

[*History Man: The Life of R.G. Collingwood*, Fred Inglis, Princeton University Press, 386 pages]

Biographer or Ventriloquist?

By James Bowman

IN WRITING HIS BIOGRAPHY of the underappreciated and now mostly forgotten British philosopher R.G. Collingwood, Fred Inglis unfortunately did not obtain the cooperation of his subject's surviving daughter, Teresa, who like her father has become a don at Oxford. Collingwood, who died in 1943 at the age of only 53, is said to have left behind a large archive of letters, which Teresa refused to make available to Inglis. Doubtless that is part of the reason why this book is so short of what would conventionally be considered essential biographical detail. For example, we are left knowing almost nothing about the woman to whom Collingwood was married for 23 years and whom he divorced shortly before his death to marry an actress and former student—or, for that matter, about the actress either.

You'd think that Inglis, a professor emeritus of Cultural Studies at the University of Sheffield, could have done a bit more digging. Somehow he even neglects to tell us the date of Collingwood's birth. Perhaps he excludes it on principle: describing the postwar, post-Collingwood philosophical landscape in Britain, the biographer writes that "Ryle and Wittgenstein had demolished the long-lived psychology of Romanticism whereby human beings are divided into inner states and outer appearances and in which the key to understanding other people is to discover how they truly think and feel about the world." If adopted as a working principle by writers of biographies, this is very bad news for readers.

As an admirer of Collingwood's philosophical writings, especially his works

on history collected after his death in *The Idea of History*, I was glad to find Inglis's book so sympathetic to its subject, and I hope that it sparks a revival of interest in the great man's thinking. But I have to say that in his daughter's place I would not have cooperated with Inglis either. *History Man* is not only badly short of essential information but also terribly overwritten. This is a very un-Collingwoodian volume in several ways, especially in its failure to stick to the evidence and its greater interest in claiming that the philosopher's thought was a cruder prototype of its author's own than in trying to understand what Collingwood actually did think.

Collingwood's greatness as a philosopher was to demonstrate the centrality of history to all thought—and, as he showed, "all history is the history of thought"—together with the idea of "absolute presuppositions," which are largely invisible to those who hold them but increasingly apparent to subsequent generations who don't make the same assumptions. These presuppositions form our thought and, once revealed, compel us to keep re-writing the history of it. The cultural milieu of the years since his death has been characterized by absolute presuppositions that include a politically motivated attempt to cut us off from history, the study of which has lately been devoted to passing judgment on the past rather than understanding it, as Collingwood would have required.

To see the inadequacies of Inglis's book, one has only to read it in tandem with Collingwood's *Autobiography*, a classic of 20th-century literature in English. The crispness, clarity, and narrative energy with which it is written is a standing reproach to the misty moralizing that Inglis spends his time superimposing upon the story he has to tell. Here, for instance, is just one of the *Autobiography's* many thrilling passages, set in Collingwood's father's library where

one day when I was eight years old curiosity moved me to take down a little black book lettered on its

spine 'Kant's Theory of Ethics.' It was Abbott's translation of the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*; 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. ... 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.

He goes on to describe in similarly perspicuous language the urgent need for reflection that this early encounter with his life's work inspired in him and his escapes into the Wordsworthian landscapes of his Lake District boyhood to indulge that need, which began to make his parents think that "I had fallen into a habit of loafing"—a part of the story that his biographer reduces to paraphrase as follows:

The happy, venturesome 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.

The reader can't help feeling that he is being invited to admire Inglis's muddily poetical translation of the plainer but

more exciting and intelligible original—to which the biographer has added unwarranted speculation about what the child was “knowing” and feeling.

This impulse to translate often leads him into unprofitable avenues. In describing Collingwood’s career at Rugby School in the first decade of the last century, Inglis can’t resist taking the occasion to reargue the case against the public (that is, private) schools, which was an obsession of the British Left in the 1960s and 1970s. There’s another absolute presupposition that even most of the Labour Party has moved on from. But having grudgingly admitted that Rugby a century ago might have been, against its own interest, a force for progressivism, Inglis goes on to criticize the Labour governments of the 1970s, 30 years after Collingwood’s death, for not abolishing private education. Leaving biography behind, Inglis laments, “a few anxious leftists of the privileged classes sent their children to local state schools in the name of both communal membership and egalitarianism, and they were much accused by others of the well-off classes of sacrificing their children to their principles, as though one could ever do anything else.”

I guess this is an attempt at profundity, but it strikes me as a remarkably stupid statement—and therefore un-Collingwoodian too. The “else” that one could do is to get better principles that don’t require one to sacrifice one’s children to them. But having taken the bit between his teeth, Inglis goes on to further animadversions against the independent schools and their allegedly “bland indifference to human misery” as a prelude to assailing, as one might have known he would, “the great she-rhino” (as Collingwood’s student Denis Healey called her), Margaret Thatcher. Today’s Oxford, by contrast, meets with his approval because it “bears witness to the fact that here at least the community of learning has lost its ancient and horrible racism, has admitted the two genders with a now full heart (and lost its institutional and pubescent horror of sex as well).”

Insofar as this has anything to do with Collingwood, we are meant to understand that he would, as the politicians say, “approve this message,” but I very much doubt that. On the contrary, Inglis’s condescension to other views typical of Collingwood’s time, views that we know Collingwood held—for instance, his Christian faith, even then rare in a philosopher, and his apologia for British and Roman imperialism—do not inspire us with confidence that the biographer has divined correctly what would have been his subject’s views on matters he expressed no opinion about in his lifetime but that interest ageing British lefties today. It all amounts to a very un-Collingwoodian snobbery toward the past on account of its failure to be as liberal and progressive as the author expects it to be.

Inglis’s purpose seems to be to limn his subject in outlines he would prefer Collingwood to have, rather than those that he was actually likely to have had. This is exactly the mistake made by the pre-war realist philosophers whom Collingwood, as he tells us in the *Autobiography*, formed his own philosophy by debunking. Of G.E. Moore’s purported refutation of Berkeleyan idealism and John Cook Wilson’s attacks on F.H. Bradley, Collingwood made the same criticism: that neither man had faithfully represented the views that he claimed to be confronting. Consequently, when he became an Oxford lecturer himself, the first thing Collingwood taught his pupils was “that they must never accept any criticism of anybody’s philosophy which they might hear or read without satisfying themselves by first-hand study that this was the philosophy he actually expounded.” This turns out to be advice as good for biographers seeking an opportunity for ventriloquial social criticism as it is for philosophers. ■

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[Nullification: How to Resist Federal Tyranny in the 21st Century, Thomas E. Woods Jr., Regnery, 309 pages]

Know Your States’ Rights

By Jeff Taylor

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN the referee in a ballgame is a member of one of the competing teams? What if this ref is imbued with overweening confidence in his side’s natural superiority, and he’s so sure of his own sense of fair play that any questioning of his calls is deemed illegitimate? Meet the United States federal judiciary.

Self-righteousness and concentrated power are a dangerous combination. Their conjunction in American politics can be traced to the rulings of Chief Justice John Marshall, an arch-Federalist who shared Alexander Hamilton’s belief in political centralization. The federalist cause from which their party took its name was a distinct move away from the decentralism of the Articles of Confederation, but its advocates insisted that federalism did not mean a consolidated, unitary government of the sort favored by kings and despots. The U.S. Constitution and federal legislation would be the highest law of the land, according to the Supremacy Clause. But traditional rights and responsibilities would be reserved to the state governments and to the people themselves. This principle was enshrined in the Tenth Amendment.

The balance between the Supremacy Clause and the Tenth Amendment was maintained while each level of government stuck to its constitutionally proper areas of concern. But gradually federal power intruded into areas formally—and formerly—reserved to the states. Beginning with the Marshall court in the early 19th century, with its invention of the power of judicial review and its creative use of constitutional loopholes, the