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**BENEDETTO CROCE**

**HISTORY: ITS THEORY  
AND PRACTICE**

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION BY  
DOUGLAS AINSLIE

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**R. G. COLLINGWOOD**

**THE IDEA OF HISTORY**

CHINA SOCIAL SCIENCES PUBLISHING HOUSE  
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# HISTORY: ITS THEORY AND PRACTICE

Reprinted from the English Edition by Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923

## THE IDEA OF HISTORY

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DOUGLAS AINSLIE**



## PREFACE

### TO THE FIRST ITALIAN EDITION

**A**LMOST all the writings which compose the present treatise were printed in the proceedings of Italian academies and in Italian reviews between 1912 and 1913. Since they formed part of a general scheme, their collection in book form presented no difficulties. This volume has appeared in German under the title *Zur Theorie und Geschichte der Historiographie* (Tübingen, Mohr, 1915).

On publishing in book form in Italian, I made a few slight alterations here and there and added three brief essays, placed as an appendix to the first part.

The description of the volume as forming the fourth of my *Philosophy of the Spirit* requires some explanation; for it does not really form a new systematic part of the philosophy, and is rather to be looked upon as a deepening and amplification of the theory of historiography, already outlined in certain chapters of the second part, namely the *Logic*. But the problem of historical comprehension is that toward which pointed all my investigations as to the modes of the spirit, their distinction and unity, their truly concrete life, which is development and history, and as to historical thought, which is the self-consciousness of this life. In a certain sense, therefore, this resumption of the treatment of historiography on the completion of the wide circle, this drawing forth of it from the limits of the first treatment



of the subject, was the most natural conclusion that could be given to the whole work. The character of 'conclusion' both explains and justifies the literary form of this last volume, which is more compressed and less didactic than that of the previous volumes.

B. C.

NAPLES : *May* 1916

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

THE author himself explains the precise connexion of the present work with the other three volumes of the *Philosophy of the Spirit*, to which it now forms the conclusion.

I had not contemplated translating this treatise, when engaged upon the others, for the reason that it was not in existence in its present form, and an external parallel to its position as the last, the late comer of the four masterpieces, is to be found in the fact of its publication by another firm than that which produced the preceding volumes. This diversity in unity will, I am convinced, by no means act as a bar to the dissemination of the original thought contained in its pages, none of which will, I trust, escape the diligent reader through the close meshes of the translation.

The volume is similar in format to the *Logic*, the *Philosophy of the Practical*, and the *Æsthetic*. The last is now out of print, but will reappear translated by me from the definitive fourth Italian edition, greatly exceeding in bulk the previous editions.

The present translation is from the second Italian edition, published in 1919. In this the author made some slight verbal corrections and a few small additions. I have, as always, followed the text with the closest respect.

D. A.

THE ATHENÆUM, LONDON  
November 1920



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# PART I

## THEORY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

### I

#### HISTORY AND CHRONICLE

##### I

‘**C**ONTEMPORARY history’ is wont to be called the history of a passage of time, looked upon as a most recent past, whether it be that of the last fifty years, a decade, a year, a month, a day, or indeed of the last hour or of the last minute. But if we think and speak rigorously, the term ‘contemporaneous’ can be applied only to that history which comes into being immediately after the act which is being accomplished, as consciousness of that act : it is, for instance, the history that I make of myself while I am in the act of composing these pages ; it is the thought of my composition, linked of necessity to the work of composition. ‘Contemporary’ would be well employed in this case, just because this, like every act of the spirit, is outside time (of the first and after) and is formed ‘at the same time’ as the act to which it is linked, and from which it is distinguished by means of a distinction not chronological but ideal. ‘Non-contemporary history,’ ‘past history,’ would, on the other hand, be that which finds itself in the presence of a history already formed, and which thus comes into being as a criticism of that history, whether it be thousands of years or hardly an hour old.

But if we look more closely, we perceive that this history already formed, which is called or which we would like to call 'non-contemporary' or 'past' history, if it really is history, that is to say, if it mean something and is not an empty echo, is also *contemporary*, and does not in any way differ from the other. As in the former case, the condition of its existence is that the deed of which the history is told must vibrate in the soul of the historian, or (to employ the expression of professed historians) that the documents are before the historian and that they are intelligible. That a narrative or a series of narratives of the fact is united and mingled with it merely means that the fact has proved more rich, not that it has lost its quality of being present : what were narratives or judgments before are now themselves facts, 'documents' to be interpreted and judged. History is never constructed from narratives, but always from documents, or from narratives that have been reduced to documents and treated as such. Thus if contemporary history springs straight from life, so too does that history which is called non-contemporary, for it is evident that only an interest in the life of the present can move one to investigate past fact. Therefore this past fact does not answer to a past interest, but to a present interest, in so far as it is unified with an interest of the present life. This has been said again and again in a hundred ways by historians in their empirical formulas, and constitutes the reason, if not the deeper content, of the success of the very trite saying that history is *magister vitæ*.

I have recalled these forms of historical technique in order to remove the aspect of paradox from the proposition that 'every true history is contemporary history.' But the justice of this proposition is easily confirmed and copiously and perspicuously exemplified in the

reality of historiographical work, provided always that we do not fall into the error of taking the works of the historians all together, or certain groups of them confusedly, and of applying them to an abstract man or to ourselves considered abstractly, and of then asking what present interest leads to the writing or reading of such histories: for instance, what is the present interest of the history which recounts the Peloponnesian or the Mithradatic War, of the events connected with Mexican art, or with Arabic philosophy. For me at the present moment they are without interest, and therefore for me at this present moment those histories are not histories, but at the most simply titles of historical works. They have been or will be histories in those that have thought or will think them, and in me too when I have thought or shall think them, re-laborating them according to my spiritual needs. If, on the other hand, we limit ourselves to real history, to the history that one really thinks in the act of thinking, it will be easily seen that this is perfectly identical with the most personal and contemporary of histories. When the development of the culture of my historical moment presents to me (it would be superfluous and perhaps also inexact to add to myself as an individual) the problem of Greek civilization or of Platonic philosophy or of a particular mode of Attic manners, that problem is related to my being in the same way as the history of a bit of business in which I am engaged, or of a love affair in which I am indulging, or of a danger that threatens me. I examine it with the same anxiety and am troubled with the same sense of unhappiness until I have succeeded in solving it. Hellenic life is on that occasion present in me; it solicits, it attracts and torments me, in the same way as the appearance of the adversary, of the loved



one, or of the beloved son for whom one trembles. Thus too it happens or has happened or will happen in the case of the Mithradatic War, of Mexican art, and of all the other things that I have mentioned above by way of example.

Having laid it down that contemporaneity is not the characteristic of a class of histories (as is held with good reason in empirical classifications), but an intrinsic characteristic of every history, we must conceive the relation of history to life as that of *unity*; certainly not in the sense of abstract identity, but of synthetic unity, which implies both the distinction and the unity of the terms. Thus to talk of a history of which the documents are lacking would appear to be as extravagant as to talk of the existence of something as to which it is also affirmed that it is without one of the essential conditions of existence. A history without relation to the document would be an unverifiable history; and since the reality of history lies in this verifiability, and the narrative in which it is given concrete form is historical narrative only in so far as it is a *critical exposition* of the document (intuition and reflection, consciousness and auto-consciousness, etc.), a history of that sort, being without meaning and without truth, would be inexistent as history. How could a history of painting be composed by one who had not seen and enjoyed the works of which he proposed to describe the genesis critically? And how far could anyone understand the works in question who was without the artistic experience assumed by the narrator? How could there be a history of philosophy without the works or at least fragments of the works of the philosophers? How could there be a history of a sentiment or of a custom, for example that of Christian humility or of knightly chivalry, without the