

Gordon Childe at St John's Lodge: some early recollections

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Nancy Sandars was among the first group of students to be taught by Gordon Childe after he left Edinburgh, where he had been the Abercromby Professor of Archaeology, to become the first full-time Director of the Institute of Archaeology in 1946. The Institute was then housed in St John's Lodge in Regent's Park. She recalls those early days with affection, and describes how Childe interacted with his students.

My first experience of St John's Lodge was on the eve of the Second World War when, after digging on the Wrekin in Shropshire with Kathleen Kenyon, I answered an SOS to help dismantle the archaeological collections and pack them up. I have a terrifying memory of standing at the top of the basement stairs and throwing pots down to be dexterously caught by Kathleen standing at the foot. However, my academic work there began in 1947, the second year of its postwar existence as the Institute of Archaeology, and Gordon Childe's first full year as Director and Professor of European Archaeology.

My years at the Institute were some of the best I can remember. I took the post-graduate diploma in western European archaeology and, because of a spell of sickness, I had nearly three years there. Gordon was not only a great teacher but he also became a great friend. In his book on Childe, Bruce Trigger points out that Childe's move to London in 1946 "provided him with his first opportunity to influence the rising generation of professional archaeologists through his teaching" at a "creative phase in his thinking that significantly altered and developed his earlier contributions".¹ However, in this short note I am not concerned with these large issues but rather with the impact of his thought and personality on the students he taught.

Gordon's method of teaching was peculiar to himself and I know of no-one else who used it. Whatever the subject of a lecture was to be, say the Neolithic of the Danube lands, or Scandinavian megalithic burials, he would first hold a tutorial and give us a full reading list, and it was only *after* we had given in our essays that he would lecture on the subject. By then we understood very well what he was talking about and could appreciate the sometimes unexpected points and views he gave us, which made it a very stimulating experience. Tutorials were a rare pleasure, for there was always some hot news from different parts of the world that Gordon would share with us, which gave us a delightful feeling of being in the forefront of discoveries and events.

The archaeological world was then so small that Gordon knew everyone personally and was in constant correspondence with many of them. There was an amused and amusing rivalry with Stuart Piggott, who had succeeded Childe at Edinburgh, as to which of them had the latest news from, say, Vinca or the Heuneburg. Instead of keeping these exciting matters for professionals and his own work, Gordon had a way of treating first- and second-year students as though we were on a level with himself, and that *of course* we knew what was going on in Sicily with Bernabó Brea or in Central Asia with Professor Tolstov, all of which made life very exciting for beginners. When some particularly recondite bit of information was being quoted he would gently comment "You will find it in a footnote in the *Dawn*",² referring to his famous book *The dawn of European civilization*, first published in 1925, but updated many times since. My copy is dated 1947 and I must have acquired it in the year I started work at the Institute.

When there were visiting celebrities, after the lecture we would be invited upstairs to meet in Gordon's study, a large

room looking out over Regent's Park, with his fine collection of books on the walls. The atmosphere was relaxed and informal, and there might be jokes made on his assertion that he never bought a book because they were always presented by the authors, although once there was embarrassment when a book presented was found to have uncut pages.

Gordon was extremely hospitable, with a slightly surprising old-world kind of formal courtesy. Best of all was to be able to listen in to some of the discussions, which made us feel that prehistory was being written. He was entirely un-set in his ideas and prepared to change once-held opinions. In answer to some query, he would tell the startled questioner "this is a low chronology week" and then go over all the arguments from a new stand point, never buttressed in by immutable opinions. Ideas were currency, there to be used, you could take and modify them as you chose, so long as something workable came out of it. One was aware, in the background of his thinking, of the rigorous training of the classicist. There was nothing soft in his dealings with students. If anyone was less than serious in their approach to the subject, they got short shrift.

In his first year at St John's Lodge he made a point of entertaining all members of the Institute separately to lunch at the zoo, where the Fellows of the Royal Zoological Society had a very pleasant dining room. Occasionally, with distinguished visitors, there was dinner at the Athenaeum club in Pall Mall. His consideration showed too when non-archaeologists were in the party and he would take care to draw them into the talk. For some, this consideration extended to great acts of kindness and practical help. He was also very adaptable and when he spent a Christmas at my



Figure 1 Nancy Sandars (left) with a Swiss colleague at the conference dinner during the third congress of the *Union Internationale des Sciences Préhistoriques et Protohistoriques (UISPP)* in Zürich, August 1950.

home in the Cotswolds, he took a traditional English Christmas in his stride.

St John's Lodge was a fine building, light and roomy with a good library and lecture room. The walk in summer across the park and round the Inner Circle was very pleasant. In the bitter winter of 1947 I remember skating on the lake. From the lawn behind the house one heard occasional squawks and roarings from the zoo, a short walk northwards. I also remember an outdoor session in the imposing forecourt, when Charles McBurney demonstrated flint knapping – a rather gory business for the flints were sharp. Occasionally we had lectures on western Asiatic archaeology from Professor Max Mallowan, which widened our perspective; and of course we had read Gordon's own books, including *New light on the most ancient East* (first published in 1934). Professor Frederick Zeuner taught environmental subjects, Ian Cornwall lectured on animal bones, and there was also photography, surveying, pot mending and metal preservation. We went to University College for anthropology, but I think that Childe himself taught almost all the straight archaeology, including the Old Stone Age, although this overlapped with Zeuner's lectures.

At least once a year there was an expedition. I think that Sinclair Hood suggested the first, to Avebury, but he left for Greece in 1947 having started his diploma the year before Gordon came to London. My diary tells me that we went again to Avebury at Whitsun 1948. We had a packed weekend, with barrows and the Avenue, Windmill Hill and Silbury Hill, and of course the museum, and, for good measure, a full moon that year over the stones. We walked a lot, Gordon in his customary shorts, suffering a little in the hot sun, and we drove a lot too. I had my father's old Wolseley and found myself commanded to drive across downland to some barrow on the distant skyline, regardless of minor impediments en route. The evenings were times for talk and listening to Gordon's reminiscences of famous digs in far away places.

Looking back on those years so long ago, I am amazed by our good fortune, and thankful that they came when the war had retreated a little from our memories and a new freedom was opening out for us: freedom to travel and meet foreign archaeologists, to go to conferences and visit museums (Figs 1 and 2), led and prompted by Gordon. But most of all I am grateful for the opportunity of contact with his unique brain and personality.



Figure 2 Gordon Childe with fellow prehistorians visiting the museum at Schaffhausen during the third congress of the UISPP in Zürich, August 1950: foreground from left to right: Kathleen Kenyon, Gordon Childe, Richard Atkinson, Stuart Piggott, Grahame Clark, Christopher Hawkes.

Notes

1. B. G. Trigger, *Gordon Childe: revolutions in archaeology*, 124 (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980).
2. This phrase forms the refrain in Stuart Piggott's witty "Ballade to a Great Prehistorian", written c. 1934/35 and quoted in full on pp. 158–9 of Sally Green's *Prehistorian: a biography of V. Gordon Childe* (Bradford-on-Avon: Moonraker Press, 1981). The first stanza is particularly apposite:
 "When sounds of verbal conflict fill the air,
 And archaeologists, that curious few,
 Debate some problem or in turn prepare
 To build whole cultures on the slightest clue,
 Then soon or late is heard the speaker who
 Says to the questioning novice – shy,
 forlorn
 And diffident – 'I can't explain to you:
 You'll find it in a footnote in *The dawn*.'"