PELICAN BOOKS

WHAT HAPPENED IN HISTORY

BY

GORDON CHILDE

PUBLISHED BY
PENGUIN BOOKS
HARMONDSWORTH MIDDLESEX ENGLAND
300, FOURTH AVENUE, NEW YORK, U.S.A.

PELICAN BOOKS

WHAT HAPPENED IN HISTORY

BY

GORDON CHILDE

PUBLISHED BY

PENGUIN BOOKS

HARMONDSWORTH MIDDLESEX ENGLAND

300, FOURTH AVENUE, NEW YORK, U.S.A.

PELICAN BOOKS

Advisory Editors: H. L. BEALES, Reader in Economic History, University of London: W. E. WILLIAMS, Director, the Army Bureau of Current Affairs; Secretary, the British Institute of Adult Education

---

WHAT HAPPENED IN HISTORY

BY

GORDON CHILDE

Drummond Young, Edinburgh

THE AUTHOR

PROFESSOR V. GORDON CHILDE, D.Litt., D.Sc., F.S.A., F.B.A., was born in Sydney, Australia, in April, 1892. He is a graduate of Sydney and Oxford Universities, and from 1919 to 1920 he held the post of Private Secretary to the Premier of New South Wales.

Besides travelling to and from Australia via both the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn, he has visited museums and archæological sites in most countries in Europe including Russia and Greece, and in Iraq, Egypt, Turkey and India.

In 1927 he was appointed the first Abercromby Professor of Prehistoric Archæology in the University of Edinburgh, and since then has directed numerous excavations in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but notably at the wonderfully preserved Stone Age village at Skara Brae in Orkney, which is visited every year by thousands of people.

Among the sixty-odd distinguished scientists and men of letters invited from all over the world to address the Conference of Arts and Sciences organised by Harvard University to celebrate its Tercentenary in 1936, Childe was selected to represent prehistoric archæology and was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters, while the University of Pennsylvania conferred upon him the honorary Doctorate of Science in 1937. He was visiting Professor at the University of California during the summer session of 1939, and in 1940 was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

Professor Childe is the author of several well-known books which include *The Dawn of European Civilisation*, *The Most Ancient East*, *The Prehistory of Scotland*, *Man Makes Himself* and *Prehistoric Communities in the British Isles*.

First Published 1942

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN FOR PENGUIN BOOKS LTD., BY
WYMAN & SONS LIMITED LONDON, READING AND FAKENHAM

CONTENTS

PREFACE

How has Man progressed during the several hundred thousand years of his existence on the Earth? That is the question to which this book offers an answer which does not pretend to be exhaustive. It is thus an extension of the account of Man's progress in the long ages before the dawn of written history advanced five years ago in *Man Makes Himself* (Watts & Co., 2s. 6d.). Indeed in chapters II–V I have had to recapitulate in a compressed form many events and conclusions set forth more fully there. But in other respects I have had to amplify what I then wrote to adjust it to the wider perspective. For in the subsequent chapters I trespass upon the domains of literary history in which written records disclose aspects of human endeavour that can only be inferred speculatively by prehistoric archæology. Yet here too I have tried to keep in the foreground the concrete archæological facts of the same kind as those available in prehistoric times. Finally, if only for considerations of space, I have focused attention on what seems from the standpoint of Europe and America in 1941 to be the main stream of human progress and even so have had to close my account some fifteen hundred years ago.

V. GORDON CHILDE.

Edinburgh, *October*, 1941.

I

ARCHÆOLOGY AND HISTORY

WRITTEN history contains a very patchy and incomplete record of what mankind has accomplished in parts of the world during the last five thousand years. The period surveyed is at best about one hundredth part of the time during which men have been active on our planet. The picture presented is frankly chaotic; it is hard to recognize in it any unifying pattern, any directional trends. Archæology surveys a period a hundred times as long. In this enlarged field of study it does disclose general trends, cumulative changes proceeding in one main direction and towards recognizable results.

Aided by archæology, history with its prelude prehistory becomes a continuation of natural history. The latter studies in the geological record the "evolution" of various species of living creatures as the result of "natural selection"—the survival and multiplication of those bodily adapted to their environments. Man is the last great species to emerge; in the geological record his fossil remains would occur in the topmost layers so that in this literal sense man is the highest product of the process. Prehistory can watch the survival and multiplication of this species through improvements in artificial and detachable equipment that secure the adaptation of human societies to their environments—and of their environments to them. And archæology can trace the same process in historical times with the additional aid of written records as well as in regions where the dawn of written history has been retarded. Without any change of method it can follow down to the present day the working out of trends discerned already in prehistory.

Our species, man in the widest sense, has succeeded in surviving and multiplying chiefly by improving his equipment for living, as I have explained at length in *Man Makes Himself*. As with other animals, it is chiefly through his equipment that man acts on and reacts to the external world, draws sustenance therefrom and escapes its perils—in technical language adapts

himself to his environment or even adjusts his environment to his needs. Man's equipment, however, differs significantly from that of other animals. These carry their whole equipment about with them as parts of their bodies; the rabbit carries paws to dig with, the lion claws and teeth for tearing his prey, the beaver carpenter's tusks, most beasts hairy or furry coats to keep in warmth—the tortoise even carries his house on his back. Man has very little equipment of this sort and has discarded some that he started with during prehistoric times. It is replaced by tools, extracorporeal organs that he makes, uses and discards at will; he makes picks and shovels for digging, weapons for killing game and enemies, adzes and axes for cutting wood, clothing to keep him warm in cold weather, houses of wood, brick or stone to provide shelter. Some very early "men" indeed had projecting canine teeth set in very massive jaws that would be quite dangerous weapons, but these have disappeared in modern man whose dentures will not inflict mortal wounds.

As with other animals, there is of course a bodily physiological basis to man's equipment. It may be summed up in two words, hands and brains. Relieved of the burden of carrying our bodies, our forefeet have developed into delicate instruments capable of an amazing variety of subtle and accurate movements. To control the latter and to link them up with impressions from outside received by the eye and other sense organs we have become possessed of a peculiarly complicated nervous system and an exceptionally big and complicated brain.

The detachable and extracorporeal character of the rest of human equipment has obvious advantages. It is more convenient and more adaptable than other animals' equipment. The latter fits its possessor for living in a particular environment under special conditions. The mountain hare passes the winter comfortably and safely on the snow-clad hills thanks to his changeable coat; he would be dangerously conspicuous in the warmer valleys. Men can discard their warm clothing if they move to a hotter climate and can adjust their costume to the landscape. A rabbit's paws are good digging tools, but cannot compete with a cat's as weapons, while feline paws are poor spades. Men can make both tools and weapons. In brief an animal's hereditary equipment is adapted to performing

a limited number of operations in a particular environment. Man's extracorporeal equipment can be adjusted to an almost infinite number of operations in almost any environment—" can be," note, not " is."

As against these advantages man has to learn not only to use but also to make his equipment. A chick soon finds itself equipped with feathers, wings, beak and claws. It certainly has to learn their use—how to keep its feathers clean for instance. But this is very simple and will not take long. A human infant arrives with no such outfit and it will not grow spontaneously. The round pebbles on the ground do not in themselves suggest knives. Many processes and stages must intervene before the wallaby's skin can be transferred to the child's back as a coat.

Even the simplest tool made out of a broken bough or a chipped stone is the fruit of long experience—of trials and errors, impressions noticed, remembered and compared. The skill to make it has been acquired by observation, by recollection and by experiment. It may seem an exaggeration, but it is yet true to say that any tool is an embodiment of *science*. For it is a practical application of remembered, compared and collected experiences of the same kind as are systematized and summarized in scientific formulæ, descriptions and prescriptions.

Happily the individual infant is not left to accumulate in its own person the requisite experience or itself to make all the trials and mistakes. A baby does not indeed inherit at birth a physical mechanism of nerve-paths stamped in the germ-plasm of the race and predisposing it to make automatically and *instinctively* the appropriate bodily movements. But it is born heir to a *social tradition*. Its parents and elders will teach it how to make and use equipment in accordance with the experience gathered by ancestral generations. And the equipment it uses is itself just a concrete expression of this social tradition. A tool is a social product and man is a social animal.

Because it has so much to learn, a human infant is peculiarly delicate and helpless, and its helplessness lasts longer than with the young of other animals. The physical counterpart of learning is the storing of impressions and the building up of connexions between the various nerve-centres in the brain.

Meanwhile the brain must keep on growing. To allow of such growth the skull-bones protecting the infant's brain remain very loosely joined together; only slowly do the junctions (or sutures) knit up. While the brain is thus unprotected it is very vulnerable; an infant can be killed terribly easily.

Helpless infancy being prolonged by these interrelated causes, if the species is to survive, at least one social group must keep together for several years until the infants are reared. In our species the natural family of parents and children is a more stable and durable association than among species whose young mature faster. In practice, however, human families seem generally to live together in larger societies comparable to the herds and packs of gregarious animals. Indeed man is to some extent a gregarious animal.

Now in human, as in animal, societies the elder generations transmit by example to the younger the collective experience accumulated by the group—what they in turn have learned in like fashion from their elders and parents. Animal education can all be done by example; a chick learns how to peck and what to peck at by copying the hen. For human infants who have so much to learn the imitative method would be fatally slow. In human societies instruction is by precept as well as by example. Human societies have gradually devised tools for communication between their members. In so doing they have brought forth a new sort of equipment which can conveniently be labelled *spiritual.*

Owing to the structure of the larynx, tongue muscles and other organs human beings in common with some other creatures are capable of emitting a very large range of noises that are technically called *articulate sounds.* Living in societies and possessing expansive brains, men have been able to invest these sounds with *conventional meanings.* By agreement sounds become *words*, signals for action and symbols for objects and events familiar to other members of the group. (Note incidentally that gestures too can be given meanings in the same way though less conveniently). The cries of birds and the bleats of sheep have meanings in this sense; on hearing the signal all members of the flock act in the appropriate way. It means to them at least action and provokes an appropriate response in the creatures' behaviour. Among men

spoken words (and of course also gestures) fulfil the same function, but on a tremendously richer scale.

Men's first words may perhaps have carried their meanings on the face of them. Our word "peewit" simulates the cry of the bird thus named. Paget suggests that the shape assumed by the lips in pronouncing a word may pictorially mimic the thing indicated. In any case such self-explanatory noises would not carry us very far. Most words used even by the lowest savages bear no recognizable similarity to what they denote. They are purely *conventional*; that is, meanings have to be attached to them artificially by some sort of tacit agreement between members of the society using them. The process becomes explicit when a conference of chemists agrees on the name for a new element. It is usually far more subtle.

It is just because the meanings of words are thus conventional that children have to be taught to talk. Learning to talk means essentially learning what meanings the society to which the child belongs attaches to noises that it can make. Incidentally this is a substantial addition to the formidable list of things a poor human infant has to learn. It certainly has a physical counterpart localized in well-defined tracts of the brain. (When these are injured the victim cannot understand what is said to him, i.e., cannot remember the meanings attached to the noises he hears.) Even the earliest "human" skulls bear marks of a swelling of the brain in the speech regions so that language seems as old and universal a human trait as tool-making.

Language transforms the process of social tradition; precept accelerates education. By example a mother can show her offspring what to do when a savage beast appears. But many young things find such concrete lessons fatal! By precept, she can explain in advance what to do if the savage beast does appear—a method of instruction much more economical of life! In general by imitating your fellows you learn how to act in a concrete case actually present. With the aid of language you can be taught how to meet an emergency before it arrives. Language is the vehicle for the transmission of the social heritage of experience; by its means experience—the results of trials and errors, what may happen and what to do—is collected and transmitted. Through social inheritance the young partake not only of the experience gained by their

physiological ancestors—which might conceivably be transmitted "in the blood" by biological inheritance—but also that of all their group. Not only can parents describe to their descendants the crises of their lives and how they countered them. All the members of a society using the same conventions in language can tell their fellows what they have seen, heard, suffered and done. Human experience can be *pooled*. In learning to make and use your equipment you are being initiated into this pooled experience.

Language is more than a mere vehicle of tradition. It affects what is transmitted. The socially accepted meaning of a word (or other symbol) is almost necessarily somewhat *abstract*. The word "banana" stands for a *class* of objects having in common certain visible, tangible, odorous and above all edible qualities. In using it we make abstraction of, that is, we ignore as irrelevant, details—the number of spots on its skin, its position on a tree or in a trap and so on—that are qualities of any real individual banana. Every word, however gross and material its meaning, possesses something of this abstract character. By its very nature language involves classification. On the practical side, by example you learn to imitate accurately and in detail a particular set of manipulative movements. By precept you can be taught the sort of movements to perform, but you are still left a little room for variation. In engineering the contrast between apprenticeship and a university education really goes back to this. Language makes tradition rational.

Reasoning has been defined as "the ability to solve problems without going through a physical process of trial and error." Instead of trying to do a thing with your hands and perhaps burning your fingers, you do it in your head using *ideas*—images or symbols of the actions which would be involved. Other animals than men certainly behave as if they reasoned in this sense. Faced with a banana midway up a tube, open at both ends but too long to reach up, a chimpanzee discovered how to push the banana with a stick from one end and then grab it from the other, without going through a number of futile movements, by sitting and "reasoning." The ape must have imagined the banana in various non-existent positions before it hit upon the trick. But it did not have to go very far from the concrete situation with which it was actually

confronted. What is distinctive of human reasoning is that it can go immensely farther from the actual present situation than any other animal's reasoning ever seems to get it. In this distinctive advance language has surely been a very great help.

Reasoning and all that we call thinking, including the chimpanzee's, must involve mental operations with what psychologists call *images*. A visual image, a mental picture of say a banana is always liable to be a picture of a particular banana in a particular setting. A word on the contrary is, as explained, more general and abstract, having eliminated just those accidental features that give individuality to any real banana. Mental images of words (pictures of the sound or of the muscular movements entailed in uttering it) form very convenient counters for thinking with. Thinking with their aid necessarily possesses just that quality of abstractness and generality that animal thinking seems to lack. Men can think, as well as talk, about the class of objects called " bananas," the chimpanzee never gets further than " that banana in that tube." In this way the social instrument termed language has contributed to what is grandiloquently described as " man's emancipation from bondage to the concrete."

To reason is to operate with symbols " in the head " and not with things or actions in the external world. Conventional words are symbols, though by no means the only kind. You can put such symbols together and combine them in all sorts of ways in your head without moving a muscle. The term " idea " is generally used for what words and other symbols denote, mean, or refer to. In a sense " banana " does not refer to anything you can see, touch, smell, or even eat, but only to an idea—the " ideal banana." Still this idea is happily represented by plenty of substantial edible bananas even if none of them quite come up to the standard of the ideal banana. But in society men make names for and talk about ideas which cannot in fact be seen, smelt, handled or tasted like bananas—ideas such as two-headed eagle, mana, electricity, cause. All these are social products like the words that express them. Societies behave as if they stood for real things. In fact men seem to be impelled to far more strenuous and sustained action by the idea of two-headed eagle, immortality or freedom than by the most succulent bananas !

Without going in for any metaphysical subtleties, socially approved and sustained ideas that inspire such action must be treated by history as just as real as those which stand for the more substantial objects of archæological study. In practice ideas form as effective an element in the environment of any human society as do mountains, trees, animals, the weather and the rest of external nature. Societies, that is, behave as if they were reacting to a spiritual environment as well as to a material environment. To deal with this spiritual environment they behave as if they needed a spiritual equipment just as much as they need a material equipment of tools.

This spiritual equipment is not confined to ideas which can be—and are—translated into tools and weapons that work successfully in controlling and transforming external nature, nor yet to the language which is the vehicle for ideas. It includes also what is often termed society's ideology—its superstitions, religious beliefs, loyalties and artistic ideals. Apparently in pursuit of ideologies and inspired by ideas, men perform actions of a kind never observed among other animals. At least 50,000 years ago those strange-looking creatures termed Neanderthal men ceremonially buried their dead children and relatives, and provided them with food and tools. Every known human society to-day, however savage, performs rites—often quite painful—and abstains from pleasures that are available to them. The motives for—and stimuli to—these actions and abstentions to-day, and presumably in the past too, are socially sanctioned ideas of the sort denoted by our words "immortality," "magic," "god." Such actions are strange to the rest of the animal kingdom, presumably because brutes do not use a language symbolism and hence cannot form such abstract ideas.

Flints over a hundred thousand years old seem to have been fashioned with more care and delicacy than was requisite for mere utilitarian efficiency. It looks as if their author had wanted to make an implement that was not only serviceable but also beautiful. More than 15,000 years ago people began painting their bodies and hanging round their necks shells and beads, made with considerable labour. To-day all over the world we find people knocking out their teeth, binding their feet, deforming their bodies with corsets, or submitting to some other mutilation in obedience to the dictates of fashion.

Such behaviour again seems peculiar to the human species. It results from and gives expression to an ideology.

So with the aid of abstract ideas men have evolved and come to need new stimuli to action beyond the universal urges of hunger, sex, anger and fear. And these new ideal motives come to be necessary for life itself. An ideology, however remote from obvious biological needs, is found in practice to be biologically useful—that is, favourable to the species' survival. Without such spiritual equipment not only do societies tend to disintegrate, but the individuals composing them may just stop bothering to keep alive. The "destruction of religion" among primitive peoples is always cited by experts as a major cause in their extinction in contact with white civilization. Of the Eddystone Islanders Rivers wrote: "By stopping the practice of head-hunting the new (i.e. British) rulers were abolishing an institution which had its roots in the religious life of the people. The natives have responded to that by becoming apathetic. They have ceased to increase sufficiently to prevent the diminution of the island's population."

Evidently societies of men "cannot live by bread alone." But if "every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" does not directly or indirectly promote the growth, the biological and economic prosperity of the society that sanctifies them, that society and its god with it will vanish ultimately. It is this natural selection that guarantees that *in the long run* the ideals of a society are "just translations and inversions in men's minds of the material." The religion of the Eddystone Islanders provided a motive for living and kept an economic system functioning. But in practice head-hunting kept down the numbers of the islanders. So it made improvement in material equipment superfluous, and eventually left the islanders a prey to British conquerors. It is from the standpoint of the social group that an ideology is judged by historical selection. But the verdict may be long delayed.

An ideology is evidently a social product. Not only are the words which support its ideas produced by life in society and unthinkable apart therefrom; the ideas, too, owe their reality, their power to influence action, to their acceptance by society. Seemingly absurd beliefs can win and maintain credence provided every member of the group accept them

and has been taught to believe in them from childhood. It will never occur to any one to question a belief universally held. Few of us have any better grounds for believing in germs than for believing in witches. Our society inculcates the former belief and ridicules the latter, but other societies reverse the judgments. Of course a number of acknowledged experts have seen germs under the microscope. But still more experts in mediæval Europe and in negro Africa have seen witches functioning. The superiority of our belief is in the long run established if antiseptics and vaccines succeed better in preventing deaths, and so permitting social growth, than do incantations and witch-burnings.

Not the least important function of an ideology is to hold society together and lubricate its workings. And in this guise at least ideology reacts on technology and material equipment. For, like spiritual equipment, material equipment is a social product not only in the sense that it springs from social tradition. In practice the production and use of tools also requires co-operation between members of a society. To-day it is self-evident that modern Europeans and Americans get food, housing, clothing and satisfaction for other needs only as a result of the co-operation of a vast and highly complicated productive organization or *economy*. Cut off from this we should be very uncomfortable and should probably starve. Theoretically "primitive man," with simpler wants and more rudimentary equipment, could shift for himself alone. In practice even the rudest savages live in groups organized to co-operate in getting food and preparing equipment as well as in performing ceremonies. Among the Australian aborigines, for instance, we find a division of labour between the sexes in hunting and gathering as well as in making implements and vessels. There is also a division of the product of this co-operative activity.

Even the student of material culture has to study a society as a co-operative organization for producing means to satisfy its needs, for reproducing itself—and for producing new needs. He wants to see its economy working. But its economy affects, and is affected by, its ideology. The "materialist concept of history" asserts that the economy determines the ideology. It is safer and more accurate to repeat in other words what has been stated already: in the long run an ideology can survive