

History Man

The Life of R.G.Collingwood

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History is the fundamental 'science' of the Humanities, not psychology, nor religion, although religion is closer to being fundamental than psychology. In particular philosophy is subsumed under history.

This point of view becomes far more understandable if you keep in mind that Collingwood basically had an idealistic point of view, top-down not bottom-up. The Human perspective is paramount, because we have no other perspective. What is given to us is our humanity, and history is the history of how this humanity has changed and evolved, and no other basis for humanity exists than this continual recreation of the past in the present, whose service it is to assert our identity by the way we think and have thought, or maybe rather by the way we think that we thought. Because human history is about thought, if it is about anything at all. The past may exist out there, but the only way we know the past is through the traces it has deposited in the present. Through those traces we can reconstruct a history, just like a detective can recreate a crime scene forensically, but that history does not exist in the past, it is an encapsulation of the past in the present. It is never definitive, it is always tentative, we never know what is at store in the future, in particular we never know how the past will be interpreted and understood in the years to come. The future is simply not the concern of the historian. The past is his territory. But the past not as part of the past, that is beyond him, just as it is beyond us, but the past as conceived in the present.

Collingwood has been accused of being a relativist by other historians, in particular by E.H.Carr, who has written an alternate interpretation of the historians craft. The suspicion of being a pre-modern post-modernist is obviously also present. It is true that Collingwood takes, at least at first sight, a position opposite to that of Ranke, whose famous words about the purpose of History is to find out what really happened, so often ridiculed, appear to contradict him. It is also true that Collingwood proposes that there is no view from nowhere, that the historian is not outside history, in the same way that the scientist is separate from his study. Nature is a mere spectacle, in the words of his, while the historian is part of what he or she studies. What is known cannot be separated from the way it is being known. Knowing something effects it. How could we assert that there are things unaffected by our knowing them, because if so, how can we know that very fact? quips Collingwood. Yet he was a strong proponent of reintroducing metaphysics into philosophy, out of which it like the proverbial baby had been thrown with the bath-water. To reject metaphysics is by itself a metaphysical stand, to once again quote him in context. In particular he reminds his readers that there are so called absolute presuppositions. What those presuppositions are, he is in general careful not to divulge, because obviously to do so is to expose yourself to ridicule. In fact intellectually you can only talk about the

absolute in religious terms. And Collingwood refers to Occam, to the effect that in order to rationally understand, you first have to have faith in the act of rational reason. You cannot start from nothing, and thus he is rather sympathetic to the ontological proof of Gods existence (as well as privately being rather partial to Anglican Christianity, and much to the (bemused?) consternation of his father, volunteering as a teen-ager to be confirmed). One may think of one of his absolute presuppositions, as being the objective existence of the past, not unlike the mathematicians conception of the Platonic basis of mathematics. After all the reconstruction of the past is not an unrestricted exercise, somehow it is tacitly expected that it will be congruent with the Truth. And in fact the strategy of inquiry is systematic and scientific without being scientific. It is a matter of putting questions and trying to give answers, which in their turn, provoke new questions. You cannot observe without first asking a question. There is no such thing as the unsolicited observation. In this regards he puts himself in the main stream of science, and his attitude is fully congruent with that articulated by Popper. Not surprisingly when it came to doing down-to-earth history, Collingwood literally pursued it down-to-earth, his favorite pastime being archeology. Yet, the proper subject of history is man, and that means his thoughts. History is about reconstructing past thoughts. It means literally to think those thoughts again, if in the context of the present. It is this faith in our ability to divine the thought of the people of the past which makes the practice of history possible and ultimately meaningful. The pursuit of history is not about measurements, nor about formulating general laws, but to make it intelligible by virtue of the continuity of thought. Just as the mathematician may have a special intuition about the Platonic world of mathematics, a view which if taken literally, is open to easy ridicule; the historian can only ply his trade by his access to past thought through a belief in its continuity making true empathy possible.

'Scissors and paste'. Those are famous words of acerbic disparagement, uncannily prophetic in this age of computer word-processing. His views on the writing of biography are equally dismissive, putting a prospective biographer in an awkward position. The responses to Inglis initial explorations did not augur well. The only surviving child of Collingwood, sired at the very end of his life, refused to have anything to do with him. This of course barred his access to valuable material, on the other hand, it is not clear that it would have made much difference. Painfully aware of the various pitfalls into which his project might founder, he tries to steer a peripheral course. The effect is a narrative which is incidental and much padded out with the personal commentary of the author. Some of it is not only instructive but also charming, much however exasperating not to say at times tedious. The author is admittedly no professional philosopher, but far more seriously, devoid of any genuine philosophical temperament, as a result of which his musings on the thought of Collingwood are imprecise, disjointed, not to say muddled, and thus at best in the nature of homilies. Has he understood the philosophy of Collingwood, apart from its character as diatribe? As Collingwood points out, it is not enough to merely copy thought (cut and paste) you need to reconstruct it sympathetically. Is he able to do so? What is he able to do? To recount some biographical snippets to complement and challenge the stark picture handed down to us by Collingwood himself through the polemics of his own autobiography.

We learn of Collingwoods happy childhood in the Lake district. How he was educated

at home, doted on by parents and older sisters. His father was an admirer and disciple of Ruskin, whose home for obvious reasons were not too far from that of the Collingwood family. It was a life that was dominated by art. His mother was an accomplished pianist and painter, and his sisters generally would pursue artistic careers. His father Gershom was an ardent archeologist of provincial note. He travelled to Iceland and sent back long reports on his adventures to his children. He wrote a novel -*Thorstein of the Mere* in which he dramatized the life of fiercely independent Norse settlers in the district. Needless to say, his father had a profound influence on him, and instigated many of his life-long interests, such as archeology.

Out of this happy childhood and, according to his biographer, the most benign and fruitful education Victorian society was able to bestow, he is propelled to Rugby. This is of course a shock, but he adjusts surprisingly fast, and a minor sports-inflicted injury saves him from the expected distractions, allowing him his undisturbed intellectual pursuit. Rugby at the time, the author assures his readers, was a place where originality and scholarly endeavors, were not only tolerated by actively encouraged. Collingwood emerged with a thorough grounding in the classics, not only being in command of Greek and Latin (the curse of generations of English schoolboys, and the delight of a chosen few) but also in addition to compulsory French and German having taught himself Italian in order to be able to read Dante in the original. The next step was Oxford, where he excelled, becoming a Fellow at Pembroke, later to transfer to Magdalen, the epidemy of Oxford life, when finally a position as a professor opened up. All the time he worked hard, read prodigiously, wrote excessively, taking advantage of his insomnia. His congenital blood pressure rose, which would in the end have disastrous consequences, cripple him by a succession of strokes, and eventually do him in for good. But that was in the future. In addition he married a taller and older woman, sired two children, moved out in style to the outskirts of Oxford, becoming in the process something of a National figure. He wrote and wrote, and published a number of books, quickly making a name for himself as not only an original and clear thinker, but also one with a beautiful style, and when it comes to philosophy style matters, Inglis reminds his readers appropriately quoting Nietzsche. In fact the style is an integral part of the contents. And in addition to all that his energy found a further outlet in the pursuit of archeology, doing thousands of rubbings of Roman inscriptions all over Britain, all of them painstakingly transliterated by his trained hand. But of the books and his archeology one can learn in other ways, what about the private Collingwood?

Inglis is not really privy to the intimacies of Collingwood's life, still there is enough tantalizing hints to suggest a troubled and excited one. There are fragments of circumstantial evidence of some extra-marital affairs, and when it came to Kathleen Edwardese, a young beautiful actress, at least twenty-years his junior, the sexual attraction he felt for her, resulted in a crisis, not to say a minor mental breakdown, when he had lost his bearings, and no longer knew what was his duty. It eventually led to his divorce from his wife, a remarriage and a final siring of child, because after all he claimed, a man should not have his sexually desire gratified by a woman without impregnating her. Apart from that, other items in his biography include an extended cruise to Indonesia meant to be a recuperative venture, and a rather strange hedonistic interlude travelling to the Greek

archipelago in the company of some young men who were often frolicking around naked, seeking out prostitutes when calling in ports, the boat loaded with wine. That was a trip undertaken at the end of his earthly tenure, and just before being permanently crippled and confined, and according to his all-knowing biographer, constituting the happiest 42 days of his life. Should one think of it as the spectacle of a latter-day Plato instructing the young, giving them principles with which to live a moral life by?

And so there is death coming too early, far too early. His children with Ethel - his first wife, all died tragically and young, while their hapless mother lived on until 1979, closing to a hundred. There is now a Collingwood society, maybe an off-shoot of archeological followers, and then of course later-day disciples, with a more or less tenuous connection to the man of history.

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