Introduction

David Collins and Christopher Williams

There has been a sustained, if protean, current of interest in the thought of R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943) since his death, with interest shifting from philosophers of history in the 1960s through the 1980s, to philosophers of art in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, to scholars in political theory departments, chiefly in the United Kingdom, from the late 1980s to today. There has recently been a renewed focus on Collingwood's meta-philosophy and methodology,[1] his general philosophical output,[2] and his place in the narrative of British intellectual life in the last century.[3] Collingwood has also had an influence – often in the background or unacknowledged – on the thought of a number of recent philosophical luminaries, including Isaiah Berlin, Simon Blackburn, Lorraine Code, Dorothy Emmet, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Bernard Williams, among probable others. Yet, despite the persistence of interest in one or another aspect of his corpus, Collingwood remains a shadowy presence: widely known, respected from a distance, but rarely read with care (or read at all). As Jon Cogburn puts the point paradoxically, Collingwood is widely acknowledged for not being sufficiently acknowledged.[4]

The reasons for this neglect are various. Part of the explanation is guilt by association. Collingwood has been viewed against the backdrop of British Idealism, which had fallen deeply out of favour among philosophers by the time Collingwood published his mature writing. This association is somewhat unfortunate, insofar as Collingwood's outlook owed much to Italian philosophers such as Vico and Croce, themselves not especially visible in Anglophone circles, and owed comparatively little to the figures

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[1] See, e.g., Dharamsi, D'Oro, and Leach, eds., *Collingwood on Philosophical Methodology*.
[2] See Browning, *Rethinking Collingwood*; D'Oro, *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience*; Skagestad, *Exploring the Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood*.
[3] See Inglis, *History Man*; Monk, "How the Untimely Death."
[4] Cogburn, "Collingwood Paradoxicality."

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whom Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore were thought to have discredited at the start of the twentieth century. Indeed, Collingwood's points of divergence from the main line of British Idealism are worth noting. In a magisterial history of this philosophical movement that runs to 600 pages, W. J. Mander devotes but a single sustained paragraph to Collingwood. Taking pains to stress Collingwood's distinctiveness, Mander observes, first, that "it was no part of his system to exclude non-mental reality," and, second (and more importantly), notes Collingwood's "rejection of the overarching intellectualism and rationalism so character-istic of all that school."[5] In place of this rationalism, Mander concludes, Collingwood offered an epistemological anti-realism that was founded on an affirmation of the reality of historical process and a denial that know-ledge without (historical) presuppositions was possible.

Notwithstanding this divergence of outlook, for some readers – or, rather, the non-readers who assume that what Collingwood thought is already known well enough for him not to need reading first-hand – there remains an invidious association with idealism that received interpretations of Collingwood's philosophies of history and art, in particular, tend to fortify. On these interpretations, Collingwood's orientation appears indefensibly mentalistic. In the philosophy of history, he is best known for his doctrine of re-enactment, according to which historical explanation requires the historian, in the present, to reconstruct imaginatively the thought of agents in the past. And in the philosophy of art, he is notorious for claiming that works of art can be created completely, and so exist exclusively, "in the head" of the artist. Neither position looks compelling on the face of it, but there are real questions about the extent to which Collingwood held these positions, at least in the lurid colours that shop-worn slogans suggest, and also about the extent to which the intellectual traditions that Collingwood drew from (and may himself exemplify), including the broader idealist tradition of the Italian philosophers whom he admired, are to be saddled with a methodological approach that overlooks, and can thereby distort, our understanding of the materiality of our experience. To address such questions, however, we need to become reacquainted with Collingwood's work, and not merely through the iso-lated specimens of his writing that the received interpretations typically emphasize. Simply put, Collingwood is not the sort of thinker who anthologizes well. The chapters in this collection are a collective invitation to reacquaintance and reconsideration.

[5] Mander, *British Idealism*, 538.

Another part of the explanation of the neglect of Collingwood – an unfairness that does not at all do *him* an injustice – is that his highly systematic ambitions in philosophy ran against the spirit of the age. This made him a victim of historical accident. The rise of what came to be known as analytic philosophy, which in England was the legacy of Russell and Moore, resulted in a style of philosophical inquiry that focused on small questions, clearly and precisely formulated, in hopes that the progress that had hitherto eluded philosophers in attempting to solve their problems might be made, even if progress meant that the larger questions themselves would disappear. Collingwood, however, was against such a narrowness of focus, and spoke with a different voice.

The ideal of systematicity, of understanding the various forms of experience as a coherent whole, was an integral element in his philosophy. The attempt to see things whole did not embarrass him, as it had many of his contemporaries; indeed, as he writes in the preface to *Speculum Mentis*, the most ambitious of his early writings, "I regard the deliberate renunciation of this ideal as the degradation of philosophy to a game, one of the most tedious and stupid of games" (SM 10). To an academic community that had become accustomed to tackling more narrowly conceived problems, Collingwood's ambition could make the shape of his projects seem alien, if not outright perverse.

It would be pointless to hazard a wholesale adjudication between Collingwood and the analytic philosophy of his day with respect to the ideal grain of the problems to be addressed. In *An Autobiography*, Collingwood wrote sceptically of the "minute philosophers" of his youth (A chapter 3), but that term, taken from Bishop Berkeley, is a double-edged sword, connoting either care or triviality depending on the context; philosophers whose approach is not "minute" likewise take other risks, which have their own virtues and vices. Apart from this bland observation, however, there is a more interesting reason not to force a choice between Collingwood and those who passed him by. It is that in the twenty-first century, the similarities between Collingwood and his contemporaries are apt to be more salient than the differences. A striking example of this is provided by Gilbert Ryle, Collingwood's immediate successor as the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford. From our historical standpoint, Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*, written in a lucid (and allusive) style that is free of technical vocabulary and scholarly apparatus, has a great deal in common with the philosophy of which Collingwood was a practitioner and which, in the chapter in his *Essay on Philosophical*

Method on "Philosophy as a Branch of Literature," he sensitively portrayed and valourized.

It should also be remembered that Collingwood died comparatively young, and that we therefore do not know what work he might have done had he lived to see the impact of (say) the later Wittgenstein, or the turn towards pragmatism on the part of some analytic philosophers, or whether he might have directly engaged with developing trends that were more responsive to his concerns. (He did, however, have a prescient appreciation of the impact of logical positivism on its first appearance in England with A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*.[6]) And we should not forget the challenges of the Second World War, and of the decade leading up to it, in response to which Collingwood increasingly wrote in what he regarded as a more public-facing way, most evident in *The Principles of Art* and *The New Leviathan*. This engagement with historical contingency, albeit at some philosophical remove, is of a piece with his general commitment to the notion that all thought exists for the sake of action. But that commitment, itself historically realized, can make his work seem more alien than it is, owing to the cool, professional style of philosophy with which we are now familiar.

The chapters in this collection fall broadly into two categories – though (appropriately) there is a great deal of overlap, with many chapters containing elements of both. In Chapters 1 through 6, several of the authors seek to re-examine relationships, or to establish points of contact, between Collingwood and various well-known (and well-subscribed) schools or movements in philosophy other than the idealist tradition with which he is commonly associated.[7] In Chapters 7 through 14, several authors focus on specific ideas in Collingwood's corpus that are arguably misunderstood, ignored, or eligible for revival. In the chapters in this second category, the discussion often involves bringing together texts from different parts of the corpus, including some of Collingwood's writings as an historian as well as philosophical writings that have been as yet largely invisible. Because the elements of Collingwood's thought are often treated separately from one another, as well as in isolation from convergent elements in the thought of

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[6] It is reported that Gilbert Ryle once overheard H. W. B. Joseph and H. A. Prichard complaining that Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* had found a publisher, and that "Collingwood, who stood nearby, turned to them with, 'Gentlemen, his book will be read when your names are forgotten'" (Patrick, "The Oxford Man," 244).

[7] It is worth noting that Collingwood denied that his philosophical views were idealist in character, and insisted that he aimed to go beyond both realism and idealism, seeing these positions and the dichotomy between them as "out of date"; see Collingwood, "The Correspondence," 255–56.

other philosophers, this collection affords a reintroduction of Collingwood that, we hope, is suited to the ongoing intellectual concerns of the present century. In that light, the essays here aim to encourage a reversal of the diagnosis made by the late Bernard Williams, who called Collingwood "the most unjustly neglected of twentieth-century British philosophers."[8]

In Chapter 1, Rex Martin considers the relation between Collingwood and logical positivism, and specifically whether Collingwood had been influenced by A. J. Ayer when he came to view metaphysical propositions, or what in Collingwood's terms are absolute presuppositions, as unverifiable. Against some recent authors who claim that Collingwood effectively endorses Ayer's verificationism in parts of his *Essay on Metaphysics*, Martin argues that Collingwood denied logical positivism entirely and that his reasons for thinking that absolute presuppositions were neither true nor false, and so were in principle unverifiable, were wholly different from those underlying the positivist's verification principle. Significantly, Martin shows that, for Collingwood, unlike for Ayer and the positivists, unverifiability did not entail meaninglessness and so Collingwood still held absolute presuppositions, or the traditional statements of metaphysics, to be meaningful despite being neither analytic nor verifiable.

Chapter 2 continues on a related note, with Paolo Camporese examining Collingwood's critique of early analytic philosophy, as represented by Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, and Susan Stebbing, which Camporese shows to be connected with, yet distinguishable from, Collingwood's broader critique of the "new realism" of thinkers such as John Cook Wilson and H. A. Prichard. Camporese explicates Collingwood's criticisms in terms of a distinction between what he calls "single-commitment tracking" and "multi-commitment tracking" views concerning what is required for understanding and analysis, and argues that, where analytic philosophy takes understanding others' statements to be possible on a single set of commitments (presuppositions, axioms, entailments, etc.), Collingwood takes understanding to require keeping in mind at least two sets of commitments, with commitment sets potentially differing in their expressive power. Camporese argues that this enables Collingwood to escape the "paradox of analysis," which holds that philosophy – understood as analysis – tells us nothing new (i.e., the conclusion of a valid argument is already contained in its premises) and so is uninformative. This allows Collingwood to take philosophy to be genuinely informative and to deny that analysis can make no difference for what is analyzed.

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[8] Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 237.

In Chapter 3, Elena Popa explores connections between Collingwood's work, especially his theory of presuppositions, and developments in contemporary pragmatist thought by Hasok Chang and Philip Kitcher, who both attempt to reconcile the ideal of objectivity with the recognition of the historical and social situatedness of knowledge. Popa argues that ideas from Collingwood's philosophy are broadly compatible with this new pragmatist philosophy of science, and that they can aid in the project of reconstructing the framework for scientific inquiry by showing how not only the presuppositions of scientific theories, but also their socio-historical background, can be identified, and by tracing how presuppositions lead to scientific research programs and models.

In Chapter 4, Vasso Kindi compares Collingwood's claim, toward the end of *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, that philosophy is a kind of literature, and the connections he draws in both this work and *The Principles of Art* between philosophical writing and poetic writing, with similar claims about the relation of philosophy and poetry made by Wittgenstein – and, to a lesser extent, by Richard Rorty. Both philosophers and poets, she contends, aim at clarifying our beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, and so their works can be sources of self-knowledge, rather than providing knowledge of the external world as scientists do. Eschewing simplistic interpretations based on equally simplistic understandings of poetry, Kindi argues that these comparisons between philosophy and poetry as kinds of writing – and a comparison of the comparisons that Collingwood and Wittgenstein each make – can be illuminating for our understanding of philosophy, its possibilities, and its value.

The next two chapters examine connections between Collingwood and figures in the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions in "continental" philosophy. In Chapter 5, Donald A. Landes looks at unexplored similarities and compatibilities between Collingwood's philosophy – in particular, his philosophical psychology and accounts of feeling, imagination, and expression – and ideas from Edmund Husserl and, especially, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Landes starts by reading Collingwood's account of the role of the imagination in art in connection with Merleau-Ponty's accounts of intentionality and expression, extending the discussion of expression in art to reveal further similarities between Collingwood's and Merleau-Ponty's views on communication and understanding, where Landes argues that highlighting these connections and similarities allows us to gain insights into both thinkers' efforts to understand the nature of lived experience and action. Landes ends by comparing Collingwood's notion of the "corruption of consciousness" with Husserl's diagnosis of

a "crisis" in the modern (i.e., twentieth-century) European sciences, and suggests that these similarities can be the basis of a kind of phenomenologically grounded ethics of responsibility.

In Chapter 6, Mathieu Marion considers Collingwood's influence on Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics and his ideas of the "fore-conception of completeness," the "fusion of horizons," and the importance of questioning for understanding, and re-assesses Gadamer's criticisms of Collingwood on the idea of re-enactment. Although Gadamer acknowledged his debt to Collingwood, translating and writing the preface to the German edition of Collingwood's *Autobiography*, he located Collingwood in the tradition of "romantic" hermeneutics alongside Wilhelm Dilthey, and accused Collingwood of psychologism and of ignoring what he called "the dimension of hermeneutical mediation" in his account of the re-enactment of past thoughts. Marion shows that Gadamer's criticisms stem from a misreading of Collingwood's remarks about, and examples of, re-enactment, and that Collingwood acknowledges what Gadamer called hermeneutic mediation, with Marion arguing that Collingwood's account of historical understanding is closer to Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons than Gadamer recognized.

In Chapter 7, Fernando Leal examines Collingwood views on logic, in particular the logic of question and answer. Whereas Frege had taken abstract propositions as fundamental for logical investigation, Collingwood regards activities of the mind as the basis, and so the logician, on his view, needs to reconstruct the act that a statement expresses; and asking a question is an especially preeminent mental activity. For Leal, the logic of question and answer represents a type of argumentation, which can be done well or badly, and he extracts from Collingwood's *Autobiography* six criteria for successful argument of this type. He then offers an extremely detailed case study of this type by means of a reconstruction of the reasoning Collingwood employed, as a historian of Roman Britain, in order to arrive at an answer to his own question concerning the purpose of Hadrian's Wall. In his reconstruction, Leal sketches a zigzag structure in which a general initial question leads to an answer that generates a series of further questions that lead, ultimately, to a specific answer sought by the inquirer.

The next two chapters turn from Collingwood's logic to his metaphysics. In Chapter 8, Giuseppina D'Oro outlines Collingwood's view of metaphysics, not as ontology or the study of being in general that aims to give us knowledge of the fundamental structures of reality, but as a logico-historical inquiry into the "absolute" presuppositions on which knowledge rests, studying the entailments between the answers given in the

various sciences, the questions to which they are answers, and the presuppositions on which these questions arise, tracing these back to absolute presuppositions, or presuppositions which are not themselves answers to questions but rather part of the framework within which questioning occurs. The job of metaphysicians, then, is to make these presuppositions explicit in order that we may better understand various activities of inquiry and ways of knowing and making sense of things. D'Oro considers the implications of this conception of metaphysics for the relation philosophy stands in to the sciences, as well as the relation of Collingwood's conception of metaphysics to Wittgensteinian "hinge" epistemology.

In Chapter 9, David Collins discusses a little-read work of Collingwood's, the *Libellus de Generatione*, a short book-length manuscript which was mistakenly reported in the *Autobiography* as having been destroyed but which fortunately survived and has recently become publicly available, having been published (in English) in 2019 in the Italian journal *La Cultura*. In this work, Collingwood appears to be doing the kind of ontology that he would subsequently disavow with his later understanding of metaphysics, and moreover argues for a radically process-based view of reality that is presented as an alternative to both realism and idealism. Collingwood argues that realism and idealism alike run into problems due to a shared presupposition that "being" (whether physical or mental/spiritual) is the fundamental unit of reality, and proposes that these problems are avoided by taking "becoming," or process, to be more ontologically fundamental than being. Collins summarizes the central argument of the *Libellus* and considers the implications of Collingwood being an "undercover" process philosopher for our understanding of his other philosophical views, arguing that the *Libellus* shows as much, if not more, affinity between Collingwood's thought and the processual elements in classical pragmatism and Henri Bergson's philosophy than between Collingwood and idealism.

Philosophy of mind is the subject of Chapter 10, in which Christopher Williams offers an exposition of Collingwood's theory of imagination as presented in the commonly overlooked Book Two of *The Principles of Art*. Williams shows how the obstacles to appreciating Collingwood's achievement are relatively superficial, and also how the theory should be understood in the light of his claims concerning the imagination in his earlier writings. First, he argues that Collingwood's doctrine is that sense perception inseparably involves the imagination of possible objects of perception and that the imagination makes the sensory object thinkable – a blend of

Kantian and Humean motifs. Second, he argues that the crucial mark of the imaginary object is self-containment ("monadism"), a notion serving to clarify Collingwood's oft-voiced claim that the imagination is indifferent to reality or unreality as well as the conceptual connection, for him, between imagination and art.

The next three chapters continue on the theme of Collingwood and art, with Chapter 11 seeing David Davies argue against the influential view of Collingwood as an "ideal theorist" of art who held that works of art are purely mental entities existing in the minds of artists and audiences, with only a contingent connection to the kinds of physical objects that an audience might encounter – paintings, sculptures, musical soundings, and so on. Extending earlier criticisms of this view from John Grant and Aaron Ridley, Davies draws on comparatively neglected passages in *The Principles of Art* to show that the medium in which an artwork is made, and in which it is "embodied," is essential to what that work is. Davies goes on to consider two further questions that this response to the "ideal" interpretation of Collingwood's aesthetics does not yet answer, which are (1) how can an audience grasp a work's expressive content by perceiving or otherwise engaging with the results of the artist's manipulation of the medium (i.e., the "artistic product")? and (2) why does Collingwood take the audience to be essential to the artwork? To answer these, Davies turns to some of Collingwood's remarks and examples concerning expression in painting.

In Chapter 12, Chinatsu Kobayashi examines the influence of Collingwood's thought, and especially his philosophy of history and accounts of historical understanding and re-enactment, on the art historian Michael Baxandall, arguing that Baxandall's methodological principle which he calls the "triangle of re-enactment" is an application of Collingwood's notion of re-enactment that shows how that notion can successfully be put into practice. Kobayashi further argues that both Collingwood's idea of re-enactment and Baxandall's application thereof should be understood as examples of abductive reasoning according to the "Gabbay–Woods" schema, which is itself an interpretation of C. S. Peirce's remarks on abduction.

As an historian, and not merely as a philosopher, Collingwood had a professional interest in art. In Chapter 13, Stephen Leach examines the chapter titled "Art" in *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, where Collingwood attempts to explain the seemingly inexplicable revival of Celtic art that occurred in Britain in the fifth century CE after a Roman hegemony of almost 400 years. Collingwood was especially proud of this

chapter; eschewing an appeal to an occult Celtic temperament, his explanation of the Celtic revival turned on the notion of an unbroken living tradition centred on the idea of a non-symbolic art. Leach reviews (and sets aside) the sometimes emotional criticisms that Collingwood's explanation has elicited, but, despite his sympathies with Collingwood, concludes that his explanation sidesteps the social and political influences on artistic production – a blind spot that Leach detects in the aesthetic theory as well as in the history.

Chapter 14 concludes the volume with Sabina Lovibond's discussion of Collingwood's last book, *The New Leviathan*, which is a work of social and political philosophy (as well as containing in its first third an elaboration on his philosophical psychology or theory of mind). Lovibond considers the book in relation to the conditions in which it was written – both the war and Collingwood's worsening health – and asks what relevance Collingwood's theory of civilization and its antagonist counterpart, "barbarism," as elements that will be present in a kind of dialectical tension in any society, might have for today. Lovibond acknowledges both *The New Leviathan*'s more contentious elements and the ways in which it continues to be relevant for us today, arguing that it is still worthy of our attention and engagement as a work of political philosophy.

Our hope is that these essays not only serve as an introduction to Collingwood's philosophical thought (while touching on his thought as a historian) for readers who have not yet read Collingwood first-hand, and as a kind of reintroduction to Collingwood for readers who may be familiar with only one dimension of his broader philosophical corpus (e.g., those who have only read his *Principles of Art*, or his work in the philosophy of history), but that they show the importance of understanding any one part of his corpus within the context of the whole. This was our motivation for choosing to focus on neglected or lesser-known dimensions of his philosophy, as well as dimensions that might be widely known but in a misconstrued form (such as his philosophy of art). Accordingly, we have not included a chapter specifically dealing with the core issues in his philosophy of history, since this is the most widely known part of his work, and because the element of his philosophy of history that is often misconstrued and most in need of "reintroduction" – his idea of re-enactment – is addressed in two of the chapters (6 and 12).

Above all, we hope the essays collected here demonstrate the continued relevance of Collingwood's philosophical contributions for contemporary concerns and debates in a number of areas in philosophy, as well as for making sense of current trends and events in practical life – such as the

growing prevalence of scientism and the idolatry of technology at the expense of an appreciation of history and culture, or political conditions which appear similar to those he was responding to in his last few books – so as to help make Collingwood the philosopher more widely acknowledged, better appreciated, and more accurately understood than he currently is.