What Do We Do, About the Past?

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Part 1: Knowing, about the past

1.1 What *is* it that we do, exactly, when we seek to know the past? This has been on my mind for a while, set off by a July 2015 meeting involving the four of us who are writing – we hope now finishing – *The Archive Project*. We've not written about this question in the book, but it is implicit for anyone who does historical research of any kind, and for this reason it has become a preoccupation.

1.2 Of course I don't mean literally 'what do we do'. I realise what the literal aspects are quite well, and indeed my chapter in *The Archive Project* discusses some methodological details of this. It is instead what this literal activity is grounded in, the sub-strata of thinking underpinning the literal activities, the murmurings in the mind's bedrock that I'm interested in here.

1.3 The assumptions of old style 'classic' historical research are now largely viewed as untenable. They are, firstly, a correspondence theory that presumes that things really happened and that history (read, historiography) is about this; secondly, the view that actions mirror intentions and so causality is what historical research is about; and thirdly, the idea that history proceeds or unfolds in a coherent chronology (as implied in such terms as modernity and globalisation, signifying a process that occurs everywhere albeit unevenly).

1.4 The assumptions that ground my own forays into historical research depart from these, except for elements of the first. How I understand and engage in the practice of such inquiries includes the following:

> 1.4.i There is / was, a past. It was / is real. It has made us what and who we are. Aspects of it live on in the present, or else those of us living now could not know the past at all. But it cannot be 'recovered', and nor is it possible to fully substantiate any correspondence between the things than once happened, and how we think of these now.

1.4.ii The past is over and gone. What remains are small often random fragmentary traces, the flotsam and jetsam of past lives and events and which only rarely relate either to intentions or to causality.

1.4.iii These traces have an existence now and are made sense of in the present, using the framework of understandings of our time, not those of the past. They are the basis of what I term the 'now/past' (discussed in relation to writing, in my chapter of *The Archive Project*). Historiography, writing about the past, is a 'now/past' activity oriented to the questions and concerns of now. We cannot know what relationship it 'really' has to what really happened back then, there is no way to access this here now.

1.4.iv Using the traces that remain to 'know the past' necessitates asking useful and hopefully insightful questions about some particular aspect, and these in turn are a product of the framework of present-time understandings we bring to formulating such questions. If there are no questions to direct our inquiry, then what results will be what the philosopher-historian RG Collingwood refers to as 'scissors and paste' accounts, those that work within the remit of others, 'the authorities'.

1.4.v But, moving beyond a 'scissors and paste' approach, more is possible. We can ask sensible questions built on the shoulders of those who came before us, and struggle to know 'the past' (and also 'the present' and 'the future' too) through using evidence and inferential logic. Here the researcher works with the traces, the small remaining scraps of this and that, and does so in the context of a framework of ideas which provides a background of 'knowledge-for-all-intents-and-purposes-and-for-now', and then pushes this a little further, to infer beyond what can be readily substantiated, into what can be inferred as plausibly likely.

1.4.vi Imagination is consequently necessarily part of inferential logic – or perhaps rather logic, the logic of in context inferences, must be part of historical imagination. Things need to work, to hang together plausibly, but also the risks and pleasures of testing the limits need to be taken. An aspect of this is trying it out in the mind and/or on paper, something Collingwood referred to (misleadingly) as 're-enactment'. Does it fly, albeit schematically?

1.5 There is more to consider about this, particularly regarding the combined ontological/epistemological character of the traces that remain, the idea and practice of 're-enactment', and how understanding and the historical imagination are grounded. These matters are pursued in Part II on the 'now/past' and Part III on the trace.

Part 2: The 'now/past'

2.1 The past is gone. Its traces, however, are in manifold ways embedded in the present, or we could not know it at all. Certainly we cannot 'know' the past in any direct sense. But, we *can* know about it indirectly and by modest inference. The 'trace' and the 'now/past' provide the keys to this. The following discussion is not intended as methodology, as 'what to do' pointers in the usual sense, but as a continuation of what was started in Part I, a consideration of what underlies methodology and theory. That is, it concerns the bedrock of working assumptions made in doing what we do when we set out to 'know the past' or some small aspect of it. It begins with the trace – no trace, no past.

2.2 The idea of the trace in the sense of the remains or residue of the past (a source of some kind, concerning an event, a process, some persons…) has a long history (pun intended) and cannot be attributed to any particular source. However, the term appears in the philosopher-historian RG Collinwood's work in the 1930s, in historian Marc Bloch's in the early 1940s, and in the philosopher Jacques Derrida's in the later 1960s. It involves the survival of the faint traces of what was once, which are precisely remains and traces, not the past itself, and they have whatever resonance they do in the present and its attempts to make sense of them. So, as the past has gone, and resurrectionalism remains impossible no matter how realist our aspirations, what precisely is the status of the trace and whatever the activity is that we do with it now?

2.3 The 'now/past' is a frame of mind (or perhaps is better seen as the product of this). It is a way of thinking about the past that focuses on the traces remaining. It mindfully does so in connection with the questions and intellectual concerns of 'now', but in a way that situates them in relation to what is known about the context and concerns of 'then', and then infers meaning and interpretation from this.

2.4 This involves following (tracing out) and in a sense inhabiting the traces remaining. These traces were made in the past, but their imprint remains and can be interrogated and known in the present. Doing this brings the past and its traces, and now and its questions and concerns, together - this is what constitutes the 'now/past' and the irony here is that it is of course a necessarily present-time phenomenon.

2.5 But what *is* it, less abstractly, that is actually done with the trace? What are the activities that go on in and about the 'now/past'? Five activities are the basis:

- having some questions to address;
- endeavouring to understand the trace in its own terms in relation to such questions;
- relating the trace in question to other traces and also to the context of which they were a part;
- working inferentially and drawing defensible conclusions from this;
- recognising that others have been this way before us and taking their work into account.

2.6 Note the order here – 'scissors and paste' accounts (see Part I) are in the footsteps of 'the authorities', the fifth and final point above. But if followed too dutifully, this would tether the researcher to what is already known or conjectured, so there is a fine line to be walked. Thinking outside the box requires knowing about the work of others, but it also requires a lot more as well, including uncoupling our thought processes from overly-following presentist beliefs and concerns and assumed knowledge.

2.7 Some practical examples are discussed by Collingwood in thinking about the trace and what is done with it. These include the puzzlingly ugly Albert Memorial in London, the mysteriously fatal choice of Horatio Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar to wear every medal he had although French snipers were on the look-out, and the 'for real' question arising from his role as a working archeologist of Romano-Britain, of what Hadrian's Wall was for.

2.8 Regarding the latter, and in the teeth of 'the authorities', the conclusion that Collingwood came to (a conclusion which has itself become 'the authority') was that the Wall was a sentry walk-way used to regulate movements back and forth of people and goods. Only in extremis was it an offence/defence mechanism, through being connected with armed fortresses on the western and eastern coasts with resident forces on the look-out for raiders and invaders.

2.9 In bald summary, Collingwood's approach consists of an understanding of 'history', the historical imagination, that is the combined process and product of being used in relation to questions (and answers), evidence (aka traces), 're-enactment', and inferential argument. But what do these things entail? And how do they connect with the 'now/past'?

2.10 The historical imagination is a companion term to the sociological imagination (as influentially written about by C. Wright Mills), with both cohering to inform historical sociology. Regarding the past, this does not involve a here and now kind of investigation, but belongs to a different order or ontology. This is because no one has direct unmediated access to the past – there are only the traces that remain. If memory and testimony stretch back to once-direct knowledge, this is interesting; but also it provides partial views, that are now indirect, and which involve different kinds of concerns and questions than those that propel a research inquiry. In particular, there are likely to be truth-claims motivating the former, but inferential understanding motivating the latter.

2.11 In an important way, then, the historical/sociological imagination is 'autonomous'. That is, it has its own specific concerns and in which 'truth' is often not at issue or particularly relevant given the questions being asked. What underpins these concerns is a frame of mind in which the traces are selected, interpolated and if necessary criticized in relation to the questions being explored. This involves inference. Inference is at basis imagining what is likely given the evidence and its particularities while inferring a bit beyond this; and it is a structural matter (what is likely, plausible, consistent with the context), rather than imagination in the fanciful sense of making it up.

2.12 At the same time, working inferentially from the evidence requires that this should be appropriate and sufficient for the use being made of it. To 'work', inference needs a strong grounding, and involves both appropriateness and sufficiency relative to the questions asked and answers sought as well as the evidence used.

2.13 The questions that propel a piece of research come into frame here, directing both practical inquiry and the thought process about it. Obviously, these can and often do change *in situ* – additional pieces added to the puzzle can change, sometimes profoundly so, the indexical processes of sense-making involved (Collingwood's example uses the analogy of detective work, around the fictitious death by stabbing of 'John Doe' and an ensuing police investigation). A good argument, then, is built and requires refining the research question/s at each stage – and this also involves questioning the evidence and the inferences being made from it too. There is no short cut to deciding whether the evidence, the trace, appropriately and sufficiently addresses the questions being asked. This all depends, on the questions, the kind of argument, the kind of inferences and so on.

2.14 Building a defensible argument requires asking and testing questions using suitable evidence or traces, not amassing a large amount of data and hoping something will emerge from it. Thinking and devising a shape, purpose and direction to a project needs to come before collecting evidence in any serious way, then. Collingwood's idea of 're-

enactment' helpfully returns at this point, as it draws together a number of the things discussed so far. However, the everyday meaning of the word can be rather intrusive and so it has screamers – 're-enactment' - around to problematise it (nb. this is rather like Norbert Elias's use of 'civilising', which needs the same treatment). So:

2.15 The past not a fact, it is 'imagined' by means of the evidence/inference/argument processes just spelled out. This raises the question of what it could have been like that has left such remains, traces, call them what you will. And this means what it was like and what it meant to the people who lived such things. At basis, this is not just who produced and consumed the remaining traces in their original forms, but how they were thought about at the time.

2.16 This involves thinking about such traces as they were thought about at the time by those who thought them then; but doing so in the present in reference the questions and issues of the scholarly now. This may sound like recourse to magic or similar, but what this comprises is more straight-forward than the awkward term 're-enactment' implies.

2.17 Firstly, all people routinely bridge the solipsist state of not being about to feel another person's feelings, through empathy, analogy and human fellow-feeling. There seems no good reason not to accept that this can be done regarding the feelings of people in the past. Indeed, we do this routinely regarding things in our own past and that of people close to us.

2.18 Secondly, in the present, we 'know' in a processual way. Knowing is incremental, and we use present-time traces as indexical of a bigger picture and make inferences about this. The I am making proposal is that this same process occurs regarding knowing things in the past.

2.19 And thirdly, there is a figure/ground effect here, of relating the specifics to knowledge of the context and back again, in an unfolding iterative way of working things out. This is not temporally limited, but can and should span different times; and it is how inferential logic works.

2.20 In relating this to the 'now/past', briefly returning to the Nelson medals example is useful. Now, it seems odd that someone would behave as Nelson did. But there is a plausible way in which by inference then 'then' in which it occurred becomes intelligible. Knowing about notions of manliness, leadership, chivalry and the like back then, also some of the particularities of Nelson's character and conduct, and how both of these

cohered in military contexts including battle, opens up a mental space for comprehending. It does so by putting oneself in, as they say, the head-space of someone who thought in that way. I wouldn't do it, stick the medals in a locked drawer! But I can gain a sense of why he did what he did and its consequences, and this tells me both about Nelson's conduct and death, and about battle, war, manliness and so on, all of which fed into his decision.

2.21 The 'now/past' is at work here. I remain me now; I'm interested in why someone then should do something that would attract snipers to shoot at them; I familiarise myself with as many remaining traces of what happened as possible; ditto the wider context; and I think through what is likely to have been going on in relation to that particular event, time and place.

2.22 But remember: this is not a prescription for methodology! This isn't how I would do research on the gender order of the early nineteenth century naval profession. It is rather a device for thinking about the kinds of thoughts, assumptions and intellectual processes that underlie or precede methodology. Also: keep in mind that, soliloquies of philosophers to the contrary, 'the trace' is never generic, always particular, always its fragmented, partial, shipwrecked, odd, self lying in the backwaters of archival rock-pools. And look – there's a bottle, and it has a letter in it! The letter is one of the traces of the past, has genre distinctiveness, and also its own profound specificity. Part 3 traces the trace.

Part 3: The trace

3.1 The *trace*, what remains, an afterlife of a kind. This is not the *residue* of the past, for using the word 'residue' makes it sound like it is an actual part of the past, a rendered down part of 'then'. And nor is it a *clue*, the term Jobs and Ludtke (2010) use, for the word 'clue' situates it too much in terms of 'now' and its investigations. 'Trace' is in fact exactly right, for this signifies, not the thing itself, 'then and the past' in a residue form; and nor does it signify 'now and its pursuits' in following clues. It has aspects of both of these - and also of something not quite either. The trace is in itself the 'now/past': there is a trace of what once was back then, although this is but faintly to be seen and grasped now.

3.2 As already noted, the term 'trace' influentially appears in the work of Collingwood, Bloch and Derrida, albeit used somewhat differently by each. The latter comments that 'The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for

effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace…' (Derrida 1973, p.156). The core aspect is that the trace marks the absence of presence and thus can relate to the future as well as the past, indeed to the present too. All well and good, with the possibilities for tracing the trace more upfront in Collingwood's (1938, 1946) and Bloch's (1954) discussions, but also strongly present elsewhere in the Derridarian corpus too (eg. Derrida 1974).

3.3 But please to note that the trace therein is a general category – it is 'the trace'. Consequently considerable irony exists here: trace and general are in fact contradictory terms, almost antonyms, for a trace is always utterly, utterly particular. Thinking in concrete terms about some archival traces confirms the specificities involved: the *Dead Sea* scrolls, *Cromwell's* death-mask, the gatepost socket of a Romano-British *Vindolanda* bathhouse, *Emily Wilding Davison's* return railway ticket to *Epsom*, the *Memphis* balcony where *Martin Luther King* was shot, *Sarah Bartmaan's* grave in the *Eastern Cape,* the mountain of papers left by *Winston Churchill* and even more by a succession of US Presidents including *Johnson, Nixon, Carter, the Bushes*… Scrolls, masks, gateposts, train-tickets, balconies, graves, political papers, forts and cities can of course be traces in and of themselves; but it is the associations that give them most meaning and resonance. By themselves they are bereft of the what and who and where and when that gave them such resonance. This is not, despite my examples, just about the momentous, famous or powerful, but the conjunctions of people and circumstance and time, and it includes of course the butcher, the baker and the woman who made candle-sticks and the rich fabric of their everyday lives.

3.4 Traces are often mysterious – why did Mary Queen of Scot's last letter castigate her son, is Kaiser Wilhelm's abdication letter as ambiguous in German as in English, why are Nella Last's diaries so different from other things she wrote for Mass Observation, did Cecil Rhodes really mastermind the Jameson Raid…? However, such questions usually arise because the traces have become bereft of the contexts and the plenitude of the contents of these that gave them meaning; that is, their specificity, their particularity. There is no 'the' trace, then, but rather very particular traces which postshadow all the long-gone very specific circumstances of their origination and circulation.

3.5 One means of not so much repairing as mindfully considering context is to ask some simple questions of any trace: who produced it, what was the context, how was it used or otherwise deployed and by whom, what meanings did it have, and how come it and not its fellows persisted over time until now? An interesting example, to follow through on earlier references to Collingwood, involves returning again to Hadrian's Wall, that Roman Wall in northern England stretching from the Bowness-on-Solway peninsula in the west to Wallsend on the Tyne in the east.

3.6 It was generally just taken for granted that the Wall was for conflict and offensive and defensive purposes until Collingwood in his archeological capacity asked a research question: what was it for? and in doing so suggested that concentrations of soldiery were actually at its two ends. As subsequent digs confirmed, this was so, and its purposes were actually routine ones of regulating movements of people and goods back and forth – no tax evasion for the Brits!

3.7 Understanding this trace, and other traces too, requires contextual questioning and building up iteratively and inferentially a considered view of the relationship of a remaining particularity – the trace - to its originating generality – the context. And it is this that underpins and structures what Collinwood calls 're-enactment', that thinking out in the mind of what some thing or action meant in its time and place.

3.8 But what about letters as traces? Goodness knows I've written much and often about the idea of 'letterness' as a general set of characteristics and thus by implication have had recourse to making generalisations about 'the' letter as a trace of the past. At the same time, the major part of their draw for me is their particularity: the specifics of their writers, their different addressees, places and times of writing, varied contents, their particular times and places of re/reading. Food for thought here, then. And beyond this, there are ways in which epistolary traces seem to have different qualities from other kinds of traces, something which is important and also needs thinking out.

3.9 The essence of epistolarity is that it is a communicative act, in a representational form, sent by one to another at remove in time and/or space, which is dialogical, involving turn-taking, and also responsive and emergent in character. What I have written about as 'letterness' does not in fact require 'the letter' in the form we presently recognise and know it (Stanley 2011). What counts and matters is epistolary intent and the epistolary pact (Stanley 2012; Stanley et al 2011). The particularities of letters in all their variant forms are deeply fascinating; at the same time, the genre of 'the letter' as presently constituted deserves thought and theoretical interrogation, including also in relation to its past and possible future incarnations (Stanley 2015). An engagement with 'the letter' as a genre, then, can coexist without contradiction with revelling in the particularities. However, where does this leave thinking about actual letters as traces of the past? Do they actually differ from other kinds trace, and if so in what respects?

3.10 Two key points to start with. One, a letter as a trace should be as subject as any other kind of trace to being related to context, to having its meaning inferred, and to being considered in relation to 're-enactment'. Two, if there is a difference between

epistolary traces and other kinds it will be additional to this, and most likely lie in the specifics of epistolarity as a communicative act in a representational form sent by one person to another at remove in time and/or space, and which is dialogical, involving turn-taking, and responsive and emergent in character. Some comparisons will help here, by throwing into relief the particularities and the generalities as well as the contrasts.

3.11 A return train-ticket, say the London/Epsom ticket that Emily Wilding Davison purchased on the day in June 1913 when she died pinning a flag on the King's horse at the Epsom horse-race, 'speaks'. In this particular case, this is because it communicates something about intentionality and probably frame of mind (Stanley 1988). It is certainly an historical trace, and a significant one. But this was not Davison's purpose when purchasing it; it lacks dialogical qualities and does not imply response; and anything that might have been 'emergent' if the flag-pinning had been successful and Davison returned to London would have been embedded in other aspects of her life. If this had happened, the ticket would have become, if not meaningless then still not very meaningful. Differet from a letter, and tricky.

3.12 Someone's will, perhaps that of the Victorian gent AJ Munby who later married housemaid Hannah Cullwick following their decades long relationship, has strong communicative intent. In this instance, the intent expressed was that Cullwick's and Munby's diaries were to be left to the Wren Library at Trinity College in Cambridge but embargoed for fifty years (Stanley 1984). But Munby's will like other wills was a statement, not a dialogue, and the deaths that lead to the statement in wills being read by their addressees preclude response. Different from a letter, address, but no answering back.

3.13 A letter which is ostensibly genuine but the addressee does not know its fictive qualities, like one that Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume wrote to a friend in 1763, on the surface has all the accoutrements of epistolary intent, although beneath it, it lacks a key part of the emergent ethics that also characterises epistolarity. That is, it was written in bad faith. In this example, it was done for 'good' reasons, for the friend concerned to show to his anxious wife to assure her that her sons away at boarding school were happy and well. Certainly Hume's letter is a trace, and it was also communicative and dialogical. However, the dialogism did not inhere in this particular letter, but instead in others he wrote to his friend and which the woman did not know about; and its communicative content is an untruth if not an absolute lie. It is in fact an ostensible letter, rather than an actual letter, and its particular features are fascinating and push it to the outer boundaries of being a letter (Stanley 2006). A letter, but just ostensibly.

3.14 While they are all 'historical' (the 1910s, the 1900s, the 1760s), it is not this that places a question mark over the examples just discussed, as another much older example conveys. This concerns the writing-tablets written between 80 and 122 CE and found at the Vindolanda archaeological site on Hadrian's Wall (Stanley 2015). These are small folded slithers of wood of around the size of a [folded] playing card. Many hundreds have been found, the detritus of a military encampment preserved by peat and moss. Their existence and the range of their writers and addressees signifies the near universal literacy of the Imperial forces, both Roman legionaries and also the auxiliary legions recruited from elsewhere in the empire. Bits of wood; cursive script; wonky Latin; unfamiliar modes of address; sparse or absent dating; formalised modes of expression; scribes responsible for the actual writing. The list of the unfamiliar and strange goes on – and yet. And yet, the fundaments are all there, upfront, present and correct. They are so many examples of communicative acts in a representational form sent from one person to another who was removed in time and/or space, and they are dialogical, involved turn-taking, and responsive and emergent in character.

3.15 Where this discussion of the epistolary trace has arrived, at least for now, is: 'Actual letters' have letterness or epistolary intent and their key characteristics provide helpful means of distinguishing epistolary traces from other kinds of traces and for exploring their distinctive qualities and purposes. In addition, and like all other traces, it is the particularities involved that then need to be iteratively and inferentially related to the wider context in which they circulated, and through this their meaning and resonance teased out.

Part 4: What, then, do we do, about the past?

4. 1 What, then, *do* we do, about the past? We think, about all of the above, and especially the traces that remain and their continuing resonance in the 'now/past'. We try these ideas out, with different kinds of traces. Then return to them and perhaps rework them.

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