History of European Ideas 37 (2011) 483–505

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

History of European Ideas

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/histeuroideas

Hugh Trevor-Roper and the history of ideas☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 10 March 2011

Keywords:
Trevor-Roper
Hitler
Cold War
Tawney
Erasmus
Gibbon
Burckhardt
Historiography
History of ideas
Enlightenment
Humanism
Liberalism
Marxism

ABSTRACT

A wave of recent publication connected to Hugh Trevor-Roper offers cause to take stock of his life and legacy. He is an awkward subject because his output was so protean, but a compelling one because of his significance for the resurgence of the history of ideas in Britain after 1945. The article argues that the formative period in Trevor-Roper's life was 1945–57, a period curiously neglected hitherto. It was at this time that he pioneered a history of ideas conceived above all as the study of European liberal and humanist tradition. Analysis of the relative importance of contemporary and early modern history in his *oeuvre* finds that, while the experience of Hitler and the Cold War was formative, it was not decisive.Trevor-Roper was at heart an early modernist who did not abjure specialization.However, he insisted that specialized study must be accompanied by "philosophical" reflection on the workings of a constant human nature present throughout history, a type of reflection best pursued by reading classical historians such as Gibbon and Burckhardt.Yet this imperative in turn fostered purely historical research into the history of historical writing – another branch of the history of ideas.

In the last few years a series of volumes have expanded and codified the literary legacy of Hugh Trevor-Roper;[1] at the same time a series of important academic statements about his career have appeared;[2] and this process has reached a temporary conclusion with the publication of Adam Sisman's biography. Here then is a natural occasion for reflection. Trevor-Roper knew that Sisman was a possible biographer before his death and looked benignly on the idea (xvi).[3] It is easy to see why. Sisman is not an academic but a freelance writer, and his life of *A.J.P. Taylor* (1994) showed that he had considerable sympathy with the concerns of historians of this generation because of their desire to span the 'lay' and the 'professional' worlds: they did not see themselves as confined to a narrowly academic or university sphere, but sought to address a homogeneous educated class which was also the governing class. Besides stylistic ease and a preference for making its points via illustration rather than explicit argument, the great virtue of this book is to remind us that the academic or intellectual biography of Trevor-Roper is only a part of the man; and if the intellectual life is to us the greatest part, still it must be set within the context of the whole. Sisman may not give us quite as much of the inner life as we would like, yet he arrays a good deal of the material for it, having feasted on the extraordinary profusion of correspondence that his subject cultivated with such enthusiasm over some five decades – a knowing yet unforced homage to the Republic of Letters of early modern Europe.[4] There is only one really justified complaint: the want of a bibliography of works cited in the text, apart from a derisory list of Books (541).[5] For the author of so rich and plural an *oeuvre* as Trevor-Roper's such a listing is nothing less than the documentary skeleton of his life. But still Sisman's overall concern is not that of the historian of ideas. There may even be too much of a plethora in his more

☆ My thanks to Blair Worden and John Robertson on whose shoulders I stand (I hope not too heavily); to Blair Worden as Hugh Trevor-Roper's Literary Executor for permission to consult the Dacre Papers; and to Judith Curthoys the Archivist at Christ Church, Oxford, for her assistance. References to the Dacre Papers appear as 'Soc. Dacre'.

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[1] Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Europe's Physician. The Various Life of Sir Theodore de Mayerne* (Yale UP, 2006); *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (Yale UP, 2008); *Letters from Oxford. Hugh Trevor-Roper to Bernard Berenson*, ed. R. Davenport-Hines (Weidenfeld, 2006) [hereafter *Letters from Oxford*]; *History and the Enlightenment*, ed. J. Robertson (Yale UP, 2010).

[2] B. Worden, 'Hugh Redwald Trevor-Roper', *Proceedings of the British Academy* [hereafter *PBA*] 150 (2007) 247–84; J. Robertson, 'Hugh Trevor-Roper, Intellectual History and the "Religious Origins of the Enlightenment"', *English Historical Review* [hereafter *EHR*] 124 (2009), 1389–1421; C. Kidd, 'Lord Dacre and the Politics of the Scottish Enlightenment', *Scottish Historical Review* 84 (2005), 202–22.

[3] References in this form are to Adam Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper. The Biography* (Weidenfeld, 2010).

[4] As early as 1951 Wallace Notestein was looking forward to an edition of 'the letters of the late… Hugh Trevor-Roper, in eight volumes': to Trevor-Roper 22 January 1951, Soc. Dacre 1/2/2.

[5] A full Bibliography compiled by Richard Foster is in an advanced state of preparation.

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doi:10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2010.12.006

comprehensive view – the various pieces in the mosaic are sometimes just detached fragments and no more – but still the fundamental conception is just, and this was surely what Trevor-Roper anticipated. The copious, if disjointed memoir drafts he composed at the end of his life do not neglect the life of the mind, but they focus overwhelmingly on his life in the wider world.[6] Indeed one obvious consequence is that they reach no further than 1945, which suggests a certain disinclination to shape or reflect on a life that from then on would be primarily academic. So there is more than one reason why, if he could speak today, he would thank Sisman for what he has done.

Narrative of a career?

Nonetheless my concern is precisely that of the historian of ideas: to get behind the plethora and to ask: what is the intellectual biography that lies within? A simple point of departure would be to follow Bruce McFarlane (347) and say that there were two Trevor-Ropers: the historian and the journalist. But this would be rather too simple. *The Last Days of Hitler* (1947), which is the obvious prototype of much of his "outlying" work, is not journalism though it lies close to it; and while this line of inquiry may have inspired his reflections on "the last days of J.F. Kennedy" as set out in the Warren Report,[7] and set him up for a fall over the Hitler Diaries – both journalistic episodes – it is also related to the purely academic attack on Lawrence Stone in 1951,[8] and the antiquarian inquiry into *The Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse* in 1976, since both were to be seen as comparable exposures of a naked truth from within falsity or error. But if we set aside the category of the journalist, still we may speak of at least two characters within one frame. First, Trevor-Roper the scholar-humanist who despite the seemingly infinite variety of his interests was unshakably loyal to 'research-genuine, productive research'[9] – a man with a definite and quite conventional historical locus in the 16th and 17th centuries; and then Trevor-Roper the non-specialist, who wielded the tools of what he hoped was a timeless 'philosophy' when 'in hostile country'.[10]

It was a combination which, however excellent its rationale, made him unusual. From his earliest entry into academic life there was always just a hint that he was slightly unorthodox, that he did not quite fit in – but then in his estimation the 'soundest members' of society were 'generally unobtrusive'.[11] Most obviously he did not fall into the category of those intellectually able and yet socially clubbable men who secured an Oxford post when very young. He was twice rejected for college fellowships (64, 75) and had to wait until after the war to secure a tenured post (in 1946 aged 32). Indeed one may suggest that his evident loyalty to his college (Christ Church) was more to its history, its water meadow,[12] its social and metropolitan connections, and its splendid fabric, than to its tutorial community.[13] He dare not sneer at the body of the tutors, for he knew full well that it was this body of 'college Hampdens', not the university professoriate, that was driving the Oxford History School at that time;[14] but something of his true view comes out in the gently satirical portrayal of the college tutor, the 'old college tortoise', the 'mere centurion in the Republick of Letters', who was the supposed author of the letters of Mercurius Oxoniensis: a man who elevated the drinking of port wine above study and the very opposite of 'that proud piece of a professor', the holder of the Regius Chair in Modern History.[15] Certainly Trevor-Roper's resort to centralised, university funding was remarkable for its day, even if talk about setting up a research institute in history in the mid-50s was more talk than anything else coming from such a pronounced individualist.[16] His search for an Oxford professorial chair, something which inevitably distanced him from the college community, was set in motion as early as 1951 when he ran for the Chair of Modern History at the age of 37 (194–6) – a precocious age even by today's standards – and was rapidly and triumphantly successful when he secured 'the grandest of historical chairs', the Regius Professorship in 1957.[17] Seen in this light the difficulties he encountered when he retired in 1980 to become the head of a college community, Peterhouse, Cambridge, were by no means unpredictable, even if the denizens of Peterhouse were no doubt an unusual group in their own right.[18]

[6] The memoir drafts from the 1990s are in Soc. Dacre 6/34, and go back to materials collected in notebooks covering the years 1940–46 entitled ∏τεροεντα (from Homer, thoughts caught 'on the wing') in Soc. Dacre 13/29/1–4. So Sisman's reference to an apparently single 'draft memoir' is a considerable simplification: xvi.

[7] C. Kidd, 'The Warren Commission and the Dons: an Anglo-American microhistory', *Modern Intellectual History*, forthcoming. My thanks to Prof. Kidd for showing me this paper in advance.

[8] 'The Elizabethan Aristocracy: An Anatomy Anatomised', *Economic History Review* 2nd Ser. 3 (1950–1), 279–98.

[9] *History. Professional and Lay* (Oxford, 1957), 19. – It would be easy to suppose, given the sheer breadth of Trevor-Roper's interests and commitments, that he was a somewhat lightweight scholar, especially if one were prepared to take the *Hitler Diaries* episode seriously. This would be an entirely mistaken view. In early life especially his commitment to scholarly rigour was, in the eyes of many, taken to excess in his critical assaults on Lawrence Stone and R.H. Tawney. But this commitment was far from being simply polemical, and it informs all that he wrote, even an apparently popular work such as *The Last Days of Hitler*. Hence the 'Note on Sources' to the 1st edition (London, 1947), 265–9 and the long 'Introduction' to the 2nd edition (London, 1950) xiii–lxii, which is an examination and defence of scholarly procedures. Another illustration of this concern lies in the selection of Gibbon's *Vindication* (1778) as a set text alongside the *History* when he placed Gibbon on the Oxford undergraduate syllabus in 1960 (University of Oxford, *Examination Statutes. . . 1960*, 66), and one out of the four lectures he gave on Gibbon and Macaulay (each) for this paper considered them in relation to their critics: 'Gibbon + Macaulay' [1972], Soc. Dacre 2/13/6 + 9/9/2. His attitude to data was both commonsensical and a counsel of perfection: he wished to distinguish between 'Serious errors of fact, errors in areas vital to general interpretation' and 'that perfect knowledge. . . so fine and so uninteresting that nobody except its discoverers, will wish to possess it' or in other words 'learned rubbish': resp. 'Gibbon I' f. 4 in 'Gibbon + Macaulay'; *History: Professional and Lay*, 14, 16. It followed that the definition of a 'true scholar' was not to be found in erudition alone; rather it was that of someone 'in love with his subject, still climbing after knowledge infinite': Memoir in seven chapters, c. 6 'Christ Church', f. 3, Soc. Dacre 6/34. The latter words may come from Marlowe, but the idea is wholly Trevor-Roper's.

[10] Foreword, *Historical Essays* (London, 1957), vi.

[11] 'The Gentry 1540–1640', *Economic History Review*, *Supplements* 1 [1953], 51.

[12] Sisman omits any mention of Trevor-Roper's participation in the successful campaign to stop a "relief road" being driven through Christ Church Meadow in the years 1956–68, a unique example of successful resistance to burgeoning road construction at this time, and a priceless legacy to the city: see e.g. 'How Virtue triumphed over Progress', 20 December 1968, *The Letters of Mercurius* (London, 1970); *Christ Church Oxford* (Oxford, 1973), 31.

[13] These traits are clearly visible in Trevor-Roper's guidebook to *Christ Church Oxford* (Oxford, 1950), where the college's history is told largely under the heading of 'Buildings' (8–23), and one of its proudest boasts was to have trained 'ten prime ministers and eleven rulers of India' (10 cf. 28, 30). See also n. 18. For Trevor-Roper's leech-like and wholly irregular exploitation of Christ Church property: Sisman, 58, 300, 419–20.

[14] *History: Professional and Lay* (Oxford, 1957), 10.

[15] *The Letters of Mercurius*, 5, 9, 14, 24 cf. 71 and Hugh Trevor-Roper 'Of our own correspondent', *Spectator* 14 November 1970, 607 on 'poor college moles, toads, tortoises, snails, mice, water-rats, etc.'. The historical conflict between Oxford tutors and professors is a central theme of his inaugural lecture, *History: Professional and Lay* (1957) – here the tutors appear as 'hermit-crabs' (18) – which Trevor-Roper proposed to solve by a harmonious compromise: the dedication of professional and professorial research to the primary function of communicating to the laity: 2–3, 9–15.

[16] To Bernard Berenson 20 July 1955, *Letters from Oxford*, 175; cf. Sisman 45, 185 for examples of university funding claimed by Trevor-Roper as a graduate and then as an academic postholder.

[17] To Bernard Berenson 22 March 1957, ibid., 221.

[18] As Mercurius himself had pointed out, 'those brought in from outside seldom prosper, it requiring long habituation to govern these fractious corporations': 'Dark and Obnubilated Affairs', 26 July 1969, *Letters of Mercurius*, 35. This remark was a reflection of the way Trevor-Roper had approached Christ Church before 1957: that is, not as a united community but as a divided, political entity made up of parties, specifically clericals and reactionaries against liberals and progressives – a cast of mind best reflected in the correspondence of Robert Blake, a consciously loyal lieutenant: Soc. Dacre 1/2/1, 1/2/2. Given this background the later conflicts at Peterhouse, where powerful religious loyalties were also at stake, seem not merely predictable but almost inevitable.