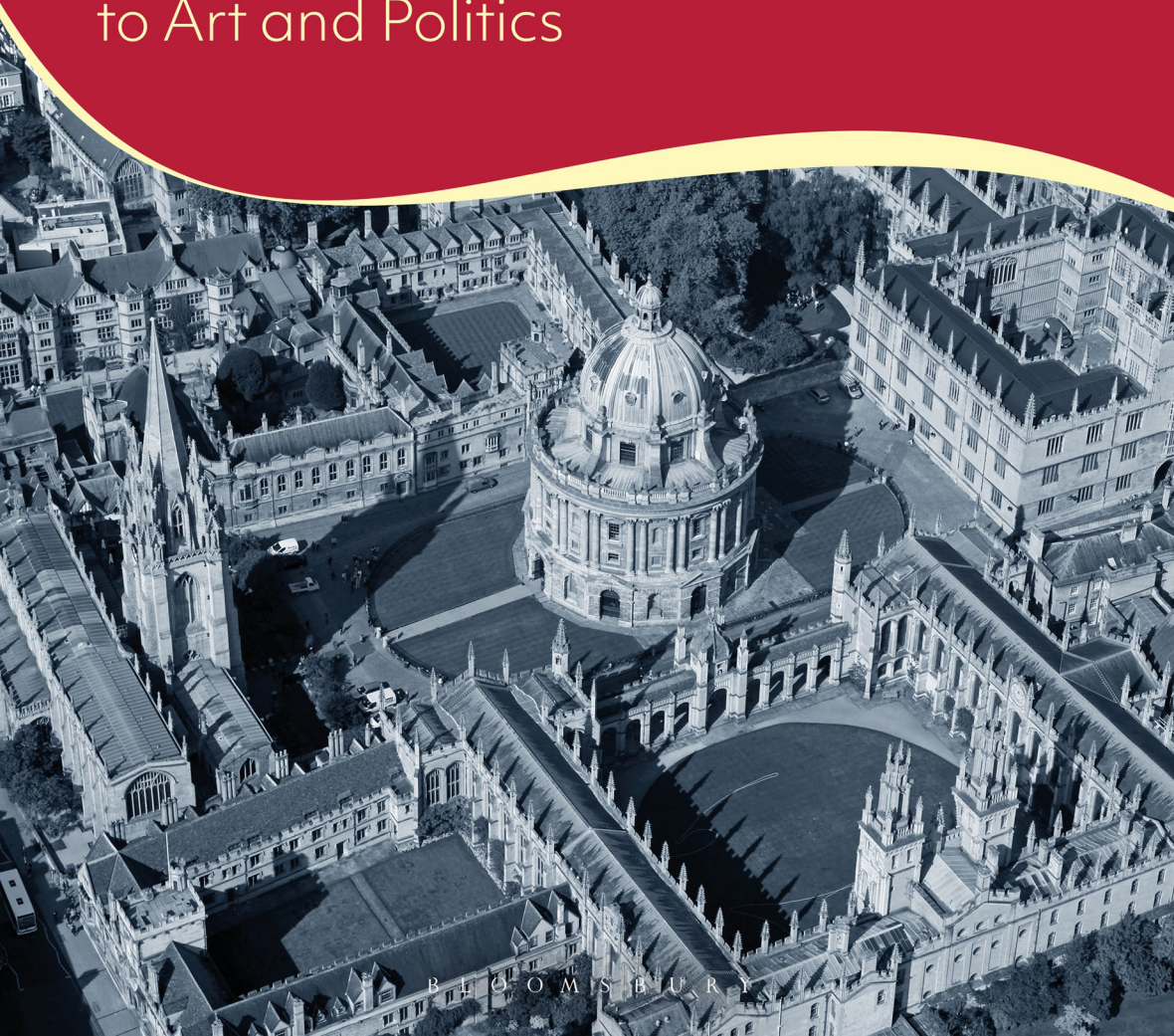


Peter Skagstad

Exploring the Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood

From History and Method
to Art and Politics



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Exploring the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood

*From History and Method to
Art and Politics*

Peter Skagestad

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To my son
Erik Ober Skagestad

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The seeds of this book date back many years to when I wrote my doctoral dissertation on Collingwood's metaphysics at Brandeis University in the early 1970s. A year later I published a book comparing and contrasting Collingwood's philosophy of history to that of Sir Karl Popper, whose lectures I had attended at Brandeis. Two years of compulsory military service in my native Norway followed, and upon my discharge my philosophical interests had moved in a different direction. Twenty years ago an invitation to give a paper at an international Collingwood Congress rekindled my interest in Collingwood's philosophy, and the result, finally, is this book.

I am grateful to Bloomsbury Academic's anonymous reviewers, to my old friend and colleague Howard DeLong, and to my wife Elaine for reading earlier drafts of the manuscript and making numerous helpful suggestions for revisions. All remaining errors and omissions are my own responsibility.

At Bloomsbury, I am further indebted to Colleen Coalter, Becky Holland, Zoe Jellicoe, Leela Devi, and Dhanuja Ravi for sure-footedly guiding the manuscript through the editorial and production process.

As ever, I remain indebted to my mentor Alasdair MacIntyre for guiding me, decades ago, through my first baby steps in Collingwood studies.

Finally, Section 3 of Chapter 7 is excerpted from my earlier article 'Collingwood and Berlin: A Comparison', published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2005, 99–112, Copyright 2005 by Journal of the History of Ideas, Inc., and is here reprinted with permission.

Like Collingwood's later works, this book has been written under the cloud of an impending threat to our civilization. During the recent dark years I have given much thought to the question of what students of philosophy can do to defend the practice of rational inquiry as an institution in our society against the powerful forces seeking to trivialize, marginalize, and delegitimize it, if not – *yet* – to suppress it outright. And I have reached the conclusion that the

best use I personally can make to this end of my talents and experience, such as they are, is defiantly to carry on the practice of rational inquiry, *as if* its value and importance were beyond dispute. That is part of what I have tried to do in this book.

Peter Skagestad

June 2020

Abbreviations

A	<i>An Autobiography</i>
EM	<i>An Essay on Metaphysics</i>
EPA	<i>Essays in the Philosophy of Art</i> , Donagan, Alan, ed.
EPH	<i>Essays in the Philosophy of History</i> , Debbins, William, ed.
EPM	<i>An Essay on Philosophical Method</i>
EPP	<i>Essays in Political Philosophy</i> , Boucher, David, ed.
FML	<i>The First Mate's Log</i>
FR	<i>Faith and Reason</i> , Rubinoff, Lionel, ed.
GRU	'Goodness, Rightness, Utility'
IH	<i>The Idea of History</i>
IN	<i>The Idea of Nature</i>
NL	<i>The New Leviathan</i> . Following established convention, references to this work cite paragraph numbers, rather than page numbers.
OPA	<i>Outlines of a Philosophy of Art</i>
PA	<i>The Principles of Art</i>
PE	<i>The Philosophy of Enchantment</i>
PH	<i>The Principles of History</i>
RBES	<i>Roman Britain and the English Settlements</i>
RP	<i>Religion and Philosophy</i>
RUP	'Ruskin's Philosophy', reprinted in EPA
SM	<i>Speculum Mentis</i>

Introduction

No longer a neglected philosopher, Robin George Collingwood (1889–1943) has in recent decades become widely recognized as one of the most significant philosophers of the twentieth century. Considered in his lifetime as fighting a rearguard action in defense of an outmoded Idealism, Collingwood is now recognized as a cogent critic of the then-nascent analytic philosophy, while himself a master of rigorous philosophical analysis. Collingwood was fully and consistently committed to reason and to the use of rational argument that is the pride of the analytic tradition, while ambitiously tackling the substantive philosophical issues that analytic philosophers—in his own time as later—have tended to shy away from. And he brought to bear on these issues an unparalleled wealth of knowledge, of history, archaeology, politics, literature, art, and folklore. His early death was one of the tragedies of twentieth-century philosophy. Thus Ray Monk, author of a noted biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein, recently argued that the “continental”/“analytic” divide that has characterized postwar philosophy could have been avoided had Collingwood lived longer. The divide, Monk argued, was largely engendered by Gilbert Ryle, who succeeded Collingwood as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford.¹ Had Collingwood not died when he did, Ryle would not have occupied this very influential position.

In his relatively short life, Collingwood made significant and original contributions to all branches of philosophy, and left his mark on metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of religion, philosophy of language and mind, aesthetics, philosophy of history, ethics, and social and political philosophy. His influence has been correspondingly wide ranging; Collingwood’s biographer Fred Inglis sees him as a direct influence on the prominent ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre, among others, and a forerunner of—though not apparently an influence on—the historian of science Thomas Kuhn.² The relevance of Collingwood’s philosophy for today’s thought thus far exceeds what is as yet generally appreciated.

1. The Plan of This Book

In his *Autobiography* Collingwood exhorts those who are interested in his work, whether they agree or disagree with him, to write about the subject matter, not about him (A, 118–19). This exhortation has been notoriously ignored by later writers, for more than one reason. In the case of the philosophy of history, as understood in the English-speaking world, Collingwood, as is pointed out by the editors of the posthumously published *Principles of History*, has set the agenda for the discipline, making it well-nigh impossible to practice the discipline without reference to Collingwood (PH, xiii). Another reason is that, in addition to his published works, Collingwood left behind a massive amount of unpublished, and in most cases unfinished, manuscripts, many of which have since appeared in print. So, a certain amount of reconstruction is required to gain a full understanding of his thought.

There is today a wealth of literature on Collingwood's philosophy, but not to the best of my knowledge any chronologically organized examination of all aspects of his philosophy. Most accounts to date have been thematically organized, relating Collingwood's ideas either to his predecessors or to present-day philosophical concerns, and with one exception confined to certain salient themes within Collingwood's philosophy.³ These approaches have their merits, but it is the belief of this author that a chronological approach will give a fuller understanding of both the continuity and the evolution of Collingwood's thought. Thus, we review the progression of his thought, starting with this first book *Religion and Philosophy* (1916) and concluding with his final book *The New Leviathan* (1942). It should be noted, however, that Collingwood typically worked on multiple projects simultaneously and over periods of many years. Thus, while *The New Leviathan* was published in 1942, it is the fruit of ideas developed in lectures on moral and political philosophy delivered over a twenty-year period. And while *The Idea of History* was published posthumously in 1946, it was largely written in 1936. So, my objective has been to present Collingwood's philosophical ideas in a roughly chronological order. I say "philosophical" since Collingwood was also a historian and an archaeologist, and his work in these fields falls outside the scope of this study. And, while I have attempted to place Collingwood's philosophy within the context of his contemporaries and predecessors, this does not preclude referencing, where appropriate, Collingwood's relevance to later philosophers.

The only chronologically organized study of Collingwood's philosophy that I am aware of is Lionel Rubinoff's magisterial classic.⁴ However, Rubinoff confines himself to Collingwood's metaphysics, whereas the present study aims to address all aspects of Collingwood's philosophy. By aiming at generality, I do not, however, lay any claim to being comprehensive; as the title of this book indicates, this is an exploration of each aspect of Collingwood's philosophy, not a comprehensive account of any of them.

In a letter to the Clarendon Press from 1939, Collingwood himself grouped his work into three series: Philosophical Essays, comprising *An Essay on Philosophical Method* and *An Essay on Metaphysics*; Philosophical Principles, comprising *The Principles of Art* and *The Principles of History*; and Studies in the History of Ideas, comprising *The Idea of Nature* and *The Idea of History*.⁵ Why not use this organization—Collingwood's own—as our organizing principle? The grouping of the two *Essays* provides, as we shall see in Chapter 7, a valuable clue to understanding the latter *Essay*, and thus to understanding Collingwood's philosophy more generally. The other two series did not materialize, as *The Principles of History*, *The Idea of Nature*, and *The Idea of History* were all left unfinished at Collingwood's untimely death, and what we today know as *The Idea of History* is that work together with Chapter 1 of *The Principles of History* and various other writings on the philosophy of history. Also, in 1939 Collingwood had not yet begun work on *The New Leviathan*, which we today cannot help seeing as a companion volume to *The Principles of Art*.

While there is, as noted, a large literature on Collingwood's philosophy, most of this literature has not penetrated very far beyond the ranks of academic philosophers. The overriding goal of the present book is to make Collingwood's philosophy, and some of the contentious issues it has raised, accessible to a general audience. Thus, no prior knowledge of philosophy is presupposed, and philosophical jargon has been avoided to the extent possible. Collingwood propounded a number of controversial ideas, and while he was a master of graceful prose, he was not always a careful writer, which is one reason why the interpretation of Collingwood's thought is also fraught with controversy. No one writing about Collingwood can ignore these controversies, or avoid taking stands on the most important of them, but I hope to have avoided getting embroiled in esoteric controversies that are of interest only to professional Collingwood scholars.

My objective in this book is to provide an overview of Collingwood's philosophy, rather than to promote "my" interpretation of his thought. However, given that Collingwood studies have been, and continue to be, a highly controversial field, I cannot avoid embracing particular stances on salient points of contention; two issues in particular stand out as worthy of mention at the outset. First, while I shall argue that Collingwood's thought evolves over time, I join those who reject the thesis, originated by T. M. Knox and later embraced by Alan Donagan, that Collingwood in the late 1930s underwent a radical conversion from idealism to a relativistic historicism. This thesis I regard as having been decisively discredited, most conclusively by James Connelly, as we will see in Chapter 6. Secondly, I will be defending Collingwood's controversial doctrine that historical knowledge consists in the re-enactment of past thoughts. This doctrine, as I understand it, has been largely misunderstood by its numerous critics, as has been argued by William Dray, in particular. This subject will be addressed in detail in Chapter 4.

Thus prepared, the reader is invited to embark on what proposes to be a journey of exploration and discovery.

Life and Work

1. Biographical Highlights

For a full and rich account of Collingwood's life, the reader is referred to Inglis's biography; here we shall simply set forth some highlights.¹ Collingwood was born in Coniston, in England's Lake District, in 1889, to parents William Gershom Collingwood and his wife Dorrie Collingwood. Gershom, as Collingwood senior was known, was a painter, writer of fiction and nonfiction, a folklorist steeped in British folktales and Icelandic sagas, an archaeologist, and private secretary to, and biographer of, the critic John Ruskin, cofounder with William Morris of the Arts and Crafts movement. Gershom was also Oxford-trained in the Idealist philosophy of T. H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet, Gershom's tutor at Oxford. Dorrie was also a painter, as well as an accomplished pianist. All this matters because Robin and his three sisters were homeschooled by their parents in Latin, Greek, and math, as well as in drawing, painting, music, archaeology, and practical DIY skills. And sailing, which became Robin's lifelong passion. His sailboat *Swallow* was to be immortalized in the children's books of the Collingwood family friend Arthur Ransome. Wherever possible, learning by doing was emphasized in the children's education.

Since Gershom did not hold down a full-time paying job until 1905, when he accepted a lectureship at University College, Reading, the family was far from wealthy and often short of money, but they appear to have earned enough from Gershom's books and lectures and Dorrie's paintings that they did not suffer deprivation, and Robin seems to have had an exceptionally happy childhood.

At twelve, Collingwood tells us in his *Autobiography*, he came across a copy of Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, and, while he found it impossible to understand, he was imbued with a sense that this was something that was vitally important for him to comprehend (A, 3–4). Thus his fate was sealed.

At age fourteen, after a year at the preparatory school Charney Hall, Robin was sent to boarding school at Rugby, where he lived for five years under pigsty conditions in an overcrowded dormitory. Collingwood later described these five years as largely wasted, due to the mind-numbingly regimented schedule, which seemed to him designed to prevent the students from doing any actual thinking (A, 8). He admits, though, that he was on excellent terms with his teachers, and Inglis has observed that he impressed his teachers sufficiently to be appointed head of his house in preference to more senior students.² Also, due to a knee injury he was excused from sports and used his free time to practice the violin and teach himself Italian to read Dante. So, not a complete waste. At Rugby he also was baptized and confirmed, as his freethinking parents had not given him a religious upbringing.

Collingwood's daughter Teresa Smith has noted that while Collingwood described himself as a "rebel" at Rugby, he did not rebel against the school's disciplinary regimen or its informal culture, both of which he fit right into. What he rebelled against was the school's pedagogy, which he found inimical to the kind of independent inquiry which his father, under the influence of Ruskin's pedagogical ideas, had inculcated into him.³

In 1908 Collingwood enrolled at University College, Oxford, from which he graduated with First Class honors in 1912. His teachers at Oxford included the Realist philosophers John Cook Wilson and H. A. Prichard, as well as the Idealist J. A. Smith, who was to become an important mentor. Collingwood later confessed himself to have fallen under the sway of the Realists and to have remained a Realist until 1916. However, in his student years he also discovered the philosophy of the Italian Idealist Benedetto Croce, who was to remain an important influence, and in 1913 he published a translation of Croce's *Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*. Vico was to become another lifelong influence.

Upon graduating in 1912 Collingwood joined Pembroke College, Oxford, as a fellow and lecturer in philosophy and classics. Later, he also taught the philosophy students at Lincoln College, and by the mid-twenties

he estimated he tutored or lectured about forty hours a week. His lectures were completely written out and revised every year. This workload did not prevent him from publishing five books while at Pembroke: *Religion and Philosophy* (1916), *Roman Britain* (1923), *Speculum Mentis* (1924), *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (1925), and *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933). From 1933 to 1934 he also wrote the posthumously published *The Idea of Nature*. At this time he also established himself as one of Britain's leading archaeologists; thus, in 1913, he became head of excavations at Galava at Amberside, replacing F. J. Haverfield, who had retired the previous year. Collingwood was to return to archaeological digs annually during college vacations for most of his life.

Collingwood's work as an historian and archaeologist falls outside the scope of this book, but is of sufficient importance for his philosophical work to bear emphasizing. Already growing up, Collingwood went on excavations with his father. Since Gershom is known to have accompanied Haverfield on some excavations, it is likely that this is when Robin made Haverfield's acquaintance. At Oxford, he accompanied Haverfield on several excavations, and upon Haverfield's death in 1919 Collingwood volunteered to take over his lectures on Roman history at Oxford. In 1927 he was appointed university lecturer in philosophy and Roman history. Continuing Haverfield's work on the archaeology of Roman Britain, Collingwood established himself as the leading authority on Hadrian's Wall and the adjacent depression known as the Vallum, in particular. In addition, Collingwood's method of question and answer, of which more in Chapter 6, became widely accepted by British archaeologists.⁴ In 1930 Collingwood published *The Archaeology of Roman Britain*, followed in 1936 by a revised and enlarged *Roman Britain*, published as Part One of *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, with J. N. L. Myres, Volume One of the *Oxford History of England*, which was to remain the standard text on the subject for the next thirty years. (Collingwood and Myres were not actually coauthors; Collingwood's *Roman Britain* and Myres's *The English Settlements* were bound together as one volume.) Finally, Collingwood collected and copied almost 1,000 Roman inscriptions; the projected volume *Roman Inscriptions of Britain* was, however, left unfinished at his death and was not published until 1965.

That Collingwood, at least at times, felt more at home in the world of history and archaeology than in that of academic philosophy is evidenced in a letter to

his friend de Ruggiero in 1927, in the wake of the disappointing reception of his first major philosophical work *Speculum Mentis*:

For four months I have been deep in historical studies, and there I find myself among friends and willing collaborators; the return to philosophy means a return to a work in which I become more and more conscious of being an outlaw.⁵

Collingwood spent the First World War in the Intelligence section of the Admiralty. In 1919 he married Ethel Winifred Graham, who was to bear him two children. During his tenure at Pembroke, in 1931, Collingwood's health suffered from an attack of chickenpox, in the aftermath of which he wrote what he himself considered his best book—indeed, the only one he was able to complete to his own satisfaction—*An Essay on Philosophical Method*. In 1935 he succeeded his old mentor J. A. Smith as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy, a promotion that significantly lightened his workload. In 1936 he gave the lectures that were to become the bulk of the posthumous *The Idea of History* (1946), long considered his magnum opus. In 1937 he suffered a breakdown and underwent a fifty-hour course of psychoanalysis. *The Principles of Art* appeared in 1938, and Collingwood suffered his first and second strokes, in March and September of that year, then wrote *An Autobiography*, and took a medical leave from his professorship. In the winter of 1938–9, on his doctor's advice, he went on a voyage to the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia. His doctor had, however, recommended that he spend his leave writing, and while on board he penned *An Essay on Metaphysics* and one-third of a projected *Principles of History*, intended to be a companion volume to *The Principles of Art*.

Upon his return to England, in the summer of 1939, Collingwood guided a group of students on a Mediterranean voyage, during which he kept a journal to be published as *The First Mate's Log*. By the end of that voyage the Second World War had erupted, which is, in all probability, why Collingwood did not continue work on *The Principles of History*, but instead embarked on his massive treatise on social and political philosophy, *The New Leviathan* (1942), which he explicitly said was his contribution to the war effort. Early in 1941 he suffered his third stroke, which forced him to rein in the scope of *The New Leviathan* to four parts, instead of the projected five. Later that

year the Collingwoods divorced, and he married his former student Kathleen Edwardes, twenty-two years his junior, who was to bear him one daughter. In January 1942 Collingwood suffered yet another stroke, leaving his left side paralyzed; he died a year later at the family home in Coniston.

At his death Collingwood left behind a wealth of unpublished material. The task of selecting and editing this for publication was entrusted by The Clarendon Press to Collingwood's pupil and friend T. M. Knox, who published *The Idea of Nature* in 1945 and *The Idea of History* in 1946, while making the controversial decision to leave the bulk of *The Principles of History* unpublished. Part of this book—less than half—was incorporated into *The Idea of History*. Knox wrote a highly controversial preface to this book, more of which in Chapter 6. The manuscript of the *Principles* was long believed to have been destroyed but was discovered at Oxford University Press in 1995 and published in 1999 together with several essays on the philosophy of history. Later publications include a number of Collingwood's lectures and essays, including several essays on folklore and literature that were published together with a long but unfinished book manuscript on folktales, under the title *The Philosophy of Enchantment* (2005).

In his Oxford years Collingwood was no doubt a philosophical outlier; his works were largely ignored by his colleagues—although widely reviewed in nonphilosophical publications—and Collingwood made it clear in his *Autobiography* that he felt isolated in Oxford. This does not mean that he was a loner; he had numerous friends and pupils in the archaeological community, in which he had assumed a leading role. He was actively involved in politics and in church life. He enjoyed long friendships with the Italian philosophers Benedetto Croce and Guido de Ruggiero, whose *History of European Liberalism* he translated from Italian in 1927. At Pembroke he met J. R. R. Tolkien, and their shared interest in folktales became the basis for a lasting friendship. Finally, Collingwood was an extremely popular lecturer, noted both for the clearness of his delivery and for his often mischievous humor and wit.⁶ On occasion, his lectures had to be moved to a different college, as Pembroke did not have a lecture hall large enough to accommodate his students.

We have repeatedly referred to Idealists and Realists; it is time to peer behind these labels and ask what they stand for.