

Chapter 11 History

Excerpt from RG Collingwood's *The Idea of History*

(Read the questions at the end of this extract first.)

The historian, investigating any event in the past, makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of an event.

By the outside of the event I mean **everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements**: the passage of Caesar, accompanied by certain men, across a river called the Rubicon at one date, or the spilling of his blood on the floor of the senate-house at another.

By the inside of the event I mean **that in it which can only be described in terms of thought**: Caesar's defiance of Republican law, or the clash of constitutional policy between himself and his assassins. **The historian is never concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other.** He is investigating not mere events (where by a mere event I mean one which has only an outside and no inside) but **actions**, and an action is the unity of the outside and the inside of the event. He is interested in the crossing of the Rubicon only in its relation to Republican law, and the spilling of Caesar's blood only in its relation to a constitutional conflict. His work may begin by discovering the outside of an event, but it can never end there; he must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think himself into the action, to discern the thought of its agent.

In the case of nature, this distinction between the outside and the inside of an event does not arise. The events of nature are mere events, not the acts of agents whose thought the scientist endeavours to trace. ... Instead of conceiving the event as an action and attempting to rediscover the thought of its agent, the scientist goes beyond the event, observes its relation to others, and thus brings it under a general formula or law of nature. ... Whereas the events of history are never mere phenomena, never mere spectacles for contemplation, but things which the historian looks, not at, but through, to discern the thought within them. ... To discover that thought is already to understand it. ... When [the historian] knows what happened, he already knows why it happened.

... But how does the historian discern the thought which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it can be done: by re-thinking them in his own mind. ... So the historian of politics or warfare, presented with an account of certain actions done by Julius Caesar, tries to understand these actions, that is, to discover what thought in Caesar's mind determined him to do them. This implies envisaging for himself the

situation in which Caesar stood, and thinking to himself what Caesar thought about the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it. The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thoughts in the historian's own mind. [This process] is a labour of active and therefore critical thinking. The historian not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the context of his own knowledge and therefore, in re-enacting it, criticizes it, forms his own judgement of its value, corrects whatever errors he can discern in it.

... Man is regarded as the only subject of historical process, because man is regarded as the only animal that thinks, or thinks enough, and clearly enough, to render his actions the expressions of his thoughts.

... Historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past, and at the same time it is the redoing of this, the perpetuation of past acts in the present.

... The historian must in two ways go beyond what his authorities tell him. One is the critical way. ... The other is the constructive way. ... I described constructive history as interpolating, between the statements borrowed from our authorities, other statements implied by them. Thus our authorities tell us that on one day Caesar was in Rome and on a later day in Gaul; they tell us nothing about his journey from one place to the other, but we interpolate this with a perfectly good conscience.

This act of interpolation has two significant characteristics. First, it is in no way arbitrary or merely fanciful [if] our construction involves nothing that is not necessitated by the evidence, it is a legitimate historical construction of a kind without which there can be no history at all.

Secondly, what is in this way inferred is essentially something imagined. If we look out over the sea and perceive a ship, and five minutes later look again and perceive it in a different place, we find ourselves obliged to imagine it as having occupied intermediate positions when we were not looking. That is already an example of historical thinking; and it is not otherwise what we find ourselves obliged to imagine Caesar as having travelled from Rome to Gaul when we are told that he was in these different places at these successive times. ... This activity, with this double character, I shall call *a priori* imagination.

... As works of imagination, the historian's work and the novelist's do not differ. Where they do differ is that the historian's picture is meant to be true. ... This further necessity imposes upon him obedience to three rules of method, from which the novelist or artist in general is free.

The historian's picture stands in a peculiar relation to something called evidence. What we mean by asking whether an historical statement is true is whether it can be justified by an appeal to the evidence; for a truth unable to be so justified is to the historian a thing of no interest.

Reading questions:

- 1** Why do you think Collingwood introduces the distinction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of an event? Why is this distinction particularly important for the historian, and less so, or not, for the natural scientist?
- 2** What do you think Collingwood is saying about what constitutes an *historical* event?
- 3** ‘When [the historian] knows what happened, he already knows why it happened.’ What does Collingwood mean here?
- 4** What does it mean for an historian to *understand* an event from the past?
- 5** In ‘re-enacting’ the past thoughts, how do you think the historian critiques, tests or evaluates the thoughts he is re-enacting?
- 6** What role does imagination play in the historian’s trade? Does it add to or detract from the credibility of the historical knowledge being constructed?
- 7** What do you think Collingwood means by the ‘peculiar relationship’ in which he says the historian stands with respect to evidence?
- 8** Briefly summarize Collingwood’s ‘historical method’.
- 9** Choose a *real-life historical situation* and apply the key elements of Collingwood’s thinking about history.
- 10** Choose an object or artefact that you think demonstrates an ‘inside’ in the way that Collingwood means this. What thought has been ‘put into’ the object?

Credit:

R.G. Collingwood. *The Idea of History*, Section 5: Epilogomena (1936). ed. van der Dussen. Oxford University Press. 1994