Relations between historical theory and archaeological practice in the work of R. G. Collingwood

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The Idealist view of history has had considerable influence upon modern historiography. It is a part of the complex system of logic and metaphysics contained in the Idealist philosophy. It can be stated briefly, however, if over-simply, as the view that the study of history, or, to express it in another way, the ultimate aim of historical study, is the study of ideas. It is held that the process of historical study is effected by re-thinking the thoughts of the past, and extensive arguments in support of and in opposition to the view have been advanced (for summaries of the arguments see, for example, Walsh 1958 and Woozley 1959). The most explicit statement of the Idealist view is that formulated by R.G. Collingwood, and is classically expressed in the series of essays written by him and published after his death (Collingwood 1956). Collingwood was eminent as a philosopher, but the bulk of his substantive non-philosophical work was in archæology and early history, and in that work some of his philosophical ideas were expressed and exemplified. Of the more than a hundred papers and articles that he wrote on substantive topics, the vast majority are on subjects that are generally considered to be archæological. The other articles are concerned with epigraphy or ancient history of a kind closely connected with archæology. Four of Collingwood's substantive books are on archæological subjects, or at least contain much material derived from that study. In his autobiography Collingwood wrote at some length on his archæological experience, and offered precepts for the practice of archæology (Collingwood 1939). Critical evaluations of his work as a whole have been made principally in terms of its philosophical content:

understandably so in view of his contributions to philosophy. But when so large a proportion of the substantive result has taken the form of archæology, it is pertinent to consider Collingwood's work in relation to his practice of that study.

For the present purpose it is not necessary to distinguish between all the various kinds and aspects of archæology, but only between classical and prehistorical studies. Classical archæology has its roots, as a formal discipline, in the study of classics and ancient history. Those two subjects, as well as being the base, also provide the methodological framework for the discipline. The formal study of prehistory developed out of advances in the biological and natural sciences made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although both classical and prehistorical archæology have the technique of excavation in common, their methodologies are different.

Collingwood was a specialist on Roman Britain. He succeeded to the position that Haverfield had held, and for many years was the arbiter and leading synthesizer of all work concerned with the Roman occupation of Britain. The period of the Roman occupation was one of contact between two vastly dissimilar complexes. The real aspect of the dissimilarity is reflected in the different methods that have to be adopted in studying the different complexes in their 'pure' forms. The study of contact periods, even more than contact areas, raises particularly difficult methodological problems. The same problems are present in historical anthropology, whilst another good substantive example in that of the periods of contact between the aboriginal and early European societies in North America. The problems are evident in Collingwood's work, and reveal one of the limitations of the Idealist method.

The limitation stems partly from the nature of the material that can be used as evidence, and partly from the critically philosophical basis of the methods applied to the study of that material. The material with which the prehistorian deals is limited in quantity and spasmodic in its occurrence. At its best, it represents only a part of the material culture of a society. Of itself, it can give little indication of the abstract ideas of the people by whom it was made. Such abstract ideas as can be

inferred from the material can only be discerned in their most general outline. Thus it is possible to state that men of the Upper Palæolithic period produced what today would be called art. It is not possible to state that those men had an artistic appreciation, much less what were their ideas about art. Collingwood's, and the Idealist, dictum, that the subject matter of history is the study of ideas and that the process of that study is by 're-thinking the thoughts of the past', is difficult to realize when only a devolved expression of that thought is available for study. A particular aspect of the situation is that the prehistorian has to identify social groups by means of his own typological imposition. The groups do not necessarily correspond to the groups as they were identified by their members. In contrast, the historian uses self-identified groups as his units of study. The identity of those groups is made available by means of the documentary expression of abstract ideas. As such expression is not available to the prehistorian, the classifications of prehistory have to be made on a discrete basis, on the criterion of correspondence with a typology. Consequently, causal relations in prehistory can only be treated as external. They cannot be treated as internal, as is claimed for the causal relations in history when studied by Idealist methods. The methodology of prehistory as it is generally practiced today is positivistic, and man in the prehistoric period is considered as a phenomenon of natural science. The use of different methodologies in historical and prehistorical studies, made necessary by different critically philosophical grounds, is one reason for the hiatus and discrepancy that often exists between the societies identified by the prehistorian and those identified by the historian in the same area.

Collingwood himself made an acknowledgement of this situation in his consideration of Croce's 'Ligurian statement'. The Ligurian statement is one of the most succint, and at the same time one of the most extreme, expressions of the Idealist view of history. It reads:

> Do you wish to understand the true history of a neolithic Ligurian or Sicilian? Try, if you can, to become a neolithic Ligurian or Sicilian in your mind. If you cannot do that, or do not care to, content yourself with describing and arranging in series the skulls, implements, and

> drawings which have been found belonging to these neolithic peoples. Do you wish to understand the true history of a blade of grass? Try to become a blade of grass; and if you cannot do it, satisfy yourself with analysing its parts, and even arranging them in a sort of ideal or fanciful history. (Croce 1921: 134-5).

In criticizing Croce's statement Collingwood wrote:

> As concerns neolithic man, the advice is obviously good. If you can enter into his mind and make his thoughts your own, you can write his history, and not otherwise; if you cannot, all you can do is to arrange his relics in some kind of tidy order, and the result is ethnology or archaeology but it is not history. Yet the reality of neolithic man was an historical reality. When he made a certain implement, he had a purpose in mind; the implement came into being as an expression of his spirit, and if you treat it as non-spiritual that is only because of the failure of your historical insight. But is this true of a blade of grass? Is its articulation and growth an expression of its own spiritual life? I am not so sure. And when we come to a crystal, or a stalactite, my scepticism reaches the point of rebellion. (Collingwood 1956: 199-200).

This criticism acknowledges overtly a difference between history and prehistory. But covertly it subsumes both studies under the same process and identifies, or rather mis-identifies, process with heuristic classification. Collingwood made the covert statement an overt one in the chapter or archæological method contained in his autobiography (Collingwood 1939). History and prehistory are part of the same continuum. But the situation that Collingwood presents is a methodological one, and methodology relates only to the process of study. The study of history and the study of prehistory are abstractions of reality. They differ as much because of the different methods adopted as because of the different materials available as evidence. The reality of neolithic man was, in methodological terms, not an historical reality but a prehistorical reality.

Collingwood did very little original work on the pre-Roman societies in Britain. In his principal single work on Roman Britain (Collingwood 1937), he gave some attention to the antecedents of the indigenous British population. The social identifications used by Collingwood, such as Iron Age A, Iron Age B, Hallstatt and La Têne etc., are those made by prehistorians. That use is acknowledged in a footnote to the main

text (Collingwood 1937: 21; fn. 1 and 2). The Belgae are the earliest group that can be identified by a name contemporary with the group's existence. That group, like one or two others in Britain, can be written of by its contemporary name in dealing with the happenings of a few years before Cæsar's first assault on Britain. This situation is not due to evidence found within Britain, but simply because the Romans had known and written of the Belgae since they first met them in Gaul. Similarly, when writing of the period of the Roman occupation, Collingwood was able to use the societal names recorded by the Romans.

Collingwood's work on Roman Britain proper was very successful. By the use of the Idealist method he made the Occupation and the process of Romanization much more intelligible than any other writer had been able to do (see Lowther 1960). That was possible because there exists, if not a wealth, a good deal of documentary material relevant to the Roman period. In studying the occupation of Britain, particularly when the study is made by Idealist methods, the whole *corpus* of Latin literature is pertinent to the investigation. Much of that literature was well-known when classical archæology began as a formal discipline. The perspective of studies of Roman Britain has always been that of historical studies and the study of archæology has been an auxiliary to the study of early history. In another book (Collingwood 1930) on the same general subject, where Collingwood used much more archæological than historical material, the insight is much less incisive.

In dealing with the end of the Roman occupation, and in particular with the Arthurian period, Collingwood was not so successful. He used the same method, but his presentation has been subjected to considerable criticism. His descriptions and explanations do not have that certainty that Collingwood claimed was made possible by the exercise of the Idealist method. There is much less documentary, in this case identified with historical, information available for the Anglo-Saxon period. Such documentary evidence as is available is still the subject of much internal and external criticism. That being so, the method adopted has to be prehistorical rather than historical.

Collingwood's work on the Arthurian period illustrates also a possible defect in one aspect of Idealist methodology. In most expositions of Idealist logic and method, the theory of Coherence is one of the principal epistemological tenets. By that theory it is held that the criterion of a true proposition is that it should cohere with all other propositions within an exhaustive system of propositions. In contrast, the theory invoked in positivistic philosophies is that of Correspondence, by which it is held that the criterion of a true proposition is that it should correspond to something known as 'fact'[1]. Collingwood's account meets the criterion of coherence, if it is considered as a separate dialectical entity. In other words, his argument is coherent in relation to its own premiss. But it loses that coherence when it is considered in relation to the argument of which its premiss is the conclusion. The argument for the nature of Arthurian society has thus only a limited coherence and, in terms of Idealist methodology itself, is not necessarily true.

Collingwood's archæological technique, as described in his autobiography, was generally and rightly in accord with his critical philosophy, although his identification of archæological and historical methodology appears to be invalid. His archæological technique, however, cannot have had the universal applicability that is implicatively claimed for it. Collingwood wrote that he applied to archæology the 'logic of question and answer', or what he called a Baconian method. In practice, he claimed, that meant that no excavation was undertaken except in the attempt to answer a specific question. Any practicing archæologist will at once admit that this is a sound working principle. There is no point in haphazard excavation: sites have to be selected for excavation on the basis of their potentiality for yielding the information that is most urgently required. Even though it may have been directed against the situation of contemporary studies of Roman Britain, Collingwood's assertion of the principle is a little too dogmatic for it to be adhered to rigidly, and does not admit initial enquiry as having the status of a specific question. He criticized Pitt-Rivers for excavating

[1] For a review and discussion of the theories of Coherence and Correspondence as they apply to archæological theory, see LOWTHER, *in press*.

'in order to see what he could find out' (Collingwood 1939: 125). In the same vein he wrote that the question ' "let us see what we can find out about this site..." is no more a "question", as I understand that term, than are such questions as "What is knowledge" "What is duty?" "What is the *summum bonum*?" ' (Collingwood 1939: 122). Too rigid an application of Baconian method has one danger and one defect. The danger is a tendency for the excavator to see only that for which he is looking. The most flagrant example of this was probably Schliemann's excavation at Mycenæ. Schliemann asked a very definite question, but ignored and often destroyed other, equally important, evidence in the process of trying to answer it. The same criticism, though in a less severe form, has been made of Collingwood's own work (Richmond 1943: 476-480). The defect of too rigid an application of the method, i.e. of asking questions that are too limited in their scope, is that it can only be used when there exists already a substantial body of information relevant to the subject. In areas in which little archæological work has been done, in much of Canada, for example, an archæologist must often excavate 'in order to see what he can find out'. A certain amount of knowledge is necessary before specific questions can be asked. Neither Collingwood, nor his predecessor Haverfield, could have asked the specific questions that they did ask had not a great deal of work on Roman Britain been done in earlier years.

It is clear that, in the sphere of critical philosophy, Collingwood regarded archæology as a whole as a part of history, although it appears from the quotation already cited (Collingwood 1956: 199) that he considered it, together with ethnology, as a technicol auxiliary to historical studies. At present, however, in 'practice', there is a distinction in methodology and critical philosophy between prehistory and the other types of archæology, But it seems probable that that distinction represents an heuristic error rather than a fundamental epistemological difference. There is no logical reason, on Idealist grounds, why the ideas of the prehistoric period, within the range of *Homo sapiens* at least, should not be as accessible to archæologists as are those of historical periods to historians. To revert to an example already given, there is no logical reason why the ideas of art

held by prehistoric men should not be accessible to archæological study. Yet though there is no logical bar to that accessibility, there is an empirical one. In terms of contemporary techniques of study, the material available as evidence from the prehistoric period is too coarse for ideas to be re-invoked with any certainty of their necessary truth. Idealist methods can be used, as Collingwood showed, in conjunction with archæological techniques in the study of situations where there is sufficient documentary evidence available for the latter to provide the framework for the study. The crude inferential techniques of prehistorical studies, functionally and methodologically corresponding to the techniques of internal criticism of historical studies, are not yet sufficiently refined to permit of Idealist methods being used in the study of prehistory. With the refinement of the inferential techniques of archæology, the objections to the use of Idealist methods in prehistorical studies will perhaps be shown more clearly to have only a limitedly empirical validity.

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