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**The Fatal Lure of Politics: The Life and Thought of Vere Gordon Childe, by Terry Irving. Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2020. pp. 424, Paperback RRP \$39.95. ISBN: 978-1-925835-74-8**

**David Clune**

Honorary Associate, Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney.

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Terry Irving's biography of Vere Gordon Childe is an unusual one. It is a blend of the traditional 'life and times', a detailed exploration of Childe's ideological development, and a history of radical left politics in Australia and Britain. Irving is unashamedly a proponent of the last and obviously empathises with Childe. While Irving's personal beliefs and sympathy for his subject are undisguised, this does not compromise his meticulous research and superior scholarship. At times, however, Irving's use of left ideological terminology does mar his otherwise readable prose. Another problem is that, as Childe destroyed all his personal papers, he is, at times, a rather shadowy figure in the narrative. Particularly in his early years, Childe is often glimpsed through the lens of the recollections and papers of contemporaries. Because of the absence of Childe's papers, Irving is sometimes forced to fall back on statements that Childe may, might, probably have done this or been present at that.

Irving says that his biography seeks to understand Childe's life 'by placing him within the tradition of dissenting intellectuals of the left'. The book is about the central place 'held by socialist politics in [Childe's] 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' (pp. x-xi). What Irving calls Childe's 'first life' in politics occupies a much greater proportion of the book than his distinguished archaeological career.

Gordon Childe had one of the most conventional of upbringings. His father was an Anglican Minister from a well-connected British family with an upper-class parish, St Thomas's, North Sydney. His uncle on his mother's side was a Judge of the Supreme Court, Sir Alexander Gordon.

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From the beginning, Childe was a brilliant scholar, effortlessly carrying off prize after prize. After attending the elite Sydney Church of England Grammar School (Shore), he studied at the University of Sydney, graduating BA in 1914 with first class honours in Latin, Greek and Philosophy and the University Medal in Classics. Childe also won a prize for an essay on philosophy and a valuable travelling scholarship. While an undergraduate, Childe was exposed to the contemporary ferment of political and industrial upheaval. He became a radical leftist, with links to the Labor Party.

Childe enrolled at Oxford and began his studies just as World War One commenced. He moved further to the left, becoming anti-war, anti-imperialist, socialist and pacifist. Inevitably, his courageous espousal of unpopular beliefs aroused the antagonism of the academic, intelligence and military establishments. Childe's heterodox political views and academic brilliance - he took a First in Greats and began a promising career in archaeology - presented the authorities at Oxford with a problem. The solution was to ship him back to Australia in 1917 with a warning to local authorities that he was a dangerous radical.

Attempts by Childe to secure employment at Sydney University and the University of Queensland were blocked because of his adverse security record and open radicalism. He was active in the Labor Party and trade union movement and was a Marxist revolutionary in his beliefs. However, Childe never joined the Communist Party and had reservations about the Soviet Union.

In 1919, Childe was appointed Private Secretary to NSW ALP Leader John Storey. When Storey became Premier in 1920, Childe was appointed Research Officer in the Premier's Department. According to Irving, Childe enjoyed his role 'as an adviser and trouble-shooter for Storey's Government, the *entrée* it gave him to Labor's inner circles, and his notoriety in the anti-Labor press. In the public service he was a kind of *enfant terrible* ...' (p. 191). Storey was keen to have information on the latest overseas developments in progressive policy and legislation and in 1921 transferred Childe to the NSW Agent-General's Office in London to fulfil this function. When Labor was defeated in 1922, the incoming Nationalist Government dismissed him.

Childe used his inside experience of the ALP in NSW to write *How Labour Governs*, published in 1923. It was a scathing critique from a Marxist perspective of 'politicalism'. Driven by its 'ambition to govern the state, the Labor Party watered down its Labor-socialist objective, drowned the progressive espousal of internationalism in a tide of jingoistic militarism, and alienated unionists by its vacillating policy'. Forced to take direct action against employers 'by the indifference and treachery of the politicians, the unions turned to amalgamation' but what emerged was a giant undemocratic body, the Australian Workers' Union, which was

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controlled by corrupt opportunists (p. 234). Having delivered himself of this farewell blast, Childe revived his archaeological career.

In 1925, Childe published *The Dawn of European Civilisation*. It made his reputation and in 1927 he became Abercromby Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh. Irving says that his 'concepts of the Neolithic and Urban revolutions "rank among the most important theoretical advances" in the study of human cultural evolution'. Childe 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 books were translated into 21 languages' (p. ix).

From 1946-57, Childe was Professor of Prehistoric European Archaeology and Director of the Institute of Archaeology at the University of London. When he retired he decided to return to Australia. Irving paints a sad picture of Childe's final years: no close family, few friends, little money. He believed he had nothing more to contribute to archaeology, was disillusioned with contemporary Australian society, and had morbid fears about his declining health.

On 19 October 1957, Childe committed suicide by jumping off a cliff in the Blue Mountains. He arranged for it to look like an accident, an interpretation sustained by the Coroner. Childe wrote a letter to a colleague explaining his intention, asking that it remain unopened for ten years. It was not, in fact, published until 1980.

Typically, Childe's final statement provokes and resonates, particularly in this time of complex debate about the Coronavirus pandemic:

The progress of medical science has burdened society with a horde of parasites – rentiers, pensioners, and other retired persons whom society has to support and even to nurse ... I have always considered that a sane society would disembarass itself of such parasites by offering euthanasia as a crowning honour or even imposing it in bad cases , but certainly not condemning them to misery and starvation by inflation (p370).