

## Hugh Trevor-Roper

### *The Biography*

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Why read a biography of Trevor-Roper? Why read biographies at all? The short answer is for entertainment. We all have a life to live, unfortunately only one, so there is certainly excitement in reading about others, and thereby vicariously enjoying them. And when a biography is finished, the subject dead and buried, we still are alive, unlike in real life, ready for yet another one. Thus there is a difference whether you read biographies in your youth and in your old age. In your youth a biography presents an inspiration providing lives to emulate or to avoid. Yet, apart from that aspect, they tend to be a bit boring compared to your own life ahead, still you cannot avoid having some idea of what to expect in life, if for no other reasons from the examples of parents and grandparents and other people around you. Still your limited experience of life, coupled with ignorance, means that you are at that stage unable to savor the real titillating pleasure of biographies, namely those of gossip, and what is intimately connected with it, the evocation of time and place. Thus you read biographies differently when you are old. Then it becomes a matter of comparing notes, to ruefully note what you have missed in life, and to look for revelations. The exercise is basically one of sentimentality.

I guess I first heard about Trevor-Roper in connection with his bogus authentication of the Hitler Diaries in connection with the German weekly - der Stern. He was getting on in years, although not yet seventy, and his actions betrayed the kind of gullibility you would expect from someone on the verge of dotage. The affair must have gratified his enemies, of which he had his fair share, and permanently damaged his authority and credibility as an historian. We will return to it in due time. But before that I must have read many of his essays for the New York Review without the name of the author sticking in my mind.

Many years later I read his pot-boiler 'The Last Days of Hitler' written as a young man and launching him on that career as a public intellectual, the parabola of which would hit bottom some thirty-five years later. Then gradually after that I became aware of his status, a collection of his letters was prominently displayed in the London bookstores on a visit, a few years later a biography appeared (probably the one have just read) and I was intrigued. Trevor-Roper, made in late life a lord (before the Stern-affair) naming himself Dacre, was moving in smart circles, with a reputation as a brilliant historian and intellectual bridging an eccentric academic milieu with that of the world, spanning the major part of the 20th century.

Now the biography starts out a bit boring and inauspiciously. In fact his background was if anything inauspicious, the middle child and eldest son of a middle-class couple from the north of England. The father was a doctor and the mother, with social pretensions, stayed at home. There was an ancestry of middling nobility, - the Trevors and the Ropers (Trever-Roper was always very concerned about not splitting the name, he was no mere

Roper) - undistinguished to the world at large, but no doubt lingering large in the imagination of the family. English society is stratified by class in a deep and rigid way outsiders may have difficulty understanding blind to the subtle markers, but obvious to author and Native readers. Thus the true significance of his childhood may pass the unwary reader by. He was sent to a Public school at the customary early age, one which once had had a good reputation but since then gone to seed. As a studious, and as we would say nowadays, nerdy boy, he was the obvious target for scorn and bullying. Later on a transfer to another school somewhat mollified his early school-years which would later be capped off by finishing school at Charterhouse, before he would be sent to Christ Church at Oxford and his real life would begin. So unsurprisingly he was a very good schoolboy with a receptive mind, particularly engrossed with the Classics, yet with a temporary flirtation with mathematics. This is of course typical of a somewhat antiquated educational system putting undue emphasis on Latin and Greek, which inevitably becoming the barge of honor and education. Any bright boy will of course be fascinated with it and take the obvious hint.

To come to Oxbridge must have been haven for him, as it would be for any scholarly personality a permanent escape from persecution and disdain, into a paradise where your natural ideals and interests are elevated to the state of being the ultimate ones. I remember myself as a teenager becoming romantically captivated by Russell's account of his student days at Cambridge<sup>1</sup>. I also visited Oxford overnight during a tour of the country with my parents and brother in the summer of 1966 on my first visit to England and bought an English translation of Gauss' 'Disquisitiones Arithmeticae' in a local bookstore. But of course the romantic picture is, if not false at least very incomplete. The majority of the student body is not admitted on grounds of scholarly excellence but those of money and connection, perpetrating the predominance of the ruling elite. Furthermore during most of its modern existence, say since the 18th century, Oxbridge was a regional backwater, as far as learning and scholarship was concerned, basically a kind of monastery indulging an indolent class of Dons. Its intellectual revival did not occur until the early 20th century and it was due to its scientists.

Trevor-Roper stood out along with the other students on scholarships among the undergraduates and quickly caught the attention of his teachers and tutors. But he was not unaffected by the worldly aspects of being an Oxbridge student. He learned to drink (a staggering lot) and to party and more to the point to network among the future elite. He was the quintessential clever boy, meaning a striking verbal facility, both oral and written, especially the latter, where he would display an uncontested literary flair; furthermore a wide reading and culture<sup>2</sup>, with a retentive power to match, a command of several languages, and a profusion of startling and original ideas. But how much was show, and how much was real substance? And when it comes to history, what counts for real substance? When it comes to the humanities in general are there really any objective tests

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<sup>1</sup> Snatches of Russell's autobiographical writings reached me in my teens and made a very deep impression on me, providing a role model, and I devoured his autobiography when it came out a few years later, so when I reread it thirty years later I realized that I must have retained most of it from my first reading.

<sup>2</sup> During a few years he kept count on the number of books he read during the year, starting with a modest number in the sixties, roughly my own pace, then to climb up to almost the double.

for brilliance and accomplishment, or it is just a case of one-upmanship? The case and career of Trevor-Roper put those questions to the fore, but the biographer does not really address them, taking his accomplishments and tenor for granted, maybe blinded by his reputation.

In a way Trevor-Roper was a social climber. His ambition was not to become an academic recluse but wanted to take part of the real world out there, meaning the world of people that mattered, even if he did not necessarily approve of them. He took up hobbies such as riding, in particular fox-hunting<sup>3</sup> much to the consternation of his scholarly colleagues, who found such an interest highly inappropriate for an intellectual. Never a natural athlete he regularly suffered falls, some of them necessitating hospital visits, and in his early thirties a serious accident forced him to give it up permanently. More significantly he abandoned his initial choice of career as a Classicist feeling that its subject was very limited, that he had already read and enjoyed most of what was to be read and enjoyed, and the dreary life of a Classicist was reduced to write commentaries on commentaries aimed at a dwindling audience. So he switched to Modern English History, in practice meaning the 17th century. And just before the war he did submit a thesis of sorts on the cardinal Laude, which was to become in a sense his only purely scholarly work. It was published by Macmillan, a publishing firm with which he would have continued contact throughout.

The war years saw him in intelligence service. That service was in need of code breakers, clever young men with an analytic and combinatorial bent, predominantly mathematicians, but also Classicists with a penchant for solving the Times crossword puzzles and similar distractions. Trevor-Roper did his stint cracking some code that came his way, but of course this was just something marginal, yet it testifies to some skill beyond the merely verbal. The position of Trevor-Roper was one of an administrator and internal critic, and he did not always get along well with his colleagues and especially not with his superiors. What he was concerned with was the compartmentalization of the various branches, their penchant for secrecy and reluctance to share intelligence. Intelligence is useless if not shared, he argued, and individual pieces make no sense in isolation only when combined into something bigger do they make sense and intelligent use can be made of them. The whole point of intelligence gathering according to him was to get an idea of how their counterpart - the *Abwehr* - operated and in that way be able to manipulate them to our advantage. At this game, the British had the better of their German counterparts, at least in the interpretation the author puts forward. Trevor-Roper could not but notice the ironic facts that many of the short-comings of the British service with their infighting had their direct counterparts among the Germans. In fact as both sides (the British and the Germans) would secretly admit, they had much in common<sup>4</sup>.

At the end of the hostilities he was sent on a mission to Germany. Trevor-Roper had

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<sup>3</sup> 'the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible' quoted in the text but not attributed to its proper source - Oscar Wilde

<sup>4</sup> Orwell remarks that anti-German feelings were much more prevalent in England at the First World War than at the Second. According to him, the experience of the British soldiers in the trenches led them to despise the French and respect the Germans. In crude racial and cultural terms the Germans and the British are very close, far closer than they would be ready to admit, even secretly. Nazi-Sympathizers

made a concerted effort to teach himself German, and for that purpose spent some time in Germany and Austria to perfect his command before the war. But he never felt comfortable with the German language, read it with some difficulty but above all with distaste, and never achieved easy fluency in speaking, something which would count against him many years later. This time his duty was to interview Germans, and in connection with this he took the initiative to find out what happened to Hitler, a mission that was enthusiastically approved by his superiors. In this task he was to display all his burgeoning skill as an investigating journalist, or to put it more directly, as a sleuth. The issue was important as rumors of Hitler's survival were bound to have all kinds of undesirable consequences. He accomplished the mission with panache and the result was a book, appositely titled 'The Last Days of Hitler'<sup>5</sup>. It was a great commercial success and established him as an expert on Hitler and Nazi-memorabilia which he made sure to profit on and make possible a more lavish life-style than was ordinarily open to an academic. In fact his reputation of an 'authenticers' strangely mirrors that of Berenson, the famous art critic, who held court in Tuscany and made a profitable living authenticating expensive purchases of art by wealthy patrons. Trevor-Roper knew Berenson personally, once having been introduced to him by letter<sup>6</sup>, as was the custom in those days, he charmed him with his erudition and wit, and especially by the correspondence that first introduction spawned. After that he would be a frequent visitor to Berenson's Villa I Tatti, whenever he had his ways by Italy, which he saw to it that he often had.

The success of the 'Last Days of Hitler' established him as a public intellectual earning him staggering advances on new books. In fact his status would equal that of a minor pop-star<sup>7</sup>, something that now seems rather remarkable. But the times were ripe for it. Radio was already established and in the 50's TV was becoming part of life in Britain (and elsewhere) and Trevor-Roper appeared on both, but when it came to a wide popular appeal his rival A.J.P. Taylor had the edge. There was a large high-brow audience for the kind of thing Trevor-Roper could be counted on to churn out namely essays, remarkable for not only their apparent sophistication but also the liveliness of its limpid prose. Trevor-Roper was a skilled polemicist and could be expected to make mince-meat of books and reputations that did not meet his standards or approval. He was nasty of course, but that is part of the fun, as long as you are not on the receiving end. He wrote regularly journalistic pieces for the Sunday Times, occasionally being sent out on missions, such as to cover the Eichmann trial in the early 60's. There followed also a steady stream of book-reviews, a natural variation of the essay. But what did he do as a scholarly historian, what had he done to really deserve the distinction of becoming a Regius professor?

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were not that uncommon in Britain before the war, just as they were not uncommon in Northern Europe, although there is no need to exaggerate their number nor to overplay their importance and influence.

<sup>5</sup> Instead of his own suggestion 'The End of Hitler' which does not have the same ring to it.

<sup>6</sup> Many years later when Trevor-Roper was to visit Sweden a letter from Berenson gave him access to the Swedish king who acted as a personal cicerone to the palace of Drottningholm. Later, as predicted, relations with the Bernadottes would sour as he was involved in a critical assessment of Folke Bernadotte and his efforts to save Jews at the end of the war.

<sup>7</sup> In fact one of his friends and admirers referred to him as a major pop star, but that is clearly hyperbole

This was a sore point. A great historian should be able to point at a large work, such as say with the case of Gibbon, with whom Trevor-Roper often was compared in his youth. Not that he did not try? His intention was to write his *magnus opus* on the Civil War, and he made many brilliant attempts, only to discard at the last moment and to start all over again. The same with many other worthy projects which he seemed to have lost interest in as they were approaching completion. Eventually he realized that the opportunity was lost, so much had happened in the field after he first had started out, that much of what he wanted to say had already been said. Was this the great tragedy of his life, or was he simply not meant to write a large work? Did he lack the necessary discipline? Was he too easily distracted by other temptations? Was he a perfectionist, and did his ambition loom larger and larger as time proceeded and thus precious parts of the same being irretrievably lost? Thus the closer he got to the fulfillment, the further it receded away. Or maybe this is undue dramatization. He was no Gibbon, he was no really path-finding historian, he was a journalist at bottom. The task of a historian is not that different from a journalist. It is a matter of digesting large swarms of material, have a critical point of view and be able to check sources; but above all one of making a synthesis and presenting it appealingly. All the necessary skills were at his disposal, not least his flair for writing. Maybe rather than frittering away his talents, he was really doing what he knew best how to do, and for what he was eminently suited for. Nevertheless the compulsion he felt to produce a masterwork, a work of genius, must have weighed heavily on him.

What is it to be a historian? What issues did Trevor-Roper actually pursue? A reader expecting to be instructed on this matter will invariably be disappointed. There is not really much emphasis on what he actually accomplished apart from the titles and the enthusiastic receptions. His literary flair is taken for granted and no examples thereof are really presented, although of course there are plenty of quotations from his work, although none chosen for purely stylistic reasons. Many of his students and rivals are presented. Such as his once protegee Lawrence Stone, whom he later set out to demolish, but with whom he eventually restored civil relations, or A.J.P. Taylor with whom he seems to have enjoyed a congenial but not personal relation, or Rowse who once had championed him but later turned against him. Furthermore Christopher Hill, Keith Thomas, E.R. Carr and Hobsbawm make regular come-on appearances, once he even performs a favor for the latter. Taken together they may give a little inkling on what historians infighting may involve without giving a deeper explanation. The philosophy of history to which Trevor-Roper seemed to adhere, was one of history being one of contingencies and that, in contrast to Marxist conception, or as it is vulgarly conceived, there are no underlying forces. He was also quite impressed by the Annales school of history in France and an admirer of Ferdinand Braudel, especially their wide outlook and readiness to bring anything in to bear. In fact quite reminiscent of what R.G. Collingwood was at pains to emphasize. Then it is another matter to what extent Trevor-Roper as a journalist succumbed to the temptation of 'cutting and pasting'. Naturally you do not expect any discussion of that in the biography. Politically Trevor-Roper was apolitical, which in practice means, whether the person approves of it or no, being conservative. He was on very good terms with the Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, also part of the eponymous publishing company, whom he managed by a determined campaign to have elected Chancellor of Oxford University,

while still in office<sup>8</sup>. As many historians he no doubt had a temperamental affinity for the past, as testified by his fondness for obsolete traditions, something we were taught in school was part of the British National character. And he was a supporter, at least initially, of the American policy in Vietnam, which in retrospect seems almost perverse, but people today do not seem to be aware of the Korean War, of which it was seen as a rerun, and the pervasive influence of the Cold War. Trevor-Roper took a very firm anti-communist stand, rejecting Communism as dogmatic and inhuman, while on the other hand he was against witch-hunts of any kind, including those directed against communists, including colleagues (thus he was happy to perform the above-mentioned favor for Hobsbawm).

One may also expect in a biography of this kind to become privy to the charmed life at Oxbridge. In many ways it was not as charmed as one would romantically be inclined to expect, and Trevor-Roper often complained about the lack of intellectual conversation at high table, and in particular the insularity of British historians and their tendency to specialize and cut off all interest in a wider picture. In particular his sojourn as a Master of Peterhouse College at Cambridge turned out to be a nightmare. He was very surprised by his election, but it turned out that he had been elected to merely become a marionette in the hands of the leading click, and when he tried to have his own way, he met nothing but obstruction from a determined mafia of opponents. The whole story seems to be taken from a C.P.Snow novel, with dons dressing in black for Franco and doing Nazi salutes. In the context the conservative master (whom they had expected would hold out against opening Peterhouse to women which was the trend in the late 70's and early 80's) appeared as a radical eager for change. His opinions of humanists sank to a new low, and he discovered, maybe too late, that the real humanists were to be found among the scientists, with whom one was able to have exciting intellectual discussions. One late acquaintance was Perutz, whom he regretted he got to know far too late in the day.

There are two places in the biography where the pace quickens and you as a reader are carried along. The first part concerns, hardly surprisingly sex, which traditionally provides the titillating aspect of any biography, the other his nemesis as an expert witness on the Hitler diaries, which deservedly or not may be what he will be remembered for by posterity. When it comes to sex, there is very little, even in the courting of his wife-to-be, although the biographer seems to have had unlimited access to the relevant correspondence. No affairs are hinted at during his happy life as an undergraduate, nor during his early adulthood, only trips abroad with young handsome men. He seems to have a penchant for young men, but that does not necessarily mean that it, unlike the case of his younger brother and confidant Patrick<sup>9</sup>, translated into carnal action. He gives the impression of sexual timidity, if one is allowed to make such a speculation on so little evidence. True, Berenson reported that his housekeeper (and mistress) could smell a virgin miles away, and apparently Trevor-Roper was one of the ones she smelled. Also his wife to be had suspected him to have been a homosexual, but he insisted that he had been in love before and meant to marry. The very act of insistence reveals a certain defensiveness. She also did not expect from him any

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<sup>8</sup> The idea of having him stand for election was suggested by Trevor-Roper to his son, while the prime-minister was on a six-week tour of Africa, to which he travelled by ship. This was in the early 60's and bespeaks a very different world from today

<sup>9</sup> A practicing homosexual and prominent advocate for gay rights

erotic passion that she had experienced earlier in her life, with such dire consequences. So who was his woman of his choice?

As the reader may surmise Trevor-Roper had a *faiblesse* to socialize with the titled, uncharitably one may explain this piece of snobbery to his social awkwardness concealed behind a mask of arrogance. As an example was the son of the General Haig of the First World War. He got on very well with him, but worried that this was not necessarily mutual, and that the titled son may find him somewhat of a bore. This friend had an elder sister trapped in an unhappy marriage by an unfaithful and abusive husband with whom she had three children, one of them quite young. It is likely that this seven year older woman simply abducted him, being intrigued by his brilliance and taking advantage of his kindness. He seems to have been just too willing to be taken in. There was complications of course, the husband was not willing to concede a divorce without her acting as the guilty party for which evidence was easy to obtain (love letters carelessly lying about to be seized). Being a divorced woman was a social disgrace at the time, and for a woman who above everything valued fine clothes and high society, hardly an intellectual, this was very important<sup>10</sup>. Although she enjoyed her husbands books, her real interest was interior decoration, which easily runs into an expensive hobby. She was expensive to keep, but Trevor-Roper showed much forbearance with her. When she complained that he did not express his feelings, he blamed his parents. When they got married people thought she looked like the mother rather than the bride. Although a few miscarriages occurred during the initial affair, there would be no issue, much to her regret. The marriage would last for over forty years until her death severely demented at ninety a few years ahead of her husband.

The notorious affair with the Hitler diaries had probably not come about had not 'the Times' along with the independent 'the Sunday Times' been bought by the Australian newspaper tycoon Murdoch, who had a very different attitude to publishing than that of the traditional staid approach of the newspaper. He smelled a scoop a long way. As Trevor-Roper happened to be on the board, and an expert was needed, who better to choose than the well-known expert on Nazi-Paraphernalia than him? Especially as a high degree of secrecy had to be maintained. Now our hero knew well that in order to establish that this was the real thing he needed more time than just a day, being hurriedly flown down to Zuerich. Why did he do it nevertheless? A sense of his importance? The excitement and adventure? He possessed just one expertise, and that was as a historian, only by reading extended transcripts of the diary could he give an informed opinion. He had no forensic skills, he could not test the ink nor the paper, which clearly would be the important preliminaries. The safe thing would be to assume that the diaries were forged until proven real? But that would take time, and could they afford to miss such a scoop in case they would eventually turn out to be the real thing after all? Thus our hero was reduced to a mere amateur, trusting the reports that the paper and the ink had been checked (in fact they had only been submitted, the verdict was not yet known). He was overwhelmed by the sheer mass of the material, thinking that it just could not be a fake. Who would have had the patience to fake so much? Thus he offered only a layman's opinion, the

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<sup>10</sup> It meant a lot to her to be invited to Windsor Castle by Royalty, almost thirty years later and thus finally being socially accepted again. Her husband complained about the inanity of the conversation.

diaries himself he could not decipher (later rumors spread that his German was not up to par, but the script was obsolete and hard to decipher for anyone, German or not). Thus tentatively he gave his approval, but soon enough he would get cold feet when he met the Stern journalist Heidemann, who had procured it. This man was a fanatic, his home filled with Nazi-Paraphernalia, and not only that he proudly showed some underpants of Idi Amin. Trevor-Roper were getting severe doubts, thinking of all the questions he should have pursued from the very start, and how well the whole thing fitted the bill, when he finally imagined how a forger would go about it. There was to be a press conference in Hamburg a few days later. By that time he started to express his second thoughts, but by now articles had been commissioned and the newspaper was already setting the serialization. The pressure was on. At Hamburg he subjected Heidemann to the cross-examination he should have had subjected him to at the outset. Heidemann broke down and left. At the press conference, which started in grand style, the whole thing collapsed as Trevor-Roper voiced his doubts. Incidentally he was the only one not speaking German that raised eyebrows and doubts as his competence. He had to return in disgrace, the whole blame fell on him, while for Murdoch and his publishing imperium it all turned out for the best anyway, with increased sales due to the furor and excitement the whole affair generated. And of course Murdoch was among other things able to wrangle out of the payment promised to Stern magazine. But the reputation of Trevor-Roper was destroyed, something he bore with fortitude having no alternative to doing so.

The remaining twenty years of his life was one of slow decline. His eye-sight failed but as a compensation he developed hallucinations to fill in the void. He was not demented though and could, by some effort make a distinction between reality and phantasy, but it was sometimes very hard, and occasionally he was put at serious bodily risk as a result. However, a successful eye operation resolved the problems, but at old age, no problems, except that of life, are solved long-term. He developed cancer, it spread and at the age of 89 he succumbed, a few years short of the age his father had managed to reach.

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