Research Article

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A Late Victorian Family Life: The Typically Untypical World of The Collingwoods of Lanehead

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Abstract: This paper examines the Collingwood family of Lanehead, Coniston, in the UK’s Lake District. It shows that the family itself was a unity which allowed for the emergence of brilliance on the part of at least one of its members, R. G. Collingwood. It argues that his emergence was the outcome both of his education and of the family habits inculcated into him by his parents and shared with his siblings from an early age and operative throughout their lives. In particular, this included the sharing of detailed and minutely descriptive family letters written as, and designed to be read as, shared narratives. It makes the claim that the family was in many ways a bohemian family, but in its own particular way—its bohemianism being offset by a sturdy work ethic and middle-class sensibility.

Keywords: bohemianism, philosophy, the self, art, lake district

Introduction

This article examines the Collingwoods of Lanehead, Coniston, in the Lake District. The family was a remarkable late Victorian family who produced, in the older generation, fine artists, archaeologists, novelists and a secretary to John Ruskin, and in the younger generation, Edwardian exemplars in the arts and crafts as well as a member contributing directly to post War development of both the archaeology of Roman Britain and philosophy. What made this possible? What was there about this family that led to their being able to make this remarkable impact? My argument can be summarised in the proposition that members of the family were highly individualistic and and yet the family was a strong corporate personality sharing a sense of vocation, and the intellectual and emotional means to realise it, from which it never swerved.

The article is centred on the figure of Robin George Collingwood, partly because to properly encompass the entire family would require a vast canvas, and partly because considering Robin enables us to focus on how the family produced him as its representative. He was a late Victorian who emerged into maturity in Edwardian England; he died in the Second World War after making his mark in philosophy (especially aesthetics and the philosophy of history) and the history and archaeology of Roman Britain. Most of his books are still in print some seventy years after his death, yet their genesis, and his ability to work so as to produce them, lay in his upbringing in the inadvertent bohemianism1 of a late nineteenth-century family of artists. Although not bohemians in quite the typical sense conjured by the term, nonetheless they expressed

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1 Some “bohemians” take bohemianism itself as their vocation; the Collingwoods placed their artistic and academic vocation first, and their bohemianism was a side effect.

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a bohemian spirit in their attitude to life and work. However, their bohemianism was transcended by their seriousness: in the end, it was their work and not their life which was of paramount importance, even though it was precisely this dedication that lent their mode and manner of living its bohemian appearance. Their individual and collective vocations were more than their employment, more than their way of earning a living, and transcended these concerns.

The Collingwood Family

The family comprised William Gershom (1854-1932), usually known as Gershom, the son of William Collingwood, landscape painter and member of the Plymouth Brethren. Gershom was not himself religious and was rather discomfited by Robin's teenage decision to become confirmed in the Church of England. He was married to Edith Mary (known as Dorrie or Molly) (1857-1928), the daughter of Thomas and Sarah Isaac, Congregationalists from Maldon in Essex. Their children were Dorothy “Dora” Susie (“Beetle”) (1886-1964), Barbara Crystal (1887-1961), Robin (George was added on his baptism in 1905) (1889-1943), and Ursula Mavis (1891-1962).

What were their distinctive talents and characteristics? Gershom was a painter, archaeologist, historian and novelist; Dorrie painted landscapes and miniatures and was an excellent pianist. They were professional painters, relying on their work for their income, whether through commissions or selling at exhibitions. Other sources of income included Gershom's work as a lecturer and later Professor of Fine Art at Reading University College (from 1905 to 1911): this was the only full-time employment of his career. Gershom's position at Reading enabled the daughters, who were similarly artistic and creative in their chosen media, to study there at reduced fees. Dora was a painter, Barbara a painter and sculptor, Ursula, a painter, who later moved into midwifery; Dora and Barbara both studied art in London and Paris in the early years of the twentieth century. The family, among other things, exhibited at the Royal Academy, were active in the Lake Artists’ Society (formed in 1904) with Gershom being its “prime mover” (Townend 211), founded the Ruskin Museum in Coniston (1901), curated various Ruskin Exhibitions, and helped to set up the Armitt Library at Ambleside.

For many years Gershom was secretary and companion to John Ruskin. He had studied Literae Humaniores in Oxford from 1872-6, where his philosophy tutor was the renowned idealist Bernard Bosanquet. During his time at Oxford, he attended Ruskin's lectures, given in his capacity as Slade Professor of Fine Art, and helped in the famous digging of the Ferry Hinksey Road. Ruskin was concerned at the poor state of the village road and in 1874, devised a plan to provide a better road for the villagers as well as giving his Oxford undergraduates the benefit of engaging in manual labour. The undergraduates included, in addition to Gershom, Oscar Wilde, Alfred Milner, Arnold Toynbee and H. N. Hardwicke.

Following his Oxford studies, Gershom travelled extensively with Ruskin to the French and Swiss Alps in the 1870s and 1880s. The first major fruit of these excursions was his edition of The Limestone Alps of Savoy (1884). Gershom wrote several works on Ruskin himself, including The Art Teaching of John Ruskin and the Life and Work of John Ruskin. The skills and abilities that Gershom picked up from Ruskin were transmitted directly to his daughters and son and embedded in their chosen media of expression, as well as in their joint medium of expression, the lengthy shared family letter.

As the Albrittons point out, “[t]he family belonged to the upper middle class in cultural terms, with quite substantial connections in the art, literary, and academic world” (151-2). For example, they knew Edward Burne-Jones, whose picture the Two Angels hung on their morning room wall. They were close friends with Canon H. D. Rawnslie, instrumental in the founding of the National Trust. Arthur Ransome was a friend and frequent visitor, who was virtually adopted by the family and came to see Mrs Collingwood as a surrogate mother; he proposed marriage to both Dora and Barbara in turn. Ransome was taught to sail by Robin and his series of children's stories set in a fictionalised Lake District, Swallows and Amazons and its successors, was based in part on the activities of Dora's children. Dora married the half-Irish, half-Armenian Ernest Altounyan, a physician based in Aleppo, and a friend of T. E. Lawrence. She herself got to know Agatha Christie and her second husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan, well in later life. Oscar Gnosspeius,
who married Barbara, was notorious for (among other things) testing water planes on Coniston Water, to the great annoyance of Beatrix Potter who lived nearby. Barbara was a friend of E.M. Forster and sculpted a bust of him.

Genius Arising

How does a family develop and express their unique genius and how does genius arise in an individual member of that family. The short answer is that one form of genius begets the other if the conditions are favourable and the bearer of genius able to bear the burden: for genius is both a gift and a burden.

Remarking on Jane Austen, his favourite novelist, Robin wrote that:

[genius never arises except in social surroundings so exquisitely fitted to produce it that its voice seems almost the impersonal voice of these surroundings themselves. At Steventon a family of seven little Austens grew up in surroundings healthy for body and mind, with plenty to read, plenty to do, and a sufficiency of people to talk to. Here among the peaceful curves of the chalk downs Jane Austen, says a critic, had a “fitting nursing-ground for that delicate genius which in the noise and bustle of town life might easily have been dazed into helpless silence.” I doubt if the critic has lived in a country house with seven healthy children, and I do not see Jane dazed into helpless silence by anything short of a boiler-factory; but Steventon certainly did form her mind, not so much by its rural quiet, whatever that means, as by the very definite atmosphere of self-contained and industrious activity which country life alone can produce. A family of intelligent children in a remote country place must invent its own amusements, and thus acquires a corporate personality which gives each of its members the sense of expressing something wider than himself. (Collingwood, *Enchantment* 37)]

Whatever the accuracy of this account of Austen’s home life, it is clearly an excellent description of Collingwood’s own early family life at Lanehead, situated on Coniston water (directly opposite the town

Figure 1. Lanehead (Courtesy of Jean and Martin Norgate).
of Coniston) and adjacent to John Ruskin’s home, Brantwood, a mile down the road across the fields. And, further, it conveys a sense not only of how an individual self is formed through interaction with others under certain circumstances but also of the specific nature of the corporate self and personality of the Collingwood family. The self is not a given: it is created through its interactions with others; it is created by influence and is also created by its influence on others with whom it interacts. But what sort of person is likely to emerge under the conditions that Collingwood describes? The answer is a person subject to intense self-scrutiny. Robin was a great observer and narrator: the two were one, and each the complement of the other. But this is no surprise, for this was true of his family as a whole, each member of whom possessed a well-developed ability to observe their surroundings, whether natural or social, closely and precisely, and to express themselves in a variety of media, perhaps speech, prose, poetry, music, stone or paint. They shared the view that “One paints a thing in order to see it […] a good painter […] paints things because until he has painted them he doesn’t know what they are like” (Collingwood, Principles 304-5). This attitude and practice were derived both from lived experience and from the profound and long-lasting influence of John Ruskin.

Until one has drawn it, one does not know what a thing is like; one has not observed it with that combination of attention to detail and attention to general effect which alone deserves the name of seeing. A person who does not draw has only a dim and vague feeling of the look of things, and at no single point has he a clear or accurate grasp of their appearance […] learning to draw means at bottom learning to see; and the whole of painting consists in an attempt on the part of the painter to force upon himself a habit of precise observation. (Collingwood, Outlines 129)

Similarly, this applies to observation and description through the written word. Understanding one’s experience requires its expression, and a key form of expression and shared communication for the Collingwood family was the family letter. Each member of each generation wrote to all the other family members throughout their lives in willed continuation of habits instilled early and firmly on their young selves. Each letter was typically intended to be read aloud to the family, or distributed among the family, irrespective of the nominal recipient. Through this correspondence, the family developed a continuous narrative self-understanding which constituted the bedrock of family communication and experience. As outlined earlier, not only was the family a group held together by strong bonds, but the strength and variety of the bonds need to be considered. They were an epistolary and self-narrating family. In January 1941, Robin wrote to his sister that “I admit that if I had been less harried to write letters when young I shouldn’t very likely be able to write books day in and day out, now; but should be no more use in the world than the present generation of ne’er do wells” (Robin to Barbara 1941).3

The work habits of a lifetime were set early by a family expectation of epistolary expression and sharing: and the habit grew stronger as they grew, engaged in their professions, married and moved away from each other: in all their doings they described their lives to each other in fascinating and intimate detail. Each member possessed a marked power of expression, the ability to note and narrate nuance and detail, quite out of the ordinary. This was especially the case for Robin, who well understood the nature of the activity. At one point Robin goes so far as to liken himself (and the tribe of writers to which he belongs) to a member of a hunting civilisation who expressed his thoughts in a ritual:

which he devises and performs about as blindly, and about as intelligently, as I write these sentences: not knowing why I write them or whether anyone will read them, not even sure that I am making my thought clear to myself or to anyone else, but knowing that there is in me something that craves expression and knowing that, if I am to express it at all, I must express it through that pen-driving ritual which is the custom of my tribe. (Collingwood, Enchantment 255)

But it is important to remember that not only was letter writing a compulsion, it was also a lot of fun: as Barbara wrote to Dora: “[i]t’s quite impossible to resist sitting down after breakfast to write to you when I’ve just got one of your letters. What rotters people are who say (I don’t believe them) that they hate writing letters! To me, it appears that one must hate one’s friends if one didn’t enjoy writing to them! Other kinds of

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2 For a development and elaboration of this point, see Connelly, “Collingwoodian reflections on the biographical self.”
3 For a flavour of the family correspondence, see Connelly, Johnson and Leach, 2014.
writing are certainly agony, but one would think a person must be illiterate if they can’t converse on paper with pleasure. Your letter is an oasis” (Wakefield 56).

In their locality, the family could best be described as “poor gentry.” Someone who lives by painting might be termed a bohemian, but someone who edits the transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society for twenty years probably cannot be described so simply. In many ways, they were more bourgeois than bohemian; they saved money and kept careful accounts both of money and of their activities—and yet they were curiously indifferent to it. Work was the most important thing and self-indulgence was frowned upon: Arthur Ransome notes that “at Lanehead work and not its material rewards was the only thing that mattered” (Autobiography 94). And, in a counter-bohemian move, their way of life was not in itself an artwork—on the contrary it was subservient to their work and did not draw attention to itself. There is a story—told by Ransome, himself the author of Bohemia in London (1907)—of Gershom standing on the lawn in a new suit of clothes getting his children to souse him with the garden hose, “to get the newness out,” to the great scandal of the local tailor (Notes). He also referred to Gershom’s complete indifference to money and to his delight on finding that the daughters were ensconced in a flat in Chelsea in 1904—when he was writing his book on bohemianism. He said of Gershom that “Whatever he wrote was first-rate of its kind [and] written with complete disregard of its possible market value. [...] once he had finished a book he was content to see it printed and was entirely indifferent to its subsequent fate. There was never a man who did so much unpaid work for other people” (Autobiography 92).

And writing of Gershom’s and Dorrie’s painting, he remarked that:

They kept their house going mainly by the sale of pictures at annual exhibitions. When the time for an exhibition drew near there would be a flurry to collect pictures to send to it, but during the rest of the year the future did not trouble them. He wrote and they both painted with complete disregard of public sales. (Autobiography 92)

All in all, a curious combination of artistic integrity and bohemian attitudes, with a serious devotion to work combined with a seeming indifference to material reward: as Brogan remarks, money “was only important in so far as it freed you to do your real work” (Life 42).

All the children were taught at home (after one or two experiments, both with schools and with governesses) except for Robin who was sent at the age of thirteen to Charney Hall preparatory school at Grange over Sands and subsequently to Rugby School. The family was always short of money, particularly after the death of Ruskin in 1900 and Robin’s school fees were paid by Emma Holt, a family friend. This left its mark: early lessons in frugality were never forgotten: until the end of his life Robin recycled all his paper, writing books, articles and lectures on the reverse of student essays or whatever was available. When very young he wrote to his father saying that “I have been drawing the Aurora. The Erratta [sic] paper is getting used up. Can you get some more?” (Robin to Gershom, 1896).

William Gershom Collingwood: Northern Man

Outside the Lake District, where he remains well known, the story of Gershom has typically been told from the perspective of his being Robin’s father or John Ruskin’s secretary and companion. This is fair in that he helped mould Robin and was himself moulded by his interactions with Ruskin, but fails to recognise that he was a considerable figure in his own right, a painter, an archaeologist and antiquarian, a scholar, and an intrepid traveller. Collingwood the Elder (The Skald, as he was sometimes known) is the better-known Collingwood in the Lake District; in Iceland, he is the only known Collingwood, with many of his landscapes exhibited in the National Museum in Reykjavik, altar paintings adorning churches, and postcards of his paintings available in hotels. In 1897 Gershom and his friend Jon Stefánssón undertook a pilgrimage to the saga steads of Iceland during which they travelled on ponies. Gershom painted and sketched his way around the country: pictorial evidence of this journey can easily be found in museums, visitors’ centres, exhibitions, and churches.

Gershom is known for this etymological, historical and archaeological work, his landscape paintings, his translations of sagas and his novels on themes directly derived from Scandinavian influence. The latter
include *Thorstein of the Mere* and *The Bondwoman*. Following the pioneering work of William Morris, he translated Icelandic sagas such as *Cormac the Skald* (with Jon Stefánsson) and was an active member of the Viking Club. He also wrote both *A Lake District History, The Lake Counties* (a guide to the Lake District) and edited the Proceedings of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society for many years, serving as its President for the last twelve years of his life, from 1920 to 1932.

Scholars such as Gershom were notable not only in showing the Norwegian influence on their locality but also in devoting the time and trouble to travel to Iceland and to translate Icelandic sagas. This was no casual hobby, but, as always, a serious piece of work. One fruit of these researches attracted some controversy because Gershom was no Thomas Bowdler. His novel, *The Bondwoman*, (1896) created a certain degree of scandal because of its explicit depiction of the sexual culture of a Viking settlement in the ninth century, including concubinage and slave trading, which Gershom addressed “in an exploratory way without condemnation or censure.” He noted, “many years later, that it was thought by some to be ‘improper,’ with one review saying that it should never have been written” (Townend 80).

### Local Bohemianism

John Fothergill, a friend of Oscar Wilde and later a notorious and eccentric innkeeper, visited Lanehead in 1893. In *An Innkeeper’s Diary*, he mentions Robin dining at the Spread Eagle at Thame and recalls that:

> I asked R.G.C. . . . to dinner as a return for [his] father’s giving me tea at Coniston thirty six years ago. [He] is one of those two or three selected super-beings, each of whom is called the cleverest man in Oxford. The last time I saw him was at this tea when Mr. Ruskin sent me over to see his father and his magnificent and enormous water-colours. Prof. C. must have been a pioneer in the Bohemian or Chelsea style, for he had a pink-checked tablecloth and they ate in the hall! Never having seen the like of it, I was rather shocked, but what put the lid on it was when a little maid to mind the children sat down along with us and worst of all the little Collingwood’s jam-covered face. When I talk to this learned man, I can see on his clean and incisive face jam even now. (Fothergill, *Diary* 258-9)

The family, it would seem on this account, were not only bohemians but pioneering bohemians. Obviously Fothergill is being playful, but nonetheless his comments hit home. The bohemianism of the Collingwoods was a by-product of their intense devotion to their work as a vocation: it was putting their calling at the forefront of their lives which led to their bohemianism: but it was a collective sense of vocation, not an individualistic sense of vocation against the needs and demands of the family. Each supported the other in their vocations and the outcome was a fierce collective independence of thought and action. But it should be noted that this independence was itself dependent, as it was for the typical middle classes of the time, on domestic service. Although not rich and subject, as we have seen, to the vagaries of artistic commercial fortune, the family kept a cook, a housemaid, the occasional ill-fated governess and employed a gardener. This was not about keeping up appearances or inability or unwillingness to engage in physical labour: it was a precondition of the leisure required for engaging in serious artistic and academic work. But it also showed the conventional side of their bohemian character.

### Becoming R. G. Collingwood

How did the young Robin become Robin George, Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy and authority on Roman Britain? As an Oxford don, he became a friend and colleague of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, lectured to T. S. Eliot on Aristotle’s *De Anima* (and later contributed to his journal *The Criterion*). He knew the members of the philosophical profession, and the members of the archaeological fraternity, both professional and amateur. He became renowned both as an authority on the inscriptions of Roman Britain and as a leading synthesizer of archaeological work on Hadrian’s Wall—his nickname was *Duce*. He travelled the country during his vacations, working on Roman inscriptions and conducting digs mostly along the line of Hadrian’s Wall and the Lake district. He was a highly valued delegate to the Clarendon Press, for which he read on many subjects in many languages. He translated books from Italian, played the
violin and piano and wrote music—he had considered becoming a professional musician. He was an artist, draughtsman, photographer and a keen sailor. He wrote many books, still in print today, on art, history, philosophy, religion, metaphysics, and the history and archaeology of Roman Britain. Seven years before his untimely death in 1943 Robin became Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy in Oxford. That is a sample of what he became: but how did he become it?

Figure 2. The Roboysredbreast, from Nothing Much (1897) (Courtesy of Abbot Hall, Kendal).

Figure 3. R.G. Collingwood on board Fleur de Lys in 1939 (Courtesy of Teresa Smith).
Robin started as his father’s pupil, incurring a debt he acknowledged when he dedicated his *Speculum Mentis* (1924) to “My first and best teacher of Art, Religion, Science, History and Philosophy.” At home his education was by example as much as by instruction: “lessons occupied only two or three hours each morning; otherwise [my father] left me to my own devices, sometimes helping me with what I chose to do, more often leaving me to work it out for myself” (*Autobiography* 1). He had lessons in history illustrated with relief maps made with papier-maché, taught himself the natural sciences from books and practical application, and “wrote incessantly.” Perhaps most importantly Robin learned profound lessons from observing his parents at work:

I learned to think of a picture not as a finished product exposed for the admiration of virtuosi, but as the visible record, lying about the house, of an attempt to solve a definite problem in painting, so far as the attempt has gone. I learned [...] that no “work of art” is ever finished, so that in that sense of the phrase there is no such thing as a “work of art” at all. Work ceases upon the picture or manuscript, not because it is finished, but because sending-in day is at hand, or because the printer is clamorous for copy, or because “I am sick of working at this thing” or “I can’t see what more I can do to it.” (*Autobiography* 2)

Amidst this activity, Robin’s archaeological and philosophical work began early. He was initiated into excavation at the age of three weeks, being taken to his father’s dig at the north tower of Hardknott Castle in a carpenter’s bag (Collingwood, *Autobiography* 80). Later he described his first exasperated intimation of his philosophical vocation:

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. Disgraceful to confess, here was a book whose words were English and whose sentences were grammatical, but whose meaning 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. (*Autobiography* 3-4)

The sense of a vocation revealed in these anecdotes is matched by an inadvertently revealing comment Robin made in 1929 at the height of his career as Roman archaeologist. In referring to his father’s digs at Hardknott he remarked that they:

were carried out at a time when *scientific archaeology was in its infancy*; this was one of the first Roman forts to be dug in this country; and the people who dug it were not able to interpret the history of the site by reference to the objects found in it, because the principles on which that interpretation depends had not yet been discovered. (*Roman Eskdale* 20, my italics)

This unconscious identification of himself with the growth and development of scientific archaeology tells of an intellectual confidence and assurance he could only have acquired from the training and support he received from his father’s tuition and his membership of the Collingwood corporate identity. This supreme self-confidence and assurance is again revealed in a comment made in 1932:

I’m not serious about Pembroke, and never have been. I know they dislike it, they want people to appear on the touchline and at college dinners in London, and I never do. But I try to give them something else instead. I try to make the name Pembroke College familiar to scholars and philosophers all over the world, and so instead of saying “I didn’t know there was a Pembroke College at Oxford” people say “Pembroke College? Oh yes, that’s where Collingwood is.” (this sounds dreadfully conceited, but I must make a clean breast of it) (Letter to I. Munro, 1932)

Of course, this intellectual confidence could outreach itself: for example, his friend A. E. J. Rawlinson commented to C. C. J. Webb that Collingwood “very full of pride of intellect.” Webb added, however, that “He is, of course, a man of most extraordinary gifts and accomplishments” (in Patrick 161). And his wife thought that sometimes his intellectual attitude was akin to “being God” (Cockin). Somehow, however,
this pride of intellect was largely justified and also transcended the desire for mere position and status. For example, when Robin became a fellow of Pembroke in 1912 he did not hold out for a larger college or one with more prestige; on the contrary, he had a sense of his vocation and its duties and accepted Pembroke as a suitable location to carry them through. He was not interested in advancement or prestige for its own sake, but solely in the value of his work; and his sense of intellectual duty was profound. On F. J. Haverfield’s death in 1919 he carried on his work on Roman Britain primarily from a sense of duty as having been the only person trained for the task by Haverfield himself. Roman Britain was not his first love, yet he spent decades studying its history and drawing and collating its inscriptions.

Conclusion

The Collingwood family had bred, then, in Robin, an unrivalled instantiation of itself and its virtues: prideful, but with ambition only for the work he thought worth doing; dedicated and hardworking, but not for the sake of material reward. If the child is the father of the man, and if the family is what makes the child, let us return for illumination to our opening theme, which was a family in the country, making their own life, their own work, and their own amusements. Let us consider some early letters and writings, which illustrate neatly how they lived their lives, lives in which they were also expected to be engaged in a serious job of work, even at play, which to be play had to be serious as play. Dora writes to her mother thus:

[yesterday morning we went to Mrs. Strickland’s and we saw a lot of little chickens. And Mrs. Strickland gave us some biscuits. And in the afternoon we played snap nearly all the time. This morning we played snap when the others came in. But I did some work before [my italics] I hope you will come to fetch us. (Dora to Dorrie 1893)

This second letter, also from Dora to her mother, shows the adventurousness of the children. In some ways like any other children, but with an added edge of precocity, inventiveness and intelligence:

Robin and I have been building an Eiffel tower surrounded by water with a bridge. Barbara and Robin are pretending to go in balloons. Robin says Mr Eiffel went in a balloon to the stars and there monkeys who threw cocoas nuts at him and it made such a noise And he said: “I am tired of this noise, it is enough to make me deaf.” So he came down again. Ursula is dressing up. (Dora to Dorrie 1894)

And five years later: “yesterday was very wet, so we had to stay indoors; typewriting. We all typewrote stories, and we had supper together with Pic and Ranny in the dining room” (Dora to Dorrie, 1899). The same year Dora wrote to Gershom, “Thank you very much for your French postcard […]. Robin is making slides for his microscope, of a bit of geranium leaf. He made a phonograph yesterday which wouldn't take down whistling or foreign languages” (Dora to Gershom, 1899). These examples could easily be multiplied. The point, however, is that they enable us to see the industry the children and family exhibited in writing and producing their family magazines, Nothing Much and, later, What Ho!, circulated to friends and members of the immediate and extended family. They show off their various talents and aptitudes, as do their parents; they also display an interesting self-knowledge and sense of their bohemian difference from the ordinary run. Consider this verse from 1898:

We don't go in for prizes, and none of us go to schools
We haven't got no principles, and we don't know nothing of rules
But we scribble a bit, and sketch a bit—‘the Rabs take after their Pa’
We're a dilettante family, we are, we are, we are.

We don't do it for money, and we don't do it for praise
We do it because we like it, and we're glad of the laugh we raise
Laugh with us then, or at us—we ain't particular—
We're a highly casual family, we are, we are, we are.
Daddy he says it’s practice, but he mostly pretends it’s rot,
I don’t think he can be proud of us—he generly says he’s not.
It’s Nothing Much, you understand, and it doesn’t go very far;
We’re an unsatisfactory family, we are, we are, we are.

So here’s our second volume, all our numbers nicely bound
Wishing a Merry Christmas and a happy New Year all round;
But to say we’ll do it another year would be saying too much by far;
We’re a distinctly unpromising family, we are, we are, we are.
(Nothing Much, 1898)"

Figure 4. Nothing Much (1897) (Courtesy of Abbot Hall, Kendal)

4 Authorship unacknowledged, but it is presented as a ‘Tail-Piece, which Daddy won’t sign’, which suggests that it is written by Gershom. Teresa Smith assumes that it is written by the children (192).
The breadth of Robin’s learning was clearly sustained by a foundation laid down in his early childhood. He shared with the rest of the family the Ruskinian powers of observation inculcated into them all and he engaged in experimental learning: on one occasion, it is reported, the young Robin blew himself across the room, and insouciantly remarked that “I consider that a most satisfactory explosion” (Altounyan, Chimes 43).

One can see quite easily the sort of family the Collingwood family was and what it became. Not only were the foundations of their later lives and habits laid down in their youths, but the habits inculcated then also themselves became the mediation for the later means of communication. We can catalogue the habits: exploration, frugality and thrift, a horror of time wasting, an unusually strong work ethic and industry, shared correspondence in which the whole family was the audience. This went with a detailed narrative: the letters were intimate and personal and yet businesslike. In many ways, the family was greater than the sum of its parts. It produced outstanding representatives incubated by the family support.

Of course one of the great unsaid things mentioned earlier—although not unsaid by the family itself, who were always very straightforward and frank—was the reliance of much of their activities on the provision of domestic service, a life in which tradesmen called, and the cook cooked, the gardeners dug and mowed the lawn. This is neatly illustrated by an illustration on the cover of What Ho! in which the family can be seen clearly engaging in artistic and literary pursuits outdoors, with some reading, some painting and, in the background, a gardener mowing the lawn. This is not to suggest that the family was impractical: on the contrary, they were intensely practical; rather, it is to suggest that they could choose what they had to be practical about, knowing that they could (and would be expected to) devolve many domestic
jobs to servants and maids. This did not mean that they disdained domestic and gardening jobs: it was a division of labour rather than a hierarchy of esteem. Stephen Fry once humorously defined a bohemian as someone who will never own a lawnmower (BBC); he was only half right because it is not ownership of a lawnmower that is vital, but how one owns it. The Collingwood family owned a lawnmower but can hardly be characterised as a typical middle-class family: in their work and their leisure and indeed all their activities they exhibited the opposite set of characteristics.

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