

Clip: TREVOR ROPER HUGH_HUGH TREVOR ROPER WITH

**Name: TREVOR ROPER HUGH_HUGH TREVOR ROPER
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S1

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Professor Trevor Roper. I suppose no leading historian of our age has had a wider range of historical interests or has written on a wider range of subjects. You've written most extensively on two themes. First, on what you've seen as the crisis of politics, of society, of ideas in the England and the Europe of the late Renaissance in the 17th century, and secondly, on Hitler and Nazi Germany. But you've written widely also on the Middle Ages, on the Enlightenment, on the modern world. You've written on historiography and historical philosophy. You've written many books and many more essays. You were born in 1914 and you grew up in rural Northumberland. What's your interest in the past formed in your boyhood?

S2

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Yes. I think that the country around me in North Northumberland was such as to concentrate my earliest interests in history. There we were in a little triangle of the country, and on one side was the Saxon coast with its castles, Norman and enduring castles. On the other side, there's the Scottish border with its memories of of the wars of independence and Anglo Scottish battles and on to the south as the industrial revolution of Tyneside. That and of course the Roman wall. One was living in a historic area with history staring at one all the time. And as I was a rather solitary child, I became and loved the country. I was fascinated by these things. And in a very amateur and childish way, I took a great interest in the history of which they were the deposit.

S1

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What did you read as a child? What were your first steps in historical reading?

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S2 00:02:22:21

Well, I'm not sure I read. There weren't many books in my parents house. Not many books in rural Northumberland, anyway. And I read encyclopedias. I read the novels of Sir Walter Scott and the fascinating historical notes. I read Scott's tales of a grandfather about Scottish history, and I rarely read. If you're talking about my early years, I read everything I could lay my hands on. Yes.

S1 00:02:59:05
And at Charterhouse, where you went to school, did you read Historical?

S2 00:03:03:03
I was a classical scholar by selection. My formal teaching was in classics, and we had a little historical teaching of a very, very amateur rhetorical kind. We have all better teaching about Greek and Roman history. But I did read an enormous amount of history.

S1 00:03:24:21
And when you went up to Oxford in 1932, the university where you were to spend most of your working life, it was, of course, to read classics and not history. Now you changed course from classics to history halfway through. Now it's plain from your writing that you've retained an intimate acquaintance with classical literature and a deep love of it. What led you to change course from classics and what drew you to the subject of history?

S2 00:03:49:08
Well, at the time I asked myself, What Where do I go from now? In the matter of this matter of study and I judged wrongly, of course, but on the evidence available to me, I said, Look at the teaching of classics as it is at present. The classical scholars spend their time editing and re-editing much edited classical texts and fancifully amending each other's imaginations of these texts. And so I reverted to the subject which I had interested myself in for so long simply because I was interested in it. Yes.

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And after completing your degree, you stayed in Oxford and you wrote your first book, Archbishop Laud. One theme of the book, as some of your later writing to, is the necessity of understanding ecclesiastical history and secular terms.

S2

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Yes, I think that was a necessity for me. Because unlike devout Christian believers, I couldn't. I couldn't agree with the arguments which were which were used by such believers. I felt that there must be something, some other explanation, some social or economic or political explanation which made use made use of these forms. And of course, in reading history, I read a certain amount of Marxist history and I read a certain amount of economic history. And it's a time when economic explanation was very fashionable, an economic explanation of the dissolution of the monasteries, an economic explanation of the reformation of the Civil War. And so I looked for such explanation.

S1

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You've become less impressed by economic explanation over your life.

S2

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Oh, yes. Yes.

S1

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Why is that?

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S2 **00:06:04:22**

Well, experience, I think. I've become suspicious of any single explanation of historical events anyway. But then came the war or other. Rather. Then came the great crisis of the later 1930s. And the period when I was writing. Archbishop Laud coincided with the period of Nazi aggression before the war. The period of the Rhineland crisis and the annexation of Austria and the Czech crisis, the Munich crisis, and finally the outbreak of war itself. And these events spoke to me rather more loudly than the thin voice of historical writers. And I think ultimately, I believe that my historical views, such as they were, were formed more in the crucible of the public events of that time than in certainly in my undergraduate studies. Yes.

S1 **00:07:26:00**

You've written, I think that the real key to understanding men's actions and beliefs in the past is to understand the distinctive experiences of the generation to which they belonged. Are you conscious yourself of belonging to a generation with distinctive experiences?

S2 **00:07:41:06**

Yes. Yes. I often ask myself whether it is really possible to convey to a generation which didn't live through those days the the tensions, the excitements, the fears, the the ideological passions of the 1930s.

S1 **00:08:07:17**

Now, in 1946, when the war was over, you wrote *The Last Days of Hitler*, perhaps the best known of all your books. You wrote it, or the report on which it was based on Army orders as the intelligence officer. Now, those orders were an accidental, but I suppose also a wonderful opportunity.

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S2 00:08:25:01

Yes, Much of my life, perhaps much of history, is determined by accident. And before the war, I had been made very conscious of the political, immediate political problem by the events of of Munich. And after Munich, I, I read Mein Kampf in German. I decided that that is the thing one must do if I wish to understand international politics. And I felt that I did have some understanding of Hitler Nazism. When the war broke out. The work that I did in the war did not depend on that, though of course it was quite useful. But at the end of the war there was this extraordinary situation when the Russians occupied Berlin and Hitler had last been known off in Berlin, but he apparently wasn't there. He had disappeared into thin air and had disappeared and remained disappeared. And the Russians maintained that he had escaped to Argentina or Spain. And for five months there was complete uncertainty as to what had happened to Hitler. And finally, in the summer of 19, the autumn of 1945, the Russians accused the British authorities in Germany of protecting Hitler as a future weapon against themselves. And this was too much. And the head of intelligence in Germany decided to have an inquiry and to discover the facts. And he asked me to do it.

S1 00:10:26:07
And you've written that you took as your model for the book the Roman historian Tacitus. And I wonder why and in what ways.

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S2 00:10:33:21

Well, Tacitus also wrote in specific historical circumstances and consequently Tacitus was very popular in Europe when comparable historical circumstances arose, namely in the time of absolute courts of the 17th century. And for the same reason I thought he was appropriate for me. That I was writing about a regime which had become a pure tyranny like the tyranny of Caligula or Nero. And if one was to detach oneself and write as Tacitus said, he was writing silly audio at Favori without taking part on either side. And yet nevertheless to separate oneself from it because it was obviously an odious world. The attitude of mind was necessarily the attitude of mind of Tacitus, and I admired Tacitus as a writer, as a lucid, crisp, clear writer.

S1 00:11:53:20
And this skepticism was important to you. It is that is skepticism a part of your historical philosophy?

S2 00:12:00:06
I love Montaigne. I like the I like heretics generally, but I like them to be skeptical. Intellectual heretics rather than passionate believing heretics. Yes. And the the skeptics of the 17th century sceptics from Montaigne to Halifax. The I find very readable. Yes. Yes.

S1 00:12:31:11
Now, after the war, you returned to Oxford. You went back to your old college Christchurch, and you retained your interest in Hitler. But your main historical interest became again what it had been before the war. The period of the origins of the Puritan Revolution. What is it that has drawn you so much to that period?

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S2 00:12:53:03

Well, I suppose at first I was not entirely committed to it and perhaps I've never been entirely committed to it. But I mean, I do. I am drawn greatly to the 18th century, but in history I like looking for problems. I don't find it very rewarding to try to establish by minute scholarship the exact sequence of political events. Mere political events happen and our past. I find intellectual history more interesting. And increasingly I have found what can be called total history more interesting, that is to say, intellectual history in its political, economic, social context, social history in its against its intellectual context, etcetera.

S1 00:14:02:10

I think you've always been at once fascinated and appalled by the force of irrationality in history, by Puritan millenarianism, by witch hunts, by Nazism.

S2 00:14:12:05

Yes, that that is that is true that I, I feel with the 18th century philosophers that that intellectual the the reason which is the only hope of mankind is nevertheless rests on shaky foundations because of the the passions, the irrational passions around it.

S1 00:14:43:08

So history or much of history can be seen as a struggle between the force of reason and the force of superstition or bigotry. In spirit, I think you would have been at home in the enlightenment of the 18th century, particularly perhaps in the company of Edward Gibbon.

S2 00:14:58:04

Well, I have a very great veneration for Gibbon. Yes.

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S1

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Now, in 1967, you published a major collection of essays, Religion, the Reformation and Social Change, and you opened the first essay with the statement. If we look at the 300 years of European history from 1500 to 1800, we can describe it in general as a period of progress. What did you mean by progress?

S2

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Well, I once said to myself that I could not understand progress in any other form except material progress. I don't hold that view now, though. It is a constituent part of my view. I think that there is such a thing as material progress, and I think that the life of man has been greatly improved in the period from the Renaissance onwards. However, it's not the only form of progress. There is also intellectual progress learning more and more about the world. And that I think in that sense also, I think that period was a period of undoubted progress. I don't feel that that can be denied. There may be regress at a lower level or to an outer world. I share the view of Gibbon that history is, in general, the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind. But I consider that it is that what is admirable in it and what is rewarding to study is the is not the I'm afraid it's an elitist view. It's not the crimes and misfortunes so much as the advances made in spite of the the down the constant downward pull of irrationalism so economic selfishness or all the other end political tyranny, the corrupt, the corruption of mankind which is pulling against it. Yes.

S1

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Yes. You've sometimes been called, and perhaps rather loosely, a Whig historian. Ah, your Whig historian.

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S2 **00:17:37:23**

I don't know what I am. I've been called a high Tory historian and I've been called a Marxist historian. And I have decided as a matter of convenience, to accept. As true everything that is said about me, however. Mutually incompatible. The judgment specie that I believe that the advice which the Oracle gave to Socrates know thyself is really an impossibility. And therefore one must allow other people to judge if they will judge differently. Well, that's just too bad. I mean, I'm only a weak historian at certain periods, and I'm even then I know I'm not going to support the warming pan or I don't respect Whigs necessarily, but on the whole, I believe like the 19th century Whigs in a pluralist society, in the control of the executive by mechanism of plural institutions. Yes. And in that sense, I would acknowledge that I am a Whig.

S1 **00:18:57:17**
Yes. Yes. And 1688 is an important date in the history of England.

S2 **00:19:02:15**
I think it is, Yes. I it's all very well for people to say, as some of them do, that in the 18th century there was as much liberty in France as in England. But that is not what French people thought.

S1 **00:19:16:23**
Now, in that same book, Religion, the Reformation and Social change you emphasized partly, I think is a reproach to the Anglo centricity of English historians, the indivisibility of European history in the past and in the present. What is it about Europe that is indivisible?

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S2 00:19:35:19

Intellectually, it is indivisible. What I suppose I was thinking of particularly I forget in what particular context I said that, but but in an intellectual context, I admit that I have sometimes felt irritated by historians who write about English intellectual history without reference to the continent. And this is very often because they don't know the Latin language, which was the language of the intellectual world, that in the early 17th century there was a republic of letters in which everyone read everybody else that books didn't need to be translated, or if they were translated, they were simply translated out of the vernacular into Latin as, for instance, the works of Francis Bacon or Descartes. But I do think that Europe is indivisible, especially in that period. After all, there was persecution. And for instance, the French Huguenots who found themselves uncomfortable in 17th century France, they spread over a great deal of Europe and they carried ideas and there were emigres of all kinds carrying ideas from one center to another that English history cannot be separated from Dutch history in the 16th and 17th centuries or from French history in the reign of Charles and James. Second or even before.

S1 00:21:15:03
One component of your historical philosophy seems, I think, to be a commitment to the principle of free will and a hostility to determinism or to historical determinism. Is that so?

S2 00:21:26:22
Yes, I know Marxism was fashionable intellectually when I was an undergraduate. Were you ever.

S1 00:21:36:14
Tempted by it?

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S2 00:21:39:01

Not much. I was tempted enough to read quite a lot, but and it had a certain fascination. But I wouldn't go further than that. No. But any determinist views that I might have, I don't think I had many, but I perhaps I was prepared to consider them dissolved during the war when there were so many moments at which events, major events, great turning points, were determined by chance and could have been determined otherwise. I think particularly of events in this country in 1940, if Winston Churchill had not been there, simply not existed, if he'd been killed when he was run over by a taxi in New York few years earlier, if there had been a cabinet divided in its council and nobody who. Was able to speak in the at short notice and the way he did in such an extraordinary crisis. And for the people to rally the people at that particular moment, there would have been a muddle. I don't say that there'd been a united a cabinet united in favour of appeasement. I don't think there would have been. I think there would have just been the moment would have been lost. And if that moment had been lost, the war would also have been lost, or at least would have led to a settlement on the basis of defeat. And the whole history which follows would have been different. And perhaps not one can't say. But it's perfectly arguable that Hitler would then have conquered Russia. The Americans certainly wouldn't have come in to rescue communist Russia. Yes. And we would have had a Nazi empire which would have turned into a German empire dominating the whole of Europe. And history would have been written on the assumption that that was inherent in previous history, that historians are very good after the event, saying it was bound to happen, that.

S1 00:23:58:21
You've been very alert to similar open moments in previous times.

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S2 **00:24:03:09**

Oh, yes. I think I think that the history of the present and is connected. I'm not going to make the connection very rigid. But the present the past was the present at one time. Yes. I dislike the way some historians look back and even down on the past and sort out people's problems for them in a rather high handed way, sometimes forgetting whole dimensions, possibly because there are dimensions to which they are insensitive passions and ideas and superstitions which with which they can't sympathize, but which are nevertheless there and a fact and perhaps a determining fact. So in this way, I think I think at all points in the past, if one is trying to understand the past in its own context, one must also consider the options while they are open. Yes. And not just judge them firmly, as Carr told us, we should judge them when they are safely closed.

S1 **00:25:14:12**
Yes. Now, with your range of interests, you've been particularly well equipped to write history. From a comparative perspective.

S2 **00:25:22:01**
I would say in necessity it's a risk too. But yes, I think it is necessary. If one takes a very obvious and large instance, one thing one can think of all the generalisations about the rise of the West, the rise of capitalism in the West, etcetera, which have been based purely on a Western model and one of the the great virtues of Joseph Needham is that Joseph Needham presented the alternative corrective model of Chinese history. However, the Chinese, they were in advance of us, they had all the all the the the springboards for capitalist development apparently, which in the sung period which we had in the later Middle Ages. Why is it that Europe took off in China? Didn't the fact that China, a Chinese science and civilization went back from the Ming period, whereas European science and civilization went forward from the Renaissance period, it must be in the back of the mind of anyone who is considering the causes.

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S1 00:26:56:20

Your characteristic form of writing has been the long essay. You've written many short essays as well. You did once write, I think, in the preface to historical essays that one historian ought to be prepared to write essays on subjects on which he's not qualified to write books. Is that something you would still say?

S2 00:27:16:19

I wouldn't deny it. One can't do everything about everything. And indeed, this is the excuse for professionalism, for concentrating on very narrow subjects. But they aim to know everything, even about a narrow subject is sometimes frustrated. So I think that one must occasionally take a risk. Yes. That it was waiting until one's absolutely sure. One's waiting till one's did. Yes. Yes. Although I don't think one should aim at controversy. I don't think I should be afraid of it.

S1 00:28:00:01

Though. You've written predominantly about the past. You've also written a good deal about the present, and I think your usual method when you're writing about a current problem or episode is to point to a historical dimension to it. Is it a responsibility of the historian, do you think, to help a better understanding.

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Of the present?

S2 00:28:24:06

Well, I think that that a sound understanding of history can be helpful in the present. And therefore, a historian who has a sound understanding of history can be helpful. Yes.

S1 00:28:43:16

Large numbers of undergraduates who aren't going to be professional historians, but who are going to live in the present, spend three years of their lives studying history. What should that study equip them for?

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S2

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It should equip them to see that in any historical situation, because I insisted that the present is historical as well as the past, that any historical situation is not necessarily as simple as it seems or to be judged within the categories which seem to enclose it, that there are perhaps analogies in the past and the passions which are immediately aroused maybe, and of which one to which one is opposed may be better understood if one sees their parallel in a different kind of society or in a different period in which one can, with the advantage of distance or of after knowledge, can see more coolly.

S1

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Yes.

S2

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Is there or.

S1

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There to be a moral purpose in the historical education? To make people better citizens or be better able to distinguish good from bad.

S2

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Well, I wouldn't like to put a to put it in in quite such decisive terms, a moral purpose. I think that a lesson, which is incidentally a moral lesson, may be deduced from the study of history. After all, in history, one is studying human beings who are not dissimilar through the ages against a wider context in more varied circumstances. I ask because.

S1

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You once intimated in writing that history did have the purpose of imparting the study of history, had the purpose of imparting civic virtue as a phrase used.

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S2 00:30:54:13

Well, it has been used for that. Of course it can be used for for the reverse. But if you were to take from the century to take Hitler himself, yes, he placed himself in a historic context and a historic tradition and just justified. And his supporters, his propagandists justified the real horrors of Nazism by putting them into a tradition to which they in which they may or may not have belonged. We can say it's an artificial selected tradition, but still history can be misused. The fact is that history can be a very powerful force for for politicians, that if a politician wishes to carry out a disagreeable policy or a highly contested policy or a very expensive policy like launching a war or changing the structure of society, it may be very difficult to persuade people. But if one can say that all the history of our country up to this date has been groaning and travelling towards this, this great birth and that we are acting in the tradition of Gladstone or Israeli or whoever it may be, or going right back to the Anglo-Saxon constitution, that this does give an added power, a power which of course can be used for evil as well as good.

S1 00:32:39:10

Now we've been talking about the content and about the arguments of your writing, but that writing has been no less celebrated for the qualities of its prose. One of those qualities is its impeccable clarity, and I think that clarity matters a lot to you, doesn't it?

S2 00:32:53:20

Yes, it does. Partly, it is ordinary humility. I think that it's arrogant for a writer to assume that he has the right to be read unless he makes concessions to the reader. And the most important concession he can make is to make his meaning absolutely clear. And it is an article of faith with me that no sentence that ought to have to be read twice before it is understood and no sentence ought to mean to be capable of meaning more anything different from what the writer intended to mean? Yes, I want to be read with pleasure. Yes.

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S1 00:33:52:18

Now, Professor Trevor Roper, you're the most individual of historians. You belong, I think, to no particular school. You've been no one's disciple. But among historians who have, I think had heroes, Is there one historian above all whom you Revere?

S2 00:34:11:03

Well, I suppose it is between two. I have an immense veneration for Gibbon. I think he is. That has been obvious from our discussion. I think he is a philosophic historian of the really highest class. After all, what other historian writing in the 18th century is still accepted as an authority? Not only does he get his facts right, he makes errors. We all do. The remarkably few in so enormous a work. But his philosophical observations have to be and his interpretations have to be considered. Still, even if 1st May occasionally dissent from them, you find other people who agree with them. And this is extraordinary. Even in Chinese history, Chinese historians of today have written that Gibbon has seen and understood Chinese history of the past better. That I think that he is unparalleled in his ability. He dates far less, for instance, than Macaulay. Yes, but the other historian whom I venerate is Burckhardt Jakob Burckhardt, who was You flatter me by describing you as an individual. No one was so individual as as Burckhardt. He stood out as an independent voice among the great German historians that marshaled elitist guards formation of the army, of German historians of his time. And now they are nowhere and he survives. And his philosophical approach, his penetrating intelligence, his his range and humanity all make me venerate him.

S1 00:36:16:09
Professor Trevor, thank you.