

**Adam Sisman**, *Hugh Trevor-Roper* (Weidenfield & Nicholson, 2010), xviii + 598 pp.  
£25.00

In biographical terms the heavyweight British historians of the twentieth century have been poorly served. Granted, in the last ten years or so studies of A.J.P. Taylor and E.H. Carr have appeared (although Taylor has had at least four biographies devoted to his life – including one by Sisman – and can hardly claim to be under-represented).<sup>1</sup> However, we await full length studies for the likes of Lawrence Stone, Christopher Hill and Lewis Namier (excluding his wife’s odd biography of him – reading it one would never guess that Namier was a historian), to name but name but three.<sup>2</sup> A gap has been filled then, by Adam Sisman’s life of Hugh Trevor-Roper. Would it be a touch unfair to call this an ‘official’ life? Sisman knew Trevor-Roper, and was given access to his personal papers as a result; but his biography is no hagiography. Though it might be said to be incomplete in certain areas – Sisman himself admits that some material from Trevor-Roper’s years as Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge has been excluded due to potential libel threats – and given some of the stories that do make it into the book, the mouth waters at the scurrilousness that must have been excluded. Nonetheless, Sisman has managed to produce an absorbing – and one suspects definitive for the foreseeable future – biography of Hugh Trevor-Roper.

Given the material he has to work with one would expect nothing less. Trevor-Roper’s personal life is definitely one of the more interesting of twentieth-century British historians. He began by publishing a biography of Charles I’s key ally Archbishop Laud at the age of 26, which was followed by a stint with the Secret Intelligence Service during the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> Trevor-Roper was asked to establish that Hitler was in fact deceased, and his report was subsequently published as *The Last Days of Hitler*, becoming a bestseller.<sup>4</sup> He was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford at the age of 43. And yet the leitmotif of Sisman’s book is the tragedy – if that is not too strong a word – of promise unfulfilled. The running thread of this biography is the great work of history that Trevor-Roper ultimately failed to write. During the Second World War he

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Wrigley, *A.J.P. Taylor: Radical Historian of Europe* (London, I.B. Taurus, 2006). Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E. H. Carr 1892-1982* (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier: A Biography* (London: OUP, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Archbishop Laud, 1573-1645* (London: Macmillan, 1940).

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (London: Macmillan, 1947).

confided to his notebook: 'I know what to do. To write a book that someone, one day, will mention in the same breath as Gibbon, - this is my fond ambition' (p 157). It was never fulfilled. As a historian his interests were wide-ranging; the seventeenth century, the origins of the Second World War, the European Witch craze. But while he produced many dazzling essays on an array of subjects, the great work was never written. Unfinished drafts and shelved manuscripts litter this book – an unfinished biography of Thomas Sutton, a work on Robert Cecil, a 'big book' on the origins of the English Civil War – all never to be completed. In a recent biography of Thomas Babington Macaulay, Robert E. Sullivan praised Trevor-Roper as resembling the latter in terms of 'temperament, outlook, talent and achievement'; one is mindful of the fact that Macaulay's great project – *The History of England* – also remained unfinished.

To be sure, Trevor-Roper had unsavoury aspects of his character and Sisman makes no attempt to skirt around these. More than one student of British historians in the twentieth century will smile at A.L. Rowse asking Trevor-Roper why he was 'so nasty to people', with the former not having a reputation as a shrinking violet himself.<sup>5</sup> Trevor-Roper's early work is littered with pot-shots at Catholics and Catholicism; later in his career it was the turn of the 'Scotch' to face his ire. His (in)famous attack on Lawrence Stone transcended the professional well into the personal.<sup>6</sup> Those who fell foul of Trevor-Roper's sharp tongue and pen during the early part of his career may be allowed a smile when reading of his treatment at Peterhouse toward the end of it. Appointed as Master of the College in 1981, his election was engineered by a clique of fellows headed by Maurice Cowling. However, Trevor-Roper quickly came into conflict with his benefactors who were dismayed by his refusal to confine himself to the ceremonial aspects of his position. Sisman presents in as much detail as he is allowed to the unedifying, but alas all too common, spectacle of academics behaving badly.

Towards the end of the book, as one would expect, the Hitler Diaries affair looms large.<sup>7</sup> In 1982-83 a notorious forger named Konrad Kujau had sold a voluminous amount of what he claimed to be Hitler Diaries to the German magazine *Stern*. As a director of *The Times*, Trevor-Roper was asked to cast his eye over them prior to publication. Under

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<sup>5</sup> See A.L. Rowse, *Historians I Have Known* (London, Duckworth, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Elizabethan Aristocracy: An Anatomy Anatomised', *The Economic History Review*, 3 (1950), 279-298

<sup>7</sup> The best account of the affair remains Robert Harris, *Selling Hitler* (London, Faber & Faber, 1987).

pressure from Rupert Murdoch for a quick decision, he declared that he was satisfied that 'the documents were authentic.' Within two weeks of publication the diaries were revealed to be fakes. In truth no-one involved in the affair comes out of it unscathed. Sisman's comment that Trevor-Roper wanted to use the Diaries to give a boost to his flagging reputation as an expert on the Nazi era is probably the best explanation of his role in the affair and why he made the mistakes that he did. Thus, he was condemned to end his career as the 'Hitler Diary Hoax Don'.

How then, should we view Trevor-Roper in retrospect? Sisman, although retaining a great deal of affection for his subject, has refrained from glossing over the ultimate conclusion that escapes from this book – Trevor-Roper produced some great work but he was arguably capable of greater. As one reads of his many projects which were begun only to be filed away unfinished, the more uncharitable reader might be tempted to summon up the character of Mr Dick from *David Copperfield* whose projected Memorial was ultimately to remain unfinished. A touch harsh perhaps, but all the same, when the historiography of twentieth-century British history comes to be written in the future, one suspects that Trevor-Roper will not play as great a part in such accounts as he perhaps should have.

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