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2017

The fatal lure of politics

Rowan Cahill

University of Wollongong, rowanc@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

R. Cahill 2017 The fatal lure of politics Radical Sydney/Radical History <http://radicalsdney.blogspot.com.au/p/radical-ruminations.html>

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Abstract

After many years of scholarship, teaching in the academy, and activism, colleague Terry Irving is putting together what he envisages being the definitive account of the life and politics of Australianborn leftist archaeologist and prehistorian Vere Gordon Childe (1892-1957). Best known in Australia for his pioneering, seminal critical account of the Australian labour movement in and out of Parliament, *How Labour Governs* (1923), Childe is more widely known internationally for his pioneering work in prehistory, author of 26 books on archaeology and history, and at the time of his suicide in 1957 in the Blue Mountains (NSW), probably Australia's most translated author.

Keywords

fatal, lure, politics

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

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“THE FATAL LURE OF POLITICS”

by Rowan Cahill

[Originally published on the ‘Radical Ruminations’ page of *Radical Sydney/Radical History* blog, 25 January 2017]

After many years of scholarship, teaching in the academy, and activism, colleague Terry Irving is putting together what he envisages being the definitive account of the life and politics of Australian-born leftist archaeologist and prehistorian Vere Gordon Childe (1892-1957). Best known in Australia for his pioneering, seminal critical account of the Australian labour movement in and out of Parliament, *How Labour Governs* (1923), Childe is more widely known internationally for his pioneering work in prehistory, author of 26 books on archaeology and history, and at the time of his suicide in 1957 in the Blue Mountains (NSW), probably Australia’s most translated author.

Irving’s ‘Childe Project’ is the result of nearly three decades of research nationally and internationally, undertaken as time permitted during the conduct of personal life and employment. It is planned in three parts. Part 1 will treat the period 1892-1927, from Childe’s birth, through his radicalisation at Sydney and Oxford universities, the ways this variously played out in the anti-war and socialist ferment of World War 1, and in the post-war rough and tumble of Australian labour/Labor politics, to his first academic position in archaeology. Part 2 will examine Childe’s politics, in particular his evolution and formulation of radical democracy. Part 3 will treat Childe’s long academic career in the UK, and his end days in Australia, and explore the relationship Childe developed between scholarship and politics. Irving intends to conclude with reflections on the important questions Childe’s life and work raise about radical democracy. Irving frames these thus: “Is there virtue in political life when it is lived apart from the state? Ought the masses to be self-governing or governed by their betters? Is it better to release or to tame the savage instincts of democracy?”

With the working title *The Fatal Lure of Politics*, Irving’s work in progress is taking place publicly, online and with open access, the chapters posted on Irving’s website, ‘Savage Democracy’ as they are completed.¹ This incremental and public approach is reminiscent of the way in which Irving and colleague R. Connell developed their classic study *Class Structure in Australian History* (1980) during the 1970s, with typed/roned chapters circulated widely prior to eventual publication.²

The chapters online to date demonstrate deep familiarity with the life and work of Childe, and there is much that has not been made public previously. However Irving has decided to retain control over his intellectual property by not making the footnotes available at this stage. Having been privy to

¹ <http://www.savagedemocracy.net>

² For a discussion of this book, including its genesis, see Terry Irving and Raewyn Connell, “Scholars and Radicals: Writing and Re-thinking *Class Structure in Australian History*”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, Volume 40, issue 1, 2016, pp. 3-15.

these, I can attest to their complexity, depth, and thoroughness, indicating deep and original research in archives and libraries in Australia, the UK, and Europe.

Apart from contesting and countering many myths and much nonsense about the life and times of Childe, what Irving is doing overall is bringing his own lifetime of activism, work, scholarship, and thought to bear upon Childe, examining some profound political questions, and modelling the writing of radical history, demonstrating how a past-life and time, deeply and radically lived, can offer much to the present and to the future.

Rowan Cahill

University of Wollongong

25 January 2017