

Robin George Collingwood's Contribution to History

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Abstract

Collingwood was a fellow of Pembroke, Oxford for some 15 years until becoming the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Magdalen College, Oxford. He was the only pupil of F. J. Haverfield to survive World War I. Important influences on Collingwood were the Italian Idealists Croce, Gentile and Guido de Ruggiero, the last of whom was also a close friend. Other important influences were Hegel, Kant, Vico, F. H. Bradley and J. A. Smith. His father W. G. Collingwood, professor of fine arts at Reading University, was a student of Ruskin and was also an important influence. Collingwood is most famous for his book *The Idea of History (1965)*, a work collated from various sources soon after his death by his pupil, T. M. Knox. The book came to be a major inspiration for philosophy of history in the English-speaking world. It is extensively cited, leading one commentator to ironically remark that Collingwood is coming to be "the best known neglected thinker of our time". Not just a philosopher of history, Collingwood was also a practicing historian and archaeologist, being during his time a leading authority on Roman Britain. Collingwood held history as "recollection" of the "thinking" of a historical personage. Collingwood considered whether two different people can have the same thought and not just the same content, concluding that "there is no tenable theory of personal identity" preventing such a doctrine. In *The Principles of Art (1938)* Collingwood held (following Croce) that works of art are essentially expressions of emotion. He portrayed art as a necessary function of the human mind, and considered it collaborative activity. After several years of increasingly debilitating strokes Collingwood died at Coniston, Lancashire in January 1943. He was a practicing Anglican throughout his life.

Keywords: Re-enactment, Recollection and re-thinking.

Introduction

Collingwood's contribution to history can be meaningfully discussed by gleaning from his works which include: *The Philosophy of History (1965)*, *An Autobiography (1939)*, *The Principles of Art (1938)* and *The idea of History (1993)*, the answers he gives to the following questions: What is knowledge? What is history and what constitutes knowledge in history? How do we arrive at historical knowledge?

What is Knowledge?

Collingwood's conception of knowledge is holistic and ideational. He sees knowledge as divided into art, religion, science and philosophy. All these branches of knowledge exist in a dialectical relationship. One points towards the essential character of the rest, but each, at the same time, possess its own internal dynamics (Collingwood, 1965). All possess an inextricable unity with the mind. All knowledge is intellectual knowledge. Hence, we can speak about the idea of art, the idea of religion, the idea of science, the idea of history and philosophy. To grasp the real nature of phenomena; artistic, religious, scientific, historical and philosophical, it is necessary to penetrate the inside of what constitutes it, its internal essence and characteristics (Collingwood, 1993).

What is History?

This conception about knowledge forms Collingwood's idea of history. Collingwood defines as "the knowledge of the infinite world of facts", as essentially universal, as a "whole in which every fact is included" (Collingwood, 1993). The word history is used both in reference to what is supposed to have happened in the course of human existence and experience and to the written accounts of these (Blackburn, 1994). History is a unique type of knowledge for, unlike science, its subject matter is man's conscious/rational actions, which are motivated by ideas (Haddock, 1990). All history is therefore a history of ideas (Collingwood, 1993).

What is Knowledge in History?

The following points emerge from Collingwood's definition of history. First is the centrality of man in historical processes. Collingwood's idea of history is therefore humanist. This makes him different from some of positivists whose eruditions' or genetic reflections led them to attribute events to divine and/or natural process.

But this was not an original idea. Before Collingwood, various philosophers had developed the humanistic conception of history (Walsh, 1967). What Collingwood did was to add a rationalist dimension to the humanism, which already existed.

Second, Collingwood's view that history is "an infinite whole in which the knowledge of every fact is included" differs from earlier thought which confined history to the actions of national, leaders and heroes which were divinely inspired. But Collingwood's view that history is infinite imposed limitations on its knowing ability "as it really happened". The limitation is its sheer extensiveness. The positivists believed that it was possible to write history as it really happened. By denying the validity of this positivist stance, Collingwood stands out as a relativist, as we will see in detail below. Collingwood's rationalism overstretched the limits accepted by modern psychology (Russel, 1991). Collingwood believes that human actions that are the motor of historical processes are a product of conscious or rational ideas. Modern psychology attributes to the subconscious irrationality or emotions a higher percentage of the human mind than reason, consciousness and rationality. Collingwood's idea of history does not even consider the role of accidents in historical causation. It does not even have a place for what modern historians call "covering laws". His argument that the techniques of the historian are completely different from those of a natural scientist is belied by modern techniques of historical inquiry.

How do We Arrive at Historical Knowledge?

Collingwood confined history to thought proper. Thought is seen not only as the force behind the action of individuals in history, but also as the fundamental concept of historical inquiry (Barnes, 1962). Since history is a product of thoughtful human action, to grasp the real nature of particular historical happenings it is necessary to penetrate the inside of events and to discern the thoughts of the historical agents concerned. According to Collingwood, the historian has to rethink these thoughts in his own mind. This entails reconstructing for himself the situation in which the agents were placed

and the way in which they envisaged it. Hence, Collingwood's re-enactment doctrine variously called re-thinking, re-creation; reconstruction had been termed a methodology in historical inquiry.

What does methodology constitute? According to Collingwood, the past events which the historian brings to light are only revealed by his thought in his attempt to understand the present in his senses, a past which has left no trace on the perceptible world. In his own words:

“Historical thinking means nothing else than interpreting all the available evidence with the maximum degree of critical skill. It does not mean discovering what really happened, or what really happened is anything rather than what the evidence indicates. If there once happened, an event which no shred of evidence now survives, the event is not part of any historian's evidence. It is no historian's business to discover it; it is no gap in any historian's knowledge that he does not know it” (Collingwood, 1993).

In the above citation it is obvious Collingwood emphasizes the role of evidence in confirming historical facts. This is done mainly through thought, about which Collingwood has the following to say:

Ideally, historical thought is the apprehension of a world of fact (Ferguson, 1996). Actually, if the presentation of thought to itself is of a world of half ascertained facts, the world in which truth and error are at any given moment inextricable are confused together (Collingwood, 1993). Thus the actual object of historical thinking is an object which is not 'given' but perpetually in a process of being given.

Like E. H. Carr (1961) after him, Collingwood was arguing that historical knowledge is acquired by a constant dialogue between the historian and his facts.

According to Collingwood the know ability of past events is only relative. It depends on perception, memory and authority of both the historical agent or actor and the historian inquirer – interpreting facts or events by re-enacting the thought if the people who produced the events. This re-enactment is inquiring into the past. The historian thought is through imagination.

The historian understands what transpires when he is able to re-think, re-live the thought and actions of the historical actor he is dealing with. The actors and the historian's thoughts become identical. This, according to Collingwood is important since:

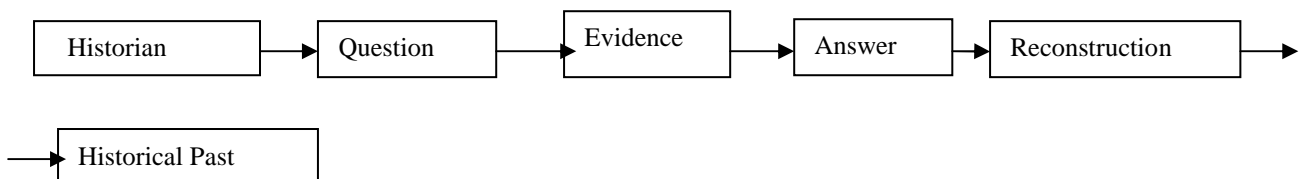
For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it. After the historian has ascertained the facts, there is not further process of inquiring into their causes. When he knows what happened, he already knows why it happened.

It is not, however, possible to know the past as it really happened. Here, Collingwood argues:

If we hope we can come to know the past exactly as it happened, our hope is in vain.... We cannot know the past, because it is not there to be known. There are no past facts except so far as we reconstruct them in historical thought. The past, which we reconstruct in historical thought, is not the real past; it is the past that can be disentangled from the present objective world by the present act of thinking. The re-enactment of the past on the present is the past itself so far as that is knowable to the historian (Collingwood, 1993).

Like B. Croce (1992) who was his mentor and whose ideas he elaborated in his works Collingwood believes that “all history is contemporary history”. It constitutes what the historian thinks in the present.

A number of points emerge from Collingwood's methodology of historical inquiry. First, there is a strong link between the historian, historical events and thought about them. According to Collingwood's historical facts/events in themselves do not constitute historical knowledge. Inferences based on imaginative thought must be drawn from them. Collingwood's re-enactment methodology can be constructed thus:



Without the historian there are no questions: Without questions, there is no evidence. Without evidence there are not answers: Without answers we have no reconstructions. And without reconstructions we have no historical past, no history.

Second, Collingwood's re-enactment methodology is based in the historian's intuition. The historian, according to him, cannot re-enact the thoughts of historical actors unless he has direct intuitive access to mental workings of the people whose actions he tries to understand and explain. He must intuitively ask relevant questions to get good evidence and answers on which to base his reconstruction or re enactment of the past. Critics have argued that this is not really possible and that if any thing, it relegates historical inquiry to empathy or telepathy which is a mystical and unscientific mental process. But those whose views tend to support Collingwood have argued that historical writings is based not only on source based knowledge but also on knowledge which is non-source based, that is, knowledge which the historian arrives at through empathy, the way he interprets the world around him which is dependent on his personal experiences.

Third, it is apparent from Collingwood's views that it is not possible to arrive at objectivity in historical writing. For the result of the historian's work will be tampered by the historian's own psychological frame of mind, his fields of inquiry, the answers he gleans from the questions he poses and the evidence he gets to validate his findings.

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that Collingwood has contributed to our knowledge of what history is and how we can arrive at historical cognition. His idea of history may not be quite original but it is obvious that through his amplification of pre-existing ideas he opened up new vistas which have interested and influenced both his critics and admirers in the second half of this century and will continue to do so well into the future.

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