

A PROBABLE ALLUSION TO EDWARD GIBBON IN A LETTER OF HUGH TREVOR-ROPER

In March 1959 Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Oxford, took his wife Xandra, the daughter of Field Marshal Haig, to convalesce in Beaulieu-sur-Mer. From there he wrote a long letter to the Yale historian Wallace Notestein: about their move to Scotland at the end of the previous year (couched in the metaphor of Abraham's travels), Xandra's illness, his holiday reading (Madame de Sevigné and 'Bertie' Russell), his latest book, A. L. Rowse (at length), and the fate of Bernard Berenson's Florentine villa, I Tatti, after his death. The letter was first published in 2014.¹

Conditions in Beaulieu-sur-Mer, 'this Phaeacian spot', permitted Trevor-Roper to read 'not-too-serious books and write not-too-serious letters' but suspended work, 'serious writing', on his current book, a history of the Puritan revolution in the seventeenth century. 'But it is no good trying to write here', he told Notestein, 'I can only write in a large room, full of my own books, and with space to walk up and down while I meditate the clausulae of my sentences'. Trevor-Roper described his approach to writing with a probable allusion to the technique of Edward Gibbon.

In one of his autobiographical sketches Gibbon explained why 'near two years had elapsed between the publication of [the] first and the commencement of [the] second Volume' of The Decline and Fall. 'When I resumed my task', he continued, 'I felt my improvement. I was

¹ H. Trevor-Roper, One Hundred Letters from Hugh Trevor-Roper. Ed. R. Davenport-Hines and A. Sisman (Oxford, 2014), 67-72.

now master of my style... It has always been my practise to cast a long paragraph in a single mould, to try it by my ear, to deposit it in my memory, but to suspend the action of the pen till I had given the last polish to my work'.² That description was fleshed out by Lord Sheffield, his friend and executor: 'before he sat down to write a note or a letter, he completely arranged in his mind what he meant to express. He pursued the same method in respect to other composition; and occasionally he would walk several times about his apartment before he had rounded a period to his taste. He has pleasantly remarked to me, that it sometimes cost him many a turn before he could throw a sentiment into a form that gratified his own criticism.'³

Gibbon had long been central to Trevor-Roper's self-fashioning as an historian. In May 1944 he recorded in a notebook that, 'to write a book that someone, one day, will mention in the same breath as Gibbon, – that is my fond ambition. And if I fail, at least I shall say, as it was said of Don Quixote, *Si no acabó grandes cosas, murió por acometerlas*'.⁴ Trevor-Roper was not asserting Gibbon as a model exclusively for a big book, such as the one mentioned in his

² E. Gibbon, The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon. Ed. J. Murray (London, 1896), 316 ('Memoir E').

³ E. Gibbon, Miscellaneous works of Edward Gibbon, Esquire. Ed. J. Sheffield (London, 1796), I, 188.

⁴ H. Trevor-Roper, The Wartime journals. Ed. R. Davenport-Hines (London, 2012), 200, with a translation in the footnote, 'Even if he did not achieve great things, he died in their pursuit (quoted to T.-R. by [Logan] Pearsall Smith)'.

letter to Notestein fifteen years later.⁵ Uppermost in his mind was Gibbon's example generally as an historian and especially as a prose stylist in a period when he was determined to refine his own.⁶ The influence of Gibbon, 'the greatest of all historians', was deep and enduring.⁷ Trevor-Roper's letters to Notestein, like those he wrote to Bernard Berenson, were among his most mannered and allusive, the ideal setting for a gesture to his favourite intellectual role model.

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⁵ Trevor-Roper described his history of the Puritan revolution as 'huge' and 'vast' in letters to Bernard Berenson of late 1957 and early 1958: see H. Trevor-Roper, Letters from Oxford: Hugh Trevor-Roper to Bernard Berenson. Ed. R. Davenport-Hines (Oxford, 2006), 244, 249. The book would be put aside for good at the start of the 1960s: see B. Worden, 'Hugh Redwald Trevor-Roper, 1914-2003', PBA 150 (2007), 265; A. Sisman, Hugh Trevor-Roper: the biography (London, 2010), ch. 16; P. Ghosh, 'Hugh Trevor-Roper and the history of ideas', History of European ideas 37 (2011), 485.

⁶ Cf. B. Worden, 'Introduction', in idem (ed.), Hugh Trevor-Roper: the historian (London, 2016), 5, 27; Davenport-Hines' introduction to the Wartime journals.

⁷ Letters from Oxford, 65 (a letter of 1951). For a selection of Trevor-Roper's essays on Gibbon, see H. Trevor-Roper, History and the Enlightenment. Ed. J. Robertson (New Haven and London, 2010).