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Fred Inglis: History Man

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By Coniston Water



The mighty Roman road ran arrow-straight from Manchester, which was Mamucium, to Blackburn, swerved a little as it hit the fells, then straight again to meet Hadrian's great wall at Carlisle. At Penrith, the legionaries and their pressgangs laboured on the main thoroughfare east, their flagstones now somewhere below the A66, to meet the Great North Road at Scotch Corner. Southwest from Penrith, they built a smaller road, still pretty straight, bending round Ullswater, making camp at Ambleside, threading through Hardknott Pass and leaving a large fort there, and on to the estuary of the Esk where the iron ore lay and the raiders from Iceland or Ireland would land.

Lesser roads from the south, marking no doubt older patterns of marketing and migration, lead you variously up the coast, with glimpses of Morecambe Bay on your left, marked "Danger Area" on the Ordnance Survey map, until, passing through Ulverston, you reach Greenodd at the mouth of the river Crake. You are now four miles from the tip of Coniston Water, the first leading character in our tale.

The road winds up along the line of the river, until the vista wonderfully expands and the day is filled with the shining waters of the lake, shaped by the open, sunny Blawith Fells and Bethacar Moor on either side. As you advance northwards up the lake, the fells on the left begin unmenacingly to gather and rear up into a benign and powerful crag that sits familiarly athwart the rolling hills, a kindly 800 metres high, authoritative nonetheless, braced to break the great

winds roaring in from the Atlantic and to turn the dark clouds to the Lakeland's steady rain.

This is the Old Man of Coniston, awful and reassuring by turns like all good father-figures, barometer to the sailors and farmers of the lake, endlessly the subject-matter of painters and photographers since tourism began here in 1770 or so.¹ His squat majesty presides over the little town, a plain gritstone Victorian street the product of the nineteenth-century railway and the smelters and holidaymaking sailors who took it.

As you enter the town, hardly more than a village, the road forks right after the humpbacked bridge and passes the Victorian Gothic church with its quiet graves about it, one short row of graves dominated by a copy of a tall pre-Norman Northumbrian cross, housing the body of John Ruskin, two respectfully lower, containing those of his friend, unpaid secretary, and lifelong admirer William Gershom Collingwood, and, next to him, Collingwood's son, our subject and object in this book, Robin George.

The road runs down to the ferry across the lake that will take you to Brantwood, Ruskin's house. If you continued by the road, then to find some of the Collingwoods at home any time between 1891 and the 1960s, you turned right at the top of the lake, briefly following the signs to Hawkshead, and after bending back down the east side of the lake took the narrow, ancient lane, clustered along the first mile or so to Brantwood by the solid, comfortable, unassertive family houses of Victorian romantics come to confirm themselves as Wordsworthians and Ruskinians by building suitably in front of a noble composition, the mountain just off centre, the blue and silver-grey lake in the middle ground, old firs and oaks on the long slopes of the garden down to the boathouse.

Among them, at the top of a modest rise, stands Lanehead, now rather changed by its role as an outdoor recreation centre for a couple of education authorities, but still rediscoverable as the family home it was for so many decades. WG, as he was commonly known, Gershom to his wife, moved to the house with his four children, Dora (born in 1886), Barbara (born in 1887), Robin (born on 22 February 1889), and his wife, christened Edith, even-handedly

known as “Dorrie” or “Molly,” pregnant with Ursula, who was born just before the move. William Gershom had moved them all by local carter from Gillhead, a cottage at Cartmel Fell, a few miles away, in order to be near his avatar and teacher, master and friend, John Ruskin, who since 1871 had lived another mile down the lakeside road at Brantwood, a plain, impressive, but not enormous house piled on a bluff with the finest view in the valley.

Lanehead was, and is, only a little smaller than Brantwood and although standing lower, it commanded a hardly less splendid view, the Old Man always in sight, the tall pines flanking the northwest of the building, the garden, and then the meadow sloping quite steeply to the lake. The house was built in 1848 on the site of an old pothouse once visited, WG tells us, by Turner, and extended three years later. The Collingwoods paid a substantial but intermittent rent of £100 a year (intermittent because they lived rent-free until 1894)² and for this enjoyed the safety, the happiness, and—near enough—the fiefdom of a dozen rooms, a conservatory known to the family as the Mausoleum, a loft, later made into a studio in the old stables at the back of the house, a sunny garden flanked with rhododendrons, the pinewood, and the boundless freedoms of the lake.

It isn’t until the second half of the nineteenth century that one really finds widespread literary reference to the importance of the home as the key domestic value in the middle classes,³ and it is at about the same time that, with the legalisation of the trade unions and their local victories in acquiring something like a living wage in the heavy industries (coal, steel, rail, shipping), working-class neighbourhoods settled into the close, companionable, well-fed, and coal-heated kind of family life that was to last a little over a century until it was torn apart by the tigerish economies of the 1980s.

The home the Collingwoods made was a long aesthetic journey from the Liverpool Gershom was born in. His father was a painter and lay preacher for the Plymouth Brethren, and his son, fired by Ruskin’s genius as teacher and preacher at Oxford, was seized of a Ruskinian vision, shared with his wife, to live the good, self-supporting family life as artists, dedicated in their avocation to all forms of art. Such a life would be lived in pursuit of personal

adequacy from art to craft, to competent making and repairing, in wood, stone, glass, to small sufficiencies in the herb and vegetable garden, the devout and diurnal round of egg-collecting, cabbage-cutting, fruit-picking, room-tidying, tea-making, book-learning; of study and scholarship and writing; of painting and sculpting; and, lastly, of sailing—sailing because it was the easiest way to fetch the groceries from Coniston on the west side of the lake, sailing because it too was art and craft and the livelihood of the many Collingwoods of the great north country family, including the mighty admiral, who had lived and died as naval officers, sailing finally because, especially for Robin, it lent itself to the rigours of solitary and extended meditation.

Almost every morning began with the sound of Mrs. Molly Collingwood playing the piano for an hour before breakfast at 8 a.m. The piano—a Broadwood grand—was in the morning room, part of the handsome extension to Lanehead built in 1851. It had then a high plasterwork ceiling and a window directly above the fireplace (the chimney flue bent around it) so that one could stay warm and look at the view south at the same time. The walls were hung with those of Molly's and Gershom's paintings which they approved at the time, dominated by the huge *Two Angels* by Edward Burne-Jones, a family friend and visitor.

Mrs. Molly played Beethoven above all, the full run of the sonatas, even the very hard opus numbers 109, 110, 111, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Mozart of course. As a schoolgirl, Wakefield tells us, she was taught by a well-known Dutch pianist, Willem Koenen, and under his instruction practised five hours a day. All the children learned to play proficiently, Ursula becoming as accomplished as her mother, Robin an excellent violinist, well remembered as such in his youth at Oxford. When, at times, Molly played in the evening and sang songs so beautifully—Schubert, Wolf (a new name), English madrigals, and folksongs—Gershom came out of his study to listen, and the children stole out of bed and sat together in the dark at the top of the stairs.

After breakfast, lessons by either parent in Gershom's study, which gave onto garden, lake, and the changeable face of the Old Man of

Coniston. The curriculum was intensely practical. Collingwood himself describes his father giving him “lessons in ancient and modern history, illustrated with relief maps in papier-maché made by boiling down newspapers in a saucepan,”⁴ and it was according to his father’s curriculum that brother and sisters alike began Latin at four and Greek at six, and the boy certainly and the girls surely, in so excellently egalitarian a household with senior sisters, learned to understand the working of pumps and locks, oil lamps and water-closets, and “other mechanical appliances up and down the house.”

Gershom, painter, writer, scholar, formidable handyman, and practical pedagogue, had of course a large library, and the children, equally precocious, eager to learn, read in it at will. It had become the custom in many such families for one parent to read aloud to spouse and children, Dickens often, Wordsworth in his home county, Dumas; Kipling’s *Stalky and Co*, the “best boarding school novel ever written,” proved so irresistible that Dora adopted the nickname of “Beetle” from the Kipling-figure in the book, and the house rang to its schoolboy slogans and insubordinate ditties. In their early years of reading, the children thrilled not only to the new classic, *Treasure Island*, but also to the grand and terrifying old English and German fairy tales of *The Hobyahs*, *Tom Tit Tot*, *Cinderella* or its variant, *Catskin*, Ruskin’s own wonderful tale, *King of the Golden River*, and, told aloud by Gershom, their father’s passion, the fearful, cold Icelandic sagas.

They were ardent pupils. Certainly there were days of reluctant learning, when the lake sparkled outside and when Euclid simply would *not* come alive, even as illustrated with wooden trigonometrical symbols and Pythagoras’s theorem tested in practical experience with cartridge paper. The children peeled off into duos by age, Robin and Ursula playing together, Dora the eldest taking charge of joint operations for many years, editing the family journal, *Nothing Much*, sometimes monthly, sometimes fortnightly.

Dora edited, everyone contributed. Indeed, Gershom thriftily collected his stories from *Nothing Much* and published them as *Coniston Tales*. The elder girls provided pen-and-ink portraits; grandfather

William handed in one or two colour sketches; when she was little, Ursula's more pungent sayings were copied out as a list of aphorisms; Robin wrote accounts of trips with his father, sketching or elementary archaeologising at Hardknott Fort, and he wrote his own, serialised detective stories for which he had conceived a passion, beginning with Conan Doyle and taking E. W. Hornung's *Raffles* with him on the long train journey to boarding school. Dora and Barbara invented and peopled the land of Piwitee, and Robin and Ursula the nation-state of Jipandland, "which had a pretty formidable navy."⁵

Occasionally the older daughters attended the village school, smocked, pinafores, and wearing clogs, but the local children hooted at them for talking posh and seeming strange, so it didn't last. No more did the brief succession of governesses, and although Ursula was, after Robin went to Rugby, dispatched to boarding school, the education, both formal and customary, provided by the parents gave all four children the essential coding, the very ground and being of their lives.

There is something important and exemplary in the nature of such a childhood, something with a historical lesson in it for the future development of England, England rather than the different class and theological educations that shaped Scotland, Wales, both Irelands. The Collingwood family education was, one could say, anchored to that powerful tradition which inaugurated the Arts and Crafts movement and was commanded by Ruskin, the childless patriarch. The official content of its curriculum, as we saw, placed painting, music, classical, folk, and English literature as its heart, but it was above all practical, active, an education in studying by *doing*, doing painting, writing poems, building a little theatre for a drama with marionettes (as the children did at Lanehead), and leaving the schoolroom for the lived endeavour of archaeology on the very sites of Roman or Norse habitation, for the strenuous discovery of geological formation, fossil traces, or (also launched from Lanehead) copper ore. Learning to sail was then just another active art-and-science, and one learned it best out of the schoolroom, in the making of it in its proper place, on the water; where else?

Surrounding and pervading this rich, dense, and even at that date and to the village schoolchildren slightly strange and fey form of life was the calm, absolute, and loving authority of Dorrie and Gershom Collingwood. To say to contemporary managers of either state or private education in the twenty-first century that the first and cherished value of a human education must be love invites the glazed eye and wrinkled nostril with which the good professor or head teacher would consign the interlocutor to the barmy enclaves of Rudolf Steiner. But love and its authority was the first, unspoken principle of Collingwoodian education, and in this parents and children spoke for a tradition that inspired British progressive and experimental education for a century. It is a tradition that expressed itself in the strong psychoanalytic doctrines of such teachers as Melanie Klein and Susan Isaacs, which had in turn so marked an influence on the making of nursery education, and came to a brief official flowering in the government report on primary schools published in 1967 as the *Plowden Report*.⁶

It is no paradox that Collingwood himself recommended, in his farewell to the world, *The New Leviathan*, that all children are best raised and educated by their parents and within their family, and kept well away from any kind of formal or state-managed education. Implicit in all the pedagogy of progressivism was a vision of schooling dissolved naturally into learning-by-living. His own best tribute to the childhood he enjoyed until the age of thirteen was that earnest recommendation in his last book that those children will thrive best—find their own best lives—who are educated according to the natural rhythms of an upbringing in the perfect safety of a loving home, deliberately placed at the centre of orderly and exhilarating freedom. Collingwood knew and sternly admonished the inflexibility and fragmentariness of all forms of official education; he also knew and praised as exemplary the special genius of his own father and mother as creators of a miniature model of the good society, the culture of which would confirm wide and deep learning, build upright, truthful, and self-reliant character, transmit and renew its particular version of love and happiness and a steady courage in the face of the future.

These are not the terms in which official education was discussed then or is managed now. Yet my claim would be, on behalf of the Collingwoods' way of life, that it shook off the heavy piety and its sometime severity of the arch-Victorian family and emerged into the freer, sunnier air of a class generation happily, momentarily at poise between prosperity and thrift, liberty and discipline, recklessness and duty, belief and antinomianism.

Their corner of their class never had much money to spare, but they kept up a big house with an assortment of part-time servants chosen from the locals for readiness, ruggedness, friendliness, availability. Dorrie's version of motherhood is still a powerful one. She was daughter of a nonobservant, partly Jewish family, born Edith Isaac, had received extensive tuition as a painter (at the West London Art School) as well as a musician, and went on painting professionally long after marrying Gershom in 1883. She was elected member of the Society of Miniaturists in 1901, exhibited frequently at the Royal Academy, went abroad annually until the First World War broke out to paint larger landscapes in northern Italy, the Tyrol, Venice, and to charge between five and fifteen guineas for a painting.⁷ Her pictures are quick, light, deft, with a lovely living line.

Gershom was, in his way, a pretty eminent Victorian, as well as one of those strong self-inventors who take the established conventions of personhood in a particular era and turn them to creative, novel, and admirable effect. He was born in 1854, son of a professional art teacher and fairly successful landscape painter who was also a devout member of the Open Plymouth Brethren, who still retain today a strong membership of biblical and antidenominational fundamentalists. Gershom's father, William, wanted his son to become prominent in the Brethren (who have elders but no ministers) and, having sent Gershom to Oxford, was very dismayed when the young man was converted by the irresistible ardour of John Ruskin's teaching to the rather different vocation of serving art, and the art of archaeology as well as the absolute art of creating a happy family.

Gershom announced his betrothal to a fiancée outside the Brethren and renounced the calling his father had chosen for him. There

was a dignified family row, but Gershom would not give way. Ruskin had fired him with his own excellent idealism to revere the moral lessons of nature as she taught them in the everyday phenomena of rocks and stones and trees, clouds and waters and flowers, and to struggle on behalf of all working men to find creative fulfilment in labour and the hope of beauty in all aspects of life. Ruskin had moreover shown Gershom personal friendship as well as enlisting him in the undergraduate roadmaking *corvées* at Hinkley on the outskirts of Oxford whereby he taught the young volunteers the satisfactions as well as the hardship of physical work.

Gershom became Ruskin's devoted disciple. After marrying Dorrie, he moved first to the cottage at Gillhead, then became Ruskin's near neighbour a quiet mile's walk north of Brantwood. He had been an admirer not only of Ruskin but also of the British idealist philosopher T. H. Green, and taught by Green's pupil Bernard Bosanquet. They taught, and Gershom passed on to his son, not only that it is our ideas about the world that constitute our understanding of the relations between things rather than our empirical sense-experiences, but also Green's early and telling lesson of excellent civic-mindedness as well as of the English liberal principle that any extension of one person's freedom must be commensurate with the same freedom for others.

Public-spiritedness of this kind was an encompassing feature of Gershom's character and the British idealist inheritance; it was to be integral to the thought of the mature Collingwood. But Ruskin himself was far more than (as they say) an academic influence. Gershom moved to Lanehead to be as near as possible to his friend and master after Ruskin's mental health sharply deteriorated. As his most recent biographer also notes, Ruskin's enormous generosity ("As had always been the case with Ruskin family servants, no one was ever dismissed [when Ruskin was sane]")⁸ meant that he was pouring away thousands of pounds of the family fortune and his own royalties "into wages, gifts, manuscripts, missals, gems, books, pictures, building projects, museums, psalters, continental trips and miscellaneous charities." He depended on half a dozen secretaries, Gershom

at this time the busiest, but they gave their labours out of devotion and without remuneration.

Gershom walked down to Brantwood three or four mornings a week. Some years earlier, shortly before his marriage to Dorrie, he had accompanied Ruskin for a four-month trip to Italy, his own first visit to the country. It was September 1882 and they travelled via Switzerland to Turin, Genoa, and Pisa, spending most of their time in Lucca and Florence where the author of what became after its serial publication across 1875–77 an instant classic, *Mornings in Florence*, showed his former pupils the glories of Ghirlandaio and Fra Angelico. Gershom and Ruskin had together prepared extensive geological notes as they crossed Haute-Savoie on the way to Italy, which were published as *The Limestone Alps of Savoy*,⁹ and it was then that Gershom first conceived the idea of writing Ruskin's biography.

By the time he moved to Lanehead, this work was well advanced and a kind of precipitate from it, witnessing just how full Ruskin's example filled Gershom Collingwood's mind, was published in 1891 as *The Art Teaching of John Ruskin*.¹⁰ The biography, as Robin Collingwood wrote in his father's obituary many years later, "has remained the standard biography for the strict and severe selectiveness of its historical method, in spite of its great successor by E. T. Cook."¹¹

Gershom continued to guard and sustain Ruskin's reputation long after the hero's death. But the household should not be imagined as living its life under Ruskin's shadow. For sure, when the children were old enough to make the walk to Brantwood and back, they were taken on visits or left to roam the wild gardens, for Ruskin loved to see children about him, however daunting his terrific beard and removed air were to them.

But their own house saw frequent visitors: the great Burne-Jones; A. W. Simpson, a Kendal furniture maker of an Arts and Crafts persuasion; admirers from University College, Liverpool, where Gershom had lectured on ornament; Thomas Ellwood, a local rector and philologist; Gershom's travelling companion from Iceland, Jon Stefansson; members of the Lake Artists Society of which Gershom became president; the numerous and active Viking Society (ditto);

and the dedicated amateurs of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian Society (which included Beatrix Potter Heelis) of which both father and son finally became presidents after many years as its moving spirits.

Gershom's prodigious energies never failed until the deadly lesions in the brain that his son inherited cut him down in the late 1920s and then paralysed him. As was necessarily the case, those energies had to be directed, along with his wife's no less signal efforts, to bringing in enough money to keep things plentiful where plenty rarely extended very many months ahead. Ruskin himself, the Vikings, the Antiquarians, and the Lake Artists all gave Gershom access to earnings, although his personal gusto for life, his charm and gentleness of manner, his invincible sense of duty committed him to a giving of himself far beyond what money he might make in return.

Typical of this zest was his voyage to Iceland in 1897, when his son was eight. That same son had recently, as he himself recalled in an astonishing revelation,

been moved by curiosity to take down a little black book lettered on its spine "Kant's Theory of Ethics"; and as I began reading it, my small form wedged between the bookcase and the table, I was attacked by a strange succession of emotions. First came an intense excitement. I felt that things of the highest importance were being said about matters of the utmost urgency: things which at all costs I must understand. Then, with a wave of indignation, came the discovery that I could not understand them. Disgraceful to confess, here was a book whose words were English and whose sentences were grammatical but whose meanings baffled me. Then, third and last, came the strangest emotion of all. I felt that the contents of this book, although I could not understand it, were somehow my business: a matter personal to myself, or rather to some future self of my own. . . . I felt as if a veil had been lifted and my destiny revealed.¹²

This was the eight-year-old "Bobbin" to whom his father was writing in June and July of that year from Iceland, plainly but silently acknowledged by both parents as of rare genius. The happy, venture-

some little boy was at the same time strikingly removed on occasions from the intent and boisterous family, pursuing thoughts that he could not yet clothe in words, but knowing them to be irresistible, thrilling also, summoning him from across a vast landscape of the mind to the long exploration at the end of which he would find them, the deep forests and dark hills would fall back, and he would be in a sunlit clearing and at peace.

II

Gershom had joined the local Archaeological Society in 1887 and instantly turned to the study of Roman and Nordic remains, subsequently publishing his *Scandinavian Britain*, the first such history, in 1908 and ultimately, copiously illustrated by his own hand, *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age* in 1927.¹³ Fired by his studies of the Norsemen's arrival in Cumbria (the Viking Society nicknamed him "the Skald," a Nordic bard or folk poet), he observed a correspondence between the politics of those early settlers and the tradition of North Country "statesman," that is, independent yeoman farmers, trading on equal terms with whomever turned up along the coast for peaceable exchanges, fierce and military in response to any unwanted irruption, absolutely refusing fealty to any of the many possessive barons and monarchs who tried to claim it. It was this same tough independence and courteous mutuality that Wordsworth celebrated in poems such as "The Old Cumberland Beggar," the section called "The Wanderer" in *The Excursion*, and made *Michael* one of Robin Collingwood's favourite poems.

The earliest incarnation of this local hero, the "statesman," was the origin of Gershom's most successful novel, *Thorstein of the Mere: A saga of the Northmen in Lakeland*, and it is not only its author's homage to the political tradition of his adopted locality, but also a careful historical reconstruction of the early settlement of Lakeland after the Roman Empire withdrew.¹⁴ It is a plainly spoken, direct, and wholly dry-eyed novel, telling how young Thorstein, roaming north up the Crake from Greenodd on the estuary, finds the hidden

mere Thorstein's Water, subsequently named after him, only later becoming Coniston. This is tenth-century Lakeland, and the hero lives in boyish rivalry with his older brothers, a pastoral but not unendangered idyll within the always trusted safety of his father's seagoing and his mothers's calm and beautiful provision.

As one would expect, the narrative manner is faithful as to dialect, teacherly as to the historical and geographical facts of husbandry, food, weather, and pathway. Gershom lingers over the details of artefacts he had drawn and loved well—the brooches, the door latches, the old carving knives—which would reappear at the heart of his son's theory of cultural suppression and resurrection. It is as if, looking down at the page, he sees something new or difficult, and looking up at his audience, he pauses in the story to explain it in a sentence or two and then resumes.

The pastoral splits open. There are raiders and abductions. Thorstein is kidnapped adventuring beside Thirlmere and forced to live as a serf with a harsh new master. Gershom describes straightly the filthy, reeking beehive huts he and his abductors inhabit. Thorstein falls in love with the daughter, "Raineach, that is Fern," escapes home, finds a bride, Raineach follows him, is lost, Thorstein marries the wrong, the right woman, Raineach returns, Thorstein, honour bound, kills his brother in mortal, rivalrous combat, goes on the run, is baptised in York, finds and marries Raineach in a tiny Christian ceremony, hides blissfully away with her on Peel islet in the middle of Coniston Water, has two children, builds a coracle exactly copied by Robin Collingwood a few years later. In the end he is killed while repelling soldiers, Raineach settles at the old home-
stead, and his people

everywhere held to their old manners and their old speech, changing little of either, and that but slowly.

For in these dales the dream of Unna came true, that saw love abiding and labour continuing, heedless of glory and fearless of death.

WG's novel is a little masterpiece, slightly awkward at times, pedagogic no doubt, but filled with that fine highmindedness, that realistic recognition of all it took to settle, defend, and perpetuate a hard

way of life, that deep trust in family love and love of place as well as in an incipient democracy of the self-reliant, all of which shaped the politics and the historical vision of his son, the greatest English philosopher of such matters. *His* peers in the university thought it Collingwood's Tory picture of society; he himself called it "democratic" *tout court*; people at Oxford by 1938 thought he had become a communist, but what Robin Collingwood learned from his father was a reverence for Lakeland "statesmen," and his politics flowed from that.

Family life, however, is only political in a colloquial sense. What the son learned from both parents, as well as his artist-sisters with whom he painted in "the Mausoleum," crewed on the lake and picnicked on Peel Island, was how best to live the warm, welcoming, fully human, and richly varied life of a not too well-off, hardworking, and strenuously creative English middle-class family of that time, and in clearly derived forms, of the next century as well. Gershom's letters from Iceland express all this with great, inexplicit, and moving force. In a letter to Barbara, then ten years old, her father writes as he must have spoken to her, pitching his actual traveller's tale into the middle of her fanciful one as any fond parent still would, spotting the narrative with the painter's eye for colour which she shared, lining up Iceland and Cumbria side by side before turning to write punctually to "My darling Molly" and to his "dear father" in Bristol.

SS Laura—Klaksvig, Faero

June 8 1897

My duckie Bab,

This letter must be to you, being written from a fairy island quite as wonderful as Piwitee. Imagine (you can) a peeled walnut magnified into a range of mountains rather bigger than the Old Man—and set in a blue sea—so that all the crinkles and folds of the walnut are voes or long bays of the sea. In and out of them the steamer goes, winding about in streets as it were of mountains—with never a scrap of flat ground, nothing but basalt crags, grass slopes and sea water. And here and there in the ledges of the great peaked hills, near the shore are green spots, drained with lots of little dykes which are full of marshmarigolds, and rich with the greenest

grass—and little brown wooden farmhouses with roofs of turf—and the grass growing green on them—so that the Silly could have fed her cow off it—and gardens with gooseberry and currantbushes—and heaps of primroses—and in the grass everywhere white daisies with never a blush of pink. And all the rest is moor—with ling and grey rocks like the back of Lang Crag, or anywhere above the tree level in our fells. At Thorshavn there were a few trees, small planes, planted in gardens, and evidently tended as we tend cactuses. But for the rest—never a tree or even a shrub; grass and ling everywhere—and rocks.

But the Piwitean part is the people and their doings.

The men are the real veritable actual gnomes of fairy book. They are dressed exactly like dwarves; and if they were smaller they would be the creatures who have the house in the story of Snow White. Their houses are toy houses—and their town is a toy town, all little wooden houses—with grass on roofs—apparently pigstyes—up and down toy paths, very steep—all in rock just like Old Man hard and clear, daisies by the sides of the streets—which can't be bicycled or driven in, and—inside the houses, such jolly old quaint comfort—like the house described in Scott's "Pirate"—sort of cabins—good furniture and brass things and walls panelled and papered with exactly the patterns we should have liked for the Morningroom. The men wear blue breeches with lots of brass buttons at the knee—grey stockings and Iceland shoes with long laces tied round their ankles—sometimes clogs also or rather pattens and long wadmaal coats and jerseys and dwarfs caps all colours. The women have shawls over their heads and aprons of many colours.¹⁵

"Bobbin, my boy" was sent details of a long ride, of birds, ptarmigans, lava and cave icicles, and his father enclosed for him verses for the August edition of *Nothing Much*. After sixteen letters, twenty-two paintings, and two hundred sketches, and a thousand miles by sea, pony, and on foot around Iceland,¹⁶ he came back to a rare old homecoming.

The trip was exceptional but characteristic. WG returned to the same unslackening round of painting, writing, teaching, administering his societies, sailing, repairing his house. In what Robin described

as his father's "finest piece of imaginative work," a new novel, *The Bondswomen*, he dealt, as he would, candidly but decorously with the historical fact that tenth-century bondswomen in the Lakeland would have had to render sexual as well as domestic services to their owners. The result, his son wrote, was

such an outburst of obloquy for its immoral tendencies (it was the year after the same fate had befallen *Jude the Obscure*) that Collingwood never published another book except in the obscurity of a country printer's office where none but friends would see them, until, more than thirty years later, Messrs Faber and Gwyer published his great work on Northumbrian crosses.¹⁷

Ruskin died in 1900, after years of intermittent insanity punctuated by some of his noblest work in his autobiography, *Praeterita*. Gershom had taken Ruskin on a last holiday some years before, to Seascale on the Cumbrian coast, and thereafter had faithfully cherished the master and his reputation, published the biography, three volumes of very successful anthologies of Ruskin's writings, and an album of drawings, all without remuneration.¹⁸ Now that he had done his duty, he was able to take up a chair of fine art at University College, Reading, with the result that for the first time there was a bit of money to spare. The family was able to take a small apartment in London just off the King's Road so that the two elder daughters could pursue their training in art (which both were to practise professionally, Dora for many years in Aleppo, Barbara a sculptor in London).

There was naturally no question of the family's leaving Lanehead for either Reading or London. The girls finished their studies at Cope's Studio, Gershom came home for every vacation. Before the new money could run to school fees, a nameless friend paid for Robin to attend Mr. Podmore's preparatory school in Grange-over-Sands. It had been concluded that since the boy was proving so formidably intelligent, he would have to learn the conventions of formal examinations suitable to his social class as well as to the extraordinary endowments of his mind. Gershom had done as much at the

Liverpool Collegiate Institute; Robin duly won a scholarship to Rugby School.

Perhaps the best and last of the tokens of this remarkable man, Gershom Collingwood's energy, vivacity, and loving kindness, is to be found in his guide *The Lake Counties*. It had many rivals, most famously Wordsworth's own *Guide to the Lakes*, in its fifth edition as early as 1838. But WG brought to the labour of love as well as a useful advance from a local publisher¹⁹ unrivalled archaeological knowledge and a familiarity with the paths, climbs, and navigable waters to match his great predecessor's. He illustrated his own book with many little line drawings; he wrote, as always, plainly and precisely and without any Victorian afflatus. This is how he approaches his family's favourite refuge:

and through Blawith and the picturesque hamlet of Wateryeat we reach the foot of Coniston lake, the view from which is one of the finest in the Lake District. The name of this lake in 1196 was Thors-tanes Watter, in medieval Latin "Turstini Watra," evidently from some early owner with the Scandinavian name of Thorstein. Like Windermere, it is not one single rock-basin though the bar that breaks it into two deeps is not so apparent. The greatest basin is that which sinks to a depth of 184 feet a little above the rocky Peel Island, conspicuous from the waterfoot. On the right is the once wooded slope of Heald Brow: on the left is heathery Beacon Hill with Torver Moor beyond, and a background of peaks rising in a concert of tossed and tumbled breakers, varied in form but harmonious in the swing of their lines—Dow Crag, the Old Man, Wetherlam, Helvellyn, Fairfield. Down below "neuks and nabs" vary the shore, and beyond, the lake spreads into breadth with Peel Island, steep-sided and crowned with trees, "ornate and gay like some stately ship of Tarshish," lifted above the surface. When you come nearer, the resemblance to a ship of old times is increased by the little "calf-rock" like a boat in tow at its stern, joined to the main rock at low water by a narrow ridge, beside which there is a pretty little cove for harbour, and a well-blackened fire-spot where many a picnic kettle has boiled.²⁰

Gershom and Dorrie, like all Lakelanders of the time, were of necessity prodigious walkers as well as sailors. The children learned to sail in *Swallow*, an old fishing boat, cumbersome to row, strong and slow under sail, in any case probably the best-known name of a small sailing boat in all the world. There was also, even heavier, “the tub” (“toob” in Cumbrian). After crossing to Peel Island’s little harbour to boil up a kettle for tea and to spread marmalade on bun loaf, to roam the island, to swim and then to take advantage of the breeze darkening the water, it was hard to make it back home in time for supper; “becalmed off Brantwood” was the standard and accepted excuse.

III

One evening in the summer of 1903, a couple of months before Robin left home for Rugby, Gershom, who had been painting high on the slopes of the Old Man of Coniston, was walking back down beside the shouting waters of Copper Mines Beck, which tumbles in such a picturesque way into Levers Water by the Miners’ bridge. To his horror he saw what he thought was a corpse washed up on a wide, flat rock between the torrents. When he called out, to his immense relief the corpse sat up and a lean and bespectacled nineteen-year-old with an incipient moustache introduced himself as “Arthur Ransome.”²¹

He had, he said, been writing poetry, which his interlocutor seemed to think a sensible occupation, and he was much thrilled to discover that this stranger was author of *Thorstein of the Mere*, “the best-loved book of my boyhood.” Ransome should know. The first of his children’s books, *Swallows and Amazons*, was to become the best-loved book of a great many boyhoods and girlhoods also, in two dozen languages across the globe.²² Although the novel was not to be written until 1932, its origins were rooted deep in that first meeting and the family friendships that grew from it.

Gershom invited Ransome to call at Lanehead, but Ransome had failed to acquire from his recently completed education at Rugby the

class assurance the school assuredly was to teach young Collingwood. Out of deep-seated difficulties, he put off accepting the invitation until the last minute and then embarrassed himself utterly by interrupting a small dinner party attended by two of the innumerable honorary uncles and aunts appointed as such by Dorrie. And of course for Ransome also, “Mr and Mrs Collingwood were to become touchstones by whom to judge all other people that I met.”²³

Ransome had lost his father young. Gershom, “infinitely kind, infinitely encouraging,”²⁴ filled the gap. He and Dorrie melted Ransome’s shyness and turned it into unselfconscious and happy devotion. When he returned to the Lakes the next year, as he had always done in the past with his brothers and sisters, WG appointed Dorrie “aunt” to Ransome and thereafter “those two gave me something I had not missed because I had not till then known that it could be. The whole of the rest of my life has been happier because of them.”²⁵

It is Ransome’s account that makes it possible to fill in the picture of the Collingwood family life, to insist that it serves to us now as type and token of the best kind of English family life that the Victorian middle classes shaped for the emancipation of their children. It was braced by necessity, dignified by self-reliance, liberated by egalitarianism, ruled by justice and by trust. Ransome turned those abstractions, in the great children’s novels, into images of aspiration and promises of happiness to subsequent generations a long way from the Lakes. But he caught and caused to live again not only the noble values but the geography and history that gave them their particular life. Gershom and Dorrie sprang strongly from the roots they had put down in what was not their home county. We all of us seek and most earnestly hope to find a place to love and be at home in. This was the lesson of Wordsworth and the Romantic movement, and Gershom and Dorrie taught it all their lives. Ransome learned the lesson from his full heart.

Collectively, as a family, they adopted me and I was delighted by each small happening that helped to make me feel that I was so adopted. I remember still my extreme pleasure the first time Mrs. Collingwood trusted me to go to the village to do an errand for her at Coward’s,

the grocer. I rowed across the lake and, just after I had left the hotel grounds and come out on the road, I passed a hawthorn tree that had shed its petals all about it, a patch of glittering snow on the dust. During all that time the leaves of the trees seemed more luminous than they are today and the hills had sharper edges. I would stand gaping at this or that as if I feared I should not remember it for ever. I need have had no such fear. On the lake or on the further side of it I used to look for the pale corner of the Lanehead house where it showed through the trees below the fell and tell myself that I could not really be one of that loved family. After meals we all helped in clearing away and I valued my right to share in this. My chair, after a meal was over, had its particular place against the wall, between the door and the sideboard, and many years later, when I came to Lanehead after long absence abroad, my aunt laughed as I got up from the table after dining there and without thinking pushed my chair back into the old place where it had stood in 1904.²⁶

He became the family's elder brother. He learned from and shared with WG that common Victorian passion for folktales which was to be one thick thread in the tapestry of R. G. Collingwood's intellectual production. The boy, six years Ransome's junior ("those years shrank rapidly as he grew up")²⁷ became nonetheless his close friend and, naturally, his sailing instructor. Ransome's biographer, Hugh Brogan, is of the reasonable view that since Ransome never mentions sailing until he joins the Collingwood family, they must have taught him, and Robin was the best, the most intrepid sailor in that sailor family. Their boat *Swallow* gave its name both to his heroine craft and to the children who sailed it. When Ransome met another Lakeland family, also very close to the Collingwoods, and wrote *Swallows and Amazons* for and about them, he found that the story needed an elder brother, calm, authoritative, resourceful. In Ransome's masterpiece, *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, the elder brother, John Walker, drags his anchor in a fog, is swept to sea in a borrowed yacht with his brother and two sisters, is dreadfully afraid, and, learning and mistaking all the way, brings his family bravely to safe harbour in Flushing. I do not doubt that when Ransome needed a model for

such a boy, he drew on the unphilosophical but central characteristics of the boy he had known best for thirty years.

Ransome joined joyfully in the Collingwoods' storytelling. His gifts ran that way, Gershom encouraged him to believe he could become a man of letters, he loved folktales, and Dora remembered her mother's retelling one of Arthur's favourites:

One of the stories was about a witch who put a spell on Anansi, so that if he said the word five he would drop down dead. His enemy made five piles of yams by the side of the road, and then lay in wait for him. Along came Anansi. "Please Anansi will you count these piles of yams for me, I am so blind I cannot see." Anansi was so small that he had to climb on to one of the piles. He began counting, "One, two, three, four . . . *and* the one I'm sitting on." "No! no! that is not the way," but he went on, over and over again, till the witch was trembling with rage, but he never said "five." My mother, counting washing for the laundry, or dealing out fruit to us at lunch, would say "One two three four . . ." "AND the one I'm sitting on," we would chant in chorus.²⁸

Living in so dependable a whirl of happiness, in love with the whole family, it was inevitable that Ransome should wish to make himself even more a part of it by falling in love with Barbara to whom he called up, as she teased him while leaning on the sill of an upstairs window at Lanehead, "talking to you is like eating a strawberry ice." Barbara, as self-possessed as well as being as open to life as the rest of them, deliberated and turned him down. Ransome gloried in the full house, and so did all who dwelled there. He stayed in Robin's bedroom for the first summer term that its occupant was at boarding school, and between the incomparable safety of the embryo archaeologist's bedroom, sailing, Beethoven at breakfast, and these vigorous, plain-spoken, spontaneous, and cultivated girls, Ransome found, as Robin did, the composition of the good life all artists and thinkers must keep alive in their imaginations.

Ransome owed much of his greatness as a writer to what he learned from the Collingwoods. But all those who saw the life at Lanehead bore witness to its qualities. In the first sentence of *Anna*

Karenina, Tolstoy famously wrote that life in all happy families is much the same, but that was only his pretext to writing about a divided one. Happy families are as various as unhappy ones, and the Collingwoods were happy in a way peculiarly conducive to the making of a philosopher. The greatest philosophers, it might be added, are those for whom the crux of thought is the making out and making up of the principles that at once direct and *constitute* a life. The human constitution is a powerful phrase and connotes not only the rules that order the body politic, connect its members, and control its heartbeat, but also the codes that compel its very shape and are immanent in its forms of life.

So it was that to have two painter parents, one a fine pianist as well, the other novelist, antiquarian, palaeographer, classicist, “skald,” and practical man as well as professional landscapist, was to be well blessed for Collingwood’s vocation. Add to that a household with two elder sisters and one younger (always better in a too-masculine world to observe the authority of an elder sister) all situated in the loveliest Romantic landscape in England, redolent of that fine, instructive local democracy which bore up, fought off, and simply ignored assorted tyrants for a thousand years,²⁹ gather up all this and the deposits of experience are laid down in rich veins to be mined as future intellectual energy. This is the making of a thinker and, as it happens, the stuff of the art of biography.

Out of such a house, settled in a homeland, one could contrive a theory of the good life and a politics for a civilisation and its art. This was both Collingwood’s vocation and his good fortune. The life of Lanehead was like that of the ideal university as John Henry Newman conceived it in Dublin in 1852. Its purpose and its function, that is, was not

to result in nothing better or higher than in the production of that antiquated variety of human nature and remnant of feudalism . . . called “a gentleman,” rather its first and chief and direct object was . . . some benefit or other, to accrue, by means of literature and science, to [its] own children; not indeed their formation on any narrow or

fantastic type as, for instance, that of an “English gentleman,” but their exercise and growth in certain habits, moral and intellectual.³⁰

Such habits were what Collingwood himself found enacted in the paintings by his parents stacked against the walls of his home. They were “a visible record of an attempt to solve a definite problem,” and they took their place in a thronged household in which the conversation was not disputatious but more a reporting of what the interlocutors were about, what were the questions and problems upon which they were deliberating. This *conversazione* was joined by all the family, naturally, and by all the visitors, about whom it was naturally assumed that they too were addressing not the great mysteries (whatever *they* may be) but particular and more or less piercing questions alive in the present moment. Arthur Ransome was only the most visible as well as the most admiring of this throng. Behind him stand “Uncle Will” Carton, Icelander-philologists Stefansson and Eirik Magnusson, rector-antiquarians Calverley and Ellwood of Turner, master painter Edward Burne-Jones, legal scholar Alfred Willink, his wife Beatrice, a painter, and son Henry (later master of Magdalene College Cambridge), carver and Quaker Simpson, writers Helen Viljoen and Evelyn Underhill, farmer Stalker, engineer Herbert Severn, youngest of the family who took over the care of Ruskin and Brantwood, William Collingwood, painter and grandfather—all these people and many others still to be called came to the Collingwoods’ house in the summer.

IV

At the very beginning of the long journey that one hopes will lead to a completed biography of R. G. Collingwood, one meets and is stopped by the stern and formidable figure of the subject himself. For during the long and recuperative sea voyage to Indonesia that he took at the end of 1938 and the beginning of 1939, he set himself certain prodigious tasks of writing and, in a letter to his son Bill, then

at Balliol, suggested that the new book, to be entitled *The Principles of History*, of which he was to write 40,000 words on the voyage, would one day be considered his “masterpiece.”

The work issued from a torrent of composition in 1938 and 1939, but it was in *The Principles of History* that Collingwood’s frequently sardonic impatience surfaced on the very topic of biography in history.

The biographer . . . includes in his subject a good deal which does not belong to the object of any historical study whatever. He includes some events which embody no thought on the part of his subject, and others which do no doubt embody thought, but are included not because they embody thought but because they have an interest, or what is better perhaps called an appeal, of a different kind.

The biographer’s choice of his materials, though it may be (and ought to be) controlled by other considerations, is determined in the first instance by what I will call their gossip-value. The name is chosen in no derogatory spirit. Human beings, like other animals, take an interest in each other’s affairs which has its roots in various parts of their animal nature, sexual, gregarious, aggressive, acquisitive, and so forth. They take a sympathetic pleasure in thinking that desires in their fellow-creatures that spring from these sources are being satisfied, and a malicious pleasure in thinking that they are being thwarted. Biography, though it often uses motives of an historical kind by way of embroidery, is in essence a web woven of these two groups of threads, sympathy and malice. Its function is to arouse these feelings in the reader; essentially therefore it is a device for stimulating emotion, and accordingly it falls into the two main divisions of amusement-biography, which is what the circulating libraries so extensively deal in, and magical biography, or the biography of exhortation and moral-pointing, holding up good examples to be followed or bad ones to be eschewed.³¹

If all this is not written “in a derogatory spirit,” one would not like to be Collingwood’s victim of a passage which was. The biographer’s riposte to the antibiographer must be, no doubt, the biography itself, as work of art and work of history. But there is inexplicable bad faith

in the passage as well. Quite apart from the existence of such great works of history and art as Boswell's *Life of Johnson* or John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens*, both of which Collingwood certainly knew, and his father's biography of Ruskin, which he certainly revered, there is the special category of biography to which he made his own utterly distinctive and compelling contribution in *An Autobiography*. For sure, he says there that "the autobiography of a man whose business is thinking should be the story of his thought,"³² but it is one of Collingwood's most signal contributions to the "science of human affairs," so urgently needed when he invented the designation and even more urgently now, to show not just the mutual inextricability of thought and feeling, but their *identity* also. Calm of mind is a feeling; all passion's being spent may be the best condition for the exercise of reason, but it is not an emotionless state. It is merely, as we shall learn from that undoubted masterpiece, *The Principles of Art*, that state of mind in which comprehensive feeling permits clear judgement. Avoiding any theological distraction, one might say that such is the moment of poise at which objectivity and loving-kindness become synonyms, the point at which sympathy dissolves into historical understanding.

So there is something irascible and wrong when Collingwood follows up his strictures by asserting so baldly a little later, "Even when we sympathise with rational animals over matters connected with their rationality, it is not their rationality with which we sympathise but only the feelings in which their pursuit of rational ends has involved them."³³ Well! This is too brisk. It fixes the biographer at the early stage of moral sympathy and arbitrarily cuts him or her off from historical understanding. But the natural movement of sympathy is to try and overcome the incomprehension of (in Collingwood's unendearing example) the baffled wife sympathising with her scientist husband, himself baffled by a scientific problem, she being (naturally) unable to follow the science. The natural extension of this block is for each to try to plumb the difficulty, to replace defeat and dejection by exposition and further thought which, even if it does not result in enlightenment, may well change despondency into resolution.

By this stage, however, there is no stopping Collingwood's crotchet. Off he goes again.

Now because sympathy and its negative counterpart malice are the strings on which a biographer plays . . . he must depict a definite and recognisable person, and emphasise the animal side of this person's existence. He must remind the reader that his subject was born and died, suffered diseases and recovered from them . . . desired certain women and succeeded or failed in his attempts to win them. . . . And because it will help the reader to individualise him, the biographer will be wise to include a portrait of him, or several portraits; a photograph of his house; and so on.³⁴

No explanation is given for the biographical airs being confined to two strings, nor is the pleonasm acknowledged about biography's needing to individualise its subject, as though biography could fail to do this and still be biographical. The feeling grows, especially as Collingwood's always high high-spiritedness mounts, that he is warning people off writing *his* biography, especially when he comes to the topics of illness and womenfolk, and most of all when he concludes, quite without an argument or evidence to support him, that not only is all biography "scissors-and-paste history," that kind of history it was at the centre of his life's work to fight against, but also, no less inexcusably, that it depends for its attraction on snobbery, as deluding its readers that they are really students of history.

Even Collingwood's admiring editors of *The Principles* recoil a bit at this point and suggest that the *Autobiography* is not without what he here disdains as "exhortation and moral-pointing." Indeed, such exhortation, expressed in some of the most pungent and powerful commentary on moral and political affairs to be found in English in the whole century, is the very heart of the book and its incontestable purpose.

The rebuttal of Collingwood's animadversions upon the genre of biography is, however, more than a matter of this biographer's needful self-defence. It is the defence of an intrinsically historical form. Certainly there are any number of scissors-and-paste biographies, as there are quantities of such histories of thought or of irrationality or

of art or science. Yet biography is so obviously the readiest and most intelligible way with which to capture something of significance in historical movement. This may of course be done either briefly or profoundly, or both. That is to say, a biographical subject offers itself to us as somehow significant. Following the precepts of Collingwood's methods as we shall discover them over these pages, the historical significance of a life reveals itself as, reenacting (the key verb in the business) the conduct of that life by way of the thoughts, passions, and beliefs made manifest in its actions, the biographer-historian situates the subject in as carefully reconstructed a context as he or she may contrive. Action, as we can see even beside Coniston Water, only means what it does in a context; human intention is expressible within the meanings convention lends it (including of course flouting the convention). Placing an interpreted life in a detailed and accurate context simply *is* to discover its significance. Such a significance may be modest enough as it is here at hand, or even, for instance, in so fine a recent biography as, say, Claire Tomalin's *Samuel Pepys*,³⁵ but it restores life to that greedy egotist and his unstoppable observation of seventeenth-century London. Doing so, it contributes its mite to the social history of the moral imagination. It brings off this little miracle of resurrection by providing a lens through which we see a different life from a strange epoch. The magic touch must be to make us see that familiar estrangement.

This is the common endeavour of the interpretative sciences, whose queen is history.³⁶ On this argument biography, well practised, is a thoroughly historical form, essential to the discipline and source of wisdom to a people.

A biographical figure may surely be commended to us as a guide to conduct. Hagiography has a long reading list, let alone an even longer liturgical canon, and is not so very discredited by historical revelation. But to take our very own topic, and to biographise an always specialist scholar, one whose name is little known nowadays outside the academy and the archaeological dig, is naturally to invite the questions, "who was he?" and "why bother?"

The answer is then not to say, or at least not to say *tout court* (my admiration for him is intended to be plain and generous), "He lived

well. Be like him.” It is much more a matter of fixing and, in the writing, dramatising a tradition to which this individual belonged. Everybody seeks to do this—that is what “identity” means, even when used in cant. Not everybody can find a tradition, and some traditions are not worth belonging to.

There have been various efforts since the Romantic movement to dislodge the idea of a tradition. Nietzsche was one such explosive engineer, and in assaulting Christianity’s “tyranny,” its “denial of life,” shook off tradition in the name of the “will to power,” the “work,” “whether of the artist or philosopher, [which] invents the person who has created it.”³⁷ Half a century later, Jean-Paul Sartre sought to smash through the moral tradition that he came to see as utterly poisoned by Fascism armed only with the existential self, freely choosing but only free in the exercise of its own “good faith.”³⁸

There remain innumerable tradition-dissolvers, Marxism and managerialism among them, but in the nature of things sheer longevity turns dissolvers into traditionalists. This biography therefore stands in a tradition. It is the tradition of good lives, inaugurated by Aristotle, amplified by Aquinas, liberated from Christianity and given the doctrine of the “civil affections” by David Hume and Adam Smith. Our tradition is rooted deep in its own history by Hegel as being the only foundation it could possibly justify, and thereafter domesticated by the British tradition that made Hegel tolerable and culminates (for our purposes) in R. G. Collingwood.

This tradition teaches that a good life may be lived only in terms of those virtues which an individual truly possesses and is capable of. The trouble with the word “tradition” is that it has, damnably, been so monopolised by the political Right, which contrasts the stability of tradition with the crazy enthusiasms of revolutionary struggle. But a moral tradition is no less than the embodiment through time and in a place of those principles which permit that version of a good life to be lived, revised, challenged, and transformed in the biographies of the traditionalists.

On this definition, as Alasdair MacIntyre (a leading present advocate of Collingwoodian ethics) says,

A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embedded *argument* and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition . . . the virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in which that individual may seek out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context . . . *an adequate sense of tradition manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present.*³⁹ (italics added)

V

It won't therefore do to allow Collingwood himself to dismiss biography as moral exhortation, nor will it do to allow Nietzsche to get away with saying that the work invents the person. He may be right to complain that "the great," as they are venerated, are "subsequent pieces of wretched minor fiction" (not so very minor, some of them, either), but for each life, major or minor, the "work" is what constitutes it and is created by it.

A life's work is only to be found in books for those people who write them. The life and works of a nurse, a university administrator, a truck driver, a television camera operator, a policewoman, a soldier are assembled by time and chance and insofar as each character is capable of making such a thing into as decent, upright, and truthful a narrative as may seem credible. On this showing the practices that fill a life and that normally include the domestic contents parallel to a job—friends, spouse, parents, in Blake's words "the price of experience, all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children"—are a life's work *in the same way* as are the philosopher's thoughts and books.

The story of a thinker's thought is then indistinguishable from the story of his life. The intensity of pleasure and absorption that Collingwood found in sailing, first on Coniston, later across the

English Channel, were intrinsic to the disciplines of his thought. His moral admonitions to his students as well as the generous recognition he gave them—which any teacher should give to his or her students as they advance towards their status as the next generation—are grounded in the unity of his theory and his experience.

Collingwood refused all his life to concede what a certain kind of liberal too comfortably claims about the moral life,⁴⁰ and that is that the fact of there being incompatible values and rival conceptions of the good life means that there can be no *one* such determinate picture of living well. But “what this contention is blind to is that there are better or worse ways for individuals to live through the tragic confrontation of good with good.”⁴¹

A biography that has thrown away its scissors and paste is thereby committed to the reconstruction of the actions and eventualities that *were* the subject’s living through the tragic (and comic) confrontation of good with good. There are consequently two grand themes to any serious and historically minded biography, and these call for the orchestration of more major chords in the human mind than Collingwood’s thin restriction to “sympathy and malice.”

The first such theme is, I suppose, the subject’s representativeness. Each of us finds, as best we can, a way of living made available by time and chance, by culture and convention, which we match to our gifts and opportunities. This isn’t really a matter of choice; we speak of choosing a career, but the choice is hemmed in by history, geography, social class, and local accident, until the best we can do (and it *is* the best) is find a way of life that seems to answer to certain imperious predispositions in our souls. Of course, it is very rare for these to match perfectly, or even well. But that remains the compelling hope directing our biggest decisions—what to study at school, whom or whether to marry, whom to befriend, where to live, what to do for a living, how to be happy, whether to be good.

The shape of possible answers to these questions may be glimpsed in the singularity of this or that representative of a social type. Our hero, Robin Collingwood, typified a complex and variegated character out of the drama of English history. First and foremost, no doubt, he was a *thinker*, and the ambitions and achievements of that thought

compose the second theme of his life's music. But he also lived with rare dedication and fullness the life of the man brought up as he was by such a father and mother, such amazing and devoted sisters, shaped by a particularly beautiful landscape, skilled in a dozen arts and crafts—fiddling, drawing, sailing, studying, handicraft, carpentry, bookbinding, beekeeping, singing, modelling, archaeologising. All these forces were then to be gathered across the fifty stormiest years of European history into the complex avocation of scholar, intellectual, sportsman, artist, teacher, Oxford gentleman, and democrat, parent and lover, free “statesman” and patriot.

You cannot make a man from a list. But you can imaginatively spin these threads of a life together until they are strong enough to draw a later generation into its own versions of these figures. Evaluations of the British culture of the twentieth century are much thinned out at present by moral hypochondria and sanctimonious recrimination towards both past and present: about certain things ill done in empire and other things done to harm our native poor, our ill-treated Celtic liminals and derelict estuaries. Not much is said in praise of *anything*.

This book is conceived as a minor riposte to this chorus. It attempts a dramatisation of a certain kind of Englishman, his courage and colourfulness, his “spots of commonness” (in George Eliot’s phrase), the tragedy of his failure, the comedy of his vision.

These last two terms modulate into our second theme. For Robin Collingwood indeed had a vision and, desperate as he was to fulfil it, failed to create either the speech or the time to bring his vision to realisation. He sought to discover the unity of a life in the multiplicity of its absorbing and creative practices, and to communicate the needfulness of such a unity to a sufficient audience and in the happy names of goodness and meaning. He wanted more. This oneness of action and vision (of practice and theory) could only be achieved, in a single mind, or in a whole society, that won its emancipation, and hence secular redemption, by a knowledge of itself as wrung from its history.

Such was the road to salvation. Collingwood’s life, embodying his thought, had as its guiding purpose the discovery and invention of

the freedom to be won by the supercession of instrumental science and the coming-to-maturity of a shared and radically historical self-awareness. This was the single end towards which he directed his extraordinary talents and his powers of dedication.

He failed. But he was not defeated. He failed because he could not break up the abstractions of a too-heavy philosophical language and rebuild them as a homely house for the habitation of a free people. And yet, in his work, and especially in his last quartet of great books, as well as in the style of his living, he met Nietzsche's test, in an observation of his to which we shall return, of "style" of character as being that unification of "necessity and freedom of will" such that "strength and weakness fit into the plan of artistry." Such and such are the meanings of his life—in an American's phrase, "now and in England."⁴²

For all his great gift for happiness, Collingwood is a tragic hero. It was surely his own discovery of the absoluteness of historically contrived presuppositions that, really, in his own phrase, "broke up his pose of the detached thinker." Once that was done, he appears for us as the inheritor of certain powerful traditions in European thought and the English character. Taking on that complex, contradictory inheritance of the roles I have already called—scholar-genius, sportsman, intellectual, Lakelander-"statesman," gentlemanly Oxonian, public professor, local figure, lover, parent, sailor, mortal invalid, and a dozen more—he battles to integrate these in as well a lived story of a life as such a character could tell between 1889 and 1943. Insofar as his story is well told in these pages, the sympathetic reader is better able to grasp certain aspects of those momentous and world-historical years. Doing so, that same reader is also better able to see the looming future for what it will bring. He or she, that is, will then see and feel how certain key threads of narrative in the tapestry of a national tradition were taken up, recoloured, and extended by this one man's life. Sixty-odd years after his death, he joins us to the best of our Anglo-Victorian past and shows how it was transmuted into something of the best parts of contemporary life. Showing us these things, linking us to the resolution and independence of which this Lakelander intellectual was capable in the midst

of those terrible wars and delusive politics, there need be no exhortation to follow such an example; you couldn't even if you wanted to. He offers a lead, that's all. Without that leadership, certain vitalising continuities might be sundered and lost. This biography is a reminder of those, a way of picking them up before they vanish. No one can copy this man's life; but you can ask what he would have made of yours, and translate his words into your own.

That latter-day Collingwoodian, Alasdair MacIntyre, everywhere present in these pages, proposed a difference between "that well-established genre, the biography of philosophers, and that yet-to-be-established genre, the history of philosophers." This book, unmistakably a biography, is nonetheless an effort to blend the two, and turn biography into history, thereby confounding our great original's polemic. As was not infrequently the case, he was giving a bit too much rope to his large talent for irascibility with the intellectual degradation everywhere visible, and in doing so not only belittled his own *Autobiography*, but ignored the fact of his life's best endeavour, which was to provide a moral theory of experience. For as MacIntyre goes on, "authors and readers of such biographies and such yet to be written histories would do well to attend to the relationship in the life of each philosopher between her or his mode of philosophical speech and writing and her or his attitude towards questions about the ends of life."⁴³