

# Vere Gordon Childe Biography

## Vere Gordon Childe

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# Biography

The Australian prehistorian and archeologist Vere Gordon Childe (1892-1957) pioneered in the systematic study of European prehistory of the 3d and 2d millenniums B.C. and showed how technological advances marked the birth of human civilizations.

On April 14, 1892, V. Gordon Childe was born in Sydney, New South Wales. He studied at Oxford University under Sir Arthur Evans and John Linton Myers. His studies there concerning the relation of archeology and Indo-Aryan languages led to *The Dawn of European Civilization* (1925; 6th ed. 1957) and *The Aryans* (1926).

Childe became the first Abercromby professor of prehistoric archeology at the University of Edinburgh in 1927 and taught there until 1946. From 1928 to 1931 he supervised the excavation of the Skara Brae Stone Age village in the Orkney Islands, Scotland. In his evolution as a scholar Childe, like all 19th- and early-20th-century prehistorians, was strongly influenced by Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and by the positivism of Auguste Comte, Max Weber, and Sir Edward B. Tylor.

Childe's aim was to form a truly international approach to prehistoric studies in order to understand how civilizations arose. His method was based on an integrative principle. He related the known events of history to the data of natural history so as to form a total picture of how human civilization had developed. He studied the legal, political, economic, religious, and sociological structures of primitive and developing societies and linked the relevant studies with anthropology, geology, biology, zoology, and paleontology. His *Man Makes Himself* (1936) and *Social Evolution* (1951) are prime examples of his power of synthesis.

For Childe the invention of writing was a primary index of civilization. He maintained that the invention of writing by ancient peoples always coincided with a critical threshold in their economic and demographic structure. At that moment they had achieved a certain economic surplus, a definite preoccupation with such things as calendrical astronomy, geometry, and arithmetic, and some literary occupations mainly of a religious bent. In addition, their population involved a more complex sociopolitical organization than ever before. Childe used the term "civilization" to refer to this critical turning point rather than to any qualitative character of the civilization in terms of technological, artistic, and leisure indexes.

Childe was director of the Institute of Archaeology at the University of London from 1946 to 1956. He died on Oct. 19, 1957, on Mt. Victoria, New South Wales.