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# What Happened in History

Gordon Childe

历史



PELICAN BOOKS

WHAT HAPPENED IN HISTORY



Professor V. Gordon Childe, D.LITT., D.SC., F.S.A., F.B.A., was born in Sydney, Australia, in April 1892. He was 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.

In 1927 he was appointed the first Abercromby Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology in the University of Edinburgh, and directed numerous excavations in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but notably at the wonderfully preserved Stone Age village at Skara Brae in Orkney. From 1946 to 1956 he was Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology and Director of the Institute of Archaeology in the University of London.

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Among the sixty-odd distinguished scientists and men of letters invited from all over the world to address the Conference of Arts and Sciences organized by Harvard University to celebrate its Tercentenary in 1936, Childe was selected to represent prehistoric archaeology and was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters, while the University of Pennsylvania conferred upon him an 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. His own University of Sydney awarded him an honorary LITT.D. in 1957. He died that year.

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



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WITH A NEW FOREWORD

BY PROFESSOR GRAHAME CLARK



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## FOREWORD

*by Professor Grahame Clark*

PROFESSOR V. GORDON CHILDE, who died in the Blue Mountains of his native Australia in 1957 soon after retiring from the Directorship of the London University Institute of Archaeology, was one of the great prehistorians of the world. More perhaps than any other man he showed how by using the data won by archaeologists and natural scientists it was possible to gain a new view of what constituted human history. Inevitably some of the books in which he summarized, with brilliant mastery of detail, the current situation in different fields of prehistoric archaeology have begun to lose something of their value for modern students. The general works in which he opened up new and often vast perspectives on the other hand are in many cases classics that repay constant re-reading and are likely to retain their value for a long time to come. Of these one of the most important is the present volume, originally published in 1941 and last revised in 1954.

In approaching this book it is important to remember two important facts about the author. Ever since he went up to Oxford he was fascinated, as perhaps only one could be who came from a different continent, by the unique quality of European civilization: to understand his approach to prehistory we must accept his word, printed after his death, that he took up the subject precisely to find an answer to this question. The scope even of a work as comprehensive as *What Happened in History* is bound up with and limited by this concern: the New World, like Australasia, is omitted and only glancing references are made to the great focus of civilization in the Far East. Childe's concern was confessedly with what, from a European point of view, is the 'main tradition', from its sources in Egypt and Mesopotamia to the confluence of these in the Hellenistic



Mediterranean. His book begins with the Old Stone Age and ends to all intents and purposes with the collapse of the Roman Empire.

A second point to remember is that he made no secret of his interest in Marxism. He found it useful to suppose that societies at each phase of social evolution rested on definite productive forces which shaped their lives, but which harboured contradictions that in due course compelled the emergence of new productive forces and a new cycle of social evolution. He thus found a model which not merely accounted for the way in which societies functioned at any particular time, but, what was even more important in some respects, provided some explanation for the dynamism of the historical process. Childe had a great contempt for what he called 'postage-stamp archaeology' and a corresponding predilection for a model that enabled him to handle in a meaningful manner the myriad facts gathered by archaeologists and historians. He was profoundly impressed by the limitations imposed on societies at the level of savagery by the low density of population and uncertainty of food-supply normally associated with reliance on hunting and gathering. Conversely he tended to lay special stress on the liberating effect of the domestication of animals and plants, the basic achievement which underlay his Neolithic Revolution. Neolithic barbarism in turn he saw to have been handicapped by a surplus too small to withstand natural disaster and by a self-sufficiency which meant that expansion could only be achieved by enlarging the area of settlement, a solution inherently wasteful since it could only be achieved in the end through conflict. This is why he stressed the importance of achieving a surplus which was reliable and large enough to support urban life and the employment of specialists like metal-workers, priests, and rulers, an achievement which for him constituted a veritable Urban Revolution. But the urban civilizations of Egypt, Sumer, and the Indus Valley were no more immune from the effects of inborn contradictions than the Neolithic peasantries had been: to mention only two, the concen-

tration of purchasing power in comparatively few hands prevented an adequate expansion of the market, and the divorce between craftsmen and literate members of society constituted an effective drag on technical advance. The fundamental importance of the adoption of iron for tools and weapons, in place of the relatively much more expensive copper and bronze, lay in the fact that it so to say democratized basic activities like agriculture, industry, and warfare: if, to begin with, cheap iron weapons allowed relatively barbarous societies to topple over ancient civilizations, iron tools ultimately made possible the emergence of Classical civilization and so in due course of our own.

Such a bare outline gives no adequate idea of the range of material presented, and no intelligent reader can read this exciting book without being led to question the model which the author is at no pains to conceal. Certain factual revisions are needed especially for the earlier prehistoric period in which research has recently been so rapid. Certain of these are listed as footnotes in the text, in the knowledge that the author himself went to the greatest pains to keep his works up-to-date.



## AUTHOR'S 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.); indeed in Chapters 2-5 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 archaeology. Yet here, too, I have tried to keep in the foreground the concrete archaeological 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*

In the twelve years that have elapsed since the first publication of this work a remarkable number of new archaeological discoveries have enriched the picture of man's cultural development, particularly in its earlier stages, without, however, modifying the general outlines of the scene. The most relevant and exciting of these new results have been included in the present edition, but no substantial rewriting has been needed nor attempted.

*March 1954*



## ARCHAEOLOGY 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. Archaeology 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 archaeology, 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 archaeology 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 formulas, 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