. In addition to wearing bright red shirts and ties that clashed with his pink nose and orange hair, Childe sported shorty-shorts with socks and sock-suspenders, clunky boots, a black mackintosh worn like a cape, and a shabby black leather Australian sheep-herder’s hat.¹⁰ The local establishment’s disdain for the

¹⁰ An article of clothing that Childe wore for over twenty years because of a long-standing bet with a friend regarding who could wear his hat the longest (Childe won).

politically and fashionably iconoclastic prehistorian was matched only by Childe's growing international recognition as the greatest prehistorian of the twentieth century.

Over the course of Childe's excavations in Scotland at the Neolithic village of Skara Brae in the Orkney Islands, many people's attitudes toward the unabashedly odd and eccentrically dressed archaeologist softened. It wasn't Childe's impressiveness as an archaeologist that endeared him to locals. Speaking to his competence as an excavator, Childe admitted that his strength was "certainly not novel data rescued by brilliant excavation from the soil... but rather interpretive concepts and methods of explanation."¹¹ What won him the grudging respect and eventually the loyalty of locals was his genuine love of the remote Orkneys and the friendships he made with villagers he met there, especially the laborers who helped him dig the Skara Brae site. Looking back on the excavations from 1927 to 1930, Childe's student Stewart Cruden recalled,

In the far north he is remembered with high regard and vivid reminiscence for it was characteristic of the man to win affection among those with whom he worked and lived, albeit their reactions to his personality are not innocent of wonder and humour.

¹¹ On Childe's impracticality in the field, one of his students once remarked, "He knew virtually nothing about surveying. His photography was deplorable; his methods nonexistent. And yet—he had a genius for interpreting evidence which was uncanny."

To them he was every inch the professor. The Stromness landlady who looked after him during the epic days of Skara Brae commiserated with genuine solicitude on how the poor man never ate, too upset when he didn't find anything, too excited when he did.

IX. REVOLUTIONS

Unlike most archaeologists of the time, Childe was acutely aware of the theoretical basis behind his writing—so much so that toward the end of his life, he stated that epistemology, not prehistory, was his first great love.¹² Following the *The Dawn* and *The Aryans*, Childe published several generally well-received books about European and Near Eastern prehistory (*The Most Ancient East*, *The Danube in Prehistory*, *The Bronze Age*) and updated editions of his earlier works, but his major theoretical breakthrough didn't come until the publication of *Man Makes Himself*, in 1936. The book was a critical success in several regards. Fundamentally, it suggested that the distinction between prehistory and history presented a false dichotomy. The admission that archaeological and historical evidence, due to their fragmentary nature, must be reconstituted and read as a text suggested that the past had to be understood on semiotic as well

¹² And apparently his only great love: as far as anyone knows, Childe never had a documented or even rumored romantic relationship. This aroused speculations that Childe was gay, but there is really no evidence about his love life one way or the other.

as on scientific terms, foreshadowing poststructuralist thought.

Man Makes Himself was also groundbreaking because it was the book in which Childe introduced the term *revolution* to describe stark discontinuities in the archaeological record. Abrupt breaks in historical continuity had commonly been described this way since the French and Industrial Revolutions, the two events that had the greatest impact on the term as it was understood in the nineteenth century.¹³ Childe picked up on the political, economic, and technological connotations of the word and applied them to clear discontinuities in the archaeological record. After toying around with this idea in a few of his earlier books, in *Man Makes Himself*, Childe characterized the domestication of plants and animals as the first major prehistoric revolution, dubbing it the Neolithic Revolution. In Childe's view, people's ability to produce their own food in situ—

¹³ A brief history of revolutions: Though the term *revolution* was initially popularized as an astronomical term by Copernicus at the end of the fifteenth century, by 1651 scientist Robert Boyle had used it to describe an overturning of the religious and philosophical order. In 1688, King James II of England was overthrown in what was known as the "Glorious Revolution." It was the American and French Revolutions, however, that galvanized the separate social, technological, and political meanings into a form closely resembling the one used today. The French Revolution in turn directly influenced ideas about the rapid mechanization in Europe, and was quickly dubbed the Grande Révolution Industrielle. By 1867, Karl Marx was referring to revolutions in Europe as "the locomotives of history." Childe's Neolithic and Urban Revolutions are logical extensions of this concept into the archaeological past.

rather than to follow it around the landscape—had enormous implications for the advent of sedentism, large families, and hence large populations, and, important for him, the accumulation of property. The Neolithic Revolution also naturally led to what he saw as the second major cultural development of all time, the Urban Revolution. In the early urban planning of Mesopotamian city-states, Childe essentially saw all the prerequisites—the blueprint if you will—of modern civilization. Since the publication of *Man Makes Himself*, archaeological revolutions have proliferated to the degree that just being *Homo sapiens* at all (in comparison to our evolutionary cousins) now qualifies us as “revolutionary.”¹⁴ Think about that the next time you feel lazy.

X. LAST STOP, RED SQUARE

It was around this time that Childe began to visit the Soviet Union. Although Childe’s friends understood his sense of humor and his political consciousness, many of his colleagues didn’t know how to take his frank support for communism. While the bright red shirts and conspicuous copy of the *Daily Worker* seem to have intentionally played up his reputation

¹⁴ This hotly debated concept is generally referred to in anthropological circles as the Human Revolution, and refers to the replacement of Neanderthals and other archaic humans by genetically modern, purportedly symbol-wielding humans in Europe between thirty and forty thousand years ago.

as the “Red Professor,” more often than not Childe used comedy to defuse people’s reactions to his very earnest support for Marxism and the Soviet experiment. He loved to tease his students that the better he was paid, the further to the right his theories moved.¹⁵

Childe’s perceived seriousness often overshadowed his dry sense of humor. At an archaeology conference, Childe once facetiously suggested that Woodhenge (a circular timber monument in England) was a crass, nouveau riche imitation of the older, more well-established Stonehenge. Childe’s opinion carried so much weight that no one in the audience got the joke.

He also had a childish/Childeish love of pranks. He told stories about keeping worthless money in his pockets when he was on vacation just to screw with pickpockets. On a trip to Spain, then ruled by the fascist dictator Francisco Franco (whom Childe hated), he packed his suitcase with nothing but a pillow simply to frustrate customs officials. When many formerly commonplace items were rationed in England during World War II, the notoriously sweet-toothed archaeologist carried a special tin labeled CHILDEISH SUGAR with him to tea.

As it turns out, Childe was just as lonely as a lefty. He used humor not only to ease tensions created by his political beliefs, but in lieu

¹⁵ Although he never became wealthy, he lived increasingly high on the hog toward the end of his life, nearly all of which was lived in hotels. He never made a meal, or a bed, and apparently had a fondness for expensive whiskey.

of building intimate friendships. To people who didn’t understand that Childe’s playfulness was also a surrogate for real emotional connection, it suggested that his political stance was just a “convoluted intellectual joke.”¹⁶ In true Childeish fashion (that is, both provocatively and as proof of his convictions), Childe began to visit the Soviet Union regularly between 1935 and 1953. When the Soviet system was first being established, Childe overlooked the violence and repression connected to the establishment of the fledgling state. As time passed, however, Childe privately expressed doubts about Stalin and the Soviet state, while publicly championing communism. At the end of World War II, in 1945, Childe’s journal indicates that he dined at the Kremlin and may have met with Joseph Stalin on a few occasions.¹⁷ On his last visit to the Soviet Union, in 1953, Childe was careful to put all of his papers in order, and left a half-joking note that read: “In case I should remain in the

¹⁶ This is probably the most serious accusation ever leveled at Childe. It’s hard to believe that the theoretical basis of Childe’s thought was nothing more than a joke. In fact, in contrast to most of the archaeologists of the time, Childe had an almost postmodern self-awareness of his theoretical framework.

¹⁷ The Soviets apparently so revered Childe as a champion of Marxism that he was one of the few Western archaeologists allowed by the Soviets to view the famous Gold Room at the Hermitage. Childe was not universally accepted by Marxist archaeologists, however. In the category of damnation by faint praise, one scholar said of him, “Childe has not yet succeeded in overcoming many of the errors of bourgeois science. But he understands that truth is in the socialist camp and is not ashamed to call himself a pupil of Soviet archaeologists.”

Soviet paradise.” This clue points less toward defection than it does toward Childe’s speculation that he might be permanently detained on arrival.

XI. “I HAVE LOST ALL OF MY OLD IDEALS.”

Despite the increasingly clear connection between Stalinism and totalitarianism, Childe was never disabused of the promise of Marxism. He was fond of telling people that he continued to study *Das Kapital* (in German, of course) throughout his life. In addition to his three well-publicized visits to the Soviet Union, Childe vocally supported the Soviet Union and Marxism as a historical science until his death. In 1949 a new revolution—the Radiocarbon Revolution, which made precise dating easier and more accurate—conscripted Childe to irrelevance. With the advent of scientific dating, knowledge of artifact styles became less necessary. Many of Childe’s prehistoric chronological sequences were soon proven inaccurate. It was also evident that though his students adored him, Childe’s isolating genius was a barrier most students simply couldn’t penetrate, preventing him from producing a generation of serious intellectual heirs.

In retrospect, it is clear from clues he gave to friends before he returned to Australia in 1957 that Childe was planning to end his life. Although he wrote shortly before his death that he had never felt better physically, Childe was terrified of the effects of old age. In letters

to relatives, friends, and colleagues during the mid-1950s, he had an ominous and weird tendency to drop hints about his impending death and dwell upon the frailties that come with old age. Childe started to confide in friends that he was losing his memory. Childe noticed that his faculty for language and his encyclopedic grasp of the minutiae of ancient societies—the talents that had made him one of the greatest prehistorians in the world—were beginning to slip. In letters from this period, Childe pointed out that it was fine to live to a ripe old age if you had children to take care of you, but otherwise you were just a burden, social deadweight.

He also expressed anxiety about his political philosophy. While Childe could come to terms with chronological inaccuracies in his work, he was more afraid that his theoretical legacy had been diminished by totalitarianism. *The Aryans* debacle aside, Childe had not seen the fruition of the Soviet experiment, and he came to doubt whether or not he had picked an entirely appropriate epistemological framework for his work. Speaking about Marxist historical science as the guiding light of Childe’s intellectual pursuits, J. G. D. Clarke stated that toward the end of Childe’s life, Childe had felt that “his prophet [Marx] played him false.” Almost definitively, in one of his final correspondences Childe remarks, “I have lost all of my old ideals.”

Strangely, though Childe may have given up on his own ideals,

like Marx, his notions about the unfolding of history are, for better or worse, here to stay. This is because the most powerful revolutions don’t come in the form of violent struggles or advantageous genes. They come in the form of ideas that are cultural catalysts—doors that, once opened, cannot be closed.

XII. ELEGIA

When talented people who have had a huge cultural impact kill themselves, it’s not just a personal tragedy for their friends and families but an existential tragedy for the rest of us: what did they know that we do not know? Childe’s suicide was doubly disconcerting *precisely* because of the profound insights into life that he seemed to have.

Inevitably, figures such as Childe are remembered not only for their work but for who they were as individuals. The culture doesn’t pay them tribute just by praising their big ideas, but by preserving memories and anecdotes about their big personalities: their sense of humor, the way they dressed, how they treated their students and comrades, the things they loved in life. Childe ultimately put his faith in people, but he wasn’t naive about what an almost absurdly tough, contradictory place the world can be. Above all, Childe understood that for people and their ideas to survive, they must adapt to the world—but people don’t adapt to the world as it is, they adapt to how they perceive it to be. ★