

# The New York Review of Books

## The Audacious Historian

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*An Honourable Englishman: The Life of Hugh Trevor-Roper*

by Adam Sisman

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Adam Sisman's biography of the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, who entered the House of Lords as Dacre of Glanton, was widely noticed when it appeared in England last year. It has now been published in North America with a new title, although the book itself is essentially the same. It takes its place among recent biographies of other British historians, notably Herbert Butterfield and Raymond Carr.<sup>1</sup> Butterfield had made his reputation with a study of the Whig interpretation of history, and Carr with searching accounts of modern Spain. But neither of them had the magnetism and brilliance of Trevor-Roper, whose death a little less than a decade ago brought to an end a career that touched far more than the professorial milieu to which he belonged. He was a scholar who played with fire, venturing into fields in which he had never worked before, issuing thunderous opinions on his peers, and ultimately suffering incurable burns from the lightning he had himself brought down. He was a Faustian figure of modern historiography.

A formidable scholar by temperament and training, he allowed himself to be diverted twice into fields that lay wholly outside his expertise, and in both cases it was the novelty of the enterprise together with the prospect of public recognition that attracted him. The end of Adolf Hitler and a sensational forgery by the expatriate Edmund Backhouse in China proved irresistible. Yet his books on these unrelated subjects are even today a more enduring achievement than his early work on a seventeenth-century archbishop of Canterbury. But the *beau monde*, into which the fame arising from his studies of Hitler and Backhouse had provided access, eventually brought him into the inner circle of Rupert Murdoch, for whom he served as a national director of Times Newspapers Ltd. It was this affiliation that led to his tragic undoing when he authenticated the bogus Hitler diaries for Murdoch's *Sunday Times*. A Mephistophelean laughter is almost audible in Murdoch's infamous response to Trevor-Roper's last-minute realization of his fateful mistake: "Fuck Dacre. Publish."

Trevor-Roper was raised in rural Northumberland, bright but starved of affection in the loveless union of a local physician with a wife who encouraged his gambling habit. He went on to Charterhouse, a charitable and educational foundation in London that dated back to

1611. It offered rigorous schooling for many of Britain's future elites. There he acquired a profound knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin, which enabled him to compete successfully for admission to Christ Church in Oxford. Trevor-Roper's beginnings as an outstanding classical scholar placed him immediately among the privileged undergraduates, and the prizes he soon won confirmed his talents. His mastery of the classics never deserted him and probably served as a kind of anchor in the turbulent times that lay before him, but he chose, halfway through his undergraduate years, to switch to modern history.

This was partly a response to the deadly instruction he would have received if he had remained in classics (with notoriously uninspiring dons) and partly a desire to expand his horizons. It was a portentous step. Trevor-Roper then, as later, had an insatiable appetite for what was new to him, and this was combined with a personal ambition to move into smart social circles that would readily appreciate the taste for fox-hunting he acquired in Northumberland.

Those early years in Oxford defined the historian of the future—a scholar who was impatient with old academic preoccupations and methods and yet, at the same time, a master of traditional learning and expression. Trevor-Roper invented himself at Oxford. World War II gave him a further opportunity to grow. He had been doing research on William Laud, the archbishop of Canterbury who was executed for his faith in 1645, and he managed to produce a book on Laud by 1940 that earned respectful, if not wholly approving, reviews (it was too polemical). But he soon found himself in the government's Radio Security Service—part of MI8—and later the Secret Intelligence Service in MI6, where he watched history happen from the inside instead of studying it in the library. There he met and liked Kim Philby, about whom he wrote candidly in these pages in 1968 and in a small book, *The Philby Affair*.

Even the pettiness of monitoring communications afforded a glimpse of a larger world that had nothing to do with the classics, seventeenth-century history, or even Oxford. At the end of the war, in an opulent castle in Germany taken over by one of his wartime friends, he was invited to undertake an investigation to discover whether Hitler was still alive and, if not, how he had died. Trevor-Roper signed on with enthusiasm. He was promised and received ample military support, including access to knowledgeable persons. This was a kind of historical research unlike anything he had ever done before, and he obviously relished it.

The resulting book, *The Last Days of Hitler*, became, and remains today, a fundamental account, presented with both scholarly precision and an unmistakable historical passion. He interrogated witnesses, including Albert Speer, with a combination of skepticism and authority, and he visited the bunker in Berlin. For someone who had begun as a classicist and continued as a historian of early modern Britain, the book on Hitler was as surprising as it was successful—"a fig for Archbishop Laud," as he described it.<sup>2</sup> It was Trevor-Roper's greatest triumph, but it was a dangerous triumph. It spawned overconfidence and led to increasingly fierce pronouncements about his colleagues.

Trevor-Roper had long been an admirer of Edward Gibbon. He soon forged an English style that, if not the equal of Gibbon's, was certainly as pungent and memorable. He knew that it could be a sharp and powerful instrument in advancing his career. The success of his book on Hitler ensured that his views would be widely noticed, and he profited from his eminence to undermine two of the major historians of the postwar period—one slightly junior to himself and the other immensely senior.

His younger contemporary and former pupil Lawrence Stone had attracted international recognition with a long article in the *Economic History Review* on the supposed decline of the Elizabethan aristocracy in favor of the rising gentry, as famously postulated by the historian R.H. Tawney. Impelled by Stone's use of archival documents that Trevor-Roper himself had been working on and had brought to Stone's attention, he soon realized that Stone seriously misunderstood the system of loans in those documents. He wrote to a colleague in 1951, "I have decided to liquidate Stone." In a long and devastating rebuttal of Stone's work, he came close to doing just that. After years of sparring with Trevor-Roper in Oxford, Stone left England in 1963 for Princeton, where his publications and his teaching were of such distinction that a major British historian in his own field, Christopher Hill, could write twenty years later, "There can be no doubt now that Stone is the better historian. Trevor-Roper's output looks pitiful by comparison."

A few years after the controversy with Stone, Trevor-Roper turned with equal ferocity against the highly successful and much-celebrated historian A.J. Toynbee, author of the ten-volume work *A Study of History*, which was cited more often than read and widely marketed in a one-volume abridgment. Trevor-Roper was not alone at that time in his resentment of the accolades and money that were being lavished upon Toynbee. He denounced Toynbee's "antirational and illiberal views" no less than his murky prose. Rather uncharacteristically in this case, Trevor-Roper spoke for the majority of historians. There were few who rose to Toynbee's defense, and his reputation never recovered.

It was at this time that Trevor-Roper moved into the Regius Chair of History at Oxford and thereby pulled ahead of A.J.P. Taylor, a prolific and articulate rival who had written on the origins of World War II and was well known in the British press, radio, and television. The huge public success of *The Last Days of Hitler*, the immense range of learning that owed so much to Charterhouse as well as to Oxford before the war, and the coruscating brilliance of neo-Gibbonian prose swept Trevor-Roper into a position in which he could now be expected to deliver his own definitive and comprehensive treatment of the Puritan Revolution. Unfortunately that never happened. His career stalled.

In 1954 he had married Alexandra Haig, a daughter of the renowned field marshal of World War I who was seven years older than Trevor-Roper and had been unhappy in her first marriage. The couple cultivated an increasingly active social life. Trevor-Roper had engaged a literary agent two years before, and this meant that growing pressure to write for the popular press limited the leisure necessary for sustained research. The hard grind of scholarship

became ever more remote. The anticipated great book on the Puritan Revolution receded into the shadows, not least because a draft of it encountered friendly but serious criticism from an esteemed colleague, J.H. Elliott, and this criticism proved to be more than its author could readily address. Trevor-Roper fell victim to the expectations that arose from his own success.

But in 1973 he confronted an unanticipated opportunity that was comparable to the Hitler investigation in its potential for drawing public attention, and it was equally remote from his professional competence as a historian. Once again he could not resist a new and undeniably fascinating distraction. It involved the forgery of a major historical document from late imperial China as well as two unpublished books that were purportedly autobiographical and indisputably obscene. When, in his capacity as Oxford's Regius Professor of History, Trevor-Roper was asked to collect a mysterious parcel at the Basel airport in August 1973, all he knew was that the director of the Swiss Institute for Tropical Medicine had been charged by a certain Dr. Reinhard Hoeppli, a Swiss who had worked in China and recently died, to transmit to the Bodleian Library a work "of great literary and historical value." To his astonishment the parcel turned out to contain the original manuscript and a typescript of two pornographic memoirs by a homosexual English baronet, Sir Edmund Backhouse, who had lived in Beijing since 1898 and died there in 1944.

Backhouse was hardly unknown to historians of modern China, because in 1910 he had published, together with the *Times* correspondent J.O.P. Bland, an influential if controversial book, *China Under the Empress Dowager*, for which the principal document was "The Diary of His Excellency Ching Shan." Backhouse claimed to have discovered this diary amid the looting after the Boxer Rebellion. Another *Times* correspondent, G.E. Morrison, was among the first to show signs of skepticism about the authenticity of the diary. Anachronism as well as the plagiarism of documents published subsequently led to a general recognition that the "Diary of Ching Shan" was an original creation of Backhouse himself, whose knowledge of Chinese and facility in writing it were legendary in Beijing.

Still, because no one could question his familiarity with the last years of the Qing dynasty, his memoirs could conceivably be more valuable as an historical source than the diary he had forged. Or so Dr. Hoeppli thought. He had befriended the aging Backhouse and undertook to make typescripts of his memoirs and to see that they were placed, after his death, in the Bodleian at Oxford, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the British Museum, and the Harvard College Library. He supplied additional typescripts to Morrison's son, Alastair, who conveyed them to the Australian National Library in Canberra. Trevor-Roper became the courier to Oxford and was astonished by the obscenities he found in the parcel he was carrying.

The two memoirs, *Décadence Mandchoue* and *The Dead Past*, with their gossip about sexual affairs, were at that time probably unpublishable, and Trevor-Roper quickly abandoned any attempt to make them public. But he was inspired by this material to undertake a full-length book on Backhouse himself, whose knowledge of Chinese and familiarity with the Manchu

court had enabled him to become a master forger. It is impossible to tell to what extent the sexual excesses of his two books reflected his fantasies rather than his life, but it is clear that both Morrison and Hoeppli were positively impressed by him. In building up his portrait of Backhouse as the “hermit of Peking,” Trevor-Roper most unfairly denigrated the Swiss doctor’s judgment of his personality, as Morrison’s son was later to write to *The New York Review* after the book appeared.<sup>3</sup>

Hoeppli had been convinced that Backhouse’s memoirs “are not purely imaginary but are fundamentally based on fact.” He was undoubtedly a rogue, but a highly intelligent one and probably a very decadent one. As told by Trevor-Roper, the story of Backhouse, under the title *A Hidden Life* in England but *Hermit of Peking* in America, became an immediate success, and it remains today a fascinating example of biographical sleuthing. Although Trevor-Roper published neither of the two books by Backhouse that he brought to Oxford, he felt able to say, not implausibly:

The final discharge of his fantasies may have been morbid, but they themselves were not. They were inseparable from his personality; and that personality, in itself, was complete, coherent, and sane. Yes, sane. For to live in a world of make-believe does not necessarily indicate an unsound mind.

One of the few weak spots in Sisman’s excellent biography is the curiously slight interest he shows in the Backhouse book. It brought out the extraordinary curiosity of Trevor-Roper, his dogged pursuit of widely scattered evidence (much of which lay outside his technical competence), his narrative skill, and his taste for publicity. Someone who greatly savored the whole Backhouse story was the brilliant Oxford historian of France Richard Cobb, whose letters to Trevor-Roper have just been published.<sup>4</sup> With reference to Backhouse’s old college, Cobb wrote mischievously, “Merton could still make Backhouse an Honorary Fellow; or perhaps they could name a building after him.” Not much later, he writes, “I think Merton should have a Backhouse Room. They have a Beerbohm one. The Backhouse Room could be a chapel of retreat for meditation on Truth.” Among other interesting details Cobb reports that the French writer Victor Segalen, who lived in China, must have known Backhouse in Beijing. Hoeppli himself had observed, in a postscript to the manuscripts that Trevor-Roper declined to publish, that Segalen’s novel *René Lys* (1922) contained striking parallels with *Décadence Mandchoue*, including nothing less than sex with the Empress Dowager herself.

By a strange coincidence, *Décadence Mandchoue* has at last been published in the very year of the American edition of Sisman’s biography.<sup>5</sup> At this late date the voluptuous couplings that Backhouse described in such detail seem tiresomely repetitive, but they remain remarkably vivid all the same, either as fact or as the fantasies of a seventy-year-old man. They do include apparently accurate historical details, which were not known at the time, about the simultaneous murder of Emperor Guangxu and the Empress Dowager. The publication of this memoir includes the sympathetic but far from naive postscript that Hoeppli

wrote for it. The other book, *The Dead Past*, remains unpublished, although it is said to contain personal accounts of a liaison with Verlaine, a homosexual brothel frequented by Henry James, and sexual intercourse with a prime minister.

In 1980 Trevor-Roper resigned his chair in Oxford, from which he would have been obliged to retire in 1981, in order to accept an invitation to become the master of Peterhouse in Cambridge, where he could continue until 1987. He never expected the hostility from extreme conservatives that he was to endure at that notoriously contentious college, and the years in Cambridge were among his most difficult. But they became infinitely worse through a mistake of his own.

That a scholar so well acquainted with fraud should have himself succumbed to a particularly egregious instance of it seems in retrospect to be the payment exacted for so much success and glamour. There was a kind of inevitability in the invitation to Trevor-Roper, as a world-renowned authority on Hitler, to examine and authenticate diaries ascribed to Hitler that had turned up in the possession of the German magazine *Stern*. The magazine naturally wanted to exploit them for maximum publicity and profit. That this invitation involved Times Newspapers Ltd., of which Trevor-Roper was a national director, only reinforced the inevitable. The *Sunday Times*, and Murdoch above all, wanted him, and Trevor-Roper felt constrained not only by his relationship to the paper but by the challenge and potential notoriety of yet another sensational discovery.

He flew to Zurich to examine the diaries, with an agreement in hand for a fee in five figures, on the morning after a grand dinner at Windsor Castle, where he had spent the night. The conjunction of royalty, money, Hitler, and Murdoch proved more perilous than Trevor-Roper could have imagined. Yet it seems clear that at the start he was suspicious about the diaries. He knew of no prior report of the existence of such diaries. Yet in the few hours he spent in a back room at the Handelsbank in Zurich he persuaded himself that the Gothic script he could barely read was Hitler's. It helped, Sisman writes, that he was falsely "assured that the paper had been tested and dated to the correct period" and also that the handwriting had been authenticated.

Subsequently when he flew to Hamburg to talk with a shady character named Gerd Heidemann, who had found the diaries, his doubts revived, and he felt himself in the presence of a fantasist who was, if no Backhouse in learning, nevertheless equally untrustworthy. He wrote his article for the *Sunday Times* but almost immediately regretted that he had done so. The terrible truth dawned on him in a characteristically elegant setting, at a performance of *Don Carlo* at Covent Garden. But it was too late, and Murdoch would not release him. His article was published, and the incontestable revelation that the diaries had been forged came soon thereafter.

Suddenly and irrevocably Trevor-Roper was catapulted back into the harsh world from which he had escaped since his youth. His reputation suffered incalculable harm. Yet through

all this and the years that followed, his mind remained as sharp as ever. He could write with the old panache and display a formidable knowledge of history, literature, and languages. But as time passed, with the death of his wife and the increasing weakness of his eyes, life was not as it was.

Luckily he had friends—devoted and brilliant friends who brought him cheer and comfort now as they had in the past. To see Trevor-Roper among these friends provides greater clarity to the portrait that Sisman has drawn. It brings Trevor-Roper out of the beau monde into a far more humane and welcoming place. Two of these friends were Richard Cobb, who had commented so amusingly on Backhouse, and Jeremy Catto, the eminent medievalist at Oriel College. Sisman had access neither to the Cobb letters nor to the profoundly moving address that Catto delivered in 2003 at Trevor-Roper’s funeral. The letters have now been published, as noted earlier, and Catto, whom I have known and respected as a friend for more than fifty years, has generously allowed me to make use of his funeral address here.

Both of these prodigiously talented historians shared with Trevor-Roper a taste for witty gossip and the foibles of their colleagues, but at the same time they never for an instant shied away from the courage and candor that inform the best scholarship. More than half of Cobb’s letters date from the Peterhouse years, and it is tempting to assume that Cobb understood well how much Trevor-Roper craved the companionship and wit of his friends at that time. Sisman quotes him as saying that he had appointed Arnaldo Momigliano a visiting fellow “in order to have someone to talk to; but he, not unnaturally, prefers Turin.”

Cobb’s dazzling irreverence must have been a tonic for the beleaguered master, and through his letters one can glimpse other congenial souls in Trevor-Roper’s ambiance, particularly the enchanting Byzantinist Dimitri Obolensky: “Has Trinity a new Master? There has been talk of Sir Dimitri, the new Knight, moving east [i.e., from Oxford to Cambridge]. I hope he doesn’t, as I find him amiable and would miss him.” Cobb’s congratulations on Trevor-Roper’s seventieth birthday in 1984 must have done him a world of good after the debacle of the diaries:

Very many happy returns for the day after tomorrow, 21st January (which is also the date of the execution of poor old Louis XVI, not that he was at all old, I mean it affectionately, for he was not a bad fellow, just a bit devious, and with a perfectly frightful wife...).

Jeremy Catto, in remembering Trevor-Roper, began by evoking his friends, “like the subjects of his writings..., of an almost infinite variety,” and how, even down to the end, he wanted to hear the latest gossip. But “this was not merely frivolous: indeed his disposition included a streak of puritan steel and he did not much care for the *merely* frivolous. He cared even less for the graver condition of unremitting seriousness.” What is particularly impressive about Catto’s speech is its insistence on Trevor-Roper’s historical thought, to which Sisman does not give much attention:

The counter-factual, the reconstruction of what might have happened, was always a valuable imaginative tool. He dissociated himself from historians who called upon the ineluctable forces of history to explain events, and he rejected the intellectual snobbery which consigned any phenomenon outside the ever-forward-flowing mainstream to the “dustbin of history.” Hugh was prepared to resurrect the abortive, the failed and the unfashionable from that overflowing repository, happily imagining “dustbin calling to dustbin with thin, plaintive voice.”

Catto recalls that Trevor-Roper had resisted what he considered the latent fascism of the student revolution in the 1960s, just as he had earlier turned against the Marxist ideology of Western intellectuals in the 1950s. The link with Cobb here is very striking, since Cobb had begun as an acknowledged anarchist, or at least that is the traditional explanation for the Second Class degree he took in History. But in later years, particularly during his time as a fellow of Balliol, he found his greatest companionship not with Christopher Hill, the college’s Marxist master, who had supported his election, but with others of a distinctly more conservative bent, such as Jack Gallagher and Maurice Keen. Cobb’s vehement objection to Hill that he simply had no taste for pleasure would have resonated with Trevor-Roper, not because he was a hedonist but because he was not an ideologue.

If Trevor-Roper never wrote the big book that was expected of him, that hardly mattered for a historian whose curiosity ranged even more widely than his vast learning. The repetition of this complaint during his lifetime and afterward exhibits the worst side of academic psittacism. The immense scope of Trevor-Roper’s publications, not least the recently published essays on Gibbon and the Enlightenment,<sup>6</sup> guarantee that his work will continue to be read, perhaps even more sympathetically than before in the light of the human failure that clouded his final years. (He wrote some thirty-two reviews and essays in these pages.) The books on Hitler and Backhouse are undoubtedly the most visible and accessible works of this audacious historian, but they are only a part of what he wrote and an even smaller part of what he knew.

#### Letters

#### *Too Much for Trevor-Roper* January 12, 2012

- 1 See Michael Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield: History, Science, and God* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) and María Jesús González Hernández, *Raymond Carr: La curiosidad del zorro: Una biografía* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2010). ↵
- 2 The reference to Laud appears in notebooks that Trevor-Roper wrote between 1940 and 1947. Sisman had access to this material, which will soon be published in the US as *The Wartime Journals*, edited by Richard Davenport-Hines (I.B. Tauris, 2012). There Trevor-Roper pays tribute to the *Note-Books* of Samuel Butler, author of *Erewhon*, as the inspiration for his reflections on life, literature, and people. The entries do not constitute a diary or journal, although a few passages, above all on Hitler, address contemporary events. Trevor-Roper himself prepared an index to his notebooks, and they appear with minimal editing in the publication. ↵
- 3 “Defending Dr. Hoeppli,” *The New York Review*, September 15, 1977. This letter was in response to a [review of Trevor-Roper’s book](#) by John K. Fairbank, *The New York Review*, April 14, 1977. Fairbank and his wife had known Hoeppli personally in Beijing. In replying to Morrison, he called Hoeppli “an admirable figure in Peking.” As Fairbank observed, Trevor-Roper had responded savagely to an attempt by Richard Ellmann to defend Hoeppli in six issues of the *Times Literary Supplement* from November 1976 to January 1977. ↵



- 4 *My Dear Hugh: Letters from Richard Cobb to Hugh Trevor-Roper and Others*, edited by Tim Heald (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011). ↩
- 5 Edited by Derek Sandhaus (Hong Kong: Earnshaw, 2011). Despite the title the work is in English. ↩
- 6 *History and the Enlightenment* (Yale University Press, 2010). ↩

