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### III. Notes

## An Appreciation of R. G. Collingwood as an Archaeologist

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In his short and busy life Collingwood found time to pursue two quite separate careers: as a philosopher and as an archaeologist. In the latter career he followed in the footsteps of his father, William Gershom Collingwood (1854–1932), who as well as being an artist, an historical novelist, and secretary to (and biographer of) John Ruskin, was also an accomplished amateur archaeologist, and a stalwart of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society (Johnstone 1967). Collingwood writes in *An Autobiography* of growing up in ‘a gradually thickening archaeological atmosphere’ (Collingwood 1939a:80).

Robin George Collingwood (1889–1943) is the author of four major archaeological works: *Roman Britain* (1923); *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (1930); *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (with J. N. L. Myers, 1936); and *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* (edited by R. V. P. Wright, and published posthumously in 1965).

*Roman Britain* (1923) ‘was a short book; I wrote it in two days; it was designed to be elementary, and it was full of faults . . . it gave me a first opportunity of finding out, more clearly than was possible within the limits of a short article, how my conception of historical research was developing’ (Collingwood 1939:120–121). It was substantially revised in 1932 and revised again in 1934.

*The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (1930a) was intended as a work of synthesis, as a summary of the growing number of archaeological papers that had addressed specific problems relating to particular sites and particular problems of chronology. As such it was written primarily for fellow archaeologists. (The 1969 edition was revised by Collingwood’s pupil, I. A. Richmond, and credited to R. G. Collingwood and I. A. Richmond.)

*Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (1936) was written with J. N. L. Myers. However, Collingwood emphasized that: ‘this work is not a work of collaboration. It consists of two independent studies of two distinct, though interlocking subjects’ (Collingwood and Myers 1936, Preface:v). Collingwood

wrote on Roman Britain, and its immediate aftermath; Myers wrote on the Anglo-Saxon invasions and settlements. Collingwood saw this book as his historical and archaeological *magnum opus*.

*Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, although supplemented and modified by Sheppard Frere's *Britannia* (1967), stood as the authoritative account of the subject until the Clarendon Press commissioned its replacement, *Roman Britain* by I. A. Richmond's pupil, Peter Salway, published in 1981. Collingwood's history built on the previous authoritative works on the subject *The Romanization of Britain* (1912) by Francis Haverfield and *The Roman Occupation of Britain* (1924) by Francis Haverfield and George MacDonald. Something of the basic structure of Haverfield's work remains in all these later works. Arguably, this paradigm was only, finally superseded in 2006, by David Mattingley's *An Imperial Possession*. (This history, like those by Haverfield, Collingwood, Frere and Salway, is written both for archaeologists and for the general reader. A criticism that Mattingley makes of all of these predecessors is of their uncritical and question-begging use of the term 'Romanization' – a term that is ultimately traceable to Theodor Mommsen.)

Collingwood's *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* (1965), completed by R. P. Wright, comprises an illustrated catalogue of over two thousand Roman inscriptions. This work had been initiated by Mommsen and taken over by Collingwood, from Haverfield, at the latter's death in 1919. This is still today the standard reference work on the subject (Collingwood and Wright 1995).

Other work includes the chapters on Roman Britain in *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Collingwood 1934a, 1934b, 1936, 1939b) and the chapter on 'Roman Britain' in *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (Collingwood 1937) and, as he mentions in *An Autobiography*, 'about a hundred articles and pamphlets mostly written between 1920 and 1930' (Collingwood 1939a:145). Collingwood also began work on the subject of the interpretation of folktales that he intended to publish as a book. This work, in which he argues that folktales are of historical interest, both as stories and as historical evidence, has lately been published in *The Philosophy of Enchantment* (Collingwood 2005). It was written over Christmas 1936 and in the early months of 1937 (Collingwood 2005, in W. James (ed) Introduction:lxiii), until set aside 'partly through illness, and perhaps to focus more completely on *The Principles of Art*' (Collingwood 2005, in P. Smallwood (ed) Introduction:xxxii; Collingwood 1938).

When he died at the age of fifty-three in January 1943 his pupil Ian Richmond wrote an 'Appreciation of R. G. Collingwood as an Archaeologist' in which he spoke of:

a tendency which marked and sometimes marred his work, to drive the evidence hard and to build upon it a series of conclusions whose very artistry disguised the inherent weakness of foundation. (Richmond 1943:476).

It is not my intention to question this judgment (see also Birley 1961), save to note that archaeology, because it is a collaborative discipline devoted to the cumulative accretion of new data, is subject to constant revision, and so it is hardly surprising that some of Collingwood's own most valued interpretations have been revised since his death (for example, his estimate of the total population of Roman Britain<sup>1</sup>). Others have been for the most part ignored (a prime example is his chapter on 'Art' in *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*).<sup>2</sup> Others have been incorporated into the latest work on Roman Britain (for example, his interpretation of Hadrian's Wall<sup>3</sup>, his system of numbering of the milecastles on the Wall, and his work on the typology of Roman brooches and his work on Roman

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<sup>1</sup> In Collingwood 1929, in *Antiquity*, Collingwood made the first such estimate. Martin Millett surveys the different approaches that have been taken towards this problem in *Millett* 1990:181–186.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Henig in *The Art of Roman Britain* (1996) suggests that there may be problems with the logical structure of this argument.

<sup>3</sup> Collingwood's argues that the Wall should be seen not primarily as a 'fighting platform' but as an 'elevated sentry-line'. This argument is reiterated in Breeze and Dobson 2000:42–43.

inscriptions<sup>4</sup>). Others yet have been neither revised nor incorporated into new work; but remain, as it were, 'on hold' (for example, his speculations concerning King Arthur and his interpretation of the bronze age site 'King Arthur's Round Table'<sup>5</sup>). Collingwood would not have expected otherwise<sup>6</sup>. For, granted his great works of synthesis, *Roman Britain* (1923) and *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (1936), are imbued with a sense of authoritative finality – as though he had himself witnessed Caesar's invasions – nonetheless, although feint, the line between data and interpretation is rarely entirely absent.<sup>7</sup> Thus it is that good archaeologists create the conditions for their own supersession.

I would suggest however, with the benefit of hindsight, that Collingwood's greatest contribution to archaeology lies not in fieldwork and synthesis (although here his achievements are not slight); but rather – although the term was not then used – in archaeological theory.

According to his autobiography, upon going up to Oxford in 1908 Collingwood became aware of a 'Baconian revolution' (Collingwood 1939a:115) in archaeology, already in full swing. The guiding precept of this revolution was that no evidence need be taken at face value (as in 'scissors-and-paste history'), or classed simply as reliable or not; but rather, that the archaeologist should take the initiative in formulating specific questions of the evidence, with the aim of reconstructing the reason *why* the evidence took the form it did. In this way, when 'put to the question', the evidence might yield answers that a more passive approach could never have extorted. Flinders-Petrie epitomised this attitude, when he wrote:

The old saying that a man finds what he is looking for in a subject is too true; or, if he has not enough insight to ensure finding what he looks for, it is at least sadly true that he does not find anything he does not look for (Petrie 1904:49).

As examples of what this new method might achieve Collingwood cited Sir Arthur Evans' work on Knossos and the work of Francis Haverfield on Roman Britain (Collingwood 1939a:81–82).

Although only a few held such confident ambitious views (and this is emphasised in Woolley's autobiography *Spadework* 1953), other sources confirm the liveliness of the period (see Joan Evans 1956:371–372). Moreover, it was beginning to be argued that the same questions might be asked, with reasonable expectation of an answer, of a written document and of an unwritten artefact. The belief that non-written evidence is of equal worth as written was, for instance, explicitly stated by that 'bold revolutionary' (Collingwood 1939a:82) David George Hogarth, although it should be added that Hogarth claimed no originality for this idea.<sup>8</sup>

However, with the exception of Collingwood, all of this went on beneath the notice of contemporary philosophers, and archaeologists were naturally content to leave them to their slumbers. For, then as now, archaeological theory was empirically driven – concerned, above all, with what does and does not work in practice.

Nonetheless, during the 1920s and 1930s, a small vocal minority including Collingwood, O. G. S. Crawford and Mortimer Wheeler did their best to propagate these ideas. In his autobiography,

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<sup>4</sup> See Collingwood, R. G. and R. P. Wright 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Collingwood's interpretations were challenged in Bersu 1940.

<sup>6</sup> As Richmond points out he had the grace to admit his mistakes, see Richmond 1943:476.

<sup>7</sup> In *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (1930), written primarily for his fellow archaeologists, the line between data and interpretation is more obvious than when Collingwood wrote for both archaeologists and the general reader.

<sup>8</sup> Hogarth (Hogarth 1899:v) wrote that the subject matter of archaeology should be taken as 'all documents, literary or material, all products of man, all things on which he has set his impress, and even all things which have set their impress on him'.

Collingwood summarised their methodology in the form of the following three principles:

1. Never to dig 'either a five-thousand-pound site or a five-shilling trench without being certain that you can satisfy an inquirer who asks you *What are you doing this piece of work for?*' (Collingwood 1939a:126).
2. 'A second principle was that, since history proper is the history of thought, there are no mere 'events' in history: what is miscalled *an event* is really an action, and expresses some thought (intention, purpose) of its agent; the historian's business is therefore to identify this thought' (Collingwood 1939a:127).
3. 'A third principle was that no historical problem should be studied without studying what I called its second-order history; that is, the history of historical thought about it' (Collingwood 1939a:132).

Arguably, realising the value of the above three principles, propagating them, and making them explicit, was Collingwood's greatest contribution to archaeology. (When, upon occasion, Collingwood drove his evidence too hard, it was not as a result of any of these principles.)

The first principle is probably now more deep-rooted and widely recognised than ever before. It is possibly one of the most basic presuppositions of archaeological theory. (Admittedly it is sometimes appropriate to ask relatively broad questions, but, nonetheless, few would now embark upon an archaeological career preferring to rely upon Mr Micawber's principle that something will turn up.) The third principle is also now widely accepted.

The second principle is the most controversial, and takes Collingwood to the heart of contemporary debates: for example, the debate surrounding the use of evolutionary theory. As an archaeologist Collingwood was eager to make use of any new theories that might prove useful, regardless of their origin, but he insisted that one still must ask *why* the people of the past acted as they did – what afforded them a motive, from their point of view. It is this feature that, he believed, distinguishes archaeology and history from natural science.

With respect to his fieldwork and works of synthesis contemporary archaeologists stand on Collingwood's shoulders but with respect to the above three principles Collingwood stands as our contemporary.

Closely linked to his work as an archaeologist is Collingwood's work as a conservationist – although I do not believe this has yet received attention in any book or paper. Much of the best preserved and archaeologically interesting stretches of Hadrian's Wall had, until the death of Mrs. N. J. Clayton in 1928, been safeguarded from destruction since the 1830s by the benevolent ownership of the Clayton estate. Upon Mrs. Clayton's death the Wall was scheduled in order to protect it from the possibility of future threats. But in 1930 archaeologists realized to their horror that this did not protect the Wall from the imminent prospect of stone being quarried just ten feet away from one of its best-preserved and impressive sections, immediately to the west of Housesteads Fort. Existing legislation – the 1882 *Ancient Monuments Act* and the 1913 *Ancient Monuments Consolidation and Amendment Act* – served to protect the Wall itself but its immediate environment was left unguarded. The thought of the Wall being left perched on an artificial knife-edge led to numerous protests in the national press and to discussion at the highest level of government.

On 24 April 1930 *The Times* reported that on the previous day the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society (Collingwood's local society) had sent a resolution of protest to the Prime Minister and leader of the Opposition. Among numerous other protests that were recorded in *The Times*, on 3 May 1930 the paper reported that a number of the dons of Oxford University had sent an appeal to the First Commissioner of Works:

*Hadrian's Wall*

**An Appeal from Oxford University**

"The following letter has been addressed to Mr. Lansbury, First Commissioner of Works, by members of Oxford University: -

University of Oxford, April 28

Sir, As members of the University of Oxford, we venture to express to you the hope that some means may be found to limit the proposed extension of quarrying works in the immediate neighbourhood of Hadrian's Wall. The stretch of the Wall, together with its associated works the Vallum and the Military Way, running from Chollerford to Gilsland, is, in our opinion, one of the most valuable of our national monuments. Both its beauty and its significance have already been impaired by the existing quarries; and we feel that the time has come when a binding and permanent limitation should be imposed on further disfigurement. We realize the importance of providing work, to the extent at present contemplated, for unemployed men in the Newcastle district; but we submit that it would be disastrous to permit the unlimited extension of such works, and so to leave the way open for the eventual destruction of a great historical monument.

We are, Sir; your obedient servants,

GREY OF FALLODEN, Chancellor.  
F. HOLMES DUDDEN, Master of Pembroke, Vice-Chancellor.  
HUGH CECIL, Burgesses.  
C. W. C. OMAN, Chichele Professor of Modern History of the University.  
HERBERT L. WILD, Hon. Fellow of Exeter and formerly Bishop of Newcastle.  
H. A. L. FISHER, Warden of New College.  
A. D. LINDSAY, Master of Balliol.  
F. W. PEMBER, Warden of All Souls.  
W. R. BUCHANAN RIDDELL, Principal of Hertford.  
M. E. SADLER, Master of University College.  
H. J. WHITE, Dean of Christ Church.  
F. G. J. ANDERSON, Camden Professor of Ancient History.  
GILBERT MURRAY, Regius Professor of Greek.  
JOHN L. MYRES, Wykeham Professor of Ancient History and President of the Royal Anthropological Institute.  
CHARLES S. SHERRINGTON, Waynflete Professor of Physiology and President of the Royal Society.  
CYRIL BAILEY, Fellow of Balliol.  
R. G. COLLINGWOOD, Fellow of Pembroke.

The fact that Collingwood's name appears last on the list, coupled with the style of writing, strongly suggests that Collingwood was the main orchestrator of this particular branch of the protest.

A file in the Public Record Office contains a short letter dated 14 May 1930, from the official private secretary of George Lansbury, the Commissioner of Works, to a secretary at 10 Downing Street, makes it clear that this appeal may have reached the desk of the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald:

Dear Mr Usher,

I understand from Mr. Lansbury that the Prime Minister told him that he had not seen the representation from Oxford University published in the Times on the subject of the Roman Wall. I therefore send you a cutting which you may think it worth while to show to the Prime Minister.

Yours sincerely

R. Auriol Barker<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> P. R. O. 30/69/691.

A similar appeal from the dons at Cambridge, organized by the historian F. E. Adcock was sent directly to the Prime Minister and was also published in *The Times* (23 May 1930). It seems likely that the many different branches of this protest were closely co-ordinated. An additional concern expressed by Collingwood was that the break up the Clayton estate would lead to increasingly restricted public access to the Wall (Taylor and Collingwood 1929:185).

The campaign of protest led to the passing of the *1931 Ancient Monuments Act*, granting the First Commissioner of H. M. Works the power to make planning schemes and pay compensation. However, there were a series of delays before this act was implemented. When it was eventually implemented for the first and last time – it protected the surroundings of this particular section of the Wall by means of the Wall and Vallum Preservation Scheme – subsequently incorporated into Northumberland National Park.

The *1931 Ancient Monuments Act* represents an intermediate stage between the impassioned but necessarily palliative and *ad hoc* protection of ancient monuments afforded by groups of public spirited archaeologists and the more holistic and comprehensive approach to planning that has since been sought by local and national government. It is owing to the passing of this Act and to the vigilance and foresight of the campaigners that the four miles of the Wall immediately to the west of Housesteads Fort – thought by many to be the finest stretch of the entire Wall<sup>10</sup> – traverse countryside that is still little changed since the Roman period. Our present day view of this bleak and rugged countryside remains a testament to the efforts of Collingwood and his fellow conservationists.<sup>11</sup>

This episode perhaps sheds some light on Collingwood's claim that in his addresses to the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society he achieved a *rapprochement* between R. G. C. the theorist and R. G. C. the suppressed man of action:

It may seem an odd form of 'release' for a suppressed man of action; but it was a very effective one. The enthusiasm for historical studies, and for myself as their leader in those studies, which I never failed to arouse in my audiences, was not in principle different from the enthusiasm for his person and his policy which is aroused by a successful political speaker (Collingwood 1939a:151–152).

Clearly, Collingwood *was* genuinely appalled at the threat that faced the Wall, but at the same time as a suppressed man of action he would have relished the fight to save it. For, in his words: 'All thought exists for the sake of action' (Collingwood 1924:15).

**(*The Foundations of History: Collingwood's Analysis of Historical Explanation* by Stephen Leach will be published by Academic Imprints in December 2009)**

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<sup>10</sup> In Collingwood 1930b:27, he wrote: 'The scenery, with its lakes, basalt crags, and distant views, is here at its best, and the remains of the Wall are very impressive, as they wind hither and thither to hold the edge of the crags or plunge into the gaps that separate one crag from the next.'

<sup>11</sup> It should be added that, through tourism, the Wall today provides more employment than was offered by even the most ambitious quarry plans.

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