

EDITORIAL

THINKING ABOUT THE ARTICLES in this issue of *BC Studies* has led us to an improbable juxtaposition: the lyrics of Houston hip-hop artist hasHBrown – “Respect is earned, not given, history is made first then rewritten” – and the now rather more arcane ideas of Oxford scholar R.G. Collingwood regarding the nature of historical thinking outlined in a 1935 essay and subsequently included in his *The Idea of History* (1946).

That history is made is a commonplace – in the sense that particular events are considered milestones (“Chris Hadfield made history by commanding the space station”) or in acknowledgment that even complex events (such as British Columbia’s entering Confederation in 1871, the First World War, or the Great Depression) were the contingent outcomes of human actions. Karl Marx elaborated on this notion and recognized some of the limits to human endeavour when he wrote: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please.”

But “rewritten?” For those who subscribe to what Collingwood called the “common-sense theory” of history – the idea that “the essential things in history are memory and authority,” that “historical truth” is “accessible to the historian ... only because it exists ready made in the ... statements of his authorities,” and that what these authorities tell the historian “is the truth, the whole accessible truth, and nothing but the truth” – rewriting history begins to suggest (as hasHBrown likely intended) distortion and duplicity.

Collingwood offers another view. His purpose in writing “The Historical Imagination” was to refute the common-sense theory of history and to recognize the historian as an autonomous authority in his/her own right, as someone whose craft rests upon the exercise of judgment about the significance, reliability, and importance of the fragments that constitute the historical record. For Collingwood, the writing of history is an imaginative act, but the historian (unlike the novelist) needs to ensure that her/his story is consistent with the world as it is known and that its claims “can be justified by an appeal to the evidence.” On this view, historical thinking (or writing) is an attempt to flesh out the details of the past, but it is always undertaken from a particular standpoint: “Any imaginative reconstruction of the past aims at reconstructing the past of ... the present in which the act of imagination is going on.”

From this it follows that “no achievement is final” – that every work of history is open to reimagination and rewriting. As Collingwood

has it: “The evidence available for solving any given problem changes with every change of historical method and with every variation in the competence of historians. The principles by which this evidence is interpreted change too ... Because of these changes, ... every new generation must rewrite history in its own way.”

All of this brings us to the five articles that follow.

Hugh Johnston has been the leading scholar of Sikh and South Asian immigration to British Columbia since the publication of his path-breaking *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru* in 1979. To some it might seem surprising that Johnston can add to this story a third of a century on. But, as Collingwood puts it: “Since historical thought is a river into which none can step twice – even a single historian, working at a single subject for a certain length of time, finds when he tries to reopen an old question that the question has changed.” Writing on the eve of the centenary of the *Komagata Maru*’s voyage, Johnston reflects present-day sensibilities and extends our appreciation of the complexities of this much examined incident in pointing out that the authorities feared the politics of the *Komagata Maru* passengers. Specifically, they wondered if those on the ship were also members of the revolutionary Ghadr Party, formed in 1913 in California with the object of freeing India from British rule.

Three-quarters of a century after Collingwood wrote that “every new historian, not content with giving new answers to old questions, must revise the questions themselves,” Isabel Wallace, a doctoral student at Queen’s University, substantiates his observation by providing a fresh perspective on the *Komagata Maru* incident. She does this by examining the medical rather than the political objections of the Canadian authorities. These days, academic historians, especially graduate students, typically grapple with both theory and evidence. Collingwood was not much concerned with theory in its current sense of analytical and conceptual frameworks drawn from an international literature, but he understood that the interpretation of evidence is a task to which the historian must bring everything s/he knows “and not knowledge only, but mental habits and possessions of every kind.” Wallace does this deftly by bringing the insights of those who have theorized racism, biopolitics, Orientalism, and the law “at its bottom fringes” to bear on a newly discovered set of records (1) to show how Canadian immigration officials responded to the discovery, in 1910, of hookworm among South Asian arrivals at a quarantine station in California and (2) to throw new

light on the opposition that met the *Komagata Maru* when it arrived in Canadian waters.

From the work conducted for her PhD dissertation on racial identity and rights activism in British Columbia between the wars, completed at Dalhousie University in 2011, Lilynn Wan resurrects something of the story of Aboriginal rights pioneer Alice Ravenhill (1859-1954). Like Wallace, Wan cuts a new facet on the ever more complex surface of BC history by coupling another overlooked archival source with wider analytical literature dealing with questions of authenticity, racial essentialism, human rights, and social justice. Or, as Collingwood observed all those years ago: “The enlargement of historical knowledge comes about mainly through finding how to use as evidence this or that kind of perceived fact which historians have hitherto thought useless to them.”

Never in the annals of *BC Studies* have we carried articles by siblings, but the McCandless brothers, Robert (Rob) and Richard (Rick) – you can imagine the potential for confusion at our editorial office – submitted articles based on their experiences as British Columbians in private industry and public service, respectively, and these came together serendipitously in the production schedule. Considering these articles it is clear that both brothers played roles in the “making” of BC history and have now moved on to write historically about these “moments.” Collingwood, concerned to free the historian from the tyranny of sources-as-authorities, paid no direct attention to the possibility of such a coalescence of roles, but he was well aware of the possibilities that might flow from such developments. For Collingwood, the “whole perceptible world” is “potentially and in principle evidence to the historian.” But it becomes such only when s/he can use it, and that requires “the right kind of historical knowledge.” In this view, “evidence is evidence only when some one contemplates it historically. Otherwise it is merely perceived fact, historically dumb.” Historical knowledge is essential to the interpretation of historical evidence, and the more “historical knowledge we have, the more we can learn from any given piece of evidence.”

Both McCandless brothers are published historians. Robert is the author of *Yukon Wildlife: A Social History* (1985), and Richard contributed an article to this journal in 1974 entitled “Vancouver’s ‘Red Menace’ of 1935: The Waterfront Situation.” Here, the former considers Shell Canada Limited’s seismic program, which involved exploration and drilling for hydrocarbons off Canada’s west coast between 1961 and 1972, a program that culminated in the moratorium on oil exploration

in 1972. Calling upon his own field experience, photographs of the expedition vessels and personnel, archival and newspaper accounts, and contemporary scientific publications, he provides a fascinating and multi-stranded account of an important episode in the history of resource exploration in British Columbia.

Richard McCandless, who was assistant deputy minister in the office of the BC attorney general in the 1990s, also casts his mind back over several decades to argue that, although the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC) was established to provide public auto insurance on a break-even basis in 1972 by an NDP government committed to an activist role for the state, it was converted into a profit-driven commercial operation by the Liberal government in 2001. As a so-called “commercial Crown,” ICBC has served, in effect, as a cash cow providing revenue for a government that makes much of its ideological commitment to limiting the role of the state.

Together, the papers in this issue demonstrate a variety of historical approaches and methods, from mature scholarly reflection through conventional professional historical analysis and focused personal memoir to policy analysis. They remind us that the writing of history is ultimately a personal activity reflecting the education, experience, and interests of the historian; that views of the past are forever open to challenge, refinement, and reinterpretation; that – as Collingwood has it – there is truth “to be had, not by swallowing what our authorities tell us, but by criticizing it; and ... [that] the supposedly fixed points between which the historical imagination spins its web are not given to us ready made, [but] must be achieved by critical thinking.”

Richard Mackie and Graeme Wynn