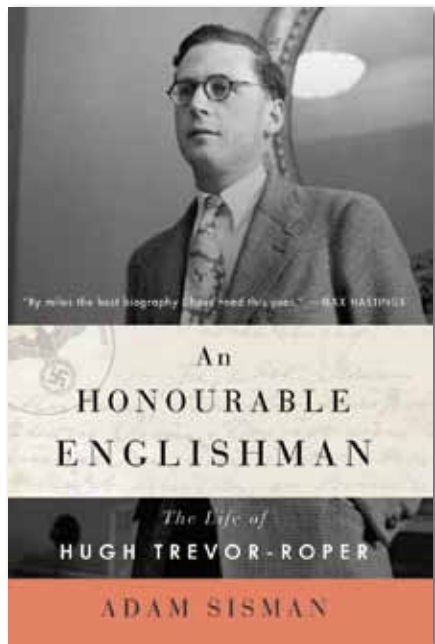


The Last Days of Hugh Trevor-Roper



An Honourable Englishman: The Life of Hugh Trevor-Roper

by Adam Sisman
Random House, 672 pp.

Trevor-Roper

How a historian who reveled in destroying the reputations of others ruined his own.

By Michael O'Donnell

Such is the hunger for new books about Nazi Germany that authors have begun chronicling the chroniclers. Last autumn *Newsday* editor Steve Wick wrote *The Long Night: William L. Shirer and the Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, a history of the famous journalist's dispatches from Berlin in the 1930s. The latest arrival in this genre is Adam Sisman's *An Honourable Englishman: The Life of Hugh Trevor-Roper*, a portrait of one of the most stylish historians of Adolph Hitler. This type of book is bizarre: the reader already knows about the Third Reich, yet can watch someone else learning about it for the first time and in this way refresh the horror. Whether or not the publishing trend is a gimmick, it can produce fine books. *An Honourable Englishman* is witty, incisive, and hugely entertaining.

It is worth reading for two reasons. First, it is a model of the biography form. Sisman is a superb writer who masterfully presents his subject—to the point where the reader somehow becomes invested in minutiae like Trevor-Roper's decision to move from England to Scotland or to replace a Bentley with a Mercedes. The second reason is the rare pleasure of a book properly shelved in the shrinking Intellectual History section of the library. Reading about Trevor-Roper—Hitler chaser, Oxbridge don, occasional foreign correspondent, bomb thrower—means doing one's learning collaterally, like taking in the fine view on a train ride that gets you from here to there. Strictly speaking, the book's subject is a fusty old professor, but its pleasures and insights range far wider.

Trevor-Roper's great work was *The Last Days of Hitler* (1947), which established the fact of Hitler's suicide and recounted the hallucinogenic final days inside the bunker of the Reich Chancellery in April 1945. The slender but authoritative book grew out of an investigative report that Trevor-Roper prepared for British intelligence. The report was commissioned in September 1945, when no one knew for sure whether Hitler was alive or dead. His successor, Admiral Karl Dönitz, insisted that he had fought to the last breath against the Soviet army; the Soviets claimed that he was alive and being harbored by the Allies. Rumors flared up like brushfires and were just as hard to stamp out. Hitler was said to be staying "on a mist-enshrouded island in the Baltic; in a Rhineland rock-fortress; in a Spanish monastery; on a South American ranch," or "living rough among the bandits of Albania." The uncertainty compromised Allied security in occupied Germany and created tension between the Soviets and the British. The thousand-year Reich could not be pronounced dead if the Führer was still alive.

As the former head of research for Allied intelligence, Trevor-Roper was just the man to find answers. He had extensive experience interrogating Nazi pris-

oners, spoke German, and knew his way around the country. Since—as it later emerged—Hitler’s body had been incinerated, Trevor-Roper could not establish physical evidence of his death. The next best thing was to find eyewitnesses to either his suicide or his corpse. Trevor-Roper traveled the countryside deducing who the occupants of the bunker were during the final days and interviewing those who were still alive. His most famous witness was the architect Albert Speer, who had defied Hitler by refusing to destroy German infrastructure as the Red Army approached Berlin. But Speer was not in the bunker when the end came, so Trevor-Roper also spoke with Hitler’s secretaries, butler, and physician, as well as guards of the *Führerbunker*.

In this way Trevor-Roper not only proved Hitler’s death by suicide, he also gained an understanding of the last sputter and cough of Nazism. His book combined exciting reporting with Gibbonesque flourishes:

More and more the once sociable Führer became an isolated hermit, with all the psychological repressions inherent in that dismal condition. He was isolated from persons, isolated from events. Convinced that only he could lead the German people out of defeat to victory, and that his life was therefore of cardinal importance; and yet convinced that every man’s hand was against him, and assassination awaited him around every corner; by a logical consequence, he seldom left the protection of his underground headquarters, or the banal society of his quack doctor, his secretaries, and the few spiritless generals who still pandered to his inspiration.

Trevor-Roper presented the Third Reich as a court—“as incalculable in its capacity for intrigue as any oriental sultanate.” He sketched vivid portraits of the infamous members of Hitler’s inner circle. Heinrich Himmler was a banal simpleton and Jo-

seph Goebbels a brilliantly nefarious propagandist. Hermann Göring was a costume-wearing kook who, “in scenes of Roman luxury, feasted and hunted and entertained,” while wearing “the emblematic stag of St. Hubertus on his head, and a swastika of gleaming pearls set between his antlers.” Speer was the most interesting figure, for he alone had the intelligence and scruples to see Nazism for what it was and nevertheless abetted it. Trevor-Roper closed the book with ruminations on Speer’s fateful passivity. On the theory that the final days revealed the logical endpoints of both National Socialism and Hitler’s monomania, Trevor-Roper concluded that the Führer’s “error lay in supposing that faith can move mountains by itself, instead of merely giving the decisive impetus to the spade.”

The Last Days of Hitler caused a sensation and made Trevor-Roper rich and famous at the age of thirty-three. It also portended a brilliant career at the intersection of popular journalism and academic writing. (Trevor-Roper was both a history professor and a lifelong contributor of reporting and review essays to the *Times* and the *New Statesman*.) Yet for all the promise, the book was his swan song. He had attained all the formal trappings of professional success by his death in 2003: he had been Regius Professor at Oxford, master of Peterhouse College at Cambridge, and Lord Dacre of Glanton, made a life peer in 1979. Yet his field of study was not Nazi Germany but the Enlightenment, and he never managed to write a major work of academic history on it. Beginning and abandoning many projects, Trevor-Roper struggled to get the bat off his shoulder. Margaret Thatcher herself once made fun of him for this. After she asked in front of others when she could expect his

next book, he said he actually had one “on the stocks.” She replied, “On the stocks? *On the stocks?* A fat lot of good that is! In the shops, that is where we need it!”

Born into the periphery of British nobility, Trevor-Roper cultivated himself as an aristocrat, not least by burnishing the hyphen that joined his two prestigious surnames. He collected undergraduates from the best families, supervising their studies, and socialized with ambassadors and duchesses. Dmitri Shostakovich and Francis Poulenc gave recitals in his home. Happiest when in horse, Trevor-Roper

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contrived to join fox hunts whenever he could, even when this meant hurrying in to read the lesson at Evensong with a surplice over his hunting costume. Sisman expertly describes the professor’s grandeur during lectures:

[He] often spoke in long sentences, consisting of multiple subordinate clauses—so many of these that on at least one occasion the audience began to applaud. He wore a rose in his buttonhole. Occasionally he would interrupt his flow to read a quotation, take a sip from a glass of orange juice, or correct his text with his fountain pen.

If Trevor-Roper remains known in

the United States for anything beyond *The Last Days of Hitler*, it is for his merciless hatchet jobs on other historians. “I have decided to liquidate [Law-

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rence] Stone,” he wrote of a former pupil who scooped him on the Elizabethan aristocracy, before writing an article that nearly destroyed that man’s career. Unsportingly, Trevor-Roper himself had thin skin and was quick to call upon the libel courts. Colleagues snickered at his paltry output while wondering aloud what made him so nasty. (In a rare misstep, Sisman ridiculously suggests it was sinusitis.) His faculty at Cambridge loathed him so much that they would not break bread with him.

Sisman portrays Trevor-Roper as more Whig than Tory; an anticommunist but no cold warrior, he deplored McCarthyite witch hunts and maintained friendly relations with Marxist historians. He dragged his feet on admitting women to Peterhouse College and harbored several petty bigotries, including against Scots and Catholics. Needless to say, spiking his writing with anti-Catholic jabs, he antagonized the Church and its defenders like the novelist Evelyn Waugh, who sniped with Trevor-Roper in the Letters pages of newspapers for decades.

Yet in the end it all came back to Hitler. In 1983 the Führer’s alleged diaries were discovered, and the *Times*, hoping to buy, hired Trevor-Roper to authenticate them. Sisman’s pages on the epi-

sode that nearly ruined his subject are riveting. Trevor-Roper was given several hours to examine the documents in a five-star Zurich hotel. He relied on the sellers, who falsely claimed that expert analysts dated the ink and paper to the 1930s and ’40s. In the frenzied bidding war between rival newspaper companies, he let himself be rushed into giving an opinion of authenticity. Rupert Murdoch owned the *Times* and wanted to bid quickly; his editor scrubbed out Trevor-Roper’s hedges and qualifications. By the time his doubts got

the better of him and he made a frantic phone call to the *Times*, it was too late: a banner headline and his own essay were about to go to press for

the next day’s edition. “Fuck Dacre—publish,” Murdoch said, using Trevor-Roper’s title. But the diaries were forgeries. Trevor-Roper’s enemies pounced, and well they should have, for a man who revels in destroying the careers of others can hardly complain when he destroys his own.

Still, Sisman’s lenient judgment seems right: Trevor-Roper was foolish not to demand more time, but he was also the victim of impossible circumstances. Another venerable expert, Gerhard Weinberg, was also taken in. The cruel irony is that Trevor-Roper would much rather have been completing his elusive three-volume magnum opus on the Puritan Revolution. It would no doubt have been outstanding work—but it never would have outweighed *The Last Days of Hitler*. **WM**

Michael O’Donnell, a writer and lawyer living in Chicago, is a frequent contributor to the *Washington Monthly*.



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