

OXFORD

R.G. COLLINGWOOD:
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
& OTHER WRITINGS

*With essays on Collingwood's
life and work*



EDITED BY
DAVID BOUCHER & TERESA SMITH

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The idea for this new edition of R. G. Collingwood's *An Autobiography* was conceived, most appropriately, in Coniston where the Collingwood family lived for many years. At the 2005 Collingwood Conference Sir Roger Bannister, former Master of Pembroke College where Collingwood was a fellow, suggested that *en route* to the full biography of one of his illustrious fellows it would be a good idea to bring out a new edition of *An Autobiography* with some additional manuscript material, and commentaries by experts in the various fields covered. We are indebted to Sir Roger for his encouragement. Peter Momtchiloff has been particularly helpful in giving the project his support and the blessing of Oxford University Press. The contributors have been wonderful to work with and we wish to express our sincere gratitude for their patience and forbearance.

Before this edition was complete Janet Gnosspelius passed away. She was the daughter of Barbara Collingwood, one of Robin's sisters. She has left behind a formidable legacy in family archives and was always ready with help and advice on all projects relating to the Collingwood family. Her indomitable enthusiasm and personality will be sorely missed. We would also like to express our thanks to our respective spouses, Clare and George, for their encouragement and support; and to George for his work on the illustrations.

David Boucher and Teresa Smith

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Teresa Smith is R. G. Collingwood's daughter by his second wife, Kate Collingwood, and literary executor to R. G. Collingwood and his father W. G. Collingwood. After reading Greats at Oxford, she studied social policy and from the 1970s taught in Barnett House, Oxford University's Department of Social Policy and Social Work, which she headed for ten years. Her research has focused on family policy, community development and early education, and most recently a centenary history of Barnett House.

Her publications include 'From educational priority areas to area-based interventions: community, neighbourhood and preschool', in Edwards, R. (ed.), *Researching Families and Communities: Social and Generational Change* (Routledge, 2008), and *Family centres and bringing up young children* (HMSO, 1996). She has also written on her grandfather W. G. Collingwood's travels in Iceland.

ABBREVIATIONS

for Collingwood's main works

BOOKS

- RP* *Religion and Philosophy* (1916)
- SM* *Speculum Mentis* (1924)
- EPM* *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933), revised edition,
edited by James Connelly and Giuseppina D'Oro (2005)
- PA* *The Principles of Art* (1937)
- A* *An Autobiography* (1939), revised edition (2013), edited
by David Boucher and Teresa Smith
- EM* *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940), revised edition (1998),
edited by Rex Martin
- NL* *The New Leviathan* (1942), revised edition (1992), edited
by David Boucher
- IN* *The Idea of Nature* (1945)
- IH* *The Idea of History* (1946), revised edition (1993), edited
by Jan van der Dussen
- EPP* *Essays in Political Philosophy*, edited by David Boucher
(1989)
- PH* *The Principles of History*, edited by William H. Dray and
Jan van der Dussen (1999)
- PE* *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folktale,
Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology*, edited by David
Boucher, Wendy James, and Phillip Smallwood (2005)

All books are published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, with the exception of *Religion and Philosophy*, published by Macmillan.

JOURNAL

Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, CWAAS

MANUSCRIPTS

Collingwood Mss in the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Dep. Coll.

Collingwood papers in the possession of Teresa Smith [TS/reference]

INTRODUCTION: THE BIOGRAPHY OF AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

DAVID BOUCHER AND TERESA SMITH

Why read Collingwood's *An Autobiography* today, more than seventy years after it was written? Or, as Stephen Toulmin put it in the introduction to the 1978 reprint, 'What is the secret of an autobiography that lasts?' (*A*, ix). Collingwood spelt out his aim in the preface: 'the autobiography of a man whose business is thinking should be the story of his thought. I have written this book to tell what I think worth telling about the story of mine' (*A*, vii). Toulmin argues that the self-told life story of an English academic working in the period between two world wars, who refused 'to use the academic life as a refuge from the larger world of politics and international affairs' (*A*, xviii), is important for us in understanding the relationship between the world of the mind and the world of action.

An Autobiography remains something of an enigma despite a great deal of speculation as to Collingwood's motives for writing it; his apparent disingenuous failure to express his intellectual debts; and the chronology of when and how the intellectual puzzles arose which he attempted to resolve. Part of the reason for its enigmatic quality is that it is almost completely cerebral, and discloses little about his life or relationships with family and friends. The anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* seized upon this feature of the book immediately: it is almost totally confined 'to the history of the growth of a philosopher's mind'.¹ There are, however, some basic facts that we know about it, such as when he started it and when it was completed, and the reasons he gave for writing it, as well as its immediate reception.

Collingwood's intention was to write 'a philosophical autobiography (philosophical in subject-matter)'—this from a letter written in September 1938 to Malcolm Knox, his friend and former pupil

¹ Anon, 1939. 'A Philosopher's Life: Thought in Human Affairs', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 August, 464.

and later editor, at St Andrews University.² An earlier letter to Knox,³ written shortly after Collingwood's first stroke in February 1938, shows his anxiety that he might not have time to complete his projected work: he must do less in future, and devote his time to preparing more of his writings for publication. There was also an element of mischievousness in his intention. In a later letter to Kenneth Sisam at the Oxford University Press, Collingwood wrote that he had written the book 'because I was told I was dying, and thought it time a few home truths began sitting on my lips'.⁴ It seems that he particularly wanted to get at Prichard, an irascible and long-time realist antagonist. There was certainly some concern at the Press, but the general view was that Prichard could take care of himself, and if it did Collingwood any harm, then let it be on his own head.⁵ Writing to his son Bill, who had obviously expressed concern about his father's remarks, Collingwood replied: 'You needn't worry about Prichard believing anything I say – nothing under any conditions would ever make him do *that*. I hope that I shall either see or hear what happens though when he reads it (in Blackwells).'⁶

Principally, however, the purpose of his autobiography was 'to put on record some brief account of the work I have not yet been able to publish, in case I am not able to publish it in full' (A, 118). This forward-looking intention, rather than the backward glance normally expected of autobiography, goes some way to explain why he was not as explicit about influences on him, such as Ruskin and Croce, as might have been expected. Anyone familiar with Collingwood's work, and the reviews of it even in the popular press, would be constantly alerted to such influences.⁷

Collingwood started to write *An Autobiography* on the maiden voyage of *Zenocrate*, the boat that he had built for him in 1938,

² Letter from Collingwood to Knox, 21.ix.38. T. M. Knox Papers, University of St Andrews.

³ Letter from Collingwood to Knox, 23.2.38. T. M. Knox Papers.

⁴ *Autobiography* file, 22 March, 1939, OUP.

⁵ Letter from RWC (Chapman) to Humphrey Milford dated 28 November, 1938 Ref P.12715/RWC. [TS/GLTR091].

⁶ Hotel Mataram, Djoka, Java, 19.2.39. [TS/FLTR0848].

⁷ Boucher, David 1989. *The Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 8–23.



Illustration 1. Launch of *Zenocrate* at Brentford, London, 24 May 1938. Collingwood started writing the *Autobiography* on board on 28 July, as recorded in *Zenocrate: her Log*. Photograph by Collingwood. Courtesy of Teresa Smith.

after his first stroke in February.⁸ *Zenocrate* was launched on 24 May (see Illustration 1); on 29 and 30 July the log mentions 'writing autobiography'. In early September, about six weeks before sailing to the East Indies on Blue Funnel Line M. V. *Alcinous*, Collingwood visited the Oxford University Press to talk about the *Autobiography*:

To occupy his mind, he is writing his autobiography, and wondered if it would be of any interest to us. It is a sort of commentary on his archaeological and (especially) philosophical development, and contains thoughts which he has not expressed in books, as well as explaining how he came to hold the odd views he now holds. It is destitute of all that makes autobiography saleable, and he supposed would be a dead loss, to which I demurred. He will send the MS. when it is finished.⁹

⁸ Collingwood, R. G., *ZENOCRATE Her Log*. [TS/FDWo32] 1938. *Zenocrate* is a Harrison Butler Z – 4 tonner, 22ft (6.4 metres) small off-shore sailing cruiser.

⁹ Letter from Chapman at the Press to Kenneth Sisam and Humphrey Milford, ref RWC/PP 4982, OUP, 14 September 1938. [TS/GLTRo71].

It is a wonder that the book got published at all given Collingwood's sales pitch. He was still working on it when he wrote to Malcolm Knox at St Andrews on 21 September. The preface, written at Coniston, was dated 2 October, and Collingwood completed the manuscript and sent it to the Press before he left for Indonesia on 22 October. In other words, he wrote *An Autobiography* in something like three months, and in the middle of this period he had a second stroke, on 28 August, on board *Zenocrate*.

The Delegates of the Press considered *An Autobiography* on 11 and 25 November, when Collingwood was in mid-voyage to the East Indies. Kenneth Sisam was charged with the delicate and unusual task of alerting Collingwood to the imminent arrival of the proofs, and somewhat elusively to intimate that the Press might not publish unless the political content of the last chapter was toned down: 'one or two of the Delegates will want to see the gallies, and may have some comments when you get back'.¹⁰ Sisam went on to say that while he sympathized with Collingwood's views on current politics, their expression might be out of tone with the rest of the book. At the same time he sent a copy of the letter and proofs to Dr Cyril Bailey, the University Public Orator, alerting him to the line of action proposed by the Press should Collingwood 'not of his own accord tone down the most difficult passages'.¹¹ Collingwood received Sisam's letter on 8 February 1939. The apprehension about his reaction was in fact unnecessary: he was rather relieved that the Press was printing his book at all, despite their being 'flustered by parts of it'; he had feared that 'it might have been altogether too much for them'.¹² Collingwood was more than accommodating, given that he disagreed with Sisam's comments on the last chapter: far from being 'higher and sharper in tone', he thought it 'lower, and a piece, in fact, of soft peddling'. He nevertheless deferred to Sisam and rewrote 'the last chapter very extensively'.¹³ On 23 March Collingwood wrote to his wife Ethel that he had made a lot of corrections to *An Autobiography* and would be posting it to Sisam at the Press at the earliest opportunity.

¹⁰ *Autobiography* file, The Archives of the Clarendon Press, 18 January 1939.

¹¹ Sisam to Bailey, *Autobiography* file, OUP Archives, 18 January 1939.

¹² Letter to Ethel Collingwood 8 February 1939, a continuation of a letter begun on 4 February. [TS/PLTR195].

¹³ *Autobiography* file, OUP Archives, 22 March 1939.

Sisam's respectful and moderate tone in his letter to Collingwood disguised the considerable disunity of the Delegates in coming to a decision; in fact, they even disputed whether they had accepted the book for publication at all. At their meeting on 11 November the Delegates expressed a variety of views. On its philosophical quality, apart from personalities, the Provost of Oriel, W. D. Ross, thought it very bad, but this was certainly a minority view countered by effusive praise about its readability and brilliance.¹⁴ Sidgwick, a Delegate, thought the attack on Rugby offensive, and while the personal attacks were not considered good form, no one wanted to censor these views. In the general round of correspondence Arthur Norris, a Delegate, said that Prichard, whom Collingwood criticized for arriving at a position of 'complete scepticism' (*A*, 31), was not averse to giving offence and should not complain at getting a little back. Ross, while finding the attack on Prichard regrettable, thought that it would rebound on Collingwood. The Vice Chancellor of the University, and Delegate, George Stuart Gordon, thought the last ten pages impossible, and likely the product of a sick man's mind. A. D. Lindsay, Gordon's predecessor and Master of Balliol, whose anti-appeasement candidature in the Oxford by-election of 1938 Collingwood had supported,¹⁵ and Cyril Bailey, the University Orator, expressed the view that rather than lose the book the Press should publish it.

Cyril Bailey agreed to draft a letter which was far less delicately phrased than the one actually sent. He asked Collingwood to reconsider the last chapter: it was written at a moment of crisis, and the passage of time might now persuade him to curtail or modify it. Although the meeting of 11 November had deferred a decision on the suggestion of G. N. Clark, the historian, the meeting of 25 November was mixed in its recollections as to the status of the book. The Delegates proceeded on the assumption that a decision had been deferred. Clark added weight to the mounting opinion that the last chapter should not be published as it stood. Despite protests from the Senior and Junior Proctors that the Delegates had no right to censor people's political

¹⁴ A view that Gadamer endorsed in his German edition, translated and published in *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 13, 2007: 7–15.

¹⁵ Collingwood letter to A. D. Lindsay 20 October 1939. [TS/FLTRo839].

opinions, they decided to leave it to the 'office' to broach the subject with Collingwood. It was up to Sisam, then, to modify the tone of the earlier letter written by Bailey, which he did by hinting that the main body of the book 'gives the permanent general reflexion resulting from your life and work', whereas the final chapter dealing with the affairs of the moment was 'out of the picture'.¹⁶

Despite the reservations about the final chapter, the Press nevertheless went ahead with producing the galley proofs which Sisam sent to Collingwood on 18 January 1939, still leaving it open for a judgement to be made on the last chapter, pending Collingwood's revisions. Collingwood received the proofs in Batavia on 22 February, just before embarking on the voyage home, and began to work on them immediately. He got around to the sensitive issue of rewriting the last chapter on 19 March while sailing past Aden. The proofs were posted from Port Said on 22 March. In a letter to Sir Humphrey Milford dated 3 April, Sisam announced: 'Here is Collingwood which now seems to Chapman and me quite harmless. I don't think it can be held to be libellous to accuse the *Daily Mail* or Lloyd George of corrupting the public.'¹⁷

The reception of *An Autobiography* far outstripped Collingwood's modest expectations of interest. It is a lively and combative introduction to his thought, and still remains one of his most successful books. It received immediate and extensive reviews, none of them in less than positive tones. On its first appearance, A. L. Rowse, a fellow Oxonian renowned for his irascibility, commented that it was the most interesting book to come out of Oxford in a generation, and constituted a document for its time.¹⁸ J. H. Muirhead, a fellow sympathizer with idealism, took it as evidence of Collingwood's recovery from illness, and expressed the view that philosophers of all schools had reason to be grateful for 'this gem of a book'.¹⁹ The *Manchester Guardian* called it 'challenging and vital'.²⁰ Reviewers, such as Howard Hannay, in philosophical

¹⁶ *Autobiography* file, n.d., Archives of the Clarendon Press.

¹⁷ Kenneth Sisam to Sir Humphrey Milford, 3 April 1939, 4609/K.S. [TS/GLTR098].

¹⁸ Rowse, A. L. 1939. 'The Dilemma of Our Time', *Spectator*, vol. 162, 262.

¹⁹ Muirhead, J. H. 1941. *Philosophy*, vol. XV, 89-91.

²⁰ A. D. R., 1939. 'Testament', *The Manchester Guardian*, 15 August, 5.

journals contended that it was 'provoking and intriguing'.²¹ One of its most prominent features for most reviewers was Collingwood's rejection of the realists' alliance with natural science, and the allying of his own philosophy to history; the examples and arguments 'testify to the liveliness of Professor Collingwood's thought and to the reality of his knowledge of the two fields'.²² An anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* summed up his achievement thus: 'its main trend consists in its authentic revelation of the philosophy underlying the externally remarkable union within one individual of a mastery of two disciplines which the unregenerate mind is apt to regard as divergent – speculative philosophy and historical research'.²³

Collingwood wrote his autobiography during a period of illness, from which he gained only temporary respite. Knowing his illness was a time bomb which could explode at any time, he chose to reveal to the world the ideas that he had developed during the previous twenty years or so. In contrast with J. S. Mill, Collingwood said very little about his illness, nor about its symptoms and prognosis. He had been to see his friend and doctor Tom Nelson in the winter of 1936 about his general health and high blood pressure. He wrote to his sister Barbara in the spring of 1937 that Nelson had given him

a very interesting lecture on the use & misuse of the human brain, & the result is that I have been doing far less work ever since, & the result of that is that my blood pressure when taken yesterday was down from about 200 to 150, which is where at my time of life it ought to be! So I am reconsidering my intention of dying apoplectically or paralytically in the Prime of Life & readjusting my ideas to the prospect of reaching a lazy old age.²⁴

However, after finishing *the Principles of Art* in 1937, and before it had gone through the press he 'was overtaken by the more serious illness' which drove him to write his autobiography. In a letter to the Press in March 1938, Collingwood wrote that he had sent the *Principles of Art* to the publisher prematurely because he had a premonition of not otherwise being able to complete it, and

²¹ Hannay, Howard 1941. *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 51, 369–70.

²² Marcham, F. G. 1941. *The Philosophical Review*, vol. L, 546.

²³ Anon, 1939. 'A Philosopher's Life: Thought in Human Affairs', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 August, 464.

²⁴ R.G.C. to Barbara, no address, dated 1.iv.37. [TS/FLTRo773].

apologized for the unconscionable number of revisions to the proofs: 'Events have showed that if I had not done so the book would never have been published at all: for even if I get back to writing in a year or two I should not at that time have the heart to revise a book that had grown cold.'²⁵ The illness that struck him after completing a draft of the *Principles*, he wrote in the *Autobiography*, left him with little prospect of more than a few years in which to do his best work. In a letter to the Press, however, he was less pessimistic, suggesting that if he lived for another ten years, he would have time to complete his work and the *Autobiography* might be allowed to go out of print.²⁶

We know now, of course, what this illness was. It was not (as Gadamer suggests in his introduction to the German edition of *An Autobiography*) a brain tumour, nor (as Knox described it, rather elliptically) a series of little explosions in Collingwood's brain.²⁷ Ethel, Collingwood's first wife, objected to Knox's description on the grounds that it was misleading: 'it would be better not to go into details about the blood vessels of the brain, firstly because no one can tell to within 5 years before the 1st real stroke when they actually began to go out of action and secondly because many people reading that sentence would think that the brain was affected more than it was'.²⁸

The illness was a series of strokes that were the consequence of high blood pressure, a condition which also appeared to be a factor in his illness of 1932, following a severe bout of chickenpox in 1931 which he caught from his children, who had picked it up at school. The illness was followed by complications and his doctors ordered him to rest up for a year. In a letter to Knox dated 12 May 1931, we get an indication of the severity of the illness: 'I have been ill for several weeks and it's gone to my brain and made me quite unable to think... I hope to recover to be able to read philosophy again, but I dare say not for months yet.'²⁹ He thought this was also a factor in the nervous breakdown he suffered in

²⁵ Collingwood letter to Arthur Norrington, junior assistant secretary to the Delegates, 8 March 1938. [TS/GLTR061].

²⁶ R.G.C. to Kenneth Sisam, 22 March 1939. [TS/GLTR097].

²⁷ See Knox, T. M. 1947. 'Introduction' to the first edition of the posthumously published *Idea of History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁸ Ethel Collingwood to Malcolm Knox, 10 October 1945. [TS/GLTR163].

²⁹ T. M. Knox Papers, St Andrews University, MS 37524/433a.

late 1931.³⁰ He was granted a term's sabbatical by the University, and in January and February 1932 made a journey to Italy, Sicily, and Greece, during which he experienced frequent mood swings ranging from exhilaration to melancholia. In 1934 he fell off his bicycle and broke his leg and arm, requiring six weeks in bed, and two weeks on crutches. Writing to Knox he said that his 'general health is very poor, and my heart seems to have suffered from what they call shock'.³¹

Collingwood's first stroke in 1938, which affected his left arm and left leg, but not his speech, was not unexpected. His blood pressure was often dangerously high and he seemed for many years, as his wife Ethel wrote later to Knox, to have had a premonition of his early death which drove him to work to excess in order to complete his projected endeavours.³² He had indeed had many warnings. Ethel noted that he first started suffering from high blood pressure in 1930. In a letter to his sister Barbara of 6 February 1938, he wrote that he had been expecting a stroke for several years and that he was surprised it was not more serious. W. Kneale, the English philosopher and logician, writing to Malcolm Knox also in February 1938, remarked: 'I think everyone was much surprised when it happened, although looking back one can say that he was always rather tense as though he lived on the edge of a volcano – but perhaps even that is imagination'.³³

His doctors recommended a year off to recuperate. Writing in March 1938, Tom Nelson noted details of his heart and blood pressure, and commented:

Robin is a man who has when need be forced himself to work with his brain ever since he went to school. He has gradually acquired the art of putting up his B[lood] P[ressure] in order to keep his cerebral arteries going, until he has come to live continuously at a higher and higher level – until in fact he cd. not get it down to sleep. He cd. not stop his brain working. The typical so-called idiopathic hypertension. Idiopathic, my foot. And the pity of it is that he has such a good brain that it is worthy of better treatment. He has to . . . [live] for at least a year at an entirely lower

³⁰ In a letter to Ethel he described it as 'my nervous breakdown'. [TS/PLTR113].

³¹ Collingwood to Knox, 17.iv.34, Knox archives, MS 37524/418 a-b.

³² 10 October 1945. [TS/GLTR163].

³³ W. Kneale, Exeter College, Oxford to Malcolm Knox, Feb 18 1938. Knox papers, St Andrews, MS37525/236a-c.

level [and] will have to go slowly . . . He has got to get the idea of working for v. limited hours and dropping his B.P in between. He is inclined at times to say that he wd. rather cease to be than be restricted. But as I pointed out to him it may not be as easy as this. Next time he may have a more extensive lesion, and continue to live for some time with a v. 2nd class brain . . . I think this carried weight, because this time he says he has noticed that since the trouble he can't spell as well as he should. Frankly I can't explain this to myself, and it may be imagining on his part, but it seemed to point a moral.³⁴

Collingwood suffered his second stroke on 28 August aboard *Zenocrate*, moored up in the Beaulieu River, taking refuge from particularly stormy weather which had required the coastguards rescuing him from rough seas, and aborting his prospective four-month cruise.³⁵ He had been painting the deck; when he awoke his face was numb and he had lost the power of speech, and lay below deck for three days before regaining the power of his legs and getting himself back to Oxford. It was a mild stroke, which nevertheless set back his recovery.³⁶

His doctors now referred him to a Harley Street specialist, a Dr Stott, who explained to him that there were two types of stroke: the first, which entailed a rupturing of the artery, was generally fatal; the second, which was constrictions and spasms of the artery, was much less serious and recovery was more successful.³⁷ He was not confined to bed and was able to potter around in the garden; his speech remained slightly slurred and he was prone to helpless fits of giggles at anything slightly amusing.³⁸ According to Collingwood, his arterial specialist in London suggested spending the winter on board a ship sailing off to somewhere like Java and doing some writing each day on his next book.³⁹ He wrote to his cousin Charlie saying that the visit to the specialist had cheered him up considerably, and from pondering his imminent demise he

³⁴ Handwritten note by Tom Nelson dated 20 March 1938, from his London address, bound into Janet Gnosspelius's photocopied set of Collingwood's letters to his father dated 2.i.1931 to 29.ix.1932. W. G. Collingwood died 1 October 1932.

³⁵ 'Lifeboat Rescues', *The Times*, 3 June 1938, 14d.

³⁶ Letter from Collingwood to Barbara, no date; headed 'mild STROKE after painting on *Zenocrate*' in Barbara's handwriting. [TS/FLTRo832A].

³⁷ Letter from Collingwood to Charlie Collingwood 19.ix.38. [TS/FLTRo835].

³⁸ Letter from Collingwood to Barbara 5 September 1938. [TS/FLTRo833].

³⁹ Letter from Collingwood to Barbara 9 September 1938. [TS/FLTRo834].

was now looking forward to taking a Dutch cargo ship to the East Indies.⁴⁰

His father had died from a stroke in 1932, but it was not until about 1940 that Robin discovered that the illness was endemic in the family. After his sister Barbara had a stroke in 1940, Collingwood wrote to her referring to it as the 'family ghost': when reading their grandfather William's diary, he had discovered that their grandmother Marie Imhoff was similarly struck down in 1860.⁴¹

During the time Collingwood suffered from high blood pressure there was no treatment available to control it. Surgical procedures were trialled, but were irreversible, and could precipitate dangerously low blood pressure. Sufferers were told by their doctors and specialists to rest.⁴² Collingwood was, however, almost incapable of relaxing, as Tom Nelson had noted. Even during periods of recuperation he was constantly on the move, absorbing new scenery, exploring ruins and archaeological sites, writing long letters, keeping notes of what he had seen, walking sometimes twenty miles or more in the blazing heat, and continuing to write his books. This is how he dealt with his illness of 1932, by travelling in Italy and Greece; his first stroke of 1938, by sailing *Zenocrate* in rough seas; his second stroke of 1938, by travelling to the East Indies; and shortly after his return to Britain by sailing away to the Greek islands in the summer of 1939 with a group of Oxford students (see Illustration 2), during the course of which he wrote *The First Mate's Log*. During his journey of 1932 Collingwood kept a diary and sketchbook. In the letters to his father there were references to his health, and to being conscious not to overdo it. However, he exerted himself much more than one would expect from someone trying to restore his health. He wrote to his wife Ethel that he sometimes got tired and exhausted, and suffered mood swings and melancholy, referring to his 'nervous breakdown'.⁴³

⁴⁰ Letter from Collingwood to Charlie Collingwood 19.ix.38. [TS/FLTRo835].

⁴¹ Collingwood to Barbara Gnosspeilus, from South Hayes, where he lived after leaving Ethel, but on Belbroughton Road paper, no date. [TS/FLTRo868].

⁴² We are indebted to Sir Roger Bannister for this medical information. Damage to the three sites of the brain (L and R hemispheres and frontal lobes, affecting movement and speech and producing emotional lability) is a clear stroke pattern associated with high blood pressure. [Personal communication]

⁴³ Letters to Ethel Collingwood written 28 January from San Antonio in Tivoli [TS/PLTR106], and 10 February 1932 from Syracuse, Sicily. [TS/PLTR113].

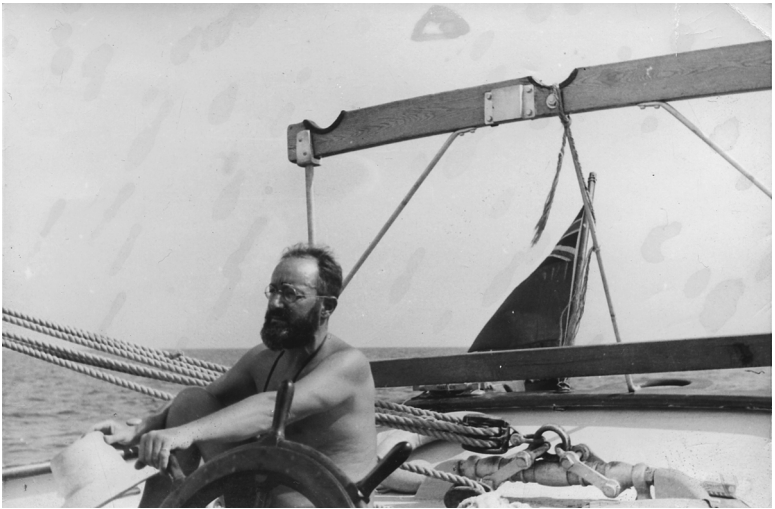


Illustration 2. Collingwood as First Mate steering the *Fleur de Lys* on its voyage to Greece in 1939. Photograph by one of the crew. Courtesy of Teresa Smith.

Before sailing for Indonesia in October 1938 Collingwood wrote to Knox informing him of his intention to sail to Java after visiting St Andrews to accept his honorary degree.⁴⁴ Because of his illness he was unable to attend the July graduation ceremony, but instead attended a small ceremony on 7 October in the Parliament Hall of the University Library.⁴⁵ Knox was instrumental in providing introductions to some friends of his brother, the McMorrans of Batavia. Collingwood sailed on 22 October 1938 from Liverpool, to Batavia, Java (modern-day Jakarta in Indonesia), through the Suez Canal, on a cargo boat with a small number of passengers, the *M. V. Alcinous* (Blue Funnel Line). He wrote a log of his voyage, *Log of a Journey in the East Indies in 1938–1939*, which is printed for the first time in this volume. The commentary by Wendy James and a letter from Collingwood to his sister Barbara whilst travelling give a fuller representation of Collingwood the man—his

⁴⁴ Collingwood letter to Knox from 15 Belbroughton Road, Oxford, 21.ix.38 (Knox papers, MS 37524/425).

⁴⁵ 'Distinguished Scholars Honoured by St. Andrews University', *The Citizen*, 15 October 1938.

energy, the remarkable extent of his inquisitiveness, and the astuteness of his observational curiosity. These were characteristics that Collingwood exhibited throughout his life, and the vibrancy, fluency, and energy of the letters and the *Log* suggest that his strokes up to this point had robbed him of little of his passion, enthusiasm, intrepidity, and brilliance of mind.

Collingwood's *An Autobiography* was completed in first draft before he sailed for the East Indies. He arrived in Batavia on 20 November, where he was met by the McMorrans (Mr McMorran was manager of Lever Bros) and taken on a number of expeditions. From there Collingwood went to Bali, and through Mrs McMorran's introductions met with many of the influential ex-patriot Dutch community, including artists such as the Russian-born German artist Walter Spies (1895–1942). Collingwood took various boats around the islands, observed local burial customs, and became passionately interested in local music, dance, and art, about which he had much to say in his letters home. He did not return from Batavia to England until 5 April 1939.

While travelling to the East Indies and back he wrote *An Essay on Metaphysics*, which he began two days after sailing, and four chapters of *The Principles of History*, and as we have seen, completing the revisions and checking the proofs of *An Autobiography*, as we have seen. He also learnt Malay on board ship; by the time he reached Batavia, he was able to converse with the servants at the Hotel Daendels, for which he was very proud of himself.⁴⁶ Indeed, there were periods when visiting more remote parts when he spoke nothing but Malay. Collingwood embarked upon a gruelling schedule of expeditions and visits from the time he arrived, taking medication for angina and insomnia,⁴⁷ suffering various bouts of food poisoning, and having to endure infected insect bites on his feet.

Collingwood emerges from the commentaries in this new edition of the *Autobiography* as not only more sociable and lively than often portrayed by Collingwood scholars, and indeed by himself

⁴⁶ Collingwood letter to Ethel Collingwood begun on 20 November 1938. [TS/PLTR186].

⁴⁷ There are a number of references to his medications in the *Log*. He took soneryl (a barbiturate drug) for insomnia (e.g. *Log* 27 October 1938), and amyl nitrate for angina (e.g. *Log* 1 February 1939).

in *An Autobiography*, but also more radical—more socially and politically aware, more ‘engaged’, from his schooldays onwards. At Rugby he was outspoken and something of a rebel, for example opposing a motion calling socialism ‘a grave national danger’ and criticizing his peers for unthinking support for the conservative view.⁴⁸ As a young don at Pembroke College, he took on the post of Oxford treasurer for one of the University settlements working with poor families in London’s East End, Oxford House in Bethnal Green.⁴⁹ His work for the Admiralty during World War I involved him extensively in European affairs, for example addressing the conference of Belgian students on the future of Belgium in 1919.⁵⁰ During World War II he was closely involved in welcoming Jewish refugees to Oxford, in supporting the Standing Committee for Developing Intellectual Cooperation with China, and in helping Italian academics caught up in police procedures in Oxford (this last pressure leading directly to another stroke).⁵¹ During his 1920s and 1930s journeys in Europe he was increasingly sensitive to and critical of the growth of fascism. A good example of his awareness of the threat to democratic civilization (as he put it in his writings, notably *The New Leviathan*) was his letter to A. D. Lindsay, Master of Balliol (who stood as the anti-appeasement candidate against Quinton Hogg in the 1938 Oxford by-election), written the day before sailing for the East Indies:

I do not think that the country has ever in all its history passed through a graver crisis than that in which it is now involved. I am appalled by the apathy with which our situation is regarded by a great many of us, and by the success which the Government has had in keeping the country as a whole from knowing the truth. Your candidature shows that the spirit of English democracy is not extinct. I hope it still survives among those who will have to vote next week.⁵²

The following year he wrote, in Ruskinian tones, of how Lord Nuffield ‘grinds the faces of the poor in order to make money

⁴⁸ R.G.C. to Dora no date. Autumn 1907. [TS/FLTRo180].

⁴⁹ 8 March 1914. [TS/FLTRo449].

⁵⁰ Collingwood letter to his father 9 May 1919. [TS/FLTRo536]. On his time at the Admiralty see Johnson, Peter 2012. *A Philosopher at the Admiralty: R. G. Collingwood and the First World War*, Exeter, Imprint Academic.

⁵¹ 2 July 1940 R.G.C. to Barbara. [TS/FLTRo860].

⁵² Collingwood to A. D. Lindsay 20 October 1938. [TS/FLTRo839].

wherewith to buy himself a saintly reputation as A Man Who Does SO Much Good, building hospitals and all that, while his employees rot in jerry-built houses in swamps and have no amenities of any kind whatever'.⁵³ All this speaks vividly of practical engagement as well as academic analysis. It is perhaps not surprising, given the politics of the times, that some of his Oxford contemporaries labelled him a Communist.

We suggest in the commentary by Boucher in this volume that Collingwood was more engaged with social reform and political thinking than is generally acknowledged. The passionate attack in the last pages of *An Autobiography* (167) on his philosophical colleagues, who professed 'a purely scientific detachment from practical affairs', grew out of a lifelong intellectual, practical, and moral context. Collingwood reminds us not only of Ruskin, but also of the work of the Victorian Oxford philosophers T. H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet, as well as Edward Caird and Henry Jones who taught generations of students that philosophy mattered in a practical and moral sense, and that engagement in the public life of social reform and politics was an honourable career.⁵⁴

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND COLLINGWOOD'S *AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

It may be something of an exaggeration to claim that the 'aim of autobiography suggests senile maunderings about the brave days of old and all the titled people the author has met',⁵⁵ but the least we expect of the author of an autobiography is to ask the questions, who am I, and how have I come to be what I am? In answering the questions it is almost impossible to avoid what Herbert Butterfield called the Whig interpretation of history, with defining moments constitutive of the self that one has become. The classics in the genre, Augustine's *Confessions* and Rousseau's *Confessions* are model exemplifications.

The autobiographer cannot avoid abstraction, but should avoid idealization in Onora O'Neill's sense of the word. To write one's

⁵³ R.G.C. to his daughter Ruth 30 xi 39. [TS/FLTRo858].

⁵⁴ *Autobiography*, 47–9. Caird was Master of Balliol, and Jones his successor at Glasgow. Bosanquet taught Collingwood's father, W. G. Collingwood.

⁵⁵ A. D. R., review of *An Autobiography*, *Manchester Guardian*, 15th August, 1939, p. 5.

life in full would take a lifetime, and there would be nothing to write about except the act of writing itself. Necessary abstraction, however, may easily veer towards idealization, an essentialism that is taken to be definitive of the self, to the exclusion of all else, as economics for Marx serves to explain the whole of history, and to which that history can be reduced.⁵⁶

Collingwood's own view of the autobiographical method was given in advice to R. Q. Nelson. It is, Collingwood suggested, 'a history of your work showing how problems arose one by one and how you tackled them'.⁵⁷ In Collingwood's *An Autobiography*, although ostensibly faithful to his advice to Nelson, that is, an account of how problems arose, and of how he dealt with them, both the problems and their solutions are invested retrospectively with a peculiarly political import and significance. The act of relating his intellectual development is revelatory of a new self-understanding. The pieces of coloured glass in the kaleidoscope through which the light shines create a different pattern as they tumble into place as the pieces cascade. Whereas Collingwood's *Autobiography* may differ in many ways from the norm, it is faithful in at least one respect to the great tradition inaugurated by St Augustine. The author does not so much recount the past as recast it, as we discuss later in this Introduction.⁵⁸

Where should we look for the model of autobiographical method that Collingwood adopted? The obvious candidates are those with which he was intimately familiar, John Ruskin, John Stuart Mill, Benedetto Croce, and ultimately Giambattista Vico. Ruskin, because W. G. Collingwood was his secretary, and R. G. Collingwood was a great admirer of his work, evident from his 1919 lecture marking the centenary of Ruskin's birth.⁵⁹ J. S. Mill, because his autobiography is iconic of philosophical biographies, and Mill himself was the target of many of Collingwood's anti-positivist arguments. Mill was very much in Collingwood's mind at the time of writing *An Autobiography*, evident from the

⁵⁶ See O'Neill, Onora 1996. *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁷ Collingwood letters to R. Q. Nelson, 1939–1941, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Eng. lett. B. 27, fols 87–94. Dated 20.ii.40.

⁵⁸ The political aspect of his life is discussed in Boucher's commentary on Collingwood's politics in this volume.

⁵⁹ Collingwood, R. G. 1922. *Ruskin's Philosophy*, Kendal, Titus Wilson.

references in *An Essay on Metaphysics* written on the voyage from the East Indies and while correcting the proofs of *An Autobiography* (EM, 143, 149–53, 160–1, 165, 301–3, 318). Croce, because Collingwood himself translated his autobiography, and greatly admired the man and his work. Vico, of course, because of his immense importance for Collingwood in establishing the autonomy of history as a legitimate form of knowledge. He says of Vico: ‘he was in the first place a trained and brilliant historian, who set himself the task of formulating principles of historical method as Bacon had formulated those of the scientific’ (IH, 63).

Despite the suggestion by Collingwood’s son Bill that *An Autobiography* resembles Ruskin’s *Praeterita*, it is in fact an unlikely candidate. Collingwood himself suggested that ‘the resemblance to *Praeterita* had escaped my notice: it is so long since I read it. Good book, if I remember rightly.’⁶⁰ Ruskin was much older than the four other autobiographers when he committed his thought to paper. Ruskin was 66, and at pains to reveal something of his personal character to complement his many books. This, of course, was not Collingwood’s intention. His was at least ostensibly to shed light on the many books that he had *not* written. There is a resemblance between the two autobiographies in so far as Ruskin attributed great significance to the influence of his father and of home life at Herne Hill, but that is where the resemblance ends. Ruskin went into great detail about aspects of his life, including illnesses, emotional turmoil, and the aesthetic pleasure derived from the many places he visited, and the paintings and drawings he acquired.⁶¹ It is from Collingwood’s correspondence that we learn these details about him, not from his autobiography.

The four others wrote their autobiographies at about the same age: Mill was 47, Croce and Collingwood 49, and Vico a little older at 55 when he wrote the first part, continuing to update it for another six years.

Both Mill and Collingwood had similar motivations. Mill believed himself to be dying of consumption, and Collingwood, with more justification, feared that the increasing risk of further

⁶⁰ Letter from R.G.C. to Bill Collingwood, Hotel Mataram, Djoka, Java, 19.2.39. [TS/FLTRo848].

⁶¹ Ruskin, John 1907, *Praeterita: Outlines of Scenes and Thoughts Perhaps Worthy of Memory in My Past Life*, three vols, London: George Allen.

strokes might lead to an early demise. For Mill, his fear impelled him to want to do three things: to silence his enemies who had said scandalous things about his twenty-one-year relationship with Harriet Taylor before their marriage; to express his intellectual debts, including those to his wife; and to write down many of the ideas that he had not yet committed to print. Mill's *Autobiography*, which he added to and revised almost up to his death in 1873, is solidly in the confessional mode of St Augustine and Rousseau. The defining moments in his life are both intellectually significant and emotionally charged. He described with disarming frankness his deep depression and mental breakdown. Upon reading Marmontel's *Memoirs*, which moved him to tears, Mill was struck by the revelation that 'the oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone'. He went on to say: 'I was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or stone.'⁶²

Collingwood, on the other hand, shared firmly only the third of Mill's motivations: the presentation of ideas that he had not yet put into print. Reference to his intellectual debts is scant, and his emotional life, except for his irritation at his philosophical colleagues, and anger at the current political malaise, is absent.

Croce's autobiography looks a more promising candidate in that Collingwood himself translated it in 1926 (J. A. Smith added a preface). Croce's autobiography does not have the urgency of either Mill's or Collingwood's. Having reached his fiftieth year Croce thought it an opportune time to take advantage of the pause in his spiritual life to reflect upon the road that he had travelled and was yet to traverse in his intellectual journey. It is not, he said, a book of 'confessions, nor recollections, nor memoirs', and certainly not an occasion for 'moral self-examination'.⁶³ Confession, he thought, alluding to St Augustine and Rousseau, whether complacent self-approbation or self-accusation and lamentation over one's misdemeanours, is simply a form of vanity based upon an exaggeration of one's self-importance. Recollections, for Croce, were related to emotions, and while the past made him both melancholy and emotional, he was unable to justify recounting such occasions

⁶² Mill, J. S. 1971. *Autobiography*, edited by Stillinger, Jack, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 85.

⁶³ Croce, B. 1927. *An Autobiography*, translated by Collingwood R. G. with a Preface by Smith, J. A. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 19.

on paper unless he were a poet for whom these feelings provided a centre of gravity and the object of his 'best spiritual faculties'.⁶⁴ Croce excluded memoirs from his autobiography because they are a chronicle of one's life, and of the lives of those whom one's own has touched, and for which some account for posterity is deemed necessary to preserve important facts that would otherwise be lost. Since his own life had largely been devoid of such encounters, what was worth recording of his life, he suggested, was the chronology and bibliography of his written works. Like Collingwood then, Croce rejected the first and second of Mill's motivations, and appears to provide the justification that Collingwood needed for the subject matter of his own autobiography written by a person whose job it was to think. Croce maintained that in order for critics to speak more authoritatively about his work, and even to facilitate a more 'enlightened severity of judgement', he proposed to tell them what he knew of his work in case they had missed something, or had difficulty in discovering it.⁶⁵

In reading Croce, however, we note that his conception of autobiography is quite different from that of Collingwood. Croce tells us what he was working on, and that he departed in some of his conclusions from his associates and mentors; he tells us of the events that led to changes in interest from, for example, researches into Italian and Spanish life, to a detailed study of the classic writers in economics inspired by Labriola's gift of his first essay on the materialist conception of history. Croce tells us that he read it and reread it: 'I felt my whole mind burst into flame. New thoughts and problems took root in my spirit and so overran it that I was powerless to free myself from them.'⁶⁶ We are told that he parted company with Labriola, and how that led to their estrangement, but not in what the departure consisted, or the process by which he arrived at his conclusions, let alone what his conclusions were. Croce's autobiography is in fact a commentary on how he came to develop his wide-ranging interests. He tells us how

⁶⁴ Croce, *Autobiography*, 21.

⁶⁵ Croce, *Autobiography*, 24. Incidentally, Croce takes a quite different view on boarding schools from that of Collingwood: 'I can never join in the fashionable outcry against boarding-school education or agree in thinking it better for boys to be brought up at home.' Croce, *Autobiography*, 34.

⁶⁶ Croce, *Autobiography*, 56-7.

he confronted intellectual problems presented to him by the likes of De Sanctis, Spaventa, and Hegel, that is, 'by re-enacting their intellectual drama in one's own person', but not what the results of those re-enactments were, other than that they consisted in departures which can be read in a book or article he published, and to which he refers the reader for the details. So, for example, in order to adapt Hegel for his own purposes, Croce had to criticize and dissolve him, the outcome of which was *What is Living and What is Dead in Hegel's Philosophy*, to which we are directed for the criticism and dissolution.⁶⁷

The closest full-length analogue to the autobiographical project that Collingwood undertook was written by someone whom he admired immensely, Giambattista Vico. This genre of literature was so new that it did not yet have a name. Vico's autobiography is entitled *The Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself*, the first part of which was completed in 1725 with additions by the author in 1728 and 1731. The final years of Vico's life were written by the Marquis of Villarosa in 1818. The model of the kind of autobiography that seeks to trace the intellectual development and achievements of its author seems to have originated with the publication in 1728 of the first volume of a quarterly *Raccolta d' Opuscoli Scientifici e Filologici*. It included a proposal by Count Gian Artico di Porcía to original and creative scholars in Italy exhorting them to write their autobiographies in order to inspire young students and influence the reform of the curricula and methods taught in schools. Prospective contributors were asked to say something about the events in their lives interwoven with accurate and detailed accounts of their studies. This was to start with grammar and the merits or deficiencies with which it was taught, followed by their studies in arts and sciences, reflecting on biases and abuses or the coherence of the curriculum and soundness of methods. Omissions in the curriculum should also be highlighted. The author should then focus upon his own special area of study, outlining what he had published and what was in preparation, detailing criticisms and his responses to them, as well as giving an objective assessment of his own errors and what he regarded as defensible.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Croce, *Autobiography*, 97.

⁶⁸ Vico, 1975. *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, translated by Fisch, Max Harold and Bergin, Thomas Goddard, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, Introduction, 2-3.

The project was ambitious and novel, mainly pedagogical; covering all the arts and sciences; having a common template; and was to include a far-reaching critical supplement to the collection.⁶⁹ Vico's *Life* was published as the exemplar of what was to be a much larger project, but nevertheless remained the only contribution to the anticipated series.

Collingwood certainly thought highly of Vico, and the Italian was very much in Collingwood's mind prior to and during the writing of *An Autobiography*. In the area of aesthetics, for example, Collingwood thought Vico's observation that poetry was the natural speech of children and savages provided the clue to the solution of all the problems of aesthetics.⁷⁰ Vico was the first, he thought, to formulate the philosophical theory of art as imagination, to which Croce and the early Collingwood himself subscribed (*A*, 138 fn.). In relation to history, writing in 1936, for Collingwood Vico's importance is that he gave a philosophical justification of the possibility of historical knowledge based upon the principle that the human mind can know what it creates, and in this respect it can be more certain of historical fact than it is of natural facts which are the creation of God and ultimately knowable only to him (*IH*, 66). While travelling to and from the East Indies, when Collingwood's own autobiography was in press, he wrote about Vico, in what was intended to be the definitive statement of Collingwood's philosophy of history. He said that anyone who had read Vico or even a second-hand account of his ideas would know that the important question to ask of any statement is not whether it is true or false, but what it means (*PH*, 15).

There are certainly similarities between Collingwood's and Vico's autobiographies. Both men were precocious children, expressed a degree of hostility towards formal education, and professed to have learnt a great deal from independent study and to have made their most original contributions in establishing the integrity and autonomy of history as a form of knowledge. Both authors take the view that the autobiography of a man whose business is thinking ought to be about his thought, that is, how he came to reach the

⁶⁹ Vico, *Autobiography*, Introduction, 4.

⁷⁰ Collingwood, R. G. 1924, *Speculum Mentis*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 58; Collingwood, R. G. 1925. *Outlines of the Philosophy of Art*, London, Oxford University Press, 80.

conclusions he did. What Vico said about himself in the third person is equally applicable to Collingwood. Talking of his autobiography, Vico said 'Scrissela da filosofo', that is, 'he wrote it as a philosopher', by which he meant not only that it was philosophical in subject matter, but that he dealt with it philosophically.⁷¹ Both Vico and Collingwood trace their intellectual development and highlight the significance of their achievements, investing them with a retrospective prescience. Pietropaolo contends that 'Vico the narrator, speaking in the here and now of autobiographical reflection, has no difficulty seeing that every significant episode of his past life was a sign of the future to come and the function of a truth of human nature that transcended his particularity'.⁷² In Collingwood's case, each philosophical battle he fought against the realists had on reflection a political significance in his fight against fascism and Nazism.

They both were acerbic about their relative lack of recognition. Collingwood is much more reticent than Vico in confessing the intellectual sources of his inspiration. He does not mention, for example, either Vico or Croce, despite the fact that both contributed greatly to his intellectual maturation. Perhaps more tellingly, Collingwood invests his autobiography almost wholly with a political significance.⁷³ Vico interweaves much more of his life into his cerebral journey that ends in triumph against adversity. He was poor and passed over for positions for which he thought he was eminently better qualified than the recipients. His physical surroundings were not conducive to intellectual achievement; he lacked sponsorship, and was bitter, as he confessed, to the point of being 'choleric to a fault'.⁷⁴

Where they differ most is in the fact that Vico accounts for his intellectual achievements, telling us how he arrived at the conclusions he had published. For the most part Collingwood tells us how he came to think what he thought, but for a different purpose. First, it was to lay before his readers ideas that he had not yet fully

⁷¹ See Pietropaolo, Domenico 2006. 'Scrissela da filosofo: The Life of Giambattista Vico Written by Himself', in Mathien, T and Wright, D. G. (eds), *Autobiography as Philosophy: The philosophical uses of self-presentation*, London, Routledge, 109.

⁷² Pietropaolo, 'Scrissela da filosofo', 115.

⁷³ See Boucher in this volume.

⁷⁴ Vico, *Autobiography*, 99.

worked out and put in print. Secondly, it was not merely a personal struggle, but a political one directed against what he thought were the pernicious and corroding influences of Oxford and Cambridge realism. Thirdly, Vico's autobiography has many of the features of the confessional genre of autobiography, in that he is frank about his failings, and effusive about his struggle, emotional and intellectual, to overcome them. Much of the emotion that permeates and animates Vico's account is absent from Collingwood's. Finally, Vico's speculative philosophy of history provides the backdrop to the account of his own achievement. Appropriately placed by providence in the intellectual milieu of his day, Vico was able to attain the reflective awareness his civilization made possible.⁷⁵ Collingwood was, of course, a critic of speculative philosophy of history, passionately opposed to the imposition of idealized patterns on the past.

Collingwood's autobiography, then, shares few of the characteristics of the exemplars he would have had to hand. It is typical in that it recasts the past in the image of his own later self-understanding, but differs in that so much of his emotional life is missing.

In studying Collingwood's *An Autobiography*, scholars have tended to focus upon his positive doctrines, such as the logic of question and answer, the theory of absolute presuppositions, and the ideas of incapsulation and re-enactment. There is a tendency to ignore, or pay scant attention to, the underlying purpose for formulating the theories, or solving the problems he set himself, and that was to counter the morally and politically corrupting influence of realism, and to make the youth of his day less vulnerable to fraudsters who duped them by purveying lies. This exemplifies his refusal to acknowledge a separation between theory and practice, and confirms his view that there were three simultaneous personae inhabiting all of his endeavours (*A*, 150-4).

Almost the whole of *An Autobiography* is infused with this purpose, and the final chapter, which so many, including the Delegates of OUP, as we saw, dismissed as an intemperate rant, was an illustration of how the realists were attempting to dupe, trick, or corrupt the consciousness of the people over Spain, Abyssinia, and

⁷⁵ See Verene, Donald, 1991. *The New Art of Autobiography*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, chapter 2.

Czechoslovakia. Realism in Collingwood's view had rendered many defenceless against governments determined to undermine democracy.

What we suggest is that Collingwood recast himself by investing the integrated succession of experiences he creates with a political import. It is quite obvious that the final chapter is overtly and strongly political, and would have been even more so had the OUP Delegates not objected, but what is less clearly understood is that each intellectual problem he encounters and works through has a political significance. Many of those who knew Collingwood were startled and disturbed by this particular pattern of recasting, especially its manifestation in the last chapter. McCallum, who wrote one of the British Academy obituaries for his friend, maintains in a letter to Malcolm Knox that: 'The transformation of the cautious and sophisticated Tory that I knew to the flamboyant and anti-fascist revealed in that startled me.'⁷⁶ In truth Collingwood always had a radical bent, as we see in Teresa Smith's chapter in this volume.

His objections to both H. H. Prichard and H. W. B. Joseph, Oxford realists, were that they had become radical sceptics, the former more so than the latter. The realists, particularly G. E. Moore in Cambridge and John Cook Wilson in Oxford, attributed doctrines to thinkers that they did not hold; to Berkeley, and to Bradley respectively.

In the early part of the First World War Collingwood's archaeological work impressed upon him the importance of the questioning activity, as integral to the act of knowing, and not preliminary to it. During his time at the Admiralty Collingwood contemplated the Albert Memorial, which for many observers appeared a grotesque monstrosity. This could not have been George Gilbert Scott's intention, and led Collingwood to formulate the logic of question and answer in answer to his own question 'why had Scott done it?' (A, 29). Converging upon this in his philosophical studies was his emphasis on sound scholarship. Together they were prescient of what Collingwood was later more ably capable of articulating: that realism was a philosophy that erred because it neglected history. Their positive doctrine about knowledge, namely the intuitionist theory, was not compatible with what Collingwood learnt from his

⁷⁶ Knox Papers, 20 September, 1941.

own historical research, and their critical methods were ill used in refuting doctrines that were not in fact held by those to whom they were ascribed (*A*, 22–8).

At the end of the war Collingwood resumed his normal duties at Oxford, and by this time, he tells us, he was an opponent of realism. In particular he wished to refute the proposition that knowing something makes no difference to the known.⁷⁷ This was in his view a logical error entailing knowledge of what was known both before and after knowing it, which is an impossibility. More pernicious was its tendency to part company with all positive doctrines by a process of critical disintegration. In relation to moral philosophy this entailed rejecting over 2,000 years of believing that its purpose was to think out more clearly the issues involved in conduct in order to act better (*A*, 47). Prichard contended that moral philosophy was purely theoretical, focusing upon the workings of the moral consciousness, without interfering with its practice, and Russell had jettisoned ethics from the body of philosophy. The implication was fundamental. The generation of students brought up on Greenian idealism had been taught that clear philosophical thinking is essential to informing and improving conduct, whereas those exposed to realism were told that philosophical thinking is a disinterested activity with no contribution to make to practical conduct.

It was, then, the separation between theory and practice to which Collingwood objected, not least because it denied the role of the committed intellectual, and absolved philosophy of social responsibility. This separation of theory and practice, however, was not peculiar to realism. Certain strands of idealism maintained the same distinction. Hegel notoriously tells us that philosophy comes on the scene too late to influence practice, and something of the same view may be attributed to Bradley. It was, however, the realists that Collingwood had firmly in his sights, and the consequences of their doctrines and their designation of bogus philosophy on the people they taught:

The inference which any pupil could draw for himself was that for guidance in the problems of life, since one must not seek it from thinkers or from thinking, from ideals or from principles, one must look to people who

⁷⁷ See Beany's contribution to this volume for the argument that Collingwood misunderstood this aspect of Oxford realism.

were not thinkers (but fools), to processes that were not thinking (but passion), to aims that were not ideals (but caprices), and to rules that were not principles (but rules of expediency). (*A*, 48)

The realists had developed a flawless critical technique with which to demolish any argument. The problem was that their formulations of arguments were distortions or perversions as viewed through their own perspectives (*A*, 73). The realists were unrelenting in their negativity; they contended that a theory of knowledge was a contradiction in terms, and destroyed political theory by rejecting its very basis in the idea of a common good. The consequence was to make students contemptuous of philosophy because they were convinced that it was merely a trivial and silly game. Realists, then, transgressed all of Collingwood's golden rules; they did not satisfy themselves as to the relevance of their criticisms by reading texts historically, nor did they take pains to determine what question the author of a text was asking, but instead assumed that the questions were perennial. Their greatest crime was completely to ignore history as an example of knowledge, and to formulate their own theory of knowledge on the methodology of the natural sciences (*A*, 84-5).

What, by implication, were the realists failing to do? The First World War had demonstrated to Collingwood that the immense advances in natural science since the Middle Ages had transformed man's ability to control nature, but no comparable transformation had taken place in historical knowledge and man's ability to control human situations, of which the war was an exemplar *par excellence*. The realists' neglect of history, then, simply contributed to this malaise. What was needed was more understanding of human affairs and more knowledge of how to deal with them. History was to provide not rules of conduct but insights in helping us diagnose our moral and political problems. This required not scissors-and-paste history, with its ideal of obtaining ready-made information from the sources about a dead past, but the new kind of history of which Collingwood was an advocate. This kind of history, the re-enactment of past thoughts of a variety of different people, results in self-knowledge, that is, the realization of what one is able to think, and what one is potentially able to be and do. Self-knowledge is simply a microcosm of knowledge of the world of human affairs, and history is the science which equips us to deal with them.

Collingwood contends: 'If the realists had wanted to train up a generation of Englishmen and Englishwomen expressly as the potential dupes of every adventurer in morals and politics, commerce or religion, who should appeal to their emotions and promise them private gains which neither could procure them nor even meant to procure them, no better way of doing it could have been discovered' (*A*, 49). The realists, by dichotomizing theory and practice, were responsible for the corruption of youth, making them the potential dupes of a dishonest government. In order to counter this, Collingwood sought to reconcile theory and practice, arguing that the way a person acts is profoundly affected by the way he or she thinks.

The final chapter of *An Autobiography* is viewed as something of an aberration, an ill-tempered attack on modern politics, out of temper with the rest of the book. This was certainly how it was viewed, as we saw, by some of the Delegates of Oxford University Press. Collingwood had removed from the final chapter references to treason and insufficiently evidenced remarks on the activities of Spanish fascist troops. By the time Sisam received the corrected proofs and the substantially rewritten last chapter, Collingwood's views on British foreign policy and the conduct of the government were being echoed by *The Times*. Both Sisam and Chapman now believed that Collingwood's remarks were quite harmless, but regretted the fact that *The Times* had persuaded continental powers that 'England's promises were about as reliable as Hitler's'.⁷⁸

Collingwood's work then, as he saw it, had a profoundly political purpose, no less than to understand better human affairs so that situations such as the First World War could be avoided. Both Collingwood's philosophical studies and his historical or archaeological studies are understood by him to be a contribution to the better understanding of human affairs. The realists, far from contributing to the better understanding required, generated perverted understandings that corrupted the consciousness of youth, making them ill equipped to obtain the knowledge of human affairs necessary to counteract the propaganda of corrupt governments. The publication of his ideas in books was for him

⁷⁸ Letter to Humphrey Milford, 3 April, 1939, OUP Autobiography file.

nothing less than a public service, that is, the dissemination of ideas that he thought ‘the public would value’ (*A*, 117). Both of the books that followed, *An Essay on Metaphysics* and *The New Leviathan*, are thoroughly imbued with this spirit.

This new edition of *An Autobiography* serves to provide the reader not only with greater clarity on how his ideas developed, but also with biographical glimpses, as this introduction itself has done, in order to give us a more rounded portrait. Our aim is not just to fill in the gaps, but to challenge the evidence.

Our aim here is to provide some detailed background on how Collingwood’s ideas developed, from childhood onwards, and, more importantly, an analysis of how the body of his work—the ‘corpus’, one might say—can now be read, some seventy years after his death. Teresa Smith, on his education and childhood at home and at school, suggests a more critical and radical development which links to the ‘man of action’ and political engagement set out at the end of *An Autobiography* and portrayed by David Boucher in his challenge to the ‘ivory tower’ image commonly held of Collingwood the thinker. James Patrick’s account of Collingwood’s Oxford years challenges the ivory tower image in a different way, by illustrating his sociability and lively engagement in a life of music, art, writing, and friendship, as well as with his students, despite his isolation from his Oxford contemporaries after his criticism of the philosophy of the day; and Philip Smallwood continues this theme by analysing the *Autobiography* for its engagement as literature. Other chapters show why Collingwood’s work continues to be relevant to us now, in any field. Tony Birley analyses some of the practical historical and archaeological puzzles Collingwood tackled and defends his approach from critics of the time, and demonstrates his importance for the survival and subsequent trajectory of Romano-British studies. Beaney, van der Dussen, Haddock, and Martin present detailed critiques of his rejection of realism, and of his lifelong work on the relationship between philosophy and history. Essentially the question is how we can say we know anything, including anything of the past. That is, Collingwood, like many of the idealists to which he has an affinity, but from which he sought a respectable distance (see Connelly in this volume), addressed the issue of the conditions of knowledge by uncovering the fundamental postulates upon which the superstructure of our thought rests. In all his enquiries,

Collingwood is furthering the frontiers of the self-understanding of the mind. But critics have questioned the authenticity of his own account of his intellectual journey, and we have addressed some of these questions in this volume. The meaning of what Collingwood meant by re-enactment; its relation to historical knowledge, including the extent to which he had a radical change of mind about the relation between history and philosophy; and the extent to which his powers of reasoning were affected by illness, are all addressed by James Connelly in his contribution.

Collingwood continues to challenge us with his insistence on critically examining the nature of evidence by making sure we are asking the right questions and using the best techniques to reach for answers. Here we try to follow his own teaching by making a fresh attempt to understand the questions he was trying to ask, and why, and to see what sort of a fist he made at answering them then and might make now.

PART I

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

AN
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By
R. G. COLLINGWOOD

CLARENDON PRESS • OXFORD

I

BENT OF A TWIG

UNTIL I was thirteen years old I lived at home and was taught by my father. Lessons occupied only two or three hours each morning; otherwise he left me to my own devices, sometimes helping me with what I chose to do, more often leaving me to work it out for myself.

It was his doing that I began Latin at four and Greek at six; but my own that I began, about the same time, to read everything I could find about the natural sciences, especially geology, astronomy, and physics; to recognize rocks, to know the stars, and to understand the working of pumps and locks and other mechanical appliances up and down the house. It was my father who gave me lessons in ancient and modern history, illustrated with relief maps in papier-mâché made by boiling down newspapers in a saucepan; but my first lesson in what I now regard as my own subject, the history of thought, was the discovery, in a friend's house a few miles away, of a battered seventeenth-century book, wanting cover and title-page, and full of strange doctrines about meteorology and geology and planetary motions. It must have been a compendium of Descartes' *Principia*, to judge by what I recall of its statements about vortices; I was about nine when I found it, and already knew enough about the corresponding modern theories to appreciate the contrast which it offered. It let me into the secret which

modern books had been keeping from me, that the natural sciences have a history of their own, and that the doctrines they teach on any given subject, at any given time, have been reached not by some discoverer penetrating to the truth after ages of error, but by the gradual modification of doctrines previously held; and will at some future date, unless thinking stops, be themselves no less modified. I will not say that all this became clear to me at that childish age; but at least I became aware from reading this old book that science is less like a hoard of truths, ascertained piecemeal, than an organism which in the course of its history undergoes more or less continuous alteration in every part.

During the same years I was constantly watching the work of my father and mother, and the other professional painters who frequented their house, and constantly trying to imitate them; so that I learned to think of a picture not as a finished product exposed for the admiration of virtuosi, but as the visible record, lying about the house, of an attempt to solve a definite problem in painting, so far as the attempt has gone. I learned what some critics and aestheticians never know to the end of their lives, that no 'work of art' is ever finished, so that in that sense of the phrase there is no such thing as a 'work of art' at all. Work ceases upon the picture or manuscript, not because it is finished, but because sending-in day is at hand, or because the printer is clamorous for copy, or because 'I am sick of working at this thing' or 'I can't see what more I can do to it'. In myself I found less aptitude

for painting than for literature; from an early age I wrote incessantly, in verse and prose, lyrics and fragments of epics, stories of adventure and romance, descriptions of imaginary countries and bogus scientific and archaeological treatises. A prolific habit in regard to such things was encouraged, demanded indeed, by the family custom of producing in manuscript a monthly magazine, circulated among a few friends and relations. My mother was a good pianist, and used to play for an hour every day before breakfast; sometimes in the evening as well, to a surreptitious audience of children sitting on the stairs in the dark; in this way I got to know all Beethoven's sonatas and most of Chopin, for these were her favourite composers, though not mine. But I have never been able to master the piano for myself.

My father had plenty of books, and allowed me to read in them as I pleased. Among others, he had kept the books of classical scholarship, ancient history, and philosophy which he had used at Oxford. As a rule I left these alone; but one day when I was eight years old curiosity moved me to take down a little black book lettered on its spine 'Kant's Theory of Ethics'. It was Abbott's translation of the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*; and as I began reading it, my small form wedged between the bookcase and the table, I was attacked by a strange succession of emotions. First came an intense excitement. I felt that things of the highest importance were being said about matters of the utmost urgency: things which at all costs I must understand. Then, with a wave

of indignation, came the discovery that I could not understand them. Disgraceful to confess, here was a book whose words were English and whose sentences were grammatical, but whose meaning baffled me. Then, third and last, came the strangest emotion of all. I felt that the contents of this book, although I could not understand it, were somehow my business: a matter personal to myself, or rather to some future self of my own. It was not like the common boyish intention to 'be an engine-driver when I grow up', for there was no desire in it; I did not, in any natural sense of the word, 'want' to master the Kantian ethics when I should be old enough; but I felt as if a veil had been lifted and my destiny revealed.

There came upon me by degrees, after this, a sense of being burdened with a task whose nature I could not define except by saying, 'I must think.' What I was to think about I did not know; and when, obeying this command, I fell silent and absent-minded in company, or sought solitude in order to think without interruption, I could not have said, and still cannot say, what it was that I actually thought. There were no particular questions that I asked myself; there were no special objects upon which I directed my mind; there was only a formless and aimless intellectual disturbance, as if I were wrestling with a fog.

I know now that this is what always happens when I am in the early stages of work on a problem. Until the problem has gone a long way towards being solved, I do not know what it is; all I am conscious of is this vague perturbation of mind, this sense of being

worried about I cannot say what. I know now that the problems of my life's work were taking, deep down inside me, their first embryonic shape. But any one who observed me must have thought, as my elders did think, that I had fallen into a habit of loafing, and lost the alertness and quickness of wit that had been so noticeable in my early childhood. My only defence against this opinion, since I did not know and therefore could not explain what was happening to me, was to cover these fits of abstraction with some bodily activity, trifling enough not to distract my attention from my inward wrestling. I was a neat-fingered boy, skilful at making all sorts of things; active in walking, bicycling, or rowing, and thoroughly practised in sailing a boat. So when the fit was upon me I would set myself to make something quite uninteresting, like a regiment of paper men, or wander aimlessly in the woods or on the mountains, or sail all day in a dead calm. It was painful to be laughed at for playing with paper men; but the alternative, to explain why I did it, was impossible.

Whether it was this growing idleness that made my father send me to school, I am not sure. In any case he was too poor to pay for it himself, and my school bills (and later my Oxford bills) were paid by the generosity of a rich friend. Thus, at thirteen, I was put into a preparatory school with the aim of competing for a scholarship, and became acquainted with the treadmill on which middle-class boys in this country earn their own living by competitive examination, beginning at an age when their working-class fellow

children are debarred by law from exposing themselves in the labour market. My father's friend would, I am sure, as willingly have paid two hundred pounds a year for me as one; but to myself at least it was a point of honour that I should win scholarships, if only to justify the spending upon me of all that money; and, even had it not been, the specialism which is one chief vice of English education would not have spared me. The ghost of a silly seventeenth-century squabble still haunts our classrooms, infecting teachers and pupils with the lunatic idea that studies must be either 'classical' or 'modern'. I was equally well fitted to specialize in Greek and Latin, or in modern history and languages (I spoke and read French and German almost as easily as English), or in the natural sciences; and nothing would have afforded my mind its proper nourishment except to study equally all three; but my father's teaching had given me a good deal more Greek and Latin than most boys of my age possessed; and since I had to specialize in something I specialized in these and became a 'classical' scholar.

II

SPRING FROST

IN that capacity I went on, a year later, to Rugby; a school which then had a high reputation, owing (as I found out in time) to the genius of one first-rate teacher, Robert Whitelaw, a man who touched nothing that he did not adorn. Because one of my five years there was spent in his form, it would be untrue to say that my time at Rugby was altogether wasted. And there were other things. I was in the Sixth Form for three years and head of my house for two; thus for the first time I tasted the pleasure of doing administrative work, and learnt once for all how to do it. In addition to Whitelaw, whose obviously sincere assumption that you knew as much as he did stimulated his pupils to incredible feats, I worked for a time under one other good teacher, C. P. Hastings, from whom I learnt a good deal of modern history. Among those of the other masters who did not have to teach me I made a few good friends; and with my contemporaries my relations were always of the happiest.

These were benefits conferred by the school itself: others I obtained rather in spite of it. I discovered Bach, learned to play the violin, studied harmony and counterpoint and orchestration, and composed a great deal of trash. I taught myself to read Dante and made the acquaintance of many other poets, in various languages, hitherto unknown to me. These unauthorized readings (for which, in summer time, I used to

perch in a willow-tree overhanging the Avon) are my happiest recollection of Rugby; but not my most vivid.

That description must apply to the pigsty conditions of our daily life and the smell of filth constantly in our nostrils. Second to that comes the frightful boredom of being taught things (and things which ought to have been frightfully interesting) by weary, absent-minded or incompetent masters; then the torment of living by a time-table expressly devised to fill up the day with scraps and snippets of occupation in such a manner that no one could get down to a job of work and make something of it, and, in particular, devised to prevent one from doing that 'thinking' in which, long ago, I had recognized my own vocation.

Nor did I get any compensating satisfaction out of the organized games which constituted the real religion of the school; for at football in my first year I suffered an injury to the knee which the surgery of those days rendered incurable. This was a crucial point in my school life. The orthodox theory of public-school athletics is that they distract the adolescent from sex. They do not do that; but they give him a most necessary outlet for the energies he is not allowed to use in the class-room. Apart from a few eccentrics like Whitelaw, the public school masters of my acquaintance were like the schoolmaster in the *Dunciad*:

Plac'd at the door of learning, youth to guide,
We never suffer it to stand too wide.

The boys were nothing if not teachable. They soon saw that any exhibition of interest in their studies

was a sure way to get themselves disliked, not by their contemporaries, but by the masters; and they were not long in acquiring that pose of boredom towards learning and everything connected with it which is notoriously part of the English public school man's character. But they must have some compensation for their frustrated and inhibited intellects; and this they got in athletics, where nobody minds how hard you work, and the triumphs of the football field make amends for the miseries of the class-room. If I had retained the use of my limbs I should no doubt have become an athlete and stopped worrying my head about the crack of that door and what was hidden behind it. As it was, I could not reconcile myself to the starvation imposed on me by the teaching to which I was subjected; and as time went on I learnt to devote my time more and more to music and to reading in subjects of my own choice like medieval Italian history or the early French poets, not because I preferred them to Thucydides and Catullus, but because I could work at them unhampered by masters.

These habits were not undiscovered, and I became a rebel, more or less declared, against the whole system of teaching. I did not rebel against the disciplinary system, and with my housemaster (my immediate superior in the disciplinary hierarchy) I remained on excellent terms; I did not even neglect my work to the extent of incurring punishment for idleness; but my masters were quite able to discern the difference between my abilities and my performance, and were