

Life at the Institute of Archaeology, 1952–54

Peter Gathercole

After reading history and archaeology at Cambridge, Peter Gathercole (Fig. 1) came to the Institute, then housed in St John's Lodge in Regent's Park, to enrol for the two-year Diploma in European Prehistoric Archaeology. Here he recalls his academic, political and domestic life in London, and his first excavations. His lifelong interest in V. Gordon Childe's academic and political ideas, pursued during his subsequent career in New Zealand and Britain, dates from those formative years at the Institute.

My years at the Institute were split into four often strongly contrasting parts. Primarily, there were the terms at St John's Lodge, the quietly decaying Regency mansion that fitted so appropriately, in its atmosphere, with the evidence of bomb damage still evident elsewhere in London. Secondly, there was the home life my wife Falmai and I had in our one room in Hackney, made exciting and consistently demanding following the birth of our son Jonathan in November 1953. Falmai had taken a degree in English at Bedford College, close to the Institute in Regent's Park, from whose hall of residence I had sometimes left by a back door late on a Sunday night to race for the bus back to Cambridge, to get into college before midnight. So, I was already familiar with the many charms of the area before I arrived at the Institute. Fortunately, I had a grant from Essex County Council, but, especially after Jonathan was born, we became very poor. To save money, I cycled to and from the Institute as often as possible, the route carefully worked out from the London A-to-Z to avoid busy main roads. This journey revealed, among other things, impressive Islington squares, nowadays reputedly thronged by wealthy Blairites. I especially liked the house (with blue plaque) where George Orwell had spent his last days; what would that trenchant sprite have said of its milieu now? We liked Hackney and the view over the Lea valley. Among memories that stand out is Coronation Day in 1953, when it rained all day (there were no lectures), and we went to the cinema in Dalston, feeling smug.

A third part of my life, however, was very different from that at the Institute, although it had links with the friends we soon made in Hackney. Our landlords were members of the Communist Party, whom we had met through comrades known well in Cambridge, where I had been active in the party's student branch. On arrival in London I was asked by the party's National Student Committee to help organize a Student Peace Conference (in those Cold War days this was neither easy nor likely to have any significant positive results, but I regarded it as a necessary

commitment). This meant, however, that for a year I was co-opted onto the National Student Committee, where, among others, I worked with the brilliant and ebullient Raphael Samuel from Balliol College, Oxford. He became well known later as a tutor at Ruskin College, and as an editor of the *New Left Review*. His death a few years ago still leaves a scar on the memory. It was agreed that I would not undertake routine party work in Hackney (which Falmai did as a matter of course), but rather would concentrate on my archaeology. Such had been the policy with students since the mid-1930s, not least at Cambridge; indeed, there, if you attained less than an upper-second class in any examination prior to Part II of the Tripos, the party's branch committee wanted to know why – as did one's senior tutor, of course. So, life was hard and busy, but passionately enjoyable much of the time.

The diploma course at the Institute was marvellous. Despite my time at Cambridge I came to London knowing very little archaeology – and the fieldwork I did in the vacations (described below) was mostly on medieval sites, where knowledge, especially of the pottery, was then very limited. So, what I knew was book-bound. But at Cambridge I had learned at least how to tackle the basic literature, and I had gone to lectures by Miles Burkitt, Grahame Clark, Dorothy Garrod, Harry Godwin and, above all, the immensely learned and idiosyncratic and “Toty” de Navarro.¹ From the latter, I, awestruck, had acquired some understanding of the complexities of the European Bronze and Iron Ages, and of the need to have some comprehension of the German and French sources, with their emphasis on stone-tool and ceramic typologies. And I had begun to tackle the works of Gordon Childe, both *The dawn of European civilization* and *The Danube in prehistory*.² In this I was guided by a contemporary at Peterhouse, Jack Golson, who was then beginning research on deserted villages in Lincolnshire and was soon to become, at Auckland University College, the first university appointee in prehistory in New Zealand. Our friendship was later cemented by mutual research interests in the Pacific and it remains as strong today.³ Although political demands sometimes



Figure 1 Peter Gathercole at the Captain Cook monument in Vache Park, Buckinghamshire, May 1995. The monument was erected in 1780–81 by Sir Hugh Palliser, Cook's patron and owner of Vache Park.

intervened, I went to every lecture I could, whether relevant to the diploma syllabus or not. So, I listened to Childe, Zeuner, Mallowan, Wheeler, Kenyon, Cornwall and others.⁴ I wanted the broad as well as the narrower picture, to fill in the detail, and to be in a position to argue out the limitations of archaeological method by defining, for example, the relationships between material base and superstructure. How deterministic was British archaeology at that time in its perception and use of theory? I was looking for answers.

Slowly, I began to think through these issues. I was of course also a good, if somewhat simplistic, empiricist in learning, for example, the facts of the Wessex Culture and the possible implications of the amber trade in continental Europe.⁵ I especially relished Zeuner's lectures, with their twin emphases on problems of dating and on Pleistocene and post-Pleistocene environments. I remember one warm dark evening in early spring, with the window open in his small crowded room, as he talked of sabre-tooth tigers; suddenly there came the roar of a big cat from the zoo across the Park – much laughter. And, although Kathleen Kenyon lectured mainly on Palestine, she also spoke of her pre-war excavations at Leicester, and on Iron Age hill forts.⁶ Later, in New Zealand, I sometimes remembered



Figure 2 Gordon Childe at Orkney airport in 1954 or 1955, when he was directing excavation of the megalithic tomb of Maes Howe at Stenness, Orkney.

her descriptions of hill forts when I visited more structurally complex Maori pa, which somewhat resemble them.

But Childe's teaching dominated, and he was as productive as ever (Fig. 2). Those years, I realized later, were also part of the gestation period of the sixth and last (1957) edition of *The dawn*, and of the three books he published in 1956: *Piecing together the past*, *Society and knowledge* and *A short introduction to archaeology*, all works crucial to an understanding of his thinking at that time. Some of his former students have discounted Childe's lecturing abilities, but to me he was a superb teacher; and if he mumbled at times in lectures, or wandered off the presumed central point to tell us about some new piece of evidence or a novel interpretation recently arrived in the mail from a colleague in Denmark or Leningrad, so what? He treated his students as on a par with himself, at least in the learning process.⁷

Childe expected both regular attendance at lectures and essays to be delivered punctually. His personal diffidence could come across when he offered self-criticism, or in a shy smile when passing on the stairs. By contrast, his openness was evident when he waved at one across the scruffy, open-for-all tea room – "Ah! Cake!" I can still hear him say, when once someone brought in a birthday gift for the staff. When our son Jonathan was born in the midst of frantic, sleepless work for an essay on the Mesolithic, I was immediately granted ten days' extension ("Enough?",

Childe asked). He probably knew of my politics, but we never discussed them, nor Marxist theory. It did not seem appropriate at the time. Actually, I was not clear how orthodox or not his views on Marxism then were, having read little of his writings in that area. Indeed, at Cambridge, in an essay on Childe's *Social evolution* (1951) I had surprised Grahame Clark by claiming that Childe's final argument was muddled and inconclusive. I did not retain this arrogance at the Institute. I still had much to do working through Childe's other Marxist writings, and it was many years before I appreciated the extent to which his views on Marxism changed in his lifetime.⁸

This brings to mind a bizarre experience. After the May Day rally in Trafalgar Square in 1954, Falmai and I happened to meet Childe near South Africa House. I felt too diffident to ask if he had been on the march. But we agreed that there had been a good turn-out. If I had known then what I do now about his militant record in New South Wales after the First World War,⁹ I would not have been so hesitant. As a budding prehistorian, I wanted more than anything an entry into the study of social anthropology, so that I could treat the two subjects comparatively. In this respect, I found Childe's lectures on social anthropology a godsend, although they were not generally popular. But they dealt with much of the relevant ethnographic literature, which gave me the entrée I needed.

What of the fourth part of my life at the time? I lacked both field experience and money, and so rescue excavations for the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Works during the vacations were the

solution. Here I was very lucky. I had met John Hurst, then an assistant inspector at the Ministry, through Jack Golson. John was always looking for supervisors for rescue digs. He took me on. I worked twice at a medieval and later site adjacent to Oakham Castle, Rutland; at St Benedict's Gates (also medieval), Norwich, as no. 2 to Jack (Fig. 3); and at Roman Clausentum (in present-day Southampton), overseen at the latter by the kind but formidable Molly Cotton.¹⁰ I also dug at the medieval site of Thurgarton Priory, Nottinghamshire, for Boots (the chemists), an opportunity that was put my way by Childe himself. Henry Hodges had worked there previously, and I was followed by Bernard Wailes.¹¹ Some weeks before the dig began, John Hurst and I were grilled by a very superior director of Boots on why the Ministry of Works had scheduled the site, before we all visited it in a cold March wind, propelled there in a pair of Rolls-Royces, John and I in the rear one, alternately amused and bemused.

Some of us at the Institute were keen to revive the University of London's Archaeological Society. Alison Ravetz (née Birch) and Gillian Spencer (née Chapman), who were fellow students from Cambridge, together with John Lewis, also of our year, decided to try – and succeeded. As well as some lectures, we organized a dance and a satirical sketch, "The Line and Circle Folk", a skit on the London Transport symbol. I wonder for how long the society survived?¹² Incidentally, it was a paper by Alison, "Notes on the work of V. Gordon Childe", published in *The New Reasoner* in 1959, that fired me to write about Childe.¹³



Figure 3 Jack Golson (left, wielding a pick), Peter Gathercole (second from right, trowelling) and others clearing the upper layers of an excavation trench at the site of St Benedict's Gates, Norwich, July 1953.

As my course neared its end in June 1954, I met Edward Pyddoke one evening leaving the Institute.¹⁴ When asked about my future plans, I mumbled about possible research. "Research?" he said. "Ridiculous! You have a wife and son, and must get a job. Birmingham Museum is advertising for a trainee in its Archaeology Department at £495 a year. I'll let you have the details". I got the job while digging again at Oakham; and at Birmingham I learned the basics of the museum trade from Adrian Oswald (today, I suspect, a much undervalued curator of an earlier generation) and so entered my first profession.¹⁵

Notes

1. All made pioneering contributions to the study of prehistory: Burkitt on stone tools, Clark on the Mesolithic and the economic prehistory of Europe, Garrod on the Palaeolithic in France and the Levant, Godwin on the history of British vegetation and de Navarro on the Bronze and Iron Ages in Europe.
2. These two books, first published in 1925 and 1929, together with *The most ancient east: the oriental prelude to European prehistory* (1928), established Childe's reputation as the then foremost prehistorian in the English-speaking world.
3. See P. Gathercole, "Cambridge: history, archaeology and politics", in *A community of cultures: the people and prehistory of the Pacific*, M. Spriggs, D. E. Yen, W. Ambrose, R. J. Jones, A. Thorne, A. Andrews (eds), 1–5 (Canberra: Department of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1993).
4. In those days the staff of the Institute were few (compared with its present complement of over 80 academic staff), but all were leaders in their fields: Gordon Childe in European prehistory, Max Mallowan and Kathleen Kenyon in the archaeology of Mesopotamia and Palestine, Frederick Zeuner in geochronology and past environments, and Ian Cornwall in environmental archaeology, especially the study of animal bones.
5. Following J. M. de Navarro's marvellous paper, "Prehistoric routes between northern Europe and Italy defined by the amber trade", *Geographical Journal* 66, 481–507, 1925.
6. The chronologies of Iron Age hill forts had been memorably set out by Christopher Hawkes in *Antiquity* 5, 60–97, 1931, in an article entitled simply "Hill-Forts".
7. Recalling her memories of Childe at the Institute, Nancy Sandars made the same point about his teaching: "Gordon had a way of treating first- and second-year students as though we were on a level with himself... which made life very exciting for beginners"; see page 11 in *AI* 1999/2000.
8. See especially B. G. Trigger, "Childe and Soviet archaeology", *Australian Archaeology* 18, 1–16, 1984, and pp. 35–43 in P. Gathercole, "Childe in history", *University of London Institute of Archaeology Bulletin* 31, 25–52, 1994.
9. See T. H. Irving, "New light on *How Labour governs*: re-discovered political writings by V. Gordon Childe", *Politics* 23, 70–77, 1988; J. Mulvaney, "'Another university man gone wrong', V. Gordon Childe 1892–1922", in *The archaeology of V. Gordon Childe: contemporary perspectives*, D. R. Harris (ed.), 55–70 (London: UCL Press, 1994); R. Evans, "Social passion? Vere Gordon Childe in Queensland, 1918–19", in *Childe and Australia: archaeology, politics and ideas*, P. Gathercole, T. H. Irving, G. Melleuish (eds), 95–106 (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1995).
10. P. W. Gathercole, "Excavations at Oakham Castle, Rutland, 1953–4", *Transactions of the Leicester Archaeological and Historical Society* 34, 17–38, 1958; J. G. Hurst & J. Golson, "Excavations at St Benedict's Gates, Norwich, 1951 and 1953", *Norfolk Archaeology* 31, 1–112, 1955; P. W. Gathercole, "Part II: 1954 excavations" in M. A. Cotton & P. W. Gathercole, *Excavations at Clausentum, Southampton, 1951–54*, 145–58 (London: HMSO, 1958). Molly Cotton had worked with Mortimer Wheeler at Maiden Castle, Silchester and in northern France in the 1930s. She later moved to Italy, where she carried out important excavations at two Roman villas near Francolise north of Naples.
11. See H. W. M. Hodges, "Excavations on Castle Hill, Thurgarton, 1953", *Transactions of the Thoroton Society* 58, 21–36, 1954; P. W. Gathercole & B. Wailes, "Excavations on Castle Hill, Thurgarton, Nottinghamshire, 1954–5", *Transactions of the Thoroton Society* 63, 24–56, 1959.
12. The Institute has for many years had its own student archaeological society, familiarly known as the SAS, but there is a successor to the University of London Archaeological Society in the form of the Senate House Archaeological and Historical Society, which organizes programmes of lectures (Ed.).
13. See, among more recent papers, P. Gathercole: "Childe's early Marxism", in *Critical traditions in contemporary archaeology*, V. Pinsky & A. Wylie (eds), 80–87 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Gathercole (1994: n. 8 above); "The relationship between Vere Gordon Childe's political and academic thought – and practice", 95–106 in Gathercole, Irving, Melleuish (1995: n. 9 above); and "Childe among the penguins", *Australian Archaeology* 50, 7–11, 2000.
14. Edward Pyddoke was Secretary of the Institute, having been appointed to the post when the previous secretary, Ian Cornwall, became a lecturer in Zeuner's Department of Environmental Archaeology.
15. I wish to thank Christine Holmes, Sander Meredeem, Professor Jack Golson and Dr Amiria Henare for their assistance in the preparation of this article.